BEYOND THE KHALSA PANTH: RECOGNIZING DIVERSITY IN THE SIKH COMMUNITY

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Abstract

Within mainstream academia, Sikhism is often presented as a monolithic religion, and Sikhs as a monolithic community, concerned with outward markers of faith, political activism, and a history closely linked to the British Army. This thesis aims to shed light on the construction of this narrative within scholarship and bring to the forefront some of the more complex issues with Sikh identity. Through a historical look at the early Sikh Panth and the changes it underwent during colonial rule I will show that the traditional values of the Sikh community were quite different than those that are currently perpetuated in academia. Two case studies will illustrate the diversity of the Sikh Panth today, in an effort to begin a dialogue about non-Khalsa groups and practices within the Sikh community. Recognizing this diversity will bring scholars a deeper understanding of Sikhism and the complex issues of Sikh identity, both historically and in the modern day.
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INTRODUCTION

When one thinks of the Sikh religion, the typical images that come to mind are of bearded men wearing turbans, the Golden Temple in Amritsar, and a religion that encourages a militaristic attitude towards the defense of their community and homeland. While these are all important aspects of Sikh identity, they are not the only defining characteristics of the Sikh Panth (lit: path, religious community). A religious community with members spread across the globe, the Sikh Panth includes individuals with a wide range of beliefs and practices that are commonly ignored in academia. Sikhism is taught in world religions classes as one of the major world religions. However, the way that Sikhism is presented in many academic interpretations focuses only on the Khalsa (lit: pure) Panth, an elite and “orthodox” segment of the Sikh Panth. In doing so, Sikh scholarship fails to acknowledge the majority of Sikhs, and the way that they themselves interpret their religion, community, and religious identity. The Sikh Panth is diverse and complicated, yet in academia, it is presented as a uniform and monolithic community, identifiable by outward markers of faith and a separatist and militaristic political agenda.

In this thesis, I explore a more complex interpretation of the Sikh Panth. I argue that the representation of Sikhism as a uniform religious community is a late nineteenth century construction that ignores the diverse nature of the Sikh Panth. In doing so, I will shed light on some of the issues that make up the complexity of Sikh religious identity. Overlooking, or choosing to ignore the wide variety of practices found within the Panth has negative consequences for our scholarly understanding of this global religion and its members. The large community of Punjabi Sikhs now living across the world hold a complex and varied range of religious beliefs, and in order to better understand their
worldview, scholars need to abandon the notion that Sikhism is devoid of any diversity or localized practices. In taking this approach, our understanding of one of the world’s largest religions will deepen and become more representative of the actual practices and beliefs of the entire Sikh Panth.

As I began my research into the Sikh community, I initially intended to focus my work on the Udasis, an ascetic group of Sikhs who trace their spiritual lineage to Guru Nanak’s eldest son. I was surprised to find that the majority of scholarship on the Udasis categorized them as a Hindu group, insisting that Guru Nanak, and therefore the Sikh Panth, rejected asceticism. I quickly became aware of a recurring narrative throughout Sikh scholarship that depicted the entire Sikh community as a monolithic group, containing no diversity. This identity was often described as though this uniformity had been consistent throughout Sikh history. The recognition of this theme led me to examine the ways in which Indian religions had been shaped and defined throughout history. It became apparent that the category of Indian religion as it is known today is a relatively recent development, and that the concept of a religious community as “signifying a single uniform and centralized community of believers”\(^1\) was alien throughout much of Indian history.

Historically, the organization of society for the majority of the Indian subcontinent allowed for a wide range of practices to coexist, often without the labels that now define them as religious. Traditionally, these practices were highly localized, as is common within many rural and agrarian societies. Away from urban centers, the village societies’ religious landscapes were filled by an array of folk beliefs, popular traditions,

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local gods, and ancestor spirits. It was not until the nineteenth century that the concept of religion, as a “systemized sociological unit claiming unbridled loyalty from its adherents and opposing an amorphous religious imagination”\(^2\) was applied to Indian religions.

Having noticed this shift in the understanding of what constituted religion in India, I began to change direction and focus specifically on the development of Sikhism from a diverse and inclusive religious community to a community that had clearly defined religious and social boundaries. Choosing to ignore, or gloss over diversity within the Sikh Panth is a grave mistake. As one of major world religions, with a large diaspora community across the globe, understanding the various interpretations of Sikhism throughout history would certainly enrich the scholarly understanding of this large religious community and their beliefs.

**THE KHALSA PANTH**

Before discussing the factors that have shaped Sikh identity as it is presented today, a brief background and description of that identity is necessary. The Khalsa Panth was created in the late seventeenth century during the time of the last living Guru, Gobind Singh. The Khalsa was established in response to a wide variety of factors, most importantly of which was an ongoing, bloody struggle between the Sikh community and the Islamic Mughal Empire. With the threats of persecution under Islamic rule, the institution of the Khalsa as a united, armed religious community would allow the Sikh Panth to stand together against those who they felt were attacking them. The creation of the Khalsa Panth was the first attempt made to unify the Sikh community and create boundaries separating the Panth and other religious communities, particularly Islam.

Members of the Khalsa underwent an initiation rite that formally accepted them as part of

the Khalsa Panth (this is often referred to as ‘baptism’ in descriptions of Sikhism).

Following this, the individual was required to wear what is commonly known as the five Ks, as outward markers of their dedication to their faith: kesh (uncut hair, commonly kept in a turban), kanga (a small comb), kaccha (shorts to be worn under ones clothes), kara (a steel bracelet) and kirpan (a sword, or dagger). They were also required to refrain from smoking tobacco, abide by the rahit (the code of conduct), follow certain dietary restrictions, and accept the teachings of the Gurus. As I will show in the following chapter, the Khalsa Panth, at its inception, was not a large portion of the wider Sikh Panth. The fluidity of religious identity allowed for those who did not become Khalsa to still define themselves as Sikh, and not be considered more or less orthodox than those who underwent the initiation ceremony. This began to shift in the late nineteenth century, and as I will show in a later chapter, it was only during this time, under British rule, that the Khalsa identity came to be considered as “orthodox.”

The Khalsa identity is the basis for the representation of Sikhs in academia today. The turban alone, as a religious symbol, has generated a body of scholarship. I do not argue that the Khalsa is unimportant, nor that it was imposed upon the Sikh community by outside forces. Rather, I suggest that the Khalsa identity should no longer be regarded as the only way to be Sikh, and that academic attention to those Sikhs who do not ascribe to the Khalsa identity may provide deeper insight into our understanding of this religion.

SIKH STUDIES

There are two main approaches to Sikhism and Sikh history within the realm of Sikh studies. The first of these is what I call the traditional approach, and it is the perspective that has dominated the field throughout its history as a discipline. Scholars in this school
discuss Sikhism from the Khalsa perspective, advocating a clearly defined Sikh identity, consistent throughout history, and uninterrupted by any social or political change, unless provoked by outside forces (such as the struggles with the Mughals). The definition of a Sikh, from this view, is a Khalsa Sikh – one who undergoes the formal Sikh initiation, wears the five Ks at all times, and is willing to take up arms in defense of his or her faith. For scholars belonging to this group, diversity within the Sikh Panth is nonexistent, and to admit to the existence of any non-Khalsa practices would be to undermine the faith of the entire community.

Much of this traditional scholarship challenges any interpretations of Sikhism that recognize diversity, or include discussion of other religious though that may have influenced the beliefs and teachings of Guru Nanak. This approach can be described as providing a normative definition Sikhism, describing how Sikhism should be, typically from an elite insider’s perspective. Scholars who take this perspective react very negatively to any work that suggests the existence or legitimacy of any non-Khalsa approaches to Sikhism within the community.

The second approach, which I call the critical approach, is a much more recent development, largely pioneered by Hew McLeod, a scholar who began publishing critical analyses of Sikh texts in the late 1960s. McLeod’s initial work was concerned with extracting historical facts from texts such as the janam sakhis (hagiographical accounts of Guru Nanak’s life) and the Sikh rahit-nama (the code of conduct). His work took an empirical approach to Sikh texts, and proved to be highly controversial within the discipline. He also produced large amounts of work on the theology of Sikhs, the life of Guru Nanak, the formation and evolution of the Sikh Panth, and traditions that may have
influenced Guru Nanak and the development of Sikhism. Although criticized by traditional scholars for ignoring the “revealed truth” of Sikhism as an entirely independent and distinct religion, McLeod’s works were groundbreaking in his attempts to critically and empirically study Sikhism and the Sikh Panth. Tony Ballantyne emphasizes that the importance of McLeod’s works cannot be underestimated, as it “transformed understandings of Sikh history and established a new analytical framework that has been extended by a younger generation of scholars.” One such scholar, is Harjot Oberoi, who provides the most recent, and most in-depth look at the ‘Khalsafication’ of Sikhism.

In his controversial work, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*, Oberoi challenges the clear-cut categories of “Muslim”, “Hindu”, and “Sikh” as they are often portrayed in academia, and perpetuated by elite members of these religions. *The Construction of Religious Boundaries* provides critical information and analysis that many within Sikh studies have overlooked or chosen to ignore. Having noticed that the categories said to dictate the social and religious lives of Sikhs did not always correspond with the way that people actually practiced Sikhism within their daily lives, Oberoi set out to examine what it meant to be Sikh throughout history, and when and where the construction of religious categories in India emerged.

Throughout his book, he makes the argument that a late nineteenth century religious reform movement, the Singh Sabha movement, forged the apparent uniformity of the Sikh Panth found today as a response to a wide range of changing attitudes under

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British rule. His overarching conclusion is that there is nothing self-evident about the categories given to Indian religions (Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, etc.). In fact, they are “…specific constructions rooted in particular historical epochs.”\(^4\) Oberoi’s work is highly relevant to my own and his argument provides the foundation upon which this thesis will expand. He focuses on the past – where “Sikh identity” comes from, and argues that the Singh Sabha movement, using the creation of the Khalsa Panth as a foundation, constructed the homogeneous identity that until recently has been used to define the entire Sikh Panth within academia. Where Oberoi falls short is in his failure to take a more in-depth approach to the variety of Sikh religious practice found within the Panth throughout time. While his approach is political, historical, and sociological, a deeper look into this time period from a religious studies perspective will bring us to a greater understanding of the various manifestations of Sikh religious belief throughout history and to the present day.

My thesis will expand on Oberoi’s foundation by focusing on heterodox, or “other” forms of Sikhism, both in the past and present day. The lack of scholarship addressing non-Khalsa forms of Sikh practice and belief has left a large hole in our knowledge of Sikhism as a religion and Sikhs as a religious community. In focusing on two non-Khalsa Sikh groups, I will be able to further illustrate the effects of the changing religious landscape under British rule on Sikh identity and religion. While Oberoi explores the construction of the Khalsa identity as the normative definition of Sikhism, this thesis will deal with the role of the colonial state in Indian religion, issues of ethnicity and religious identity within the Sikh diaspora and the reimagining of certain Sikh groups and their changing positions within the Sikh Panth.

\(^4\) Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*, 418
Oberoi’s work received a stunning amount of backlash from not only the Sikh community, but also many traditional Sikh scholars, eventually leading to his resignation of the Chair of Sikh studies at the University of British Colombia. In a book titled *The Invasion of Religious Boundaries*, Dr. Kharak Singh and other Sikh scholars provide a 400-page long scathing attack on Oberoi’s interpretation of Sikh religion, identity, and history, calling it “vicious propaganda” and a “thoughtless exercise”. This reaction highlights the relative infancy of Sikh studies. Whereas older religious communities have somewhat begrudgingly accepted scholarly analysis of their beliefs and history, the Sikh community lacks previous experience with this type of analysis and therefore many take offense to the academic’s ignorance of the “revealed truth” of Sikhism.

Of course, this reaction to Oberoi’s work can also been seen as evidence that supports the very thesis that these traditional scholars are attacking. The scholars who contributed to this book vehemently deny the existence of any Sikh groups outside of the Khalsa Panth. In the abstract of the book, Dr Kharak Singh states that Oberoi’s argument is a blatant attack against the Sikh religion:

[Oberoi]…suggests that the Khalsa form is only one of the several forms of Sikhism, and that, too, is not prescribed by Guru Gobind Singh, but has been imposed by the Singh Sabha Movement to the exclusion of other forms. The Sikh community naturally felt betrayed. Such vicious propaganda emanating from any quarters would be resented.\(^5\)

Obviously, Dr. Singh does not take kindly to the assertion that there are several forms of Sikhism, nor does he appreciate the argument that the Singh Sabha movement sought to end existing diversity within Panth. This sentiment reflects the attitude of the traditional Sikh scholars discussed above. By stating that Oberoi is incorrect in his treatment of the

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Khlasa form being only one of several forms, Dr. Singh is emphasizing that the Khalsa is the only true form, or at the very least, the most pure. This suggests one of two things: either these scholars are still denying any sort of heterodox groups within Sikhism, or the Singh Sabha movement succeeded in the way that Oberoi suggests, forging a uniform history of identity that can be traced directly to the last living Guru. Because of the emotion with which the community reacted to Oberoi’s work, it seems that the latter is the case, and anyone who suggests that Sikhism is a diverse religion is viewed as an enemy, trying to tear down the community with “vicious propaganda.”

**ABSENCE AND NEGATION IN SIKH SCHOLARSHIP**

In his analysis of the field of Sikh studies, Oberoi argues that there are two principles at work in historiographical accounts of the Sikh Panth in the nineteenth century: the principles of absence and of negation. I will briefly outline this argument in order to demonstrate not only the lack of scholarship regarding non-Khalsa practice in Sikhism, but also the origins of this exclusive, Khalsa representation of Sikhism in contemporary sources.

The principle of silence, or absence, can be summed up by the popular saying, “winners write history.” There is a tendency for those who came out victorious, or those far removed from the actual goings-on, such as an elite class, being the recorders of struggles and other important events. In the instance of Sikh studies, there are few accounts of popular worship of Hindu deities, nature worship, the worship of village deities and ancestors, or witchcraft among the Sikh community, although these were all common practices within the majority of the Sikh Panth, who were spread across rural Punjab. When these practices are mentioned, they are used as examples of the “decline of
Sikhism” during the nineteenth century, and are given as proof of the need for the Singh Sabha movement in order to “preserve” the Sikh faith, and save it from extinction.

Ultimately, this argument within official Sikh historiography goes on to establish that Sikhs were delivered from the bondage of these un-Sikh beliefs by the intervention of the late nineteenth century Singh Sabha movement.  

Scholars who perpetuate this view of history, then, are supporting the principle of negation: they are negating the validity of these practices and insinuating that those who participated were not “real” Sikhs. As I will show in chapter two, the negation of non-Khalsa practices within the Sikh Panth was a common theme within the Singh Sabha movement and it is one that continues into traditional Sikh scholarship today.

The natural question arises: if these alternative practices were so popular among Sikhs until the nineteenth century, why were they negated and deemed ‘not Sikh”? This omission of popular practices among Sikhs can be traced to the changing social landscape in the nineteenth century, and the presence of European scholars, colonial rulers, and other western observers of religion in India. Their approach to Sikhism focused largely on the Sikh texts, and therefore they became concerned with what the authentic Sikhism ought to look like, overlooking the various forms of practice in which the majority of Sikhs were engaged. The focus of European observers was on the urban and elite Sikhs, and the “ideals” presented in Sikh texts and in the practices of the Khalsa Panth as opposed to the religious expression found amongst the majority of the Sikh community living in rural Punjab. When these observers do address non-Khalsa, and popular forms

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of Sikhism, they are treated as corruptions or deviant practices with no textual basis or moral value.

This approach no doubt had an effect on the urban and elite Sikhs at the time, many of whom were educated in western schools and sought jobs within the colonial army and government. This class of Sikhs also began to adopt this new approach to religion, dismissing any non-Khalsa practices and beliefs as deviant and impure. Thus, it was the Sikh elite, during the nineteenth century, who imposed these value judgments regarding who was and was not a Sikh. This approach, however, overlooked the great majority of Sikhs who interpreted their religion in a different way, and incorporated non-Khalsa traditions into their daily lives. Oberoi summarizes this sentiment when he states that scholarly focus should turn to the actual practices and beliefs among the Sikh community as opposed to the way that Sikhism became represented under British rule:

> It is time to give up the ideological blinkers imposed by the complex changes in economy, society, and politics under the Raj. A firm distinction ought to be made between the way certain beliefs and rituals came to be represented in the rhetoric of socioreligious movements like the Singh Sabha and their actual place and function in the life of everyday people.⁷

This statement describes the necessity of my own research. There is an inconsistency between Sikhism as presented in scholarship and actual Sikh practice found within the Panth. This limits the accuracy and relevance of contemporary understandings of Sikhism within Sikh studies. I hope to shed some light on this lack of information through a more in-depth look at diversity within the Panth.

**CHAPTER SUMMARY**

I will begin with a chapter on the early Sikh community in order to demonstrate the fluidity of religious boundaries from the pre-colonial period and into the mid- to late-

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nineteenth century. During this time, religious life was dominated by diversity, and the concept of exclusive religious identity was irrelevant to the early Sikhs. The community held Guru Nanak to be an important religious figure, and the father of the Sikh tradition, but daily religious life also included a myriad of local and family gods, Hindu festivals, and the worship of non-Sikh holy figures.

The second chapter will examine the late nineteenth century, a time of change in all aspects of Indian life, due to the British colonial powers and their rule of India. I will discuss the changing attitudes towards Sikh practice, which began in response to British presence, and cumulated in the Singh Sabha movement, a religious and social reform movement that sought to remove all non-Khalsa forms of religious practice from the Sikh community. It was not until this period that a uniform Sikh identity was considered necessary, and the monolithic and exclusive Sikh identity that we know today was largely constructed during this time, due to the efforts of the reform movement.

The third chapter will examine a non-Khalsa Sikh group, the Udasis, as a case study of the effects of the Singh Sabha movement on the Sikh groups that did not ascribe to the Khalsa identity. An ascetic group of Sikhs who trace their lineage to the eldest son of Guru Nanak, the Udasis traditionally held an important role in the Sikh community, as keepers of the temple, Sikh scholars and teachers, and revered holy men who respected in their struggle to experience and connect with the divine. However, following the Singh Sabha reforms, they were marginalized due to their ascetic practices, which reformists labeled non-Sikh, and in many cases, Hindu. As a result, they were soon considered deviant, and no longer recognized as a part of the Panth. The Udasis are but one example
of a wide variety of Sikh groups, who were traditionally included in the Sikh Panth, and later ostracized by Singh Sabha reformers due to their non-Khalsa practices.

A second case study, of a group called Sikh Dharma, will address the diversity found within the Khalsa Panth itself. Sikh Dharma is a group of non-Indian converts to Sikhism, largely in the United States. This group further complicates the issue of the Khalsa identity by calling into question the role of Punjabi ethnicity within the Sikh Panth. Although members of Sikh Dharma closely follow the Khalsa form of Sikhism, the wider Sikh Panth often dismissed them as non-Sikh, a dismissal that I ascribe to cultural difference between Punjabi Sikhs and the American converts with Sikh Dharma. The initial tensions between Sikh Dharma members and Punjabi Sikhs challenges the claim that all Khalsa Sikhs are considered true Sikhs, and highlights the role of ethnicity within the Sikh Panth.

These four chapters will demonstrate the complex nature of Sikhs identity and religious practice. While the Khalsa form of Sikhism is typically accepted as the orthodox form, my goal is to show that throughout Sikh history, diversity was accepted, and even celebrated. Through a historical look into the Sikh past and the nineteenth century restructuring of religious identity, I will show that the Khalsa form of Sikhism is but one of many interpretations of the religion. The two case studies will further illustrate this point and will serve as examples of the effects of the Singh Sabha movement, and the complexity of Sikh identity.

In order to appreciate the diversity traditionally found within the Sikh community, a look into the past is necessary. A short history of the typical approach to religious identity in the Sikh Panth will allow us to understand both the context in which Sikhism
developed as well as the fluidity of religious boundaries that was common in India until the nineteenth century.
Khalsa (lit: pure) Sikhism is the “orthodox” view of Sikhism and is the form currently prevalent within Sikh scholarship. Outside of scholar’s view, however, Sikhism takes a wider variety of incarnations, and includes a range of practices and beliefs considered by Khalsa Sikhs and many scholars to be deviant and “non-Sikh”. The fact that non-Khalsa forms are widely ignored in academia in favor of the Khalsa view does a disservice to the scholarly understanding of one of the world’s largest religions. This chapter explores the traditionally inclusive nature of the Sikh community and its approach to religion. While the Khalsa form of Sikhism relies heavily on boundaries, a detailed code of conduct, and outward expressions of religious identity, the majority of the Sikh community blends their Sikh beliefs with other traditional, non-Khalsa customs.

Until the nineteenth century, religious diversity within the Sikh community was the norm. Harjot Oberoi acknowledges that historically, one’s Sikh identity was not exclusive, and actually incorporated a range of traditional customs and beliefs:

A pilgrimage to the Golden Temple could be supplemented with similar undertakings to the Ganges at Hardwar or the shrine of a Muslim saint. Far from a single Sikh identity, most Sikhs moved in and out of multiple identities grounded in local, regional, religious and secular loyalties. Consequently, the boundaries between what could be seen as the Sikh ‘great’ and ‘little’ tradition were highly blurred…

This web of multiple identities is often ignored within traditional Sikh scholarship. There, only those who wear the outward makers of faith (commonly known as the “five Ks”), live by the orthodox code of conduct (rahit), have a militaristic view on protecting the faith, vow allegiance to Guru Nanak and the ten Sikh Gurus, and consider the Adi Granth

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8 Oberoi, Construction of Religious Boundaries, 24.
(Granth Sahib) as the living Sikh Guru are considered “real” Sikhs. These criteria are typically considered to be un-changing identifiers of a Sikh, and of the Sikh community. This definition is based primarily on the creation of the Khalsa Panth by Guru Gobind Singh at the end of the seventeenth century, and perpetuated in the late nineteenth century by the “revivalist” Singh Sabha movement. In actuality, Sikhism began as a devotional movement, one that actively rejected such identifiers and was focused on inner, not outer, expressions of faith. It is my intention to show that what is presented as Sikhism within academia is an historically inaccurate portrayal of the Sikh community. Although the Khalsa identity was created over three centuries ago, it was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that it came to be considered as the “correct” form of Sikhism.

An historical look at the early Sikh community will provide a better understanding of the approach to religion and religious identity traditionally found in Sikhism. I will begin with a brief look at the early Sikh community and the Sant tradition, a Northern Indian devotional movement that flourished during the life of Guru Nanak, and reflects many of the early teachings of Sikhism. This movement emphasized the importance of individual devotion and rejected institutionalized forms of religion. Both of these concepts are also found in the teachings of Guru Nanak and will help illustrate the original goals of Sikhism as a devotional religion focused on cultivation of the self and the rejection of outward expressions of religion.

I will then examine the origins of the Khalsa identity, the form of Sikhism that is often presented as the true, and correct form. Even after the institution of the Khalsa, however, the majority of Sikhs remained true to cultural and traditional beliefs. The final
section of this chapter will outline some of the traditional customs and beliefs found within the Sikh community as late as the nineteenth century in order to demonstrate the wide range of practices traditionally found within the Sikh Panth.

**THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE OF PUNJAB**

The Vedas and the Upanishads, texts which contain the foundation for much of Indian religious and philosophical thought, the Hindu Epics (such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata) and the customs and traditions of various castes, villages, and lineages were all part of the ancient religious landscape of the Punjab. By the time Guru Nanak was born in the mid-fifteenth century, the teachings of Islam were also present in India. Therefore, one can assume that the people of Punjab were deeply influenced by the traditions, customs, and religious ethos that came from these sources. Traditionally, these various practices coexisted with little perceived need for distinguishing between them or establishing religious boundaries. This approach to religious identity can be found throughout Sikhism for the majority of its history, and was, in fact, the prevalent attitude until the late nineteenth century.

The Indian Sant tradition of North India was also blossoming in the time of Guru Nanak, and one need only briefly glance at the beliefs and concepts found within the Sant tradition in order to draw connections to the teachings of Guru Nanak and the religious beliefs of Sikhs. The Sant tradition can be considered a fusion of the *bhakti* devotional movement and the Nath yoga tradition. These schools of thought have been described elsewhere in great detail, so for the purpose of this argument we will focus only on those aspects relating directly to Sikhism.

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The goal of the *sant* is mystical union with God. This is found in many Indian mystical traditions, such as Sufism and the *bhakti* tradition. In essence, one must transcend the ego through love and devotion to God in order to develop a direct and individual connection with the divine, and come to the personal realization that God is within. This was a central teaching for the early Sikh community as well, and Guru Nanak stressed that through devotion and love, one could reach God. *Nam simran*, or “remembrance of the Name,” was one way that this could be achieved, according to the teachings of Guru Nanak. The concept of *nam*, which is usually found in the compound *satnam* (“true Name”) is present throughout Nanak’s teachings as well as those of the later Gurus. McLeod summarizes the concept of *satnam* as “the total expression of all that Akal Purakh [God] is.”

Similar to other Indian religious worldviews, Akal Purakh (Nanak’s concept of God) is often described in terms of what it is not, demonstrating the ineffability of the divine. By expressing that God can be found through the *nam*, Nanak was giving his followers a direct way to connect with the divine.

Nanak taught that the *nam* is everywhere, but man is blind to it because of his own self-centeredness. This blindness and ego leads man into a constant cycle of birth and death because of his *karma*. Through the Guru, however, man can be awakened to the *nam* and work through his karma. Liberation, therefore, is found through bringing oneself into harmony with the *nam* and in turn, with the universe and Akal Purakh. This can be done through *nam-simran*. An individual can practice *nam-simran* in a variety of ways, including the repetition of a mantra, singing of *kirtan* (hymns), and meditation on

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the **nam**. All of these practices are “designed to bring the individual into accord with the **nam**, thus earning him or her the kind of **karma** which provides release.”\(^{12}\)

Two of the most well known figures within the Sant tradition are Ramananda and Kabir. Their compositions are filled with devotional and mystical experiences of God and stress the importance of inner meditation and the realization that God can be found within the self. Ramananda, specifically, had a great influence on this tradition, and in turn on the Sikh worldview. Like Guru Nanak, Ramananda rejected the notion of caste and did not distinguish between his high and low caste disciples. He also taught that the focus on the inner self, as opposed to the outer rituals performed by priests, was the best way to connect to the divine. Kabir is one of his most well known disciples, and plays an important role in Guru Nanak’s teachings as well. In fact, it is said that during Kabir’s life, he met Guru Nanak, and the inclusion of both Kabir and Ramananda’s compositions in the *Adi Granth* are evidence of the importance of these figures to the early Sikh community. In reading poetry composed by these three men, the overlying themes of love, devotion, rejection of ritual and caste, and the importance of meditation on the self and the divine Name come through as common themes.

The Sant tradition was clearly an important part of the religious landscape during Guru Nanak’s life. Although it may not be accurate to say that Sikhism evolved from the Sant tradition, it would be a mistake to ignore the parallels found between the two movements. Understanding some of the overlapping concepts found within the Sant tradition helps to more fully grasp some of Guru Nanak’s teachings, and the beliefs and ideals held within the early Sikh community.

\(^{12}\) McLeod, *A Sikh Theology*, 36
The focus on inner devotion and the rejection of outward ritual are two important religious concepts found within the Sant tradition and at the core of Guru Nanak’s teachings. These themes help us to understand the inclusive and fluid approach to Indian religion and religious identity during Guru Nanak’s time. If the ultimate religious goal is to cultivate one’s inner self and transcend the ego in order to directly experience God, outward markers, institutions, and religious exclusivity are not necessary, nor are they helpful. The type of religious thought taught by Guru Nanak and the sants, therefore, was not naturally one of exclusivity. Any practice that was seen to be helpful in order to reach one’s goal was a legitimate, and encouraged practice. From this approach, one could worship a variety of deities, participate in any amount of festivals and undergo many different rites of passage, and not be seen as a walking contradiction. As a result, a wide range of religious practices and beliefs were present within the early Sikh community – a fact that would later perplex British outsiders who viewed religion as a clearly defined, single entity.

Another important glimpse into the early Sikh community, and the structure of early Sikhism, is found in the writings of Bhai Gurdas (circa 1558 – 1673), the scribe of the Adi Granth and the nephew of Guru Amar Das (the third Sikh Guru). As is the case with many Sikh sources, his writings have not been translated into English in a comprehensive way, although some analysis of his works exists in Sikh scholarship. He notes that a good Sikh should: recite the compositions of the Sikh masters before dawn; visit the dharamsala (Sikh temple) in the early mornings to participate in the sangat (Sikh congregation); be humble, charitable, and polite; eat, sleep, and speak in moderation. He should also practice the precepts of the Guru. In doing these things, the
Sikh can transcend the human ego and reach liberation. There is no mention of outward markers of faith, exclusive religious identity, or concern for the unity of the community – only the focus on inner devotion and individual transcendence of the ego, teachings consistent with the beliefs of Guru Nanak. Although there is an emphasis on the right way to live as a Sikh who wishes to attain liberation, there is no dominant, cohesive religious ideology as is emphasized today. This suggests that the social and militaristic concerns of today’s Khalsa Sikhs were not present within the early Sikh community, and as is still the case with many Sikhs today, the focus was on religious practices and connecting with God on an individual level, not on outward expressions of identity.

Although academia often overlooks the diversity found in the Sikh community, both in contemporary and historical contexts, there are pieces of evidence that support the notion that religious variety was both common and accepted. The next section will briefly review one type of literature that continues to be among the most popular works in Punjab, the janam-sakhis.

**THE JANAM-SAKHIS**

The early Sikh community is often defined by their devotion to Guru Nanak, the first of the Sikh Gurus, and the Guru to whom Sikhs everywhere offer their primary devotion and reverence. W.H. McLeod, one of the pioneering critical scholars of Sikhism, took painstaking efforts in an attempt to reconstruct the world and life of Guru Nanak through various Sikh accounts. The janam-sakhis are hagiographic accounts of Guru Nanak’s life and contain stories (sakhis) about the deeds, beliefs, teachings, and travels of the Guru. Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*, 50.

14 The most prominent of these works is *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* in which McLeod traces various forms of Sikh literature as he tries to construct an historically accurate biography of the Guru from the works that are available both in English and Punjabi.
Guru. Although the events within the stories may not all be historically accurate, they provide valuable insight into the context of the early Sikh Panth and the amount of religious diversity that existed in Punjab, both during and after Nanak’s time.\(^\text{15}\)

Like many religious figures within the Sant tradition, little was recorded about his life during his lifetime. The *janam-sakhis* were likely recorded into manuscripts during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and they reflect the fluidity of religious boundaries that was the norm for the early Sikhs.\(^\text{16}\) The stories show little consistency in the way that Nanak is represented, and he is often depicted as a figure with seemingly contradictory attributes:

In one myth he is represented as an ascetic who lives on sand, in another he becomes a householder who toils for a living. One set of stories transports him to Mecca; another set takes him to Hardwar. The Nanak of the Janam-sakhis is a saint who delights in mixing up as his own the sartorial styles of Muslim *pirs* and Hindu ascetics; chooses companions and disciples whose castes and religions do not match; pays no heed in his social transactions to spatial and dietary religious taboos.\(^\text{17}\)

For many Western scholars, this apparent inconsistency in the image of Nanak represented in the *janam-sakhis* could be frustrating. However, it gives important insight into varying religious and cultural traditions and identities that saturated Nanak’s world, and also implies that a uniform Sikh identity was neither important nor necessary to the early Sikh community. McLeod argues that these works function not only as stories of the first, and most revered Sikh Guru, but also operate as a reflection of the context in which they evolved. In this vein, the *janam-sakhis* “express in some measure the beliefs

\(^{16}\) Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*, 55.
\(^{17}\) Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*, 55.
of the community during this period.” A fixed identity, with rigid boundaries was clearly of no concern to the Guru or to the compilers of what is still the most popular and best selling literary work in Punjab.

As we have seen, Sikhism in its earliest development was a fluid tradition, and the majority of the community saw no contradiction in identifying as Sikh while participating in traditional customs and practices. The *janam-sakhis* highlight the inclusive nature of the early Sikh community in the many portrayals of Guru Nanak. The fact that he is depicted as an ascetic and a householder within the same text is evidence of the religious context in which the Sikh community evolved. At the end of the seventeenth century, however, this slowly began to change with the creation of the Khalsa Panth.

**THE KHALSA PANTH**

One of the most significant events in the history of the Sikh identity was Guru Gobind Singh’s creation of the Khalsa Panth. As discussed in the introduction, the establishment of the Khalsa Panth was the first time that outward identifiers and clearly defined boundaries were ascribed to the Sikh identity. Although it can be speculated that the Guru wished for all Sikhs to undergo initiation into the Khalsa Panth, it does not seem that this was the case, even during his lifetime. Many Sikhs chose to retain their customary cultural practices as dictated by their lineage and caste. By the second half of the eighteenth century, the Khalsa identity had been established, complete with certain rituals and a code of conduct. Consistent with the traditional approach to religion, however, it was accepted that this was not the only form of Sikhism, nor was it a superior form.
can speculate that the higher caste Sikhs living in urban areas would have taken the
initiation and become Khalsa. This is supported by the fact that the vast majority of
Khalsa Sikhs at the time were of the Jat caste, traditionally an elite military class that held
positions of power within their villages.21

On the other hand, those who did not live in more urban areas, but in rural
villages, would have remained Sikhs in the traditional sense, preferring to honor their
village traditions alongside the Sikh beliefs. The creation of the Khalsa, therefore, did not
end the fluidity that was present within the Sikh community. Rather, by marking off a
clearly defined group within the larger Sikh Panth, the creation of the Khalsa highlighted
the existence of a variety of interpretations of Sikhism. As Oberoi notes, “Large numbers
of Sikhs continued to interpret and reinterpret Sikh tradition differently from Khalsa
Sikhs, with the result that there was immense diversity within Sikh society for much of
the nineteenth century.”22 With the institution of the Khalsa, definitions and boundaries
within the Sikh community became identifiable. Instead of unifying the Sikh community,
however, the creation of the Khalsa instead legitimized a difference between two types of
Sikhs – the Khalsa Sikhs and the non-Khalsa Sikhs. In response to the development of the
Khalsa identity it became clear that there were many ways of being Sikh, and that above
all, the community was united through the common belief in the Guruship of Nanak and
the reverence of the Adi Granth.23

21 For an in-depth analysis of the impact of the Jat caste on seventeenth and eighteen century
Sikhism, see W.H. McLeod, Early Sikh Tradition (1980).
23 J.S. Grewal, “Legacies of the Sikh Past for the Twentieth Century.” In Sikh History and
Religion in the Twentieth Century, edited by Joseph T. O’Connell, Milton Israel, Willard G.
PUNJABI POPULAR RELIGION

Guru Nanak’s focus on nam simran as the way to liberation allowed for the early Sikh community to incorporate a variety of traditional cultural and religious customs and beliefs. Although Guru Gobind Singh’s creation of the Khalsa Panth can be seen as an attempt to unify the Sikh community and implement boundaries, the vast majority of Sikhs remained uninitiated and continued to identify as Sikh without ascribing to the Khalsa identity. Traditional practices, customs, and beliefs held a place in the everyday lives of Sikhs, even after the institution of the Khalsa. It was these practices that most often came under attack at the end of the nineteenth century as being contradictory to the “true” teachings of Sikhism, according to religious reformers.

The popular religious landscape of Punjab can be better understood through a brief overview of the demographics and economic structure of Punjab. The British government began taking a census in the nineteenth century, and the earliest census contains the best reflection of traditional Punjabi demographics. 87 percent of the population of Punjab lived in 34,000 villages, and because there were very few mercantile families, the vast majority of the population was agrarian. Because of this, much of life was dependant on seasonal cycles and the agricultural calendar, and the overall lifestyle and approach to religion among Punjabi villagers therefore differed in significant ways than the approach taken by the more urban, Khalsa Sikhs, even as late as the nineteenth century.

This inclusive and fluid religion, which can be deemed the “popular” religion of rural Punjabi Sikhs, was focused on pragmatic results. Whereas the Khalsa form of Sikhism emphasized the importance of textual analysis of the Adi Granth and other Sikh

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scriptures, the popular, rural, approach to religion was concerned with developing a relationship with deities who could intervene in their daily lives. The underlying belief theme in this overview of popular religion is the belief in supernatural forces thought to have the ability to intervene in human life, if and when they are properly worshipped.

SAKHI SARVAR

The Sikh worship of the Muslim saint (pir) Sakhi Sarvar is one example of a figure that is outside of the Khalsa boundaries of Sikh belief, yet held great importance in the vast majority of the Sikh community for much of its history. Sarvar was likely significant within rural life due to his ability to cure any illness or affliction. The narrative of his lifetime is filled with stories of him curing broken bones, leprosy, and even reviving the newborn son of a Sikh peasant. Naturally, a saint who was believed to possess such powers would be held in high regard amongst those who were often afflicted with illness or injury that prevented them from working in the fields and earning a living. Although Sarvar himself was Muslim, his followers belonged to all faiths, and his supernatural gifts were not considered to be exclusively helpful to Muslims. A British official briefly mentioned this phenomenon in a report on Muslim Saints, noting that worshippers of Sarvar were not exclusively Muslim, regardless of the religion of the saint himself:

The greatest shrine in the Western Punjab is that of Sakhi Sarvar…Although the shrine is that of a Mohammedan…Men, women and children, Sikhs, Hindus and Mohammedans alike, come from all districts in the Punjab. There are traditions to suit each, and all are welcomed by the Mohammedan servants of the shrine…I will not, however, dwell much on Sakhi Sarvar, although he is the greatest personage of the Indus Valley, because so much has been written about him already…

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These few sentences illustrate some important points about the role of this miracle saint in the daily lives of Punjabis. O’Brien comments that people of all faiths come to the shrine to pay respects and pray to Sakhi Sarvar, although he is identified as a Muslim saint. This highlights the inclusive and fluid approach to religion and religious expression traditionally found in Punjab. Because no clear boundaries were in place, it was not seen as unusual for people of many faiths to worship saints from a variety of religious traditions alongside each other. The author also notes that there are “traditions to suit each” and that Sarvar is “the greatest personage of the Indus Valley.” In fact, O’Brien fails to go into depth about this figure because the saint is so well known. These two statements imply that the worship of Sakhi Sarvar was so established in the religious landscape that each religious group had developed unique ways in which to worship him, and that even amongst foreigners, greater detail is not necessary.

A description of the most important Sakhi Sarvar shrine, given by Oberoi, further demonstrates the inclusivity of religious communities within Punjab. He notes that unlike the clear architecture found in many shrines of the “great” traditions (Hindu, Muslim and Sikh shrines), the architecture of this particular shrine appears to be loosely constructed, “according to the devotees’ conception of what was to be counted as sacred design.”\(^\text{27}\) As a result, the icons, space, and design found within the shrine contain elements of the three great traditions of Punjab. For example, what is worshipped as the tomb of Sakhi Sarvar is only steps away from a shrine to Guru Nanak, one building houses an image of Bhairava (a Hindu incarnation of Shiva), and nearby holy spots are associated with Ali Murtaza, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad. As O’Brien noted above, pieces of

\(^{27}\) Oberoi, *Popular Saints*, 369.
all traditions are represented, and there is something for members of all faiths. Sakhi Sarvar is not the only example of popular religion found in the Sikh community, however. The worship of Devi, the Hindu incarnation of the goddess, was traditionally a very important aspect of Sikh religious expression, and was one of the most commonly attacked during the Singh Sabha movement as evidence of the decline of Sikhism.

**DEVI**

In the Hindu tradition, Devi is the creative, active, and powerful female force of the universe. In mythology, she is often portrayed as the “creator and queen of the cosmos…[who] oversees or performs directly the three primary cosmic functions of creation, preservation, and destruction.” Like many Hindu deities, Devi takes on a variety of incarnations, each of which is seen to have specific stories, powers, and ways of worship. One such incarnation popular in rural Punjab, and widely worshipped by Sikhs, is Sitala Devi, the Cool One, and the goddess of disease, specifically smallpox. Because it was widely believed that her wrath caused outbreaks of smallpox, a variety of rituals and beliefs centered around keeping the goddess happy and gaining her favor after an epidemic struck. For example, once smallpox began to spread in a village, it was considered favorable to give offerings to mules, the vehicle of Sitala. Because she is naturally the “Cool One,” smallpox was seen to be a result of her anger heating her and causing an outbreak of the disease. As a result, many other rituals associated with smallpox involve attempting to cool the affected ones, and symbolically cool Sitala Devi’s anger.

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...dropping of water, milk, and curd during the ritual cure was evidently to cool Sitala Devi. On being cooled she was no longer dangerous and once again became benevolent and forgiving. In her origin myths, Sitala is said to be born of cooled ashes and accordingly by nature she was cool and continually sought coolness from her worshippers.\textsuperscript{30}

It is not difficult to understand why a goddess who was thought to have the power to both inflict and cure smallpox, a deadly disease, would have an important role in rural religious belief. Because Sitala Devi liked to be cool, and keeping her cool prevented outbreaks of smallpox, many daily rituals were designed to appease her, and shrines to her were found in almost every town and village. Within the household, she was worshipped with cold food and cold water, and her image was often kept behind water pots in an attempt to prevent her from inflicting disease on the family.\textsuperscript{31}

\textbf{CLAN DEITIES}

Sakhi Sarvar, a Muslim \textit{pir}, and Devi, the Hindu goddess, were both important “non-Sikh” figures in the daily lives of the Sikh peasantry. A final category of supernatural forces played a role in the religious lives of the community: village and family spirits. In an army recruitment manual written by a British official, the practice of ancestor worship among both elite Sikhs and Sikh peasants was described:

The worship of the sainted dead, though contrary to the injunctions of Gobind Singh, is universal among Jats [an elite militaristic caste highly recruited by the British army], whether Sikhs, Sultanis or Hindus. Small shrines to \textit{pitrs} or ancestors will be found all over the fields, and there generally is a large one to the \textit{Jathera} or common ancestor of the clan.\textsuperscript{32}

The official expresses some surprise that this practice continues to go on among Sikhs, despite the fact that Guru Gobind Singh directly denounced it. This attitude is common

\textsuperscript{30} Oberoi, \textit{Popular Saints}, 375.
\textsuperscript{31} Oberoi, \textit{Construction of Religious Boundaries}, 165.
among British observers of the Sikh community, and will be discussed in great detail in the next chapter.

It is also significant to this argument that the Jat caste, specifically, is noted to universally engage in ancestor worship. Although the Jat caste often took a more relaxed approach to their outward Sikh identity, they were thought to be inherently Sikh, and the majority of Khalsa Sikhs were from the Jat caste. The fact that Bingley observed that ancestor worship was prominent among the Jat Sikhs suggests that even the higher caste Khalsa Sikhs still considered traditional religious and cultural customs to be important and relevant to their daily lives.

A common Jat god is Bhoomia, a spirit who protected the land on which a village was settled. Traditionally, a shrine was built for Bhoomia on the spot where the village was founded, and a variety of rituals were performed to keep him happy in exchange for protection of the community. He was given offerings upon a marriage or the birth of a son, and worshipped at harvest time for a fruitful crop. It was believed that he would violently punish anyone who offended him, and therefore it was in the best interest of the village community to keep him happy. Spirits like Bhoomia were common, and important figures in village religion throughout Punjab. Oberoi suggests that such gods were more relevant to the daily lives of rural Sikhs than they would be to those in urban areas, due to the agrarian way of life found in the non-urban villages:

[village gods] ensured solidarity among villagers, protected residents from disease, evil, misfortunes, and threats from the outside world; they also had a function to perform both in life-cycle rituals and the agrarian cycle, particularly at the time of harvest and sowing of crops. For average Sikhs living in rural tracts, the local god was far more important that the distant universal God acknowledged by Sikh texts. The average Sikh would
experience god in his day-to-day life and think of the village as belonging to the local god, i.e. Bhoomia. 33

The worship of Hindu deities, village and clan deities, and Muslim *pirs* were traditionally common features of the religious landscape for both Sikhs and non-Sikhs in Punjab. It clear that figures associated with day-to-day life held great importance among the Sikh community, the vast majority of which were of agrarian, peasant castes and lived in rural Punjabi villages. Alongside their Sikh beliefs, Punjabi Sikhs also turned to a wide variety of sacred and, not exclusively Sikh, resources when faced with existential dilemmas, such as infertility, illness and agricultural needs.

Until this point I have discussed the nature of Sikh identity as a fluid religious identity. Even after the creation of the Khalsa Panth the last years of the seventeenth century, the dominant and traditional form of Sikhism was inclusive, diverse, and reliant on old traditions. This approach to Sikh identity is often overlooked in academia in favor of the Khalsa form of Sikhism. It is important to understand, however, that the vast majority of Sikhs did not ascribe to the Khalsa identity, and even through the late nineteenth century, continued to participate in non-Khalsa religious traditions.

If the Sikh community did operate in the way that I have outlined here, how did Sikhism come to be regarded as a religion defined by strict and exclusive boundaries? I argue that the formation of the Singh Sabha movement, a Sikh “revivalist” movement, in the late nineteenth century was the cause of this perception of the Sikh community. Started and perpetuated by urban Sikh elite, this movement aimed to create religious boundaries, strictly define the religion, and give the community a distinctive religious identity. In the next chapter, I will demonstrate that the that the “Sikh identity” as defined

by scholars and Sikh elite is largely the result of this reform movement, which sought to establish religious boundaries with the intention of isolating Sikhism from other Indian religions, thus creating a uniform community of believers.
CHAPTER TWO

THE BRITISH, THE SINGH SABHAS, AND THE SIKHS

Throughout Sikh history the majority of the Sikh Panth consisted of individuals with a variety of religious and social identities based on their villages, lineages, castes, and religions. In the late nineteenth century, the Singh Sabha reform movement sought to end the diversity of traditions included in the Panth and create a uniform and exclusive religious community based on the Khalsa identity. The motivation behind this movement was primarily a perceived decline in Sikhism and Sikh practice within the Sikh Panth. In this chapter, I argue that Sikhism was actually not in “decline” during the colonial rule of India, as is often suggested. Rather, this narrative was constructed by Christian missionaries and British observers who felt that the purity of Sikhism was being tainted by Hindu rituals. This belief was carried into the elite, educated Sikh class that developed under British rule, and ultimately resulted in the formation of the Singh Sabha movement, and the acceptance of the Khalsa identity as the “pure” form of Sikhism.

The British newcomers to the Indian religious landscape brought with them their own conceptions of what constitutes a religion and a religious community. In their dealings with Khalsa Sikhs, through the army and other social interactions within urban centers, the British came to favor Khalsa Sikhs, viewing their religion as moral, logical, and text-based, in other words, similar to their own. Many aspects of the Khalsa closely paralleled western religions, further enforcing the perception of the Khalsa form as the pure form, and the non-Khalsa practices observed within the community as evidence of decline. This view is expressed most strongly in the writings of Max Macauliffe, the British Deputy Commissioner of the Punjab, who published a six-volume study of
Sikhism, as well as the first English translation of the Adi Granth. In the preface to his extensive *The Sikh Religion*, he describes the merits of Sikhism in language that suggests that Khalsa Sikhs are clearly the pure Sikhs, and Sikhism in its authentic form should be free of what many British viewed as Hindu practices:

To sum up some of the moral and political merits of the Sikh religion: It prohibits idolatry, hypocrisy, caste exclusiveness, the concremation of widows [*sati*], the immurement of women, the use of wine and other intoxicants, tobacco-smoking, infanticide, slander, pilgrimages to the sacred rivers and tanks of the Hindus; and it inculcates loyalty, gratitude for all favours received, philanthropy, justice, impartiality, truth, honesty, and all the moral and domestic virtues known to the holiest citizens of any country.\(^{34}\)

This summary clearly sets the Sikhs on a higher level than the Hindus, in the eyes of Macauliffe, and many other British observers. Infanticide, *sati*, idolatry, and the caste system were all markers of Hindu practice, and the lack of such practices in “orthodox” Sikhism clearly set them apart, and above, the Hindu community. It follows that all Sikhs who did not ascribe to the Khalsa identity were perceived by colonialists to be lax in their religious observance, and therefore that Sikhism appeared to be quickly “declining” into Hinduism. As we will see, the Singh Sabha movement was born from these assumptions, and sought to separate Sikhism from other religions, namely Hinduism.

As discussed in the previous chapter, prior to the nineteenth century, the majority of Sikhs had little need or interest in distinguishing themselves from Hindus. Members of both religions venerated the same holy men (*sants*), shared similar ideas regarding time, space, and holiness, ate similar diets, spoke the same languages, attended the same festivals and underwent similar rites of passage. In fact, the overlap between the two

religious identities was so great, and of such little concern to the two communities, that early colonial census-takers had a difficult time distinguishing between Hindus and Sikhs, and were often frustrated by the lack of clear boundaries. While recording the census in 1881, a British census taker in the Punjab wrote:

…on the border land where these great faiths meet, and especially among the ignorant peasantry…the various observances and beliefs which distinguish the followers of the several faiths in their purity are so strangely blended and intermingled, that it is often impossible to say that one prevails rather than the other, or to decide in what category the people shall be classed.

The inability of the census taker to distinguish between the religious communities in Punjab indicates not only the lack of established, exclusive boundaries between the followers of the two religions, but also a lack of the outward symbols considered to be vital markers of the Sikh identity today. The blending and intermingling described by this census taker was, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, the norm among the “ignorant peasantry”, or the rural and village communities that constituted the majority of Punjab’s population. However, the attitude of the observer echoes many colonial reports of the time. He obviously finds that the “purity” of religious traditions are diluted and “strangely intermingled” – a feeling that is also found at the core of the ‘Sikhism in decline’ narrative within scholarship that deals with this time period.

This chapter will explore the colonial period of Sikh history, and the ways in which colonial factors helped to shape the form of Sikhism commonly accepted as dominant within academia today. I will begin by describing the new elite group of Sikhs that arose under British rule. Educated within the western education system, and largely

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concentrated in urban centers, this new class of Sikhs had the most contact with western ideas and interpretations of religion and religious communities. It should not be surprising, given these factors, that the leaders of the Singh Sabha movement came from this group. I will then briefly outline the context in which the Singh Sabha movement developed. Surrounded by foreigners and colonial rulers who perceived a disconnect between the “true” (Khalsa) form of Sikhism and the practices of the majority of the Sikh Panth, many of the urban, western educated Punjabis also began to see that their religion was losing some of its purity. However, the fluidity of religious practice within the Sikh community was not indicative of a decline, or loss of purity, in the Sikh faith. Rather, this traditional approach to religious identity had historically been the norm. What had changed was the religious, political, and social landscape, and by exploring this changing context, we will be able to understand the importance of the Singh Sabha movement. I will close the chapter by outlining some of the new traditions and ideas that the Singh Sabha movement brought to the Sikh Panth.

THE NEW SIKH ELITE

At the end of the nineteenth century, a shift was beginning to take place within Indian social structures, and, in turn, inside the Sikh community. A new social class was beginning to form, made up of a variety of individuals from many castes. Whereas caste had traditionally been a localized form of social organization, under British rule there emerged an urban-centered high status social group to which membership could (theoretically) be acquired irrespective of one’s caste. The key to being a part of this group was to take advantage of the western education system, and attend English schools. Naturally, only those who were already in privileged upper classes and living near such a
school could afford this education, a fact that still alienated much of the peasant and rural classes. However, this type of social class was new to Indian social structures, and proved to deeply influence a wide variety of changes that took place under colonial rule.

The western education system, introduced first by the East India Company, and later institutionalized by the British government, quickly became an essential foundation for the economic and social success of Indians. As Sayers points out, “If an Indian wanted to work for the British East India Company or hold even a local government appointment he required a Western education.”\(^\text{36}\) This need for a western education resulted in the establishment of a number of new schools in important urban centers which, as we will see, became crucial in shaping the worldview of those who attended. Bernard Cohn emphasizes the importance of this education system for both the colonial state, as well as its Indian citizens when he states that: “With the growth of public education and its rituals, it fostered official beliefs in how things are and how they ought to be. The schools became the crucial civilizing institutions and sought to produce moral and productive citizens.”\(^\text{38}\) By fostering these beliefs on how things ought to be, according to the British point of view, the new education system had a strong hand in the shaping of opinions regarding the nature of religion, and what a true religion should look like.

Some of the ideas and theories that dominated European scholarship at the time also helped to shape the views of the new Sikh intelligentsia. These ideas, mainly those about history and evolution, influenced the way that the newly educated elite began to

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approach their own history and religion. Societal evolution, the idea that a society was a clearly defined entity “that evolved through time driven by inherent forces of change”\textsuperscript{39}, as well as Max Müller’s emphasis on the comparative study of religion, were dominant trends in Europe as western schools began opening in India. Müller, who spent much of his time dealing with the textual heritage of India, felt that the scientific comparison of religion would lead to higher knowledge due to the large amount of information it required.\textsuperscript{40} This approach, taken with the theory of societal evolution, led to the idea that “religions were clearly defined entities with origins in time and space, with specific trajectories of development ending in decline and extinction.”\textsuperscript{41} These ideas are clearly found in the rhetoric of the Singh Sabha movement, demonstrating the effects of the new education system and its ideas on the educated Indian classes.

It was not only through scholarship that conceptions of religion were being shaped. European understandings of religion had undergone a shift in the recent past, and this had an effect on their interpretations of Indian religions as well. Peter Harrison’s in-depth study on post-Reformation conceptions of religion in England has provided valuable insight into the shifting views on what constituted a religion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – views that would be carried on into the British experiences and opinions of other religions. During this time period, there was an increasing importance placed on creeds and catechisms as a central aspect of religious life for English Protestants. This shift “…shows how ‘religion’, now imagined to be a set of beliefs, came

\textsuperscript{39} Torkel Brekke, \textit{Makers of Modern Indian Religion in the Late Nineteenth Century} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.), 19.
\textsuperscript{40} Brekke \textit{Makers of Modern Religion}, 22.
\textsuperscript{41} Brekke \textit{Makers of Modern Religion}, 22.
to displace ‘faith’ and ‘piety.’”\textsuperscript{42} This change in the perception of religion is evident in the large body of literature that aimed to “encapsulate in propositional form the essence of ‘the Christian Religion’, ‘the Protestant Religion’, ‘the true Catholic Religion’, or just simply ‘Religion’….almost without exception, they present as the substance of Christianity articles of belief.”\textsuperscript{43} These pamphlets, religious almanacs, and household guides not only prescribed new models of Christian behavior, they also “…played a central role in setting apart the Protestant religion from magic, paganism, and Catholicism, with its ‘idols’, sacramental ‘magic’, and ‘priestly ritual’.”\textsuperscript{44} In creating the conception of propositional religion, clearly distinct, self-contained, and defined by sets of beliefs, religions could now be compared with one another. The category of religion could now also be separated from other spheres of life, such as politics or economics. This secularization of religion in England and surrounding countries had long, and wide-reaching effects on the British perceptions of other, non-Christian religions across the globe. As we will see, these ideas were the basis for British conceptions of Indian religions, and played an important role in the later construction of Khalsa Sikh identity.

**BRITISH CONCEPTIONS OF HINDUISM**

Although many British commentators acknowledged the sophistication of the Sanskrit language, the Vedas, and the knowledge of Brahmans, they were disgusted by the actual manifestations of religious practice among the wider Indian population. Idolatry within Hinduism, as was the case with Catholicism in Europe, was quickly identified as

\textsuperscript{42} Peter Harrison, ‘*Religion’ and the Religions in the English Enlightenment*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 20.

\textsuperscript{43} Harrison, *Religions in the English Enlightenment*, 25.

\textsuperscript{44} Tony Ballantyne, *Between Colonialism and Diaspora: Sikh Cultural Formations in an Imperial World*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 43.
evidence of Hinduism’s heathen nature. Idol worship itself was seen as backwards, and evil, and as William Ward wrote in the introduction to his book on Hinduism:

> It is very difficult, perhaps, to speak decisively on the precise origin of any of the *Ancient Systems of Idolatry*; but not so difficult to trace idolatry itself to certain natural causes, and to prove, that the heathen deities owe their origin to the common darkness and depravity of men; who, rejecting the doctrine of the divine unity, and considering God as too great or too spiritual to be the object of human worship, chose such images as their darkness or their passions suggested. Hence idolatry has arisen out of the circumstances common to all heathen nations…"45

These comments on idolatry give some insight into the general ideas regarding the nature of religion from a European view. If idol worship was evidence of the “common darkness and depravity of men,” it would follow that those who worshipped idols were depraved heathens, who were too backwards to comprehend God, and therefore had given in to their darkest passions. Indeed, Ward goes on to say:

> As it respects the Hindoos…the fact is, that they have still, for popular use, a system of morals to seek: some of their idols are actually personifications of vice; and the formularies used before the images, so far from conveying any moral sentiment, have the greatest possible tendency to corrupt the mind with the love of riches and pleasure.46

This echoes sentiments typically found in European observations of Indian religion and society – the glorified past, which has been lost throughout time. Hinduism has the Vedas, “a system of morals,” but Hindus had failed to uphold them and were now corrupt “with the love of riches and pleasures.” Their temples, once home to the wise Brahmans who could read Sanskrit were now sites of depraved worship, which Ward described as “the last state of degradation to which human nature can be driven.”47 Given these

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opinions of Hinduism and Hindu practice, it appears that whatever morality could once be found within the religion was so far gone that it was unsalvageable.

SIKHISM AS THE INDIAN PROTESTANTISM

Sikhism, on the other hand, was a religion that seemed to still have a chance of being saved. From the first contact between the British and the Sikh community, the Khalsa community was upheld as a religious community that was rational, text-based, and in its “pure” form, was devoid of idolatry. As Macauliffe noted in an earlier quote, Khalsa Sikhs were seen to uphold “justice, impartiality, truth…and all the moral and domestic virtues known to the holiest citizens of any country.” In other words, European Protestants recognized traits that were valued in their religion as being important to Sikhs as well. Tony Ballantyne deems these traits as “points of recognition” between the two religious communities. “Given the prominence of gurdwaras, Guru Granth Sahib, granthis, and the sangat in Sikh practice, British observers had not problem in viewing Sikhism as a “religion” because these structures could be translated as places of worship, as scripture, as priests, and as a congregation – that is, as key elements of any ‘religious system.’” It was not only that Sikhism was recognized as a complete “religious system,” but more specifically that Sikhism was seen as being parallel to European’s own, Protestant, religion.

An evangelical essayist and judicial commissioner of Punjab, Robert Cust, wrote an early biography of Guru Nanak, in which he draws clear connections between the familiar Protestant faith and the Sikh religion. Ballantyne quotes him as praising Nanak for working to “…reform the lives and religion of his countrymen, to break through the

48 Macauliffe, Sikh Religion, xxiii.
49 Ballantyne, Colonialism and Diaspora, 44.
tyranny of Priestcraft, outward Ritual, and Caste." Throughout his book, he compares Guru Nanak to Luther and Calvin, a religious reformer who wanted to remove religious practice from priestly power and idolatry. Although Cust did not believe that Nanak was entirely successful in isolating Sikhism from other religious traditions, he felt that the colonial government should aid Sikhs by “promoting a clear and systemized vision of the “religion” and endorsing only correct forms of social practice.” However, in separating and compartmentalizing religion, these observers isolated what they recognized as “religion” from the other complex social structures at work in the daily lives of Punjabi Sikhs, such as kinship ties and traditional non-Khalsa forms of practice.

Max Macauliffe was another British observer of Indian religion who saw threads of Protestant religion in the Khalsa form of Sikhism. In his lecture entitled “A Lecture on the Sikh Religion and Its Advantages to the State,” Macauliffe stressed that Sikhism and the Protestant religion were both born out of the same religious reform that swept across Europe and India at the same time.

After the mental darkness that Gurdas described, a great cyclic wave of reformation overspread both continents [Europe and Asia]. In Europe most religious works were written in Latin, in India they were in Sanskrit. In both continents all learning was in the hands of the preisthood, and this admittedly led to serious abuses. During the very period that Wickliffe and Luther and Calvin in Europe were warning men of the errors that had crept into Christianity, men like Kabir and Guru Nanak were denouncing priestly hypocrisy, and idolatry in India.  

50 Cust, quoted in Ballantyne, Colonialism and Diaspora, 47.
51 Ballantyne, Colonialism and Diaspora, 47.
In Macauliffe’s eyes, Sikhism’s monotheism, rational and text-based religious structure, rejection of caste and priestly power resembled the English reformation’s rejection of Catholicism. The circumstances under which Sikhism was created were similar to those which lead to the turning away from Catholicism and the Pope in Europe. Macauliffe insists, in his lecture, that the state needed to protect these distinct, non-Hindu, traits of the Sikh community. The Khalsa Sikhs, more specifically, the Jat Sikhs, were of great benefit to the colonial state as masculine, martial, and moral subjects:

There is no doubt that Sikh is at his best as a soldier; he makes an excellent agriculturist...as a soldier under military discipline, he is hard to beat, and the retired Sikh officer and soldier is generally a very valuable member of the village community and renders very efficient assistance to the district officer...our Government should take advantage of every legitimate opportunity offered to promote the cause of Sikhism.53

One way that British promoted the Khalsa identity was through the recruitment of Khalsa-identified Sikhs into the British Army. The Khalsa identity was seen as moral and so closely related to the religion of the colonists that only Sikhs who could be identified as members of the Khalsa were recruited into the Army. Punjabi Sikhs (specifically Jats) were recruited into the British Army in higher numbers than almost any other Indian group. In order to be considered Sikh, according to a recruitment manual by R.W. Falcon, one had to maintain the external symbols of the Khalsa. “Singhs, the members of the Khalsa; these are the only Sikhs who are reckoned as true Sikhs...the best practical test of a true Sikh is to ascertain whether [in] calling himself a Sikh he wears uncut hair and abstains from smoking tobacco.”54

54 Falcon, quoted in Ballantyne, Colonialism and Diaspora, 65.
These two requirements are both markers of a Khalsa Sikh, in particular the uncut hair, *kesh*, which is one of the five Ks required to be worn by members of the Panth. According to Falcon and many other British officials, it was only these Sikhs who would be the true warriors, any others who claimed to be Sikh, but did not maintain the outward symbols of the Khalsa were to be avoided by recruitment officers, as their type of Sikhism was “very diluted by Hinduism.”55 By maintaining this strict insistence on the Khalsa Panth as being the only valuable form of Sikhism, those within the colonial government “…identified the fastidious maintenance of religious identity as central to the esprit de corps and general effectiveness of the Indian Army, a force that was increasingly reliant on the ability and loyalty of its Sikh soldiers.”56

Throughout the British experience with Indian religion, colonial observers heavily favored the Khalsa Panth. In Sir John Malcom’s *Sketch of the Sikhs*, written in 1812, he describes the Sikhs of Punjab as an “extraordinary race”57 and spends much of his book quoting the Adi Granth and highlighting the moral character of Sikhs, as compared with Hindus. The importance that many British observers placed on religious texts is emphasized when, speaking of Nanak, Malcom notes that: “He [Nanak] admitted the truth of the ancient Vedas, but contended that the Hindu religion had been corrupted, by the introduction of a plurality of gods, with the worship of images; which led their minds astray from that great eternal Being, to whom adoration should alone be paid.”58 The underlying sentiment of this statement is found throughout British accounts of Indian religions. Malcom’s observation that Nanak knew the truth that was contained in the

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55 Falcon, quoted in Ballantyne, *Colonialism and Diaspora*, 65.
56 Ballantyne, *Colonialism and Diaspora*, 66.
58 Malcom, *Sketch of the Sikhs*, 166.
Vedas, but acknowledged the corruption of a textual religion by idolatry is a common observation.

European observers of Sikhism were focused on what the religious community ought to be like, based on the Khalsa Panth, with whom they had the most contact and viewed as similar to their own religious community, as opposed to the actual practices and expressions of Sikhism within the wider community. They focused on the texts, such as the *rahit-nama* (the Sikh code of conduct), and noticed that the majority of Sikhs did not, in fact, follow all the rules laid out by what the Europeans took to be their sacred texts delineating the proper way of life for a Sikh. As H.H. Wilson lamented in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society in 1847, the reverence, or worship, of the Adi Granth as an object, as opposed to the careful following of its message was evidence of the Sikh decline in moral and religious practice. The apparent disregard for the moral obligations described in the *Granth*, according to Wilson, demonstrated the downward spiral of Sikhism: “…the moral declamations of the contributor to the sacred Granth, have led to as great, if not greater, laxity of conduct, and as utter a disregard of both religious and moral obligations, as the superstitious belief and multiplied ceremonial of the Brahmans.”

The fact that there is a sacred book for the Khalsa, which is worshipped rather than read and followed, appears to be heartbreaking for this author, and in fact, he adds that “the Sikh religion scarcely deserves the name of a religious faith” due to the moral laxity of its followers.

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60 HH Wilson, *Institutions of the Sikhs*, 58.
The combination of new scholarship regarding the nature of religion and the favorable opinions of Khalsa Sikhs promoted by the British led to the “Sikhism in decline” narrative that is still prevalent in Sikh scholarship today. Khalsa Sikhs slowly began to adopt this narrative, viewing any non-Khalsa practices or beliefs as corruptions of the purity of their faith. Viewing their religion as superior, and on a high level of “evolution” than Hinduism likely affected this new interpretation of the traditional practices found amongst the wider, rural, Sikh community. Distinguishing Sikhism from Hinduism in order to remain highly favored and respected by colonial rulers, as well as to save their religion from the extinction described by educators became an important task for the new elite.

“THE DECLINE OF SIKHISM”

The Sikh decline into Hinduism is a recurring narrative throughout Sikh scholarship and British observations of religion during the colonial period. This period is often described as a time of crisis for the Sikh community, during which their religion was threatened by a “lapse into idolatry”. For the British, as well as the new Sikh intelligentsia, Hinduism was a lesser religion, full of social inequalities, horrific practices, and idol worship, which according to British observers, was the worst, and crudest manifestation of religious practice. Christian missionaries in the early nineteenth century often depicted Hindus’ idol worship as the biggest obstacle in the “missionary’s crusade for the sweeping religious transformation of India.”61 As we have seen, however, many Hindu practices and Sikh observances overlapped within rural and village communities, and for the majority of the Sikh population, neither religious tradition was seen to be superior.

Within the class described above and colonial circles, however, the decline of Sikhism into Hinduism came to be seen as a real threat to the Sikh community. Two observations made by Macauliffe in the *Calcutta Review* give a clear picture of the sentiment at the time:

...the Sikhs of the Punjab have now completely relapsed into idolatry, and, expecting that they still wear long hair, retain a few other external marks of the Sikhs religion, and pay a reverence to the Granth which they carry to adoration, their worship in all respects resembles that of the Hindus. They adore idols, visit Hindu places of pilgrimage...The Hindu corruptions of the religion of Nanak and Gobind are now bitterly deplored by all educated and intelligent Sikhs.  

This feeling echoes that of the census taker quoted at the beginning of this chapter: the intermingling of religious practice had resulted in the loss of purity of the greater religions and – something that, as Macauliffe is quick to point out – is “deplored” by intelligent and educated Sikhs. In making this distinction, he illustrates the shift described above. The intelligent and educated Sikhs, likely the urban Khalsa Sikhs, educated in the British system, are described as being aware of the “Hindu corruptions” and are disgusted by them. He clearly holds these Sikhs in high regard by insinuating that the non-Khalsa practices found within the community are among the uneducated and morally lax Sikhs.

This view is further reflected in the writing of Major Leech, a senior British official who expressed his surprise at the mingling of Sikhs and Hindus at a popular Hindu pilgrimage site near the Ganges River:

It will appear extraordinary that the Sikhs, who are forbid to worship at a Hindoo Mandar [shrine], should frequent Hindoo places of pilgrimage; but such is the case. Sikh pilgrims to the Ganges at Hurdwar have for many

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years past been increasing, and nothing is more probable than the Sikhs gradually re-adopting many more Hindoo observances.\footnote{R Leech, “Notes on the Religion of the Sikhs, being a Notice of their Prayers, Holidays, and Shrines.” \textit{Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal} no. 162 (1845), 393}

From both Macauliffe and Leech’s comments, it is clear that the perceived movement toward “idolatry” and “Hindoo observances” are evidence of the fall of Sikhism. The fact that Leech remarks that Sikhs are forbidden to worship at Hindu shrines tells us that he has already concluded that the Khalsa form of Sikhism is the pure form, as the Khalsa is the only group that is forbidden to worship in non-Sikh temples. Macauliffe also notes that Sikhs have “now lapsed” into idolatry, insinuating that it is a new development (which, as I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, it is not), and taken as evidence of Sikhism falling from its pure and authentic, Khalsa form.

This type of thinking led to the claim that Sikhism was in decline and the Sikh community would shortly be absorbed into the Hindu community, losing the Sikh tradition altogether. For western observers of Indian religion, it was clear that a true Sikh should not worship at a Hindu shrine, and vice versa. Macauliffe also expresses his shock at the amount of Sikh pilgrims at the Hardwar shrine. He recounts one festival, in which a hundred thousand Sikhs participated by bathing in the Ganges, leading to massive deaths from cholera that was in the water. Although he notes that many Hindus also died, he laments that it would have been a great gain to the world “…if the one hundred thousand Sikhs who attended it [the festival] possessed such a very elementary knowledge of their religion as to know that their action was reprobated by all their holy Gurus.”\footnote{Macauliffe \textit{Sikh Religion}, p. xxi} This short observation reveals a larger theme in much of Macauliffe’s writings. He notes that many Sikh lives could have been saved if only they were taught about their own religion,
presumably from the British point of view. This brings us back to the census taker who expressed his frustration at the “ignorant peasantry”. If these rural and uneducated (by colonial definitions) villagers just knew how they were supposed to practice their religion, they would be able to save Sikhism, and as Macauliffe pointed out, save lives as well. He goes on to give a vivid description of the “boa constrictor”-like qualities of Hinduism, a religion that, according to him, devour everything in its path:

Truly wonderful are the strength and vitality of the Hindu religion. Hinduism is like the boa-constrictor of the Indian forests. When a petty enemy appears to worry it, it winds round its opponent, crushes it in its folds, and finally causes it to disappear in its capacious interior. In this way, many centuries ago, Hinduism in its own ground disposed of Buddhism...and in this way it is disposing of the reformed and once hopeful religion of Nanak...the still comparatively young religion is making a vigorous struggle for its life, but its ultimate destruction and assimilation in the body of the huge and resistless leviathan is inevitable.\(^65\)

For Macauliffe, as well as many of his peers, it is clear that the lack of religious boundaries between Hindus and Sikhs would inevitably lead to the extinction of a religion that they had come to respect. This powerful imagery captures the emotionally charged sentiment of the time. Clearly, the “intelligent and educated” Sikhs who were also a part of this social and academic discussion felt that something needed to be done in order to save their religion from the horrible extinction described by Macauliffe.

**THE CREATION OF THE SINGH SABHAS**

The presence of the British and their conception of religion clearly impacted the ways in which many Sikhs began to interpret Sikhism, and the creation of the Singh Sabha movement grew out of this new context. Harbans Singh lists three motivating factors for the creation of the Singh Sabha movement, all of which I link to the presence of new colonial ideas and conceptions regarding religion:

1) an awareness born of the general awakening in the atmosphere that Sikhism as it was commonly practiced was a corruption of what it originally was, 2) a reaction to what was happening in the other Indian traditions, and 3) defensiveness generated as a reaction to Christian proselyzation.\(^\text{66}\)

The first of these three reasons reflects the point of view discussed in detail above: that Sikhism was declining and retreating into Hinduism. This clearly derives from the European conception of religion. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Sikhism, as it originally was, was actually a myriad of practices and rituals sharing the common thread of Guru Nanak and his teachings. When the British rulers and Christian missionaries began to observe Indian religious traditions, they saw what they identified as a discrepancy between what was written in Sikh texts and practiced by elite Khalsa Sikhs and their own observations of popular Sikh practice among the non-elite Sikhs. Assuming the original form of Sikhism was to be found in sacred textual sources, and among the elite and orthodox Khalsa community, the foreigners concluded that the majority of Sikhs no longer practiced religion in the correct way, and therefore Sikhism was in crisis and on the verge of extinction.

Sikhism was not the only religious community inclined to take a critical look at itself and to begin a reformation movement in response to the European presence on the subcontinent. Brekke outlines in detail the changes that took place in the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain communities during this period as well, concluding:

At the end of the nineteenth century Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains were in the process of redefining what it meant to belong to their communities. They did this inside the parameters laid down by the English language, by

European ideas of religion, European ideas of history, and European ideas of societies and nations.\(^{67}\)

The influential Hindu reform movement Arya Samaj emerged during this period as well (1875) and focused on the infallibility of the ancient Hindu texts, the Vedas in particular, looking to them in order to being Hinduism back to the way it “originally was,” according to the texts. The result was a new definition of Hinduism as an all-India community that traced its beliefs to the Vedas, as opposed to the previous understanding of a variety of traditions, highly individualized and localized.

In the early days of the Arya Samaj, membership included many Sikhs who would later become leaders of the Singh Sabha Movement, such as Bhai Ditt Singh, and Bhai Maya Singh.\(^{68}\) Arya Samaj leaders viewed Sikhism as a Hindu movement, which “…had sought to create a purified Hinduism devoid of idolatry, caste, and priestly dominance.”\(^{69}\)

In other words, they viewed Sikhism as an older Hindu reform movement with the same goals as the current Arya Samaj. However, it wasn’t long before Arya criticisms of Sikhism and Guru Nanak as inferior to Hinduism and the leader of the Samaj lead to these Sikhs leaving the group. Bhai Ditt Singh and many others who actively participated in the Samaj later became prominent leaders of the Lahore Singh Sabha, writing extensively on the differences between Hinduism and Sikhism, and strongly advocating the removal of any Hindu beliefs from the Sikh community.

The third factor that Singh cites motivation for the creation of the Singh Sabha movement is the presence of Christian missionaries in Punjab. This was an important


\(^{69}\) Jones, *Arya-Sikh Relations*, 459.
catalyst for the creation of the Singh Sabha, which brought identity and religious uniformity to the forefront of Sikh concerns. The first Christian mission in Punjab was established in 1839, and missionaries moved quickly throughout the state, converting Indians to their faith. According to census data, converts to Christianity rose from 3,912 in 1881 to 38,000 by 1901.\textsuperscript{70} Not only did the Christian missionaries introduce new religious ideas, but they also brought with them a new tool for religious propagation that would later become crucial to the Singh Sabha: the printing press.

The Christian missionaries introduced the first printing press to Punjab and used it to print religious newspapers and pamphlets. They also established other institutions such as schools that implemented a western education system fused with a religious curriculum, and medical missions. Sikh reformers used this model as a pattern to shape their religious reform. The missionaries set a precedent for reformers and their vision of a uniform Sikhism. Some of the goals of the Singh Sabha movement involved making western education available to Sikh children and establishing Punjabi language newspapers, ideas likely borrowed from Christian missionaries and their conception of a religious community. Therefore, the presence of Christian missionaries not only inspired and motivated the Sikh need for reform, but it also contributed the conceptualization and form of the movement.

In examining the various reasons given for the formation of the Singh Sabha movement, it seems certain that changes in social and political environments, largely due to Europeans (specifically the British), encouraged some Sikhs to redefine their religion and their religious identity. The emphasis placed on the Khalsa as the source for pure

religious practice and belief encouraged reformers to more closely follow Guru Gobind Singh’s conceptions of Sikhism and the Khalsa Panth. As the last living Guru, the Sikh Panth could look to his conception of the community as a source for the ways in which they should shape their religion. In doing so, they were aiming to “purify” their religious community in a way that was not only favored by the British, but also consistent with one of the most important and revered Gurus of Sikh history. These factors, along with the new conceptions of the religious identity as exclusive and clearly defined, the new Sikh intelligentsia decided to hold a meeting, or sabha, to discuss the future of their religion.

In the next section we will look at the goals of the Singh Sabha movement, and the effect it had on the Sikh community.

**THE SINGH SABHA MOVEMENT**

Until this point we have discussed the nature of Sikh religious identity as fluid. It was accepted, for the majority of Sikh history, that a person could identify as a Sikh yet still worship village deities and participate in Hindu rituals. Even after the creation of the Khalsa Panth the last years of the seventeenth century, the dominant and traditional form of Sikhism was inclusive, diverse, and reliant on old, and local, traditions. In 1873, this began to change with the birth of the Singh Sabha movement. Faced with a changing political and social environment, and feeling threatened by the appearance of Christianity on the religious scene in the Punjab, the Sikh elite began to mobilize in an effort to strengthen both their community and their religious identity.

A *sabha* is an assembly of persons with common interests, and in India today it is commonly used to refer to a government office or organization. The Sikh leaders who were concerned about the future of their religion initiated the first Singh Sabha, or
gathering, in 1873 in Amritsar. Interestingly, this first meeting was composed of the more “conservative” Sikhs, who wished to strengthen the Sikh community by reviving the common practices of the pre-colonial era. This group was also concerned with the expansion of education among Sikhs and the defense of Sikhism against Christian and Muslim proselytization. They were not, however, concerned with the establishment of a uniform and distinct Sikh religious identity, rather, they were “comfortable with portraying Sikhs as a reformist element within greater Hinduism.” In other words, the Amritsar Singh Sabha was comprised of Sikhs who sought to maintain the more traditional forms of Sikhism and transmit the Sikh traditions in order to establish an identity that was representative of the inclusive Sikh community. They asserted that anyone who accepted the teachings of Guru Nanak was a Sikh, and the Khalsa form, therefore, was not yet seen as orthodox or pure.

This first meeting was attended by leading Sikh theologians, gyanis and bhaís (religious teachers and leaders), and aristocracy: a demographic that represented the higher castes. Because of the attendance of this group, one can see why the traditional approach to Sikh identity was supported. The leaders of this chapter were held in high regard because of their roles in traditional Sikhism. Gyanis and bhaís were highly respected religious figures because of the inclusive nature of the Sikh community. As more sabhas were established throughout Punjab, ideological differences amongst the many chapters caused a split between these traditional leaders and the newly educated elite Sikhs.

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72 See Barrier, Sikh Politics, 167 – 174.
In 1879, following internal disagreements within the Amritsar sabha, a new sabha was founded in Lahore and was made up of the new cultural elite, the “modern and progressive” thinkers, who had been educated within the new education system, and felt that the Khalsa form of Sikhism should be upheld as authentic Sikhism. Their ideology focused on purging the Sikh community of all non-Khalsa practices. For example, Gyani Ditt Singh, a former member of the Arya Samaj and a prominent leader of the Lahore Sabha, primarily focused on the traditional Sikh worship of Muslim Pir Sakhi Sarvar (discussed in the previous chapter), arguing that it undermined the Sikh faith. Ridding Sikhism of practices like these, in his opinion, would purify the religion and save it, in its authentic form, from extinction.

The central motivating factor of this Sabha was to distinguish Sikhism from Hinduism, and prevent Sikhism being absorbed by the Hindu tradition as predicted by British observers:

[the Lahore chapter felt that] the Sikh religion was in danger of extinction. The Khalsa Sikhs of the Lahore chapter reacted more vehemently to the danger of marriage outside the *panth*. They attacked the institution of caste, the claim of the existence of living gurus beyond the original ten, the reverence for *pirs*, *sants* and descendents of Nanak, as well as the worship of idols in any form. The Tat Khalsa viewed these customs as accretions to the Sikhism handed down by the gurus. Corruptions in the faith needed to be eradicated; in their view this was the goal of the Singh Sabha.

As the Singh Sabha movement spread, the views of the new Sikh elite began to take hold throughout the Sikh community. Using methods inspired by the Christian missionaries and promoting the Khalsa identity created by Guru Gobind Singh, the sabhas began to reach across village and kinship ties to push for a unique and codified identity unlike any

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73 See Barrier, *Sikh Politics*.
seen before within Sikhism. They created a vast network and by 1900 there were at least 116 Singh Sabha groups spread across Northern India, from Agra to Peshawar and Srinagar to Karachi.\textsuperscript{75} The sabhas began to challenge non-Khalsa Sikhs, who had traditionally been accepted parts of the Sikh community, and highlighting their non-Khalsa traits in an effort to marginalize and delegitimize them.

**THE CREATION OF AN IDENTITY**

In order to create this separate and uniform identity, there needed to be an emphasis on separate “Sikh history” that highlighted the struggles, symbols, and uniqueness of the Sikhs. Through this process, the sabhas used a reconstructed “past” to legitimate the need for a separate identity in the present. This strategy was common during this time period as a variety of groups and communities adjusted to colonial rule and attempted to set themselves apart from other groups. For the Singh Sabhas, it became a vital factor in building community solidarity and distinguishing the religion as unique, and separate from any other religious tradition. A large amount of Sikh historical literature grew from this process, including biographies on Gurus and Sikh martyrs, and pamphlets emphasizing past Sikh struggles and the importance of defending the faith as a community. The uniformity that the sabhas wished to create stigmatized non-Khalsa practices, rituals, and forms of worship amongst the community. In order to replace the popular traditions, a new set of traditions, histories, and stories had to be created:

The older forms of Sikhism were displaced forever and replaced by a series of inventions: the demarcation of Sikh sacred space by clearing holy shrines of Hindu icons and idols, the cultivation of Punjabi as the sacred language of the Sikhs, the foundation of cultural bodies exclusively for Sikh youth, the insertion of the anniversaries of the Sikh Gurus into the

\textsuperscript{75} Oberoi, *Ritual to Counter Ritual*, 149.
ritual and sacred calendar, and most importantly of all, the introduction of new life-cycle rituals.\textsuperscript{76}

All of these “inventions” were tools intended to assert the uniqueness of Sikhism and emphasize the belief that Sikhs were not Hindus, Muslims, or any combination of the two – that Sikhism was its own true, revealed religion. Through these new religious markers of faith, the Singh Sabha movement aimed to rid Sikhism of non-Khalsa beliefs and practices, and created boundaries that defined the community, making it easier for outsiders to identify the Sikh Panth. Of the above list provided by Oberoi, I will address three of the changes made by the Singh Sabha in order to briefly demonstrate the effect that this movement had on the Sikh community.

**Punjabi as a Sacred Language**

The first change implemented by the Singh Sabhas was the cultivation of Punjabi as a sacred language for the Sikhs. This effort parallels other Indian religious reform movements that took place in the late nineteenth century. The languages spoken in Punjab during this time ranged from Hindi and Urdu to a variety of Punjabi dialects with no religious connotation.\textsuperscript{77} In the 1860s reformist Hindus began campaigning for Hindi to be the dominant language of northern India, and elite Muslims declared their sacred language to be Urdu. The Sikhs, however, did not have any such claim on an official or sacred language of their religion. Their sacred book, the *Adi Granth*, was written in a variety of languages, however, the text was all in Gurmukhi script, a common script used when writing Punjabi. Partly based on this, the leaders of the Singh Sabha movement adopted Punjabi, written in Gurmukhi, as the sacred language of the Sikh Panth.

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\textsuperscript{76} Oberoi, *Ritual to Counter Ritual*, 149.

This set off a chain of events that resulted in the Singh Sabha opening schools specializing in teaching Gurmukhi, developing new Gurmukhi fonts for the printing presses, producing literary works in Gurmukhi and campaigning for the use of Punjabi as the primary medium of instruction in schools. This is perhaps one of the most important changes brought about by the reform movement. In order to communicate with the wider Sikh community, a common language was an extremely beneficial tool. If the sabhas aimed to create a monolithic identity within a community that was previously defined by its flexibility and inclusiveness, the leaders of the movement would have to establish a shared sense of common understandings via communication within the community. By tying language to religious identity, the Singh Sabha reformers created a unifying and compulsory element if an individual wished to communicate with the rest of his or her religious community.

THE DEMARCATION OF SACRED SPACE
The Singh Sabha movement elevated the importance of Guru Gobind Singh’s Khalsa identity. Instead of remaining but one form of Sikhism among a variety of interpretations, the leaders of the Singh Sabha movement claimed that Khalsa was the correct form of Sikhism. From this perspective, the Adi Granth was the living Guru and, because of this, Sikh shrines known as gurdwaras took on a new level of importance. If it were to be the home of the Guru, Singh Sabha reformers felt that the shrines should be rid of any Hindu or non-Khalsa icons or imagery.78

Prior to the reform movement, one could visit the Golden Temple and see a variety of images depicting non-Sikh deities. There was even a painting showing Guru

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78 Oberoi, The Construction of Religious Boundaries, 324.
Gobind Singh receiving a double-edged sword from the Hindu Goddess (Devi).\(^7^9\)

Removal of these images by Singh Sabha leaders created controversy not only within the Sikh community, but also between Sikhs and Hindus, who claimed that the images had been there since the temple’s inception and therefore should not be removed.

Another interesting point arises when discussing Sikh sacred spaces and the Singh Sabha attempt to purge them of any non-Sikh elements. Historically, the keepers of the shrines were Udasis and Nirmalas, ascetic Sikhs who did not ascribe to the Khalsa form of Sikhism. As the Singh Sabha grew, this became a landmark issue for the movement. Why should individuals who were now considered non-Sikhs be in control of Sikh sacred space? Oberoi cites an editorial from a Singh Sabha periodical, the *Khalsa Akhbar*, in which the author is insistent that only Khalsa Sikhs be in charge of the temples:

> We appeal before the Khalsa community and the government that the present committee for the management of the Golden Temple is neither based on the principles of the Khalsa panth nor on government legislation. If this committee was constituted on the basis of the Khalsa religion, its membership would have been made up of only the Khalsa. But at present this is not the case as Raja Harbans Singh, a committee member, is a Hindu, who professes beliefs contrary to that of a Khalsa, for instance idol worship…Oh Khalsa! When will you wake up to your religious duties? Do you not care for your scared shrines?\(^8^0\)

Clearly, management of the Golden Temple was now to be a job only for Khalsa Sikhs, and the removal of any non-Khalsa leaders or images was an important issue for the Singh Sabhas.

**LIFE CYCLE RITUALS**

Harjot Oberoi has analyzed the Singh Sabha’s creation of life-cycle rituals in great detail elsewhere; however, due to the importance of this topic, it is necessary to touch upon it

\(^7^9\) Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, 322.

\(^8^0\) *Khalsa Akhbar*, 1 January 1887 quoted in Oberoi *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, 327.
again here for the purposes of this discussion.\textsuperscript{81} It should not come as a surprise that rites of passage, or life-cycle rituals, among the wider, rural Sikh community varied depending on caste and village customs. In order to solidify what was now considered a unified religious community, the Singh Sabha movement needed create a uniform set of rituals that would bring Sikhs together and remind them of their religion as they experienced important life events, such as births, marriages, and deaths.

Rites of passage rituals are of paramount importance to community solidarity and identity. For the Sikhs before the Singh Sabha movement, there was no uniform set of such rituals. The Khalsa leaders of the reform movement quickly launched a campaign to unify rites of passage among the Sikhs, and purge them of any perceived Hindu elements. Between 1884 and 1915, a large amount of pamphlets, manuals and other literature was created and distributed among the Sikh community.\textsuperscript{82} This literature condemned the vast majority of rites of passage found amongst Sikhs as Hindu in origin and described new ways to mark important life events.

Those in the Singh Sabha movement made the claim that they were restructuring Sikhism in order to return it to its original form. Through these three examples, it has been demonstrated that the Singh Sabha movement reconceptualized Sikhism by removing aspects of religious life that were viewed as non-Khalsa and replacing them with new “correct” traditions.

The ideologies of the Singh Sabha movement continue to be propagated in contemporary academia, a fact which should not come as a surprise, given the Singh

\textsuperscript{81} See Harjot Oberoi: \textit{From Ritual to Counter Ritual} and \textit{The Construction of Religious Boundaries}, 328-345.
\textsuperscript{82} Oberoi, \textit{From Ritual to Counter Ritual}, 150. For a list of these publications, see the appendix of Oberoi \textit{From Ritual to Counter-Ritual}. Unfortunately, access to these sources is limited.
Sabha’s use of printed and published works delineating the purity and correctness of the Khalsa form, which are some of the only primary sources available with information on the Sikh religion. It would seem, therefore, that the Singh Sabha movement was successful in creating the perception of a uniform identity for the Sikh community. Within academia today, the focus is on Khalsa Sikhism and the social and political concerns of the Sikh Panth, a community depicted as willing to take up arms in order to defend its faith. Textbook descriptions of Sikhism give clear definitions of the correct way to live and worship as a Sikh, as found in the _rahit nama_ literature and primary sources produced by the Singh Sabha movement. Yet, as I have shown, this is a new interpretation of Sikhism and should not be taken at face value, for doing so does a great disservice to the understanding of Sikhism. Although many Sikhs may wear the outward markers of Khalsa identity, they still interpret their religion from the inclusive and fluid approach traditionally found within the Sikh Panth, as the next two chapters will demonstrate.

I will now turn to a case study of the Udasis, an ascetic Sikh group that historically filled a variety of important roles within the Sikh Panth. As should be expected, however, following the reformation described above, the Udasis were labeled non-Sikh due to their non-Khalsa ascetic practices. A closer look at this group will allow for a clearer understanding of the direct effects of the Singh Sabha movement as it sought to purge the Sikh Panth of diversity.
CHAPTER THREE

THE UDASIS: ASCETIC SIKHS

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the Khalsa form of Sikhism as the dominant form is a relatively new interpretation of the religion. It is the result of the nineteenth century Singh Sabha reform movement, which sought to unify Sikhism into a distinct religion, separate from any other Indian religion and complete with its own rituals, texts, and code of conduct. However, throughout Sikh history, Sikhism has been interpreted and practiced differently within various communities. One such group is the Udasis, a Sikh group that incorporates traditional ideas from the Indian ascetic tradition into their Sikh worldview. Although the orthodox Khalsa Sikhs label Udasis as a Hindu ascetic order, I will show that they are in actuality a Sikh ascetic order, blending together an ascetic tradition that was well-established in traditional Punjabi culture with the teachings and concepts of Sikhism in order to meet their religious and spiritual goals.

An important point to make before discussing the Udasis and their role in the Sikh Panth is the traditional approach to Sikhism within the Punjabi community. The Indic approach to religion and religious identity is much more open and inclusive than the approach of most western cultures. Traditionally in Punjab, one’s village, kinship, caste, and occupation are all factors that make up one’s social identity. Because of this approach, many Sikhs practice a variety of “non-Sikh” customs and traditions alongside their Sikh beliefs. This allowed for a variety of interpretations of religion and religious identity in various contexts and among different groups. In the case of the Udasis, although they incorporated traditionally Hindu ascetic practices, they still identified strongly as Sikh and were accepted as such within the community.
For the Udasis, the ascetic tradition, which existed long before Sikhism, was the best way to reach the ultimate goal of direct connection with God. A short history of the Indian ascetic tradition will allow us to better understand the Udasi approach to Sikhism. We will then turn to the Udasis themselves and contrast them with the Khalsa form of Sikhism in an effort to show why they later became a marginalized group within the community. This will be followed by a history of the Udasi role within the Sikh Panth. Throughout the majority of Sikh history, the Udasis were teachers, missionaries, keepers of the gurdwaras (Sikh shrines), and respected members of the Sikh community. However, following the Singh Sabha reform movement in the late nineteenth century, their ascetic practices put them in the category of Hindus and leaders of the community deemed them “non-Sikh”. We will therefore conclude with a discussion of the Singh Sabha reform movement and, more specifically, the effect it had on the Udasis.

INDIAN ASCETICISM

As is the case with the Sant tradition, ascetic practices have had a tremendous effect on India and Indian religious thought, and continue to be a force in the religious landscape today. The word ‘asceticism’ is derived from the Greek askesis, which loosely translated means ‘athlete’. The connection between athlete and ascetic is not a difficult one to make. Like an athlete, common ascetic practices involve physically challenging one’s body to go for long periods without food, sleep, or shelter from a harsh climate. The difference, however, is also significant; while athletes train the body and mind for external purposes, the sadhu, the general term for an ascetic, trains his body and mind for

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internal, or spiritual, purposes.\textsuperscript{84} As we will see, for the Udasis, one goal of this training is to completely devote his time and energy to nam simran.

The goal of the sadhu is commonly described as liberation, or moksha, and centers on freedom from the karmic cycle of death and rebirth. The ascetic focuses his energy on inner spiritual growth, struggling to overcome the limitations of his mind in order to open himself up to a personal experience of God. In doing so, he also rids himself of karma and can become free from the need to be reborn. As should be expected, however, there are many things that can get in the way of this focus. Ascetics view attachments (\textit{rag}) as the largest obstacle on their paths to God. The obvious attachments are that of the material, householder world: family, one’s home, money and careers, to name a few. These attachments are seen as distractions from the ultimate goal and remaining involved with them keeps the individual from focusing completely on God. Therefore, the first step on the path to God is necessarily renunciation of the material world. Sadhus renounce the material world and choose to live outside of it, reducing the amount of attachments distracting them from their ultimate goal.

Nonattachment extends the concept of renunciation to a mental, as opposed to a purely physical, removal of the self from the material world. The majority of ascetic practices and vows undertaken by sadhus are designed to allow the ascetic to focus on his inner spiritual growth, and therefore become unattached to physical comfort, and even his own conception of himself. Learning to overcome physical discomfort is vital to the spiritual growth of a sadhu because comfort is seen as the strongest attachment to the

\textsuperscript{84} For various reasons, including the strain that ascetic practices put on the body as well as the need to renounce one’s family, the ascetic path is traditionally undertaken by males. For this reason and for the purpose of simplicity, ascetics will be referred to using masculine pronouns throughout this discussion.
material world. As a result, any practice that helps the sadhu control the physical desire for comfort is seen as a crucial step along their path. These practices are commonly called tapas and are a crucial aspect of the ascetic lifestyle.

**Tapas**

Tapas, or austerities, are the practices employed by sadhus in order to reach their goal of freedom from the karmic cycle. The word tapas comes from the Sanskrit root tap, and means heat, or to be heated. Historically, this heat was seen as a physical sensation, resulting from the sadhu’s proximity to a sacred fire or exposure to the sun (two common ascetic practices). The earliest conception of tapas is found in the Vedas. These texts focus on ritual and the necessity of priests as mediators in reaching one’s spiritual goals. It is through this lens that tapas is presented in the Vedas. The practice of sitting near the sacred fire or remaining in the sun for long periods of time were considered to be tapas because one became hot while performing these things.

Today, the word tapas refers to austerities performed by ascetics with the intention of freeing the soul from attachments and liberating it from the death and rebirth karmic cycle. In order to reach this goal, the sadhu will practice various forms of austerities, challenging his body and his mind in an effort to reach a different level of consciousness and go beyond the attachments that limit his mind. This conceptualization of tapas still incorporates the original meaning of heat. Tapas are practices that are meant to result in an inner heat, or an inner fire, that burns away the individual’s limitations, ego, and attachments. The heat that is generated from austerities signifies that the ascetic is challenging his inner self and striving to go beyond his own limitations in order to open his mind to an experience of God. Within the Udasi community, tapas is viewed much in

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the same way as described above. One of Guru Nanak’s central teachings, as discussed in chapter one, was the practice of nam simran, or remembrance of the Name. This is similar to various meditative practices found within the ascetic and Sant traditions. It is central to all Sikh practice, and the Udasis are no exception. Whereas the majority of the Sikh Panth, Khalsa or not, are expected to spend part of each day practicing nam simran, Udasis fully devote themselves to the practice by striving to become unattached from anything that may remove their focus from the divine Name.

Because nam simran was so central to Guru Nanak’s teachings, any other practices that helped one to fully focus on this activity were all seen as legitimate. In summary, the goal of the ascetic, and the central teaching of Guru Nanak are closely linked and center on the need to transcend one’s limitations and sense of self in order to have a direct and personal experience of God. For the Udasis nam simran is an important practice, and they perform a variety of other devotional practices with the intention of fully immersing themselves in the divine Name at all times. The ascetic practices they perform alongside the teachings of Guru Nanak are seen to be complementary and are done with the same goals in mind.

The ascetic tradition, although typically conceptualized as a Hindu tradition, existed in Punjab centuries before Guru Nanak began teaching his followers. The Vedas, Upanishads, and the Hindu Epics all describe ascetics as beings with great spiritual knowledge. These texts were well known throughout Punjab and the influence that they have on religious and philosophical thought continues from their conception into the present day. The teachings about how to experience God and achieve liberation present in these texts are reflected in the Udasi way of thinking, and their beliefs and practices can
be seen as a compromise between Guru Nanak’s teachings and the ideas and concepts about God that were deeply rooted in Indian religious thought.

UDASI BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Ascetic and monastic orders in India, have throughout history, “…sought to reconceive and redefine religious and spiritual practice, modifying, and in some cases replacing, one set of doctrines, restrictions, and vows with another.” The Udasis are no exception. Although they follow many of the teachings of Guru Nanak and the Sikh Gurus, they employ practices that the mainstream Sikh community does not. The Sikh tradition, beginning with Guru Nanak, has traditionally rejected asceticism as being too extreme, and a path that is not accessible to everyone. Guru Nanak taught that true asceticism was to live purely within an impure world. While ascetics renounce the life of a householder, Guru Nanak and the rest of the Sikh Gurus lived as married householders. For the Udasis, however, the material world is a distraction, and attachment to it took time and focus away from the central teaching of Sikhism – nam simran. In order to concentrate fully on this practice, Udasis chose to renounce and detach themselves from the householder lifestyle in favor of an ascetic path.

The beliefs and practices of the Udasis can therefore be conceptualized as a compromise between the teachings of Guru Nanak and the ancient philosophy and religious thought present in India as Sikhism was developing. Guru Nanak’s eldest son, Baba Sri Chand, is considered the founder of the Udasis. He is described as taking an interest in ascetic practices at a young age, while Guru Nanak was travelling and teaching across India. Although the Guru appointed a successor from among his disciples, some

chose to follow his son in his practices and interpretations of his father’s teachings. Sri Chand kept in close contact with the appointed Sikh Gurus throughout his lifetime, and as we will see, many of his teachings mirrored those of the mainstream Sikh Gurus.

As previously discussed, for the ascetic, liberation cannot be reached unless he is completely focused on both his ultimate goal and his own spiritual development, and as a result, renunciation of his attachments is an integral step on the journey. The very word ‘Udasi’ is derived from the word *udas*, which literally means to sit away (ud = away; as = to sit) from the material world. Therefore an individual who does *udas* is called an *udasin* and keeps himself away from, and indifferent to, the material world. Although there are references from the second half of the nineteenth century to some Udasis living at home, engaged in worldly pursuits\(^{87}\), these accounts are few and seemingly restricted to that particular time period. It is safe to say, then, that worldly affairs are of no interest to the Udasis, and their primary concern is on their religious life, whereas the greater Sikh community has secular interests alongside their religious goals.

**UDASI CONCEPTIONS OF THE GURU**

It is not only their ascetic practices that place Udasis outside of the boundaries of orthodox Sikhism. Some of their theology also contradicts what Khalsa Sikhs now hold to be the unchanging beliefs of a Sikh. The most apparent departure is in the Udasis’ conception of the Guruship and the lineage of Sikh Gurus. To the majority of Sikhs, this is at the core of their faith. Throughout the tradition there is a narrative of the ten Sikh Gurus, each appointed by their predecessor, beginning Guru Nanak. The Udasis trace their lineage to Baba Sri Chand, Guru Nanak’s eldest son, as opposed to Guru Angad, the successor was chosen by Guru Nanak. This is not to say that they reject the orthodox

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lineage of the ten Sikh Gurus. Rather, they believe in what can be described as a parallel line of succession – the lineage of the ten Gurus as well as the Udasi lineage from Baba Sri Chand down to their mahants, or living gurus. As previously mentions, Baba Sri Chand kept in close contact with the mainstream Sikh Gurus, maintaining a particularly close relationship with Guru Ram Das. Following his death, leadership of the Udasis was passed on to the son of Guru Hargobind, Baba Gurditta. This close relationship to the Sikh Gurus helped to legitimate the Udasi guru lineage as parallel to the ten Sikh Gurus.

Like many Hindu ascetic orders, the Udasis view the personal, spiritual knowledge of God as a marker of a guru. They believe that anyone who has experienced God is a legitimate source of knowledge and regard them as spiritual teachers, in the same vein as the Sikh Gurus. This is not consistent with the mainstream concept of the Sikh Gurus, which sees the ten Gurus to actually be one and the same. The most commonly used metaphor to describe this belief is that there is one Guru (Guru Nanak) and he lives in each of the ten Sikh Gurus, as a single flame can be passed from torch to torch. For Udasis, however, one does not need to have the spirit of Guru Nanak within him in order to be a mahant and seen as a spiritual teacher, or guru. The conception of the guru for the Udasi, therefore, is more in line with the Hindu conception of a teacher who has experienced God and can help the individual sadhu on his spiritual path.

Because of their interpretation of the Guruship and the lines of succession, Udasis do not ascribe to the Sikh doctrine of the Guru-Granth and the Guru-Panth, which dictates that the Guruship was passed on to the Adi Granth, the sacred book, and the entire Sikh Panth after the death of Guru Gobind Singh. Following his death, the last living Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, appointed the Adi Granth as the living Guru to
guide the Sikh Panth. Udasis hold the Sikh scriptures above all other texts, however, they do not view the *Adi Granth* as the living Guru. For them, the *Adi Granth* is seen as an important text that holds sacred knowledge, but it cannot replace a living guru who can guide a *sadhu* through his own individual development and help him on his own personal path to God.

**THE UDASI BODH**

Throughout Sikh rule, and continuing into British rule, the Udasis composed much of their own literature, including some compositions that are included in the *Adi Granth*. Many of these works reflect their self-image and beliefs in various points of history. Unfortunately many of these texts have yet to be translated fully into English, an undertaking that would vastly benefit current knowledge of the Sikh ascetic community and their beliefs throughout history.

Notable among these texts are the Udasi *Matras* and the Udasi *Bodh*. The *Matras* are attributed to Baba Sri Chand, as well as other important figures in the Udasi tradition. They detail the Udasi code of conduct, the ways they should live their lives, and put a great emphasis on developing the inner-self as opposed to the formal outward symbols of the Sikh faith emphasized by Khalsa Sikhs in their code of conduct.

The Udasi *Bodh* is a valuable source of information on Udasi self-image as well as their thoughts and beliefs. Though some unorthodox concepts can be found in the *Bodh*, it also contains some very orthodox Sikh ideas of God. In this work, it is reinforced that the *Adi Granth* is the foundation of the Udasi belief system. The belief in the parallel lineage is also established in the *Udasi Bodh* with stories depicting Guru Nanak
instituting two Guru lineages: one to the householder Angad and one to the celibate ascetic Sri Chand.

The religious beliefs and philosophical ideas found in this text closely resemble Hindu philosophy and thought. The Udasis appear to be working to figure out a compromise between the way to liberation and direct knowledge of God as it is put forth in the ascetic tradition, and therefore the way that the culture dictated it pre-Sikhism, and their relatively new ideas regarding Sikh scripture and Sikh religious thought. Because Vedic and Upanishadic philosophy was deeply rooted in Indian religious thought long before Sikhism developed, it would be hard for many people to suddenly disregard beliefs and ideas that were embedded into the religious landscape.

The Udasi Bodh also outlines Guru Nanak’s conception of God, or Akal Purakh, literally translated as “the Timeless Being.” Nanak uses many words to describe this Being, and in the traditional Indian style, he usually describes Akal Purakh in terms of what it is not, being purposely elusive, and leaving room for an individual to essentially “fill-in-the-blanks” through a personal experience. This approach is reflective of his personal mystical beliefs and practices, and by leaving room for description, it is clear that: “…in the last resort only those who comprehend Akal Purakh in their own mystical experience can truly grasp the meaning that human words endeavour to communicate.”

This idea is consistent with the traditional ascetic conception of the Ultimate Reality as a non-dual, timeless Being who is beyond limitations and description and therefore knowable only through personal experience. This belief is echoed throughout Indian religious thinking, including within the Sant tradition. The word used by Nanak to describe God is Alakh, meaning that Akal Purakh is ineffable, a concept common to

88 McLeod, A Sikh Theology, 35.
many ascetic groups, including the Udasis.\footnote{McLeod, \textit{A Sikh Theology}, 35.} Both the Udasis and Khalsa Sikhs believe that the way to liberation is through \textit{Akal Purakh}, and that the way to get there is through \textit{nam simran}. In the \textit{Udasi Bodh}, this practice is emphasized repeatedly as the way to bring an individual closer to God. Through their ascetic practices, the Udasis transcend the limitations of the mind and can fully devote themselves to remembrance of the divine Name.

Through the \textit{Udasi Bodh}, one can see the Udasis navigating between a new set of philosophical and religious beliefs and ancient concepts present in Indian religious thought. Many Vedic and Upanishadic ideas are present in the text, yet the incorporation of Sikh scriptures and the teachings of Guru Nanak and Baba Sri Chand are new and illustrate a compromise between established beliefs of the culture and the beliefs of their new religion.

For the majority of Sikh history, the Udasis and their ascetic practices were accepted as a part of the Sikh community. Although the Sikh Gurus did not endorse an ascetic lifestyle, they clearly did not exclude Udasis from the Sikh Panth. As discussed in the previous chapters, religious identity was not exclusive, and it was therefore common for a Sikh to participate in traditional Punjabi customs, and seemingly Hindu practices, alongside Sikh beliefs with no hesitation. The fluidity and inclusive nature of religious identity allowed the Udasis to not only be accepted as part of the Sikh community, but also to be held in high regard as holy men, teachers, and experts on Sikh scripture.

\textbf{UDASIS AND THE SIKH COMMUNITY}

It has been demonstrated that most Udasi beliefs incorporate mainstream Sikh theology and the teachings of Guru Nanak. For much of Sikh history, those were the only
requirements for an individual to be considered a Sikh. Harjot Oberoi cites a publication printed in 1887 that defines Sikhs as: “All those who believed in the sanctity of the Sikh Gurus and the Adi-Granth.” The Udasis, as well as many other Sikh groups fit this category and their inclusion as recently as 1887 demonstrates that the black and white boundaries imposed by the Singh Sabha reform were not yet relevant to the entire Panth. The Udasis have had close ties to the mainstream Sikh Panth in times of political and social struggles.

As Sikhism began to develop into a large religious community, the Sikhs struggled to find their place within India’s cultural, political and religious landscape. Entering the eighteenth century, they faced a struggle against the Mughal rulers. As the tensions rose, the Empire issued an order for the massacre of Sikhs, causing many to go into hiding. During this period, the Udasis helped to keep the spirit of their religious community alive, and established themselves in gurdwaras as granthis, readers of the Granth, an important role in Sikhism. They also kept their learning centers functional, continuing to teach about Sikhism and upkep the gurdwaras. Because Udasis did not wear the five K’s that much of the Sikh military wore, they did not appear to be Sikh, and were able to escape Mughal persecution. The importance of this role is reflected in the statement of one scholar:

Udasis proved a helpful adjunct to the Sikhs. Being ascetic and unbaptized, they escaped persecution at the hands of the Mughal authorities, and when Sikhs were hunted down in tyrannical genocide, and many had withdrawn into deep forest to reorganize for guerilla war, the Udasi kept the torch burning as custodians of the gurdwaras and kept the spirit of Sikhism alive.  

This statement illustrates the fear that must have been felt by Sikhs at the time, as well as the valuable service that the Udasis provided by maintaining Sikh places of worship and keeping their religion “alive” in a time of crisis for the Sikh community.

Because of the solitary way of life inherent in the ascetic lifestyle, little has been recorded about the daily lives and interactions between the Udasis and the wider Sikh community. Through information regarding Udasi centers (*akharas*), one can get an idea of how Udasis functioned within the rest of the Sikh Panth. An *akhara* is typically headed by an Udasi *mahant*, or guru, and houses core members of the group who are initiated and guided on their spiritual path by the *mahant*, who teaches them techniques, as well as his own personal wisdom. It can be compared to a monastery, although members often come and go depending on the vows they have undertaken and the practices that go along with them.

Throughout Punjab, Udasi centers are typically found in four types of places: 1) within towns and cities associated with Sikh Gurus, 2) near shrines associated with Gurus Nanak, Ram Das, Arjan and Hargobind, 3) locations associated with well-known Sikh historical figures, and 4) near popular religious pilgrimage centers. Those paying respect to Sikh traditions and holy figures commonly visit all of these places, and as a result Udasi centers would have been familiar to Sikhs throughout Punjab. These institutions not only functioned as a place for Udasis to live and practice, often they also had small religious and language schools attached for anyone who was interested in studying Sikhism or the sacred language of the *Adi Granth*. Oberoi notes that the Udasis, as well as being ascetics, were also scholars of the Sikh tradition: “…Udasi scholars played a key role in the creation and diffusion of both sacred and secular knowledge.

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Some of the foremost Sikh educationists, writers, historians, exegetes, transcribers, translators, and Ayurvedic medical experts in the nineteenth century were either Udasis or Nirmalas [another, smaller, ascetic Sikh group].

The Udasis played an integral role in spreading the Sikh faith, not only through their religious learning centers, but also through their wanderings. For many sadhus, a common form of tapas is the restriction of lodgings. Because a sadhu must become unattached to the material world in order to achieve his religious goals, many ascetics take vows (vrats) that restrict becoming too attached to one place. As a result, they are often wanderers, rarely staying in one place for long periods of time as to avoid the attachment to one’s home. This is found within the Udasi community as well, and is reflected in the sudden rise of Udasi centers between the mid eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As Udasis moved throughout Punjab, they were able to spread the teachings of Guru Nanak in ways that were impossible for householders who stayed in their villages with their families. Through their travels, Udasis established akharas in places described as peripheral zones for the Sikh faith during that time. Because of the renunciant values held by the Udasis, they could wander into “…liminal zones, pilgrim centers, and fairgrounds” to teach people about the Sikh tradition. If their mission was successful, they would then set up an Udasi center, and in doing so, expand the reaches of Sikhism throughout Punjab.

Traditionally in Indian religions, the priests and mystics would mediate between a religion tradition and those who were not adherents, and that is the role that the Udasis filled for Sikhism. The image of the wandering ascetic was not novel to the majority of

Punjabis, and therefore, a Sikh ascetic would have been well received and treated with respect within the general population. This allowed the Udasis to cross “cultural frontiers when propagating the faith.”

For the majority of the eighteenth century, a time of Sikh rule in Punjab, the Udasis flourished, becoming prominent and respected by the rulers of the state, as well as the Sikh community. Nearly every ruler extended monetary donations or tax-free land grants to Udasi centers, and as a result the number of Udasi centers grew to around 250 across Punjab during Sikh rule. This money gave the Udasis the means to build more establishments, and served as a catalyst for the expansion of Sikhism. As mentioned above, Udasis would often travel to parts of Punjab that did not have a large Sikh population and teach about their beliefs, often setting up new akharas if the community seemed receptive. Whereas these missionary travels could have been the norm for as long as the Udasis existed, the support of the Sikh state allowed for them to make a larger impact in a shorter amount of time than was previously seen. By end of Sikh Rule, the Udasis were the largest religious group among the Sikhs. In 1881, they numbered over 16,000 whereas the closest group to them – the Nirmalas – had about 2,000 practitioners, demonstrating both the accessibility of the Udasis, as well as the effect that the support of the state had on them.

For contemporary Khalsa Sikhs, and many scholars, the Udasis are seen to be deviant, heretical, and non-Sikh. However, a look at their role in history shows that for the Udasis, the Sikh cause was their cause as well. They stepped up to take care of

gurdwaras when the Sikhs were targets of violence under the Mughal Empire, and helped
to spread Sikhism across Punjab, which is now a majority Sikh state in India. The Udasis
share many religious beliefs and practices with Khalsa Sikhs, and as evidenced by the
above examples, they have historically shared some social and political concerns as well.
While the Udasi focus is on inner devotion and spiritual growth, they have historically
stepped in to support the Khalsa Sikhs in times of need, demonstrating the close ties that
they feel to the wider Sikh community.

The inclusive nature of Indian religious identity demonstrated by the acceptance
of Udasis as a part of the Sikh Panth allowed Punjabis to incorporate many traditional
beliefs and customs alongside their Sikh faith. Through a close examination of the Udasis
we have seen that although the Sikh Gurus rejected asceticism, the wider Sikh Panth
accepted the Udasis as Sikh ascetics based on deeply held traditional beliefs and religious
thought that validated the ascetic approach to religion. Because the ascetic tradition
existed in India far before Sikhism, the majority of Punjabi Sikhs recognized the spiritual
and religious merit of a sadhu and included the Udasis as members of the Sikh Panth.

REFORM OF SIKH IDENTITY

With the creation of the Singh Sabha movement, however, this began to change. Many of
the Europeans who came to India during British Rule found the inclusive approach to
religion to be confusing and backwards. From their standpoint, a religion should have
clearly defined boundaries, and for many western observers, the Khalsa form of Sikhism
fit the preconception of how a religious tradition should look. Under the influence of
these new ideas and approaches to religion, a group of Khalsa Sikhs mobilized to unify
the Sikh Panth and create a uniform identity in line with the Khalsa Sikh identity through the Singh Sabha movement.99

As leaders of the Singh Sabha moved towards a more social focus for the religious community and pushed for a unique identity, the Udasis continued to focus wholly on their inner devotion to God and their ascetic practices, as taught by Baba Sri Chand. These teachings supported the Udasi beliefs to cultivate an inner devotion to God, and not focus on outward symbols and rituals.

He [Nanak] imparted regular instruction to his disciples and exhorted the visitors as well to discard trust in external forms and in status based on caste or wealth, to cultivate inner devotion and a truly religious attitude by recognizing the greatness of God and reflecting upon His revelation.100

The importance that the Udasis placed on teachings like the one above left them on the outside of the reformation of Sikh identity. Whereas the Singh Sabha movement largely focused on a separate and community-based Sikh identity, history, and religion, the Udasis were only concerned with individual religious growth and development, leaving the social reform to the Khalsa Sikhs. They still held their roots in the earliest forms of Sikhism, and therefore did not emphasize external markers of Sikh identity endorsed by the Singh Sabha movement. In the last few decades of colonial rule, the Singh Sabha movement successfully established a new definition of a Sikh:

[a Sikh is] one who fully subscribed to their five K’s, visited only Sikh shrines, considered Punjabi as the sacred language of the Sikhs, conducted his rites de passage according to the prescribed rituals, and abjured prohibited foods…Their [the cultural elite] ethnocentric logic subsumed other identities and dissolved alternative ideals (like asceticism) under a monolithic, codified, and closed culture.101

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99 See chapters one and two of this thesis for more detail.
100 Grewal, Sikhs of the Punjab, 39. Emphasis added.
In doing so, they set boundaries that were clear and could not be confused with other religions such as Hinduism and Islam. By highlighting the practices and symbols unique to Sikhism and eliminating or condemning those who did not adhere to their guidelines, the Singh Sabha reformers created an identity that was completely new and a community that appeared to be uniform.

Following the Singh Sabha movement, Sikhism appeared to shift from an inclusive religious community concerned with inner devotion to God and meditation on the divine Name to a community perceived to be immersed in politics, social concerns and outward religious markers. However, although this is the perception found within contemporary scholarship, it is still not the norm within the Sikh community. Although many Sikhs do ascribe to the Khalsa identity, far more consider themselves to be Sikh while remaining unbaptized and still participating in traditional Punjabi practices and customs. The Udasis continue to consider themselves descendants of Baba Sri Chand, followers of Guru Nanak, and ascetic Sikhs and are often accepted as such within the wider Sikh community. The emphasis on the Khalsa form of Sikh identity and the rejection of groups like the Udasis as deviant and heretical within academia ignores an important aspect of the Sikh community, one that could bring new understanding to scholarship and academic knowledge about the religion.

The Udasis are not the only group that was marginalized following the Singh Sabha reform movement. A wide variety of non-Khalsa groups were also labeled heretical, deviant, and non-Sikh. Towards the middle of the twentieth century, however, a new group of Sikhs was established in the United States. Sikh Dharma, a non-Punjabi group of Sikh converts introduced a new complexity to the problem of Sikh identity. The
following chapter will explore this group as an example of a Khalsa Sikh group of non-Punjabi converts, bringing issues of Punjabi ethnicity to the forefront.
CHAPTER FOUR

SIKH DHARMA AND THE ROLE OF ETHNICITY IN SIKH IDENTITY

The migration of a large number of Punjabis to new countries in the past century has introduced new complexities to the problem of Sikh identity. Removed from their spiritual “homeland” of Punjab, Punjabi Sikhs are forced to renegotiate their religious and ethnic identity in a new landscape. Adapting to a new country and a new culture is not the only factor that plays into Sikh identity outside of India, however. In the United States (and to some extent other countries such as Canada and the UK), the immigration of Punjabi Sikhs has resulted in a number of non-Punjabis converting to Sikhism. The most visible example of this phenomenon is a group called Sikh Dharma, which has its roots in the U.S.

Sikh Dharma is a new interpretation of Sikhism that calls into question some of the ways in which Sikhism is represented amongst scholars. By examining the different interpretations of Sikhism found in the Sikh Dharma and diaspora communities, it becomes apparent that from a Punjabi perspective, religious identity is still not considered an exclusive identity, and specifically, that one’s Sikh identity is closely linked to one’s ethnicity and social identity. While not all Punjabis identify as Sikh, it is safe to say that the vast majority of Sikhs throughout history would identify as Punjabi. The religion primarily developed in Punjab, and all ten Sikh Gurus were Punjabi, strongly linking the religion to that region. For non-Punjabi converts, however, Punjabi cultural values are seen to be distinct from Sikh values, and they therefore emphasize strictly religious aspects of Sikhism in their approach to the religion. The approach of
Sikh Dharma members highlights the complexity of Sikh identity as Punjabi Sikhs come into contact with a variety of people and their interpretations of religion.

Members of Sikh Dharma strongly identify with the Khalsa form of Sikhism, which is typically considered the orthodox form of Sikhism amongst scholars and other non-Punjabi observers. While the Indian approach to religion tends to be fluid and flexible, the Khalsa form of Sikhism relies on uniformity and exclusivity. In order to identify with the Khalsa interpretation of Sikhism, one cannot participate in any other religion. However, for many Punjabis, worshipping at a Sikh shrine and paying respects at sacred Hindu sites are not considered contradictory acts. From this perspective, traditional Punjabi customs, superstitions and rituals can comfortably coexist with Sikhism. In other words, the traditional Sikh identity and belief system is not exclusive and often includes seemingly contradictory beliefs and practices that are linked with Punjabi identity. Sikh Dharma members strongly assert the Khalsa identity, however, and rely heavily on the outward markers of the Khalsa Panth as a way to assert their religious identity.

An integral aspect of contemporary Khalsa identity is the Rehat Maryada, the Sikh code of conduct, which outlines the way of life of a Khalsa Sikh. Following a discussion of this text, we will turn to the role of ethnicity within both the Punjabi Sikh diaspora community and the Sikh Dharma community. For Punjabi Sikhs, their religious identity is only one aspect of their Punjabi identity, making their assertion of their Sikh identity more flexible and dependant on context. However, for non-Punjabi Sikhs, religious identity is often separate from other aspects of their identities and therefore should be asserted consistently within all contexts.
As a result of the nineteenth century Singh Sabha Movement, a Sikh came to be defined as an individual who underwent the initiation into the Khalsa Panth (the collective community of Khalsa Sikhs), followed the Sikh code of conduct (called the *rahit*), bore the outward markers of the faith, and believed in the succession of the ten Sikh Gurus (including the *Adi Granth*, the sacred text held to be the last in the line of Sikh Gurus). The *rahit* was written by Guru Gobind Singh, and outlined a variety of rules and creeds that a Khalsa Sikh should live by. This was later developed into the *Rehat Maryada*, a comprehensive code of conduct to be followed by Khalsa Sikhs. As we will see, these are all aspects of the religion that are followed strictly by non-Punjabi Sikh converts in the Sikh Dharma movement, and often renegotiated by Punjabi Sikhs living abroad.

**The Rehat Maryada**

Following the Singh Sabha movement, leaders within the Sikh community determined that the *rahit* should be collected and put together in a comprehensive way. They felt that the old *rahitnamas* (manuals containing the *rahit* as written by Guru Gobind Singh) contained discrepancies and material that was no longer relevant in the nineteenth century. The new *rahit* was compiled using material that they deemed reliable and demonstrative of the differences between Sikhism, Hinduism, and Islam. The result was the *Rehat Maryada*, which is considered authoritative by the Khalsa Panth in defining the Sikh identity, Sikh rituals, and the Sikh way of life.

The *Rehat Maryada* clearly defines a Sikh as a Khalsa Sikh. This defintion, however, excludes a vast majority of the Sikh community, both within India and living abroad.

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103 One such discrepancy notes that Sikh marriages should be performed by Brahmins (Hindu priests). This is quite contradictory to the task of removing Hindu rituals from Sikhism, and although this is found in the *rahitnamas*, it was removed when the *Rehat Maryada* was compiled.
abroad. As one scholar notes, Punjabi customs that may conflict with Khalsa Sikh beliefs still play a role in the daily lives of Punjabi Sikhs:

Influenced by Punjabi culture, Sikhs maintain certain superstitious trends in everyday conduct. For example, although the Rehat Maryada denounces superstition (RM 6 and 12), it is [traditionally] considered inauspicious to sneeze prior to an important event. Additionally, certain days of the week are not suitable for washing the hair.\textsuperscript{104}

Though these examples may seem insignificant, they illustrate an important point. Punjabi Sikhs, although some may identify as Khalsa Sikhs, often still follow some traditional Punjabi ”superstitions” regardless of the rules against them in the Rehat Maryada. Takhar goes on to add that, “other themes must be considered [outside of the “orthodox” Khalsa approach to Sikhism] such as Punjabi culture and ethnicity that form the backbone of everyday Sikh social behaviour.”\textsuperscript{105} In short, even Khalsa Sikhs who have undergone initiation and wear the five Ks are still Punjabis, and this plays a role in their everyday lives, regardless of what is stated in the Rehat Maryada.

Punjabi politics and social concerns are often at the center of discussion in studies of the Punjabi Sikh diaspora, but Punjabi ethnicity within the context of social and religious identity is often overlooked. When religious identity is discussed it is often with respect to the renegotiation of the outward Sikh identity as Punjabis attempt to assimilate to their new homes. Although the Rehat Maryada make no mention of ethnicity as a defining characteristic of a Sikh, it cannot be ignored that within the Punjabi Sikh community, traditional Punjabi culture continues to inform daily interactions as well as interpretations of identity. This is most apparent within the Punjabi diaspora community, where Punjabi Sikhs assert their Sikh and Punjabi identities differently within different communities.


\textsuperscript{105} Takahar, \textit{Sikh Identity}, 26.
contexts. Religious, specifically, Sikh identity, therefore, is only one aspect of identity within the Punjabi diaspora, and is often renegotiated in different contexts.

THE SIKH DIASPORA

At the turn of the twentieth century, many Sikh males left Punjab in search of better jobs in other countries, with the intention of returning to their villages with their new fortunes. Throughout the century, Sikh and Punjabi identity was continuously renegotiated in response to new immigrants moving to the United States as well as political events in Punjab. At different times, members of the community asserted their religious identity in different ways. Because Punjabi Sikhs are often born into their religion, they tend to be much more flexible in their assertion of Sikh identity than their non-Punjabi counterparts. This is especially noticeable when one examines the role of the jat caste within the first wave of Punjabi immigration.

The jat caste accounts for a large portion of the Khalsa Panth, and W.H. McLeod has made a strong argument that many of the traits associated with a Khalsa Sikh were originally jat traits that were absorbed into the Sikh community when a large number of jats converted to Sikhism in the seventeenth century.¹⁰⁶ Throughout colonial rule, the Sikh Panth was commonly conceived of as a generally uniform religious community marked by agrarian skill and martial valor. These traits were generalized to all Sikhs, regardless of caste, a fact that accounts for the heavy recruitment of Sikhs into the British Army. However, within Punjabi social society, these traits were traditionally ascribed to the jat caste, and as McLeod argues, “the Panth contains within itself a heterogeneous constituency, and many features so commonly regarded as typically Sikh should properly

¹⁰⁶ See McLeod, Evolution of the Sikh Community (1976), 83-104.
be regarded as characteristically Jat.”

Because of this deep connection between Khalsa identity and jat identity, many jats are considered to be inherently Sikh, regardless of any perceived inconsistencies in their behavior or outward expressions of religion. In short, “the Jat Sikh commonly assumes a considerable freedom with regard to observance of the Khalsa disciple (raham). In his own eyes and those of other jats he remains a Sikh even if he cuts his beard or smokes tobacco.”

Between 1907 and 1920, approximately 6,400 South Asians entered the United States, the vast majority of them Sikhs of the jat caste who settled in California to take up their traditional occupation of farming and agriculture. Because the majority of Punjabi immigrants at the time were jats, they already had a relaxed approach to their Khalsa identity and therefore quickly assimilated to American culture by cutting their hair and abandoning the turban without feeling a loss of connection to their religion.

Although the first wave of Punjabi Sikhs in the United States stopped outwardly identifying themselves as Sikhs, the community continued to gather to worship, and by 1904, a gurdwara (Sikh shrine or temple) was established in Stockton, California. The gurdwara there is the oldest in the United States and continues to hold religious and social gatherings to this day. The religion was perpetuated within the community through gatherings for Sikh festivals and the establishment of gurdwaras, although many of the men stopped asserting outward markers of their religion in an effort to better assimilate to the new culture.

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107 McLeod, Evolution of the Sikh Community, 103.
108 McLeod, Evolution of the Sikh Community, 98.
110 Williams, Religions of Immigrants, 71.
Following the Immigration Act of 1965, which opened America’s borders to new immigrants, many more Punjabi Sikhs were able to move to the United States. The new immigrants came from a variety of castes and educational backgrounds, and ascribed to the Khalsa identity in varying degrees. This resulted in a growth of Sikh institutions across the country, and also created some tension between generations about the best way to preserve both Sikh and Punjabi identity. This pattern has continued throughout the Punjabi diaspora as the community asserts their Punjabi and Sikh identities in varying degrees in response to a number of social and political contexts. Throughout the 1980’s “Punjab crisis”, a time of violence and political struggle in the Punjab, many Sikhs in the west began to reassert their outward identity in an effort to show their support for the Sikh community in Punjab. However, following September 11, 2001, many Sikhs again removed their turbans and shaved their beards in response to racial discrimination and a number of violent crimes against the Sikh community.

While members of Sikh Dharma view their Sikh identity as unchanging, and feel that it should be consistently asserted in daily life, the diaspora community tends to be far more relaxed, approaching their Sikh identity as only one of many aspects of their social and religious identity. Historically, this renegotiation of Sikh identity has been a source of tension between the Sikh Dharma community and the Punjabi community, with the former accusing the latter of becoming too “western” and compromising their faith by discarding the outward symbols of the Khalsa. For Punjabis, the approach of Sikh Dharma members, which stresses the religious aspects of Sikhism while avoiding
involvement in the cultural and political affairs of Punjab has been “interpreted as betrayal of true Sikh identity and solidarity.”\footnote{Williams, Religions of Immigrants, 149.}

Now that we have understood the flexibility found in the Punjabi Sikh community with regard to Sikh identity, I will turn to the group of non-Punjabi converts in the Sikh Dharma movement. As I will show, the approach to Sikh identity within this group is exclusive and less fluid than the approach of Punjabi Sikhs.

**SIKH DHARMA**

Harbhajan Singh Puri was one of the many Punjabi Sikhs who moved to America following Indian independence in search of jobs and better opportunities. In 1968, he began teaching yoga to a small group of students and quickly attracted a devoted following and moved into his own yoga center. Only a year after coming to the United States, Yogi Bhajan (as he was called by his students) established a non-profit educational institution called Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization (commonly called 3HO) where he taught a form of yoga called Kundalini yoga, known as the “yoga of awareness.”\footnote{Williams, Religions of Immigrants, 145.}

During the first years after the establishment of 3HO, the organizational structure of the group resembled that of many yoga schools and ashrams established during the late 1960s. During morning yoga, the group would meditate in front of a picture of their spiritual teacher (Yogi Bhajan), perform breathing exercises and recite mantras. Some members of the group established small centers where they taught on behalf of Yogi Bhajan after receiving training, and some members of the group began to live in the
ashram in a communal setting. In the early 1970s, however, this began to shift and many of Bhajan’s closest students began expressing an interest in Sikhism, Bhajan’s own personal religion. In 1973, two years after a visit to the Golden Temple in Amritsar with 84 of his students, Yogi Bhajan founded the Sikh Dharma Brotherhood.

**NON-KHALSA PRACTICES**

The primary difference between Khalsa Sikhism and the form of Sikhism practiced by Sikh Dharma members is the latter’s incorporation of yoga. Kundalini yoga is central to the Sikh Dharma way of life and religious practice. The beginnings of the 3HO movement mirrored the beginnings of many Asian-based new religious movements that arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Prior to the incorporation of Sikh teachings and the development of Sikh Dharma from 3HO, the group’s focus on meditation, yoga, and inner spiritual development was a commonly found amongst a large number of NRMs.

Yogi Bhajan claimed to be a master of Kundalini yoga, although his interpretation of this type of yoga was eclectic, to say the least. According to Dusenbery, he combined “aspects of Karma Yoga, Hatha Yoga, Bhakto [sic] Yoga, Mantra Yoga, and Laya Yoga” with various elements of Buddhist and Hindu Tantra. He encouraged his followers to read the *Yoga Sutra*, an ancient Indian text containing descriptions of yogic practices, and Bhajan extended its teachings about overcoming attachments to the material world and the ego, and the struggles involved in one’s spiritual journey. The overall message found in the *Yoga Sutra* and further emphasized by Sikh Dharma of yoga is that through yogic disciple and the internal struggles that come with it, the yogi will gain pure

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113 Williams, *Religions of Immigrants*, 145.
114 Dusenbery (1975), quoted in Elsberg, 45.
intelligence and “…will finally be free to apprehend God in moments of intuitive understanding and joy, even to experience union with divinity (samadhi).”\textsuperscript{115}

According to Yogi Bhajan’s website, kundalini yoga is a comprehensive yogic tradition:

combining meditation, mantra, physical exercises and breathing techniques; it is a Raj Yog, encompassing the eight limbs of yoga [as expressed by Patanjali’s \textit{Yoga Sutra}] into a singular practice of excellence and ecstasy. “Kundalini” literally means “the curl of the lock of hair of the beloved.” This poetic metaphor alludes to the flow of energy and consciousness that exists within each of us, and enables us to merge with – or “yoke” – the universal Self. Fusing individual and universal consciousness creates a divine union, called “yoga.”\textsuperscript{116}

According to Khalsa Sikhs, practices such as yoga are detrimental to one’s spiritual growth and were rejected by the Sikh Gurus as false rituals. The \textit{Adi Granth} emphasizes \textit{nam simran}, or meditation on the divine name of God, as the ultimate practice for Sikhs. While many non-Khalsa Sikh groups, such as the Udasis, practice yoga in some form, the non-Punjabi Sikhs identify as Khalsa Sikhs, and therefore their practice of yoga has created some controversy. Members argue, however, that their yogic practices do not contradict orthodox Sikh beliefs and that their incorporation of kundalini yoga is practiced with the intention of transcending the physical body and the mind in order to perform \textit{nam simran} more efficiently and with greater concentration.

Meditation within Sikh Dharma is preceded by recitation of \textit{mantras}, breath control (\textit{pranayam}) and kundalini yoga. After performing yoga, the individual can meditate more efficiently and can calmly face his or her fears and anxieties that ordinarily limit the individual’s behavior and emotions, with the intention of “neutralizing” them.

\textsuperscript{116} “About Kundalini Yoga” www.yogibhajan.com.
until the mind is clear enough to see “the light and power of creative consciousness.”

Takhar illustrates this point with a quote from a Sikh Dharma member:

Sikh Dharma members practice three types of yoga (1. kundalini, 2. laya, and 3. tantric) which are supposed to enable them to meditate more efficiently. Members also put great emphasis on health, more so than is respected in the orthodox Sikh religion. In fact both yoga and vegetarianism are rejected by the Holy Book as forms of blind ritual. There has been some controversy.

With this controversy in mind, we can now turn to the assertion of Sikh identity found within Sikh Dharma. As we will see, followers of Sikh Dharma regard themselves as not only members of the wider Sikh community, but specifically as members of the Khalsa Panth.

**KHALSA PRACTICES**

Although they do not share Punjabi Sikh concerns with politics and Punjabi customs, members of Sikh Dharma generally fit the definition of Khalsa Sikhs. They take initiation into the Khalsa Panth, follow the *Rehat Maryada* strictly, and maintain the outward markers of faith, often more closely than their Punjabi counterparts. They assert their Sikh identity strongly and emphasize that they are members of the Khalsa Panth as opposed to solely members of Sikh Dharma. For this reason, there is no initiation into Sikh Dharma, rather, members take the traditional initiation into the Khalsa Panth, known as *khande-di-pahul*. The initiation is done in the presence of the *Adi Granth*, considered to be the Guru, and is led by any five initiated members of the Khalsa Panth. Since there are no ministers or priests in the Sikh tradition, the power of the Guru was vested into the entire Khalsa Panth and the *Adi Granth* at the time of Guru Gobind Singh’s death. As a result, whenever there are five members of the Panth gathered, they are seen to have the

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Guru with them. Because of this belief, Sikhs can undergo initiation as long as there are five initiated Khalsa members to perform the ritual.

The ceremony is commonly known as taking *amrit*, meaning drinking the nectar. During the ceremony, the initiate drinks a mixture of sugar crystals and water stirred with a *khanda* (double-edged sword). By drinking the *amrit*, the individual is believed to be taking the sacred substance of the Gurus into him or herself. Once one has taken *amrit* they are to follow the *rahit*, wear the five Ks, take the new name of Singh (for men, meaning “lion”) or Kaur (for women, meaning “princess”) and follow the teachings of the Gurus. The Sikh Dharma website describes the responsibilities of an individual who has taken *amrit*:

Those who take *Amrit* commit to becoming protectors and custodians of the Universal Truths held within the *Siri Guru Granth Sahib* and, in fact, of all living beings. They also embody the spiritual way of life that the Sikh Masters created. Those who take *Amrit* commit to surrender everything – body, mind, property and life – to preserve this tradition and wisdom.\(^{119}\)

The language used by Sikh Dharma members mirrors the language often used within the wider Khalsa Panth, and through this echoing of sentiment we can begin to see the connection that Sikh Dharma members feel to the rest of the Khalsa Panth. Having undergone the same initiation ritual as their Punjabi counterparts, non-Punjabi Sikhs feel that they have as much of a right to their Khalsa identity as those who are from India or of Indian descent.

Once a member has undergone the *amrit* ceremony, they are expected to follow the way of life advocated by Yogi Bhajan, which is consistent with the religious

teachings of the Sikh Gurus. According to Yogi Bhajan, the principles of Sikhism that one should live by are:

1. Rising early, bathing, and meditation on God’s name to cleanse the mind
2. Continuing to remember God’s name with every breath throughout the day
3. Working and earning by one’s honest efforts
4. Living a family way of life practicing truthfulness in all dealings
5. Sharing and selflessly serving others
6. Abstaining from drugs, alcohol, tobacco, and meat
7. Keeping the body healthy and as created by God

A very important requirement for a Khalsa Sikh is to wear the five Ks at all times. Of these, the most recognizable, and well known is kesh, the uncut hair and beard (for men). Usually Punjabi men wear a turban in order to keep their hair clean and easy to manage. This is the most assertive marker of a man’s Sikh identity as it is easily recognizable and quickly identifies his religious affiliation. Indeed, the turban has become the hallmark of a Sikh. Often, Punjabi Sikhs who have not taken amrit still wear the turban as a symbol of their religion (these Sikhs are known as kesdharis, meaning “hair-bearing”).

For Punjabi Sikhs, the turban is a male symbol worn to identify not only a man’s religion but also the militaristic prowess of the Khalsa Panth. Leaders of Sikh Dharma, however, have extended this marker to women as well, a very strange concept for Punjabi Sikhs. Yogi Bhajan’s followers believe that the turban is not only a Sikh symbol but it also helps to protect the brain from damage and aids in the rising of the energy that is awakened while performing kundalini yoga. Both men and women in Sikh Dharma, therefore, wear the turban. They also typically wear the bana, traditional clothing consisting of a long tunic and pajama-like pants. Although the style is typical of Punjabi

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121 Takhar, *Sikh Identity*, 12.
122 During British rule, the British army recruited many Khalsa Sikhs, praising them for their militaristic nature, which the British attributed to the power the Sikhs drew from the five Ks.
Sikhs, members of Sikh Dharma wear all-white bana, a color usually reserved for widows in Punjabi culture. For non-Punjabi Sikhs, the color signifies the death of the ego.

The turban for women and the wearing of all-white bana are two examples of the cultural disconnect between Sikh Dharma and the Punjabi Khalsa. For Punjabi Sikhs, the turban is a masculine symbol, which became a marker of Sikh identity during Sikh military struggle. For the Khalsa, the requirement is actually keeping the kesh, not the turban. Over time, however, the turban became synonymous with male Sikh identity, largely due to the Sikhs who needed to manage their hair while serving in the military. Within this cultural context, the turban has dual symbolic meanings, not solely of religion but also masculinity. The white bana worn by members of Sikh Dharma are another example of the reinterpretation of Sikh and Punjabi symbols by the western converts. Within Punjabi culture, white is a color usually worn by widows and symbolic of death. Although Sikh Dharma members interpret it as signifying the death of their egos, this is not a common interpretation in the Punjabi Sikh community. These examples contextualize and illustrate the different ways in which these two groups assert their religious and ethnic identities. Sikh Dharma members divorce the symbol of the turban from its masculine connotations and reinterpret they symbolic meaning of the color white. For Punjabi Sikhs, however, the meaning of these symbols are not strictly religious, but are also grounded in Punjabi cultural and traditional contexts.

The fact that non-Punjabi Sikhs follow the teachings of the Guru, adhere strictly to the guidelines of a Khalsa Sikh as given in the Rehat Maryada, and undergo the

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124 See Bernard Cohn, *Colonial Forms of Knowledge* for an in-depth analysis of the Sikh turban and its role in the Sikh armies.
initiation into the Khalsa Panth are all indicators of their Sikh, and specifically, Khalsa religious beliefs and identity. They do incorporate some practices that the Sikh Gurus felt were empty rituals, such as yoga, although members claim that their interpretation of yoga allows them to open their minds to God, and the teachings of the Gurus, allowing them to immerse themselves more completely into Sikh religion. Taking that into consideration, it stands that the largest division between Punjabi and non-Punjabi Sikhs is their ethnicity and the effect that it has on their differing interpretations of Sikh identity.

**INTERPRETATIONS OF SIKH IDENTITY**

The Khalsa identity became the “correct” form of Sikhism under the influence of the British and other Europeans present in India during colonial rule. During colonial rule, the Khalsa Sikhs became the elite, orthodox group within the wider Sikh Panth, and as a result, non-Punjabi Sikhs look to the Khalsa Panth for their own interpretation of Sikhism. However, this leaves out much of the Sikh Panth, who along with their Sikh religious identity, incorporate traditional Punjabi traditions and customs into their worldview, practices and beliefs. Dusenbery identifies these different interpretations when he states, “contrasting, culturally informed interpretations of Sikh teaching and practices have lead the two groups [gora Sikhs and Punjabi Sikhs] to apply different standards in the evaluation of each other’s assertions of Sikh identity.”

The strict and enthusiastic assertion of Khalsa identity found amongst the non-Punjabi Sikhs can be attributed to their American approach to religion and religious identity in general. Non-Punjabi Sikhs “…hold that religious identity is essentially spiritual and personal, achieved through a full and conscious doctrinal choice (e.g.,

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through spiritual rebirth, confirmation, conversion) rather than ascribed as a fact of natural birth."¹²⁶ For the majority of Punjabi Sikhs, this is not the case. Their Sikh identity, more often than not, is a fact of natural birth, as are their traditional Punjabi cultural values and traditions. As a result, neither of these two identities is emphasized over the other. They are both Sikh and Punjabi, and tend to assert each identity in varying degrees dependant on context. Dusenbery summarizes this argument by highlighting the two different approaches to religious and cultural identities:

In short, the Gora [“white”] Sikhs are religious absolutists and cultural relativists, arguing that universal religious ‘codes for conduct’ can be distinguished from and take precedence over particularistic cultural conventions. They thus distinguish that which they identify as a uniquely Sikh duty from that which they regard as mere Punjabi or North American custom.¹²⁷

From this perspective, members of Sikh Dharma emphasize their Sikh identity as separate from cultural customs, and, in turn, expect Punjabi Sikhs to do the same. This attitude was clearly present in the early development of Sikh Dharma, and tension between the non-Punjabi converts and the Punjabi diaspora community centered on the two communities’ assertions of Sikh identity. Although tensions have since subsided, the dialogue between the two groups provides us with interesting insight into the divergent approaches of the two groups and their religious identity.

As previously discussed, many Sikh males abandoned their turbans and shaved their beards upon arrival in the United States. This was encouraged within the diaspora community and, as the Sikh Dharma movement was developing, “most Punjabi Sikhs in North America had been content to keep a low profile, often regarding their visibility as a handicap and sometimes sacrificing their beards and turbans as a necessary adaptation to

¹²⁶ Dusenbery, Sikhs at Large, 350.
¹²⁷ Dusenbery, Sikhs at Large, 351. Emphasis added.
the demands of life in North America.” For the non-Punjabi converts, however, this was seen as abandonment of religious identity, and in fact, an abandonment of the religion itself. A letter to the editor written by a Sikh Dharma administrator and published in the 1973 *Sikh Review*, expressed the dissatisfaction, and perhaps even anger, of the Sikh Dharma community at the Punjabi Sikh community:

> You have become more concerned with society, more concerned with your image as a social group, and you have totally forgotten that if you are not Sikhs of the Guru, then Sikh means nothing at all. You can be a Punjabi no matter what you do and where you go, but you cannot call yourself a Sikh unless you are living as a Sikh.

The language used by this author highlights the point being made here. From the Sikh Dharma perspective, one’s Sikh identity must be asserted consistently at all times. She notes that one is always a Punjabi, not matter what, but unless one is “living as a Sikh” – which to Sikh Dharma members means as a Khalsa Sikh – that individual cannot call himself a Sikh. This emphasizes the assertion of religious identity above all else, and it demonstrative of the different approaches taken by these two groups. Throughout the rest of the letter, the writer accuses the diaspora community of not being true Sikhs because they cut their hair and care “more for social acceptance and the life of ease.” The final blow comes when the author asserts that Punjabi Sikhs are “so prejudiced and limited that they are ready to confine the Word of the Guru to Punjabis or Indians only.” Although I could not find any response in later issues of the *Sikh Review*, one can imagine that sentiments such as these did not sit well with the Punjabi Sikh community.

In his study of the non-Punjabi Sikh community, Verne Dusenbery notes that this debate has subsided, and Sikh Dharma Sikhs are “less morally censorious and publicly

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130 Kaur, *Letter to the Editor*, 56.
dismissive of Punjabi Sikhs in North America than they were in the earlier years.\textsuperscript{131} However the early tensions between the two communities provide an interesting example of the various controversies surrounding Sikh identity, especially as Punjabis continue to leave Punjab and settle elsewhere around the world. Although the Khalsa identity is clearly the dominant form of Sikhism addressed within scholarship, among the Sikh community, a variety of interpretations and beliefs still exist, and the complexities of Sikh identity are still the focus of debate within the Panth.

Members of Sikh Dharma, although they assert that their approach Sikhism is the most pure form, and therefore consider themselves to be members of the Khalsa Panth. The fact that they are not Punjabi, however, highlights the role of ethnicity within the broader Sikh community. Throughout Sikh history, Sikh identity was fluid and included a variety of groups and practices that were not always sanctioned by the Sikh Gurus. However, the community was always united by their Punjabi identity and therefore, shared cultural values, customs, traditions and even holidays, regardless of their religion. Marriage customs, approaches to gender roles, and rites of passage within the Punjabi Sikh community were often a blend of Sikh rituals and Punjabi traditions. This is not the case with the approach of Sikh Dharma members, who strive to separate what they consider Punjabi customs from the Sikh Gurus’ teachings. In doing so, they bring the role of ethnicity within the Sikh community to the forefront, and add new complexities and depth to the issue of Sikh identity.

\textsuperscript{131} Dusenbery, \textit{Sikhs at Large}, 43.
CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, I have shown that the academic focus on Khalsa Sikhism as representative of all Sikhism is an inaccurate interpretation, yet one that has dominated Sikh studies for the majority of its history. Although this work has only touched the surface of the issue, I have shown not only that Khalsa Sikhism has not historically been the dominant form, but also that even among groups ascribing to the Khalsa identity, it is not a monolithic identity and includes a variety of interpretations. As stated in the introduction, I argue that diversity is present within the Sikh community and should be acknowledged and accepted within academia in order to come to a more in-depth and richer understanding of the Sikh Panth and Sikh identity.

The diverse and inclusive nature of the Sikh Panth in its early development demonstrates the traditionally fluid approach to religion and religious identity in India. The brief overview given in the first chapter gave important insight into the religious landscape in Punjab throughout much of the history of Sikhism. The variety of religious practice amongst rural, agricultural Punjabi Sikhs did not require the clear boundaries and exclusivity that defined the religious life of many colonial observers. For them, the Sikh participation in Hindu festivals and reverence of Muslim and village-based saints and deities, was evidence of a decline in Sikh religious practice, and of the religion itself. This view is carried into academia today, largely due to the efforts of the Singh Sabha movement, and the western educated, urban and elite Sikhs who participated in reform efforts.

It is important to recognize the origins of this depiction of Sikhism, and for that reason, the first half of my thesis was dedicated to tracing the history of the Khalsa
identity and some of the factors that helped to give it the “orthodox” label that it has today. Traditionally within scholarship, the dominance and orthodoxy of the Khalsa form of Sikhism has been accepted at face value, and very few scholars have felt the need to determine at what point in time the Khalsa form became accepted as the true form of Sikhism.

The colonial period saw the construction of clear-cut categories that classified Indians into exclusive and neatly defined social and religious groups. Religious categories such as “Sikh” and “Hindu” were not the only identities that were codified during this time. Nicholas Dirks makes a compelling argument about the ways in which the caste system also changed and, to a certain extent, was created in its current form under British rule. In order to successfully govern India, British administrators felt the need to classify and create clear-cut categories for Indians, in the place of previously fluid and localized identities. Dirks’ argument closely parallels the argument made here – not that the concept of caste was created by colonialists, rather, that caste in its current form was shaped by British administrators and applied indiscriminately across India as a universal system of social organization. In the same way, it is apparent that although there was a sense of a Sikh Panth throughout history, it was not considered an all-India community, universally the same throughout all regions of the subcontinent. As demonstrated, a variety of practices, often highly localized, were incorporated into an individual’s worldview, and were considered complimentary, as opposed to contradictory to one’s Sikh beliefs. However, unfamiliar to this approach to religion, British rulers, as well as many scholars at the time, overlooked the amount of diversity present within the
Panth, and lumped the variety of religious traditions within Sikhism into the uniform category of ‘Sikh’.

The Meherat Rajputs, and their approach to religious identity further illustrate the locally based approach traditionally taken in Indian history. The Meherat are a community living in Rajasthan, who, according to folk legend, trace their lineage to Prithviraj Chauhan, a folk hero who is said to be a defender of Hinduism against Islamic forces. Interestingly, however, this community does not identify as Hindu. Rather, the majority of the Meherat community “identify with Islam, the male Meherats undergo circumcision, their marriage rituals are mostly based on the Muslim practice of nikah, and their dead are buried. At the same time, the Meherat know little about Qur’anic injunctions or the centrality of praying at the mosque. Instead they pray to the saints Tejaji and Baba Ram Deoji.”

Because of caste and kinship bonds, however, many Meherat marry into other nearby Rajput clans that are Hindu.

On the surface, this community appears to be an Islamic group. They practice many Islamic traditions, such as circumcision, and they bury their dead, something that is not common in the majority of Hindu traditions. However, their local ties outweigh this Muslim classification. Tracing their lineage to a folk hero who is considered to be the defender of Hinduism in Rajasthan, as well as offering the majority of their prayers to Baba Ram Deoji and Tejaji, two well known Rajasthani heroes, highlights the locality of their community and religious practice. Marrying within the Rajput community as opposed to the wider Muslim community furthers my point. On early census, the Meherat claimed ‘Meherat’ as their religion, not Islam or Hinduism, demonstrating that the overarching, and universal categories used by colonial observers were irrelevant markers.

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of community to the majority of the population. In the case of the Meherats, it is clear that their lineage, kinship, caste, and other local community bonds were stronger and often more important than whether they are Hindu or Muslim.

There are, of course, countless examples such as this one, which reflect the religious variety and inclusiveness previously found within Indian communities. One did not have to abandon local customs in order to consider the practice of *nam simran* the path to the divine, or to incorporate the teachings of Guru Nanak into his or her religious thought. Village-based traditions and beliefs were not exclusive, and participating in them was not seen as invalidating one’s Sikh beliefs. Colonizers, however, in their haste to classify Indians, reduced community organization to religious, or caste-based and generalized these categories to all of India rather than attempting to recognize the locally based structures that were in place.

It is not my intention to suggest that the ideologies of the Singh Sabha movement were in any way *imposed* by the colonial presence in India. The colonial period of India’s history had deep and profound effects on the subcontinent and the various social, political, and religious structures established there. The Singh Sabha movement was born out of these changes, in response to the new, western ideas and models introduced by colonial rule. The urban elite class that I have discussed as the force behind such reform movements was educated within colonial forms of education and was often striving for jobs and opportunities within the colonial government. It would only be beneficial for this group to establish religious boundaries that outlined Sikhism as a religion similar to Christianity (with one God, a sacred book, a moral and social code, and distinct and meaningful life-cycle rituals), making it familiar and easy to identify from an outsider’s
point of view. Additionally, because the Khalsa identity was considered to be the authentic version of Sikhism, Khalsa Sikhs were favored within the colonial government, especially in the British army, where “…Sikhs who sought recruitment to the British army had to undergo Khalsa baptism and uphold the five symbols of the Khalsa.”

The colonial period of India’s history, therefore, provided the environment of social, religious, and political change in which the Singh Sabha movement developed. This crucial turning point in Sikh history has clearly shaped the way that Sikhism is perceived today, and more scholarship in this area would only deepen the current understanding of the Sikh Panth and its history and identity.

The two case studies provided, of the Udasis and Sikh Dharma, give brief outlines of two groups, both of whom approach Sikhism in very different ways. The Udasis practice a traditional form of Sikhism, focused on devotion, and employ ancient Hindu ascetic practices in order to reach their spiritual and religious goals. For Sikh Dharma members, who approach religion much in the same way as the colonial observers that perpetuated the Khalsa identity, belonging to the Khalsa Panth is the correct way of being Sikh. One who does not ascribe to the Khalsa identity, therefore, is not Sikh. However, their non-Punjabi ethnicity still places them on the fringes of the wider Sikh Panth, many of whom feel that their Punjabi identity is closely tied with their Sikh beliefs.

There are, of course, a wide variety of Sikh groups within the larger Sikh Panth today, as well as throughout history. I chose these two groups as examples because of their places within the history of the Sikh Panth and the very different Sikh identities they assert. The Udasis were historically included, and respected, by the Sikh community. As missionaries, keepers of the gurdwara (Sikh temples), and teachers of sacred texts, they

133 Oberoi, Construction of Religious Boundaries, 423.
fulfilled very important roles for the religious community throughout much of its history.

Taking in to consideration the discussion in the first chapter regarding the variety of religious practice found within the traditional Sikh Panth, this should not come as a surprise. With the rise of the Singh Sabha movement, and its push for a dominant Khalsa identity as representative of the entire Sikh community, the Udasis were soon labeled heretical, and not true Sikhs, due to their renunciant lifestyle and ascetic practices. This has led to an academic ignorance (whether intentional or not) of the existence of ascetic practices and communities within the Sikh Panth. The Udasis, formally an integral part of the Panth, are rarely mentioned in Sikh studies, and in the instances where they are, the group is used as an example of a deviant group, one that proves the Singh Sabha’s need to “purify” Sikhism by removing “Hindu” practices (such as asceticism).

Sikh Dharma, on the other hand, does not have a long history within the Panth. Having been established in the United States in the 1970s, Sikh Dharma further complicates the idea of the Khalsa Panth as a monolithic and completely uniform community. Unlike the Udasis, members of Sikh Dharma strictly ascribe to the Khalsa identity, requiring members to take initiation into the Khalsa Panth, live their lives according to the rahit, and wear the five Ks (including the controversial requirement of turbans for women). However, their relationship with the Sikh diaspora community has at times been tumultuous, due to the seemingly relaxed approach towards the Khalsa identity taken by Punjabi Sikhs. If the Khalsa identity is considered to be the “correct” form of Sikhism, however, Sikh Dharma members should be classified as Khalsa Sikhs. The fact that they are often considered non-Sikh, or a lesser form of Sikh (much like a caste distinction), brings forward the issue of ethnicity, and ethnically being accepted as a
Sikh, versus non-ethnic converts. In other words, the tensions between the strong Khalsa identity asserted by members of Sikh Dharma, as contrasted with the much more relaxed identity asserted by Punjabi Sikhs can be traced largely to ethnicity and its role within the Sikh Panth.

The contrast between the Udasis and Sikh Dharma demonstrate the wide range of diversity that can be found within the Sikh Panth across time. The Udasis provide an example of a non-Khalsa group that was historically included in the Sikh Panth, and was later excluded, while Sikh Dharma is a relatively new Sikh group that highlights the new complexities of Sikh identity as Sikhs move out of Punjab and across the globe.

Throughout this work, I have made the argument that diversity within Sikhism ought to be recognized, and given much more attention within scholarship about the Sikh Panth. As Sikh identity continues to be a growing area of study, it would only be beneficial to give up the normative academic tradition of the Khalsa Panth as the ‘true’, ‘orthodox’ or ‘authentic’ Sikh community and explore non-Khalsa groups in more depth. Additionally, even among Sikhs who have taken amrit and ascribe to the Khalsa identity, many continue to uphold traditional practices and beliefs related to family, caste, and village ties. While much of contemporary scholarship focuses on Sikhism within diaspora communities and their political struggles (such as the Khalistan movement for a separate Sikh state), there is still much work to be done with regard to the wide range of religious beliefs found within the Sikh Panth in order to fully understand the deeply complex and multi-faceted issue of Sikh identity.
**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


