

LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD: THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF SIKHISM

TONY BALLANTYNE¹
University of Otago

The study of the Sikh past is deeply conflicted, riven by polemics over the boundaries of the community, debates over the transformations enacted by colonialism and migration beyond India, and heated exchanges over the status of the discipline of history itself as a way of understanding Sikh communities and their experiences. While Sikh studies does not possess the lengthy genealogy that characterises the study of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, does not receive the media attention afforded Islamic studies since the Rushdie affair and lacks the financial resources and institutional support that Jewish studies enjoys in Europe and North America, it has emerged as a lively and contested academic field. A critical examination of Sikh studies highlights several fundamental intellectual and political issues, allowing us to explore the encounter between faith and scholarship, the relationship between imperialism and academic disciplines, and the fundamental epistemological questions that trouble historians.

This essay has two primary objectives. Firstly, it is an attempt to map the major analytical positions that dominate the historical work produced within the sub-discipline of Sikh studies in the hope that both the common

¹ Tony Ballantyne (ajballantyne@yahoo.com), who has recently moved from the University of Illinois to join the Department of History, University of Otago, is the author of *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series. Palgrave-Macmillan, 2001). This article introduces issues he is exploring in his new book *Entangled Pasts: Sikhism, Colonialism and Diaspora*. The key arguments developed in this essay were first presented in September 2001 to the Program in South Asia and Middle Eastern Studies Seminar at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, the Cultural Studies Group at Urbana, and the 'Sikhism in Light of History' conference held at Ann Arbor, Michigan. Tony would like to thank Hew McLeod, Antoinette Burton, Brian Moloughney and Sally Henderson for their responses to earlier versions of this paper, but notes that, as ever, the sole responsibility for the article remains with the author.

ground and points of conflict within the field can be brought into stark relief. Secondly, this essay explores a series of epistemological and methodological problems in order to clarify the assumptions that currently govern the field and to push Sikh studies towards a more sustained engagement with a broader set of questions that are central to humanities scholarship at the dawning of the new millennium. In forwarding a series of provisional responses to these problematics, this essay marks a first and hesitant step towards a vision of the Sikh past that grapples with cultural encounters, the power of colonialism and the cultural traffic that cuts across the borders of the Punjab region and the Indian nation-state.

Mapping the Field

Sikh historiography is dominated by a series of ongoing and intense debates over important events, the veracity of key sources and the origins of certain practices. Many of these exchanges are of great intellectual and cultural significance for Sikhs, especially where the origins of Sikhism, the composition and provenance of key texts (most notably the *Adi Granth* and *Dasam Granth*), and key markers of Sikh identity (such as the ‘five Ks’ and turban (*pagri*)) are concerned.² Robust exchanges over such issues absorb much of the energy of scholars working on the Sikh past and as a result there have been relatively few attempts to explore the fundamental assumptions that shape Sikh studies. Those that do exist, typically either present a narrative of the sub-discipline’s development or explore the supposedly fundamental rifts between ‘western critical scholarship’ and understandings of the Sikh past produced from within Sikh communities.³ Here I adopt another strategy, a more schematic approach that charts the shape of the field, identifying a variety of analytical positions that are differentiated by their fundamental understanding of the shape of Sikh history, their epistemological frameworks, and the methodologies they deploy.

It is possible to identify five divergent approaches to the Sikh past – the internalist, the Khalsacentric, the regional, the externalist and the diasporic. The following discussion of this five-fold typology, which also highlights important

² The five ks, *panj kakar* in Punjabi, are the external markers of identity that are associated with the Sikhs of the Khalsa (the militarised order instituted by the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, in 1699).

³ E.g. Gianeshwar Khurana, *British historiography on the Sikh Power in the Punjab* (London, 1985); Darshan Singh, *Western Image of Sikh Religion* (Delhi, 1999); Fauja Singh ed., *Historians and Historiography of the Sikhs* (Delhi, 1978); Trilochan Singh, *Ernest Trumpp and W.H. McLeod as Scholars of Sikh History, Religion and culture* (Chandigarh, 1994). J. S. Grewal’s *Contesting Interpretations of the Sikh Tradition* (Delhi, 1999) marks something of a break with this tradition.

variations within each position, undercuts the easy oppositions and binary logic that shapes the opposition between ‘Khalsacentric’ and ‘Eurocentric’ approaches to the Sikh past drawn recently by critics of ‘western critical scholarship’. Such a typology also marks a significant refinement of the simple opposition between ‘internalist’ and ‘externalist’ approaches to Sikh history that I have highlighted elsewhere.⁴

Internalist Approaches: Normative, Textual, Political and Cultural

The first of these five analytical traditions is what I have termed the ‘internalist’ approach, a method that dominates Sikh historiography. Despite the significant methodological, epistemological and political differences we can identify as marking four distinct versions of this internalist scholarship (normative, textualist, political, and cultural), those working within the internalist tradition are united by a common analytical orientation. Internalist scholars prioritise the internal development of Sikh ‘tradition’, rather than the broader regional, political and cultural forces that shape the community from the outside.

The oldest of these traditions is what we might term the ‘normative tradition’ or what Harjot Oberoi terms the ‘Tat Khalsa’ tradition. This vision of the Sikh past emerged out of the intense struggles within the Sikh Panth (lit. way; community) during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Pamphleteers, editorialists, and social reformers forwarded conflicting visions of the boundaries of the community and the Panth’s development in the hope that by clearly defining the community’s past they would be able to cement their own vision of the community’s present and future.⁵ History writing was a crucial tool for the rival factions of the Singh Sabha movement, which flourished throughout Punjab after it was initially established in Amritsar (1873) and Lahore (1879). The so-called Sanatan faction insisted that their practices were in keeping both with Sikh custom and what they imagined as the ancient, even eternal, devotional practices of north Indian Hindus. Sanatanis frequently saw the Gurus as avatars of Ram and Krishna, worshipped images and idols, and accepted the *varnasramadharm*, the paradigmatic Brahmanical view of the centrality of the four-fold divisions of *varna* (caste) and *asrama* (stage of life) in shaping an individual’s identity and obligations. On the other hand, the modernist Tat Khalsa faction of the Singh Sabha advocated a clearly delineated Sikh identity and used historical writing to argue that Sikhism was a religious tradition entirely independent from

⁴ Tony Ballantyne, ‘Resisting the “Boa Constrictor” of Hinduism: the Khalsa and the Raj’, *International Journal of Punjab Studies* 6:2 (1999), 195-215.

⁵ The best guide to these exchanges is N. Gerald Barrier, *The Sikhs and Their Literature: a guide to tracts, books, and periodicals, 1849-1919* (Delhi, 1970).

Hinduism. Most famously, Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha proclaimed in his 1898 pamphlet '*ham hindu nahin*': we are not Hindus. Nabha's pamphlet, like other texts produced by Tat Khalsa ideologues, was simultaneously an attack on the power of the Hindu reformers of the Arya Samaj in Punjab and also a response to the Sanatan tradition that remained popular with older Sikhs and the rural masses. These Tat Khalsa reformers rejected Urdu as a medium for education and administration, proclaiming that the Punjabi language written in the Gurmukhi script, the very script used in the *Adi Granth*, was *the* language of Punjab. While they battled the threat of Islamicization they saw as being embodied in Urdu's dominance, they also crafted a complex series of life cycle rituals that marked them off from Punjabi Hindus. Tat Khalsa leaders insisted that Sikhs were a distinct and self-sufficient community and this belief was articulated most clearly when the Chief Khalsa Diwan informed the Governor General in 1888 that Sikhs should not be 'confounded with Hindus but treated in all respects as a separate community.'⁶

To inscribe a firm boundary between Sikhs and Hindus, historical texts produced by Tat Khalsa historians rested on two narrative strategies. Firstly, they evoked ideal types, historical role models who embodied the ideals of the Khalsa. Suspicious of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's piety and morality and unsettled by Dalip Singh's conversion to Christianity, they looked back to a more distant Sikh past, a past untainted by colonialism, for properly Sikh heroes. The heroic martyrdom of the ninth Guru (Tegh Bahadur) and the martial spirit of the tenth, Gobind Singh, served as exemplary models, as did the great protector of the fledgling Khalsa, Banda Singh Bahadur. These heroes and martyrs devoted their lives to the faith and the promulgation of a distinctive Sikh identity in the face of Mughal oppression and Tat Khalsa historians enjoined their contemporaries to do the same.⁷

Following on from this, the second key element of Tat Khalsa historical narratives was an insistence on the dangers posed by Hinduism.⁸ Like many British administrators, Tat Khalsa reformers conceived of Hinduism, especially in its popular forms, as an all-consuming jungle or a boa constrictor capable of crushing and consuming religious innovation through its stifling weight and incessant expansion. The efforts of Hindu reformers and the laxity of uneducated Sikhs not only blurred the boundaries of the community, but also threatened the very future of Sikhism. Only a return to teachings of the *Adi*

⁶ Bhagat Lakshman Singh, *Autobiography* Ganda Singh ed., (Calcutta, 1965), 58.

⁷ Some of these traditions are explored in the work of Lou Fenech on martyrdom in Sikh tradition. See n. 16 below.

⁸ It is important to note that 'Hinduism' itself is a problematic term in the South Asian context. The product of the Orientalist study of South Asian textual traditions and the sociological knowledge produced by the colonial state, there is no equivalent term for 'Hinduism' in any pre-colonial South Asian language. Nevertheless, during in the nineteenth century the term was adopted by a variety of South Asian leaders, especially those writing in English.

Granth and the strict maintenance of the *rahit* (code of conduct), would prevent Hinduism from engulfing Sikhism altogether.⁹

This normative tradition of historical writing was consolidated in the early twentieth century by the likes of Bhai Vir Singh and after Partition it was increasingly professionalised by a new generation of scholars, most notably Ganda Singh and Harbans Singh. Both of these authors wrote what we might term ‘corrective histories’, works that challenged interpretations of Sikhism popular outside the community (such as the belief that Nanak’s teachings were essentially syncretistic) and disputed evidence that indicated diversity in Sikh identity and practice within the historical record. This corrective approach is most obvious in Ganda Singh’s edited collection of European accounts of Sikhism, where his glosses and footnotes not only correct European misapprehensions, but also rebut European claims that Sikhs engaged in practices that contravened the injunctions of the *rahit*.¹⁰

In the late 1960s this normative tradition faced its first serious challenge with the publication of W. H. McLeod’s *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*. McLeod, who quickly established himself as the most influential modern historian of Sikhism. McLeod introduced a new methodological rigour and interpretive strategy into the study of the Sikh past: textual criticism. Published in 1968, one year before the quincentennial of Nanak’s birth, McLeod’s *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* was at odds with the reverential and even hagiographical tone of the numerous volumes that marked this important celebration. McLeod’s book was not a celebration of the Nanak of faith, but rather a critical assessment of what we know about ‘the man Guru Nanak’.¹¹ Taking the *janam-sakhis*, the life stories of Nanak that circulated amongst his followers, as his sources, McLeod set about evaluating the reliability of each *sakhi* or *gost* (chapter). On the basis of miraculous content, the existence of corroborating external sources including the *Adi Granth*, agreement between different *janam-sakhis*, and genealogical and geographical evidence, McLeod placed each narrative into one of five categories: the established, the probable, the possible, the improbable, and the impossible.¹²

According to this typology many treasured narratives – such as the young Nanak’s restoration of a field of wheat ruined by buffaloes – were discounted entirely, others were dismissed as improbable, while others still were identified as merely possible: McLeod placed 87 out of 124 *sakhis* in these categories. The remaining thirty-seven McLeod accepted as either probable or as established on the basis of corroborating evidence. From these sources, McLeod reconstructed the life of Nanak: after his meticulous reading of each *sakhi* and careful weighing of evidence, he produced an account of

⁹ Ballantyne, ‘Resisting the “Boa Constrictor”’.

¹⁰ Ganda Singh, *Early European Accounts of the Sikhs* (Delhi, 1964).

¹¹ W. H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* (Oxford, 1968), vii.

¹² *Ibid.*, 68-70.

Nanak's life – 'everything of any importance which can be affirmed concerning the events of Guru Nanak's life' – in just three short paragraphs. He insisted that in 'the *janam-sakhis* what we find is the Guru Nanak of legend and of faith, the image of the Guru seen through the eyes of popular piety seventy-five or a hundred years after his death'. The *janam-sakhis*, McLeod insisted, 'provide only glimpses' of the historical Nanak.¹³

McLeod's critical reappraisal of the historical Nanak in *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* proved highly controversial (even while his summary of Nanak's teachings was widely accepted as a clear and accurate explication) and it established the key features of a textualist approach to the Sikh past. There are four key features of this analytical strategy that are worth underlining. Firstly, even though McLeod has produced an extremely important volume on bazaar prints and Sikh popular culture, his fundamental approach is empirical and exhibits a deep-concern with establishing the 'facts' of the Sikh past. Secondly, his method is grounded in careful source criticism, paying close attention to the provenance of particular texts and the relationships between texts. Thirdly, philology is central in his analysis, as he assiduously attends to questions of meaning, translation, and linguistic history. Fourthly, taking his substantial *oeuvre* as a whole (and while recognizing his significant pioneering contributions in the study of gender and diaspora), the real focus of McLeod's work is the period prior to western intrusion and the rise of Ranjit Singh and he is primarily interested in the development of textual traditions and the internal dynamics of the community.

McLeod's textualist approach transformed understandings of Sikh history and established a new analytical framework that has been extended by a younger generation of scholars. Where McLeod has focused largely on the *janam-sakhis* and *rahit-namas*, two recent works have focused on the core 'scripture' of the Sikhs, the *Adi Granth*. Pashaura Singh's meticulous yet controversial *The Guru Granth Sahib: Canon, Meaning and Authority* scrutinized the production of the *Adi Granth*, its canonization as 'scripture', and explored the ways in which the relationship between Sikhs and the *Adi Granth* have changed over time.¹⁴ Gurinder Singh Mann's *The Making of Sikh Scripture* drew on recently discovered manuscripts in order to offer a brief yet broad vision of the development of Sikh scripture, extending and modifying McLeod's explorations of the making of the core Sikh textual tradition.¹⁵

Lou Fenech's recent monograph on the place of martyrdom in Sikh history works within the textualist approach pioneered by McLeod, but has pushed it in an important new direction as he used textual analysis to explore the development of a distinctive Sikh cultural tradition focussed on the figure

¹³ Ibid., 146-7.

¹⁴ Pashaura Singh, *The Guru Granth Sahib: canon, meaning and authority* (Delhi, 2000).

¹⁵ Gurinder Singh Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture* (New York, 2001).

of the *shahid* (martyr). By reading culture through textual analysis Fenech's work, to a greater extent than that of McLeod, Gurinder Singh Mann or Pashaura Singh, marks a sustained engagement with neglected cultural questions, such as literary expression, popular culture and the workings of community memory over the broad sweep of Sikh history.¹⁶ Like Fenech, Jeevan Deol's work is deeply concerned with literary expression and his essays to date fruitfully explore a number of theoretical issues related to narrative and discourse while returning Sikh texts and history to a wider Punjabi cultural field.¹⁷

A third variant of the internalist approach can be identified in the work of historians of Sikh politics. Most notable here is the work of N.G. Barrier. One of the leading specialists on Sikh history in the colonial era, Barrier's work in the 1970s explored broader aspects of Punjabi administration and politics before the rise of Gandhi and his more recent work on Sikh politics remains highly cognisant of both this regional context and the power of the colonial state. Unlike the textualist approach, Barrier foregrounds community mobilisation and access to political power, providing valuable insights into the institutions, power structures, and internal struggles that have shaped Sikh politics in the last 150 years, both in Punjab and beyond.¹⁸ His current work on institutional and textual authority within a global Sikh community promises to create a paradigmatic and nuanced analysis of recent Sikh politics, filling a gaping hole in the scholarly literature on Sikhism.

While Barrier's work has been central in shaping our understanding of Sikh politics in the colonial era, Harjot Oberoi has produced the most sophisticated cultural analysis of social change in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Oberoi's critics have frequently identified him as a member of a 'McLeodian school', failing to recognise the fundamental epistemological and methodological break that Oberoi's work makes from the textualist tradition and McLeod's strict empiricism. Although Oberoi's *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* notes that 'the field of modern Sikh studies has for long been

¹⁶ Louis E. Fenech, *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition: playing the 'game of love'* (New Delhi, 2000).

¹⁷ Jeevan Deol, 'Eighteenth Century Khalsa Identity: Discourse, Praxis and Narrative', *Sikh Religion, Culture and Ethnicity* Christopher Shackle, Gurharpal Singh & Arvind-pal Singh Mandair eds., (Richmond, 2001), 25-46; 'The Minas and Their Literature', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118:2 (1998), 172-184; 'Surdas: Poet and Text in the Sikh Tradition', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 63:2 (2000), 169-193; "'To Hell With War": Literature of Political Resistance in early Nineteenth Century Punjab', *South Asia Research* 17:2 (1997), 178-209.

¹⁸ See, for example, N.G. Barrier, 'The Formulation and Enactment of the Punjab Alienation of Land Bill', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 2:2 (1965), 145-165; 'Mass Politics and the Punjab Congress in the Pre-Gandhian Era', *Journal of Indian History* 50:149, (1972), 459-470.

nurtured by the writings of Professor W.H. McLeod' and acknowledges an 'enormous debt' to McLeod, his analytical framework is an entirely original one, at least within the context of Sikh studies.¹⁹ The very title of the work which foregrounds the *construction* of Sikh identity signals an important shift away from empiricism towards a social constructivist approach. This rupture is also confirmed by Oberoi's epigram, taken from Tzvetan Todorov's discussion of the openness and multiplicity of historical narratives in Todorov's landmark *The Conquest of America*, a quotation that underlines Oberoi's keen interest in the production of narratives and discourses and their cultural power.²⁰ Oberoi cast a wide theoretical net: drawing both from the classical sociology of religion (Durkheim, Weber and Evans-Pritchard) through to Foucault's work on the shifting epistemological foundations of knowledge-construction. If these theoretical interests mark *The Construction of Religious Boundaries* off from the tradition pioneered by McLeod, so too does Oberoi's interest in the centrality of colonialism. Although his work covers a huge geographical and temporal terrain, McLeod's most detailed research explores the period up to the middle of the eighteenth century and it resolutely focuses on transformations that were driven from within the community. Oberoi instead focuses on the period between 1849 and 1920, recounting the birth of a new Sikh episteme under colonialism. It is important to note that for Oberoi, this crucial shift was not the direct result of British rule, but rather the social, economic, and cultural reconfigurations of colonialism created the conditions for this momentous reshaping of Sikh intellectual and cultural life. It is against this colonial background that Oberoi reconstructs the role of indigenous elites and propagandists in the reordering of indigenous identity along communal lines.

Oberoi detailed the clash between the Sanatan tradition and the systematised religious vision of the Tat Khalsa, a modernist vision that inscribed clear lines between Sikhs and other communities by insisting on the maintenance of a cluster of new rituals and social practices as markers of community. In short, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries* documented the undermining of an 'enchanted universe' of popular religious syncretism in the villages of the Punjab by a highly ordered pattern of practice and clearly delineated Sikh ('Tat Khalsa') identity formulated in the province's urban centres and disseminated through print culture, community organizations and sustained proselytization.

¹⁹ Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: culture, identity and diversity in the Sikh tradition* (Delhi, 1994), xii.

²⁰ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: the question of the other* Richard Howard trans., (New York, 1984).

Khalsacentrism and History

The Construction of Religious Boundaries pushed Sikh studies in a new direction, stimulating an analytical reorientation that was strongly resisted by many conservative Sikhs. The book and its author became targets of fierce polemics. In the introduction to their *The Invasion of Religious Boundaries*, a sustained rebuttal of *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, Jasbir Singh Mann, Surinder Singh Sodhi and Gurbakhsh Singh Gill characterised Oberoi's work in the following way:

Clumsy distortions, mindless anthropological constructions and assumptions, producing ignominious forged postures, sacrilegious statements about mystic Gurus, effectless effort of a bland, blunted, unattached, constricted, shallow, pathetic Oberoi has produced a disjointed cynical, conscienceless and unscrupulous book ... to attack the independent Sikh Identity ... In writing this book, he has shown his pathological identification with Eurocentric paradigms, and has attempted to bring nihilistic depersonalisation by biting the hands that fed him.²¹

Elsewhere in the *Invasion of Religious Boundaries*, Sodhi and Mann argue that 'Oberoi has become prisoner of [the] McLeodian Eurocentric research paradigm.'²²

To counter 'western critical scholarship', Mann, Sodhi and Gill advocate the adoption of a Khalsacentric approach to the Sikh past. Although this approach shares some fundamental assumptions about the primacy of developments within the community with the internalist visions of Sikh history described above, the thoroughness of its critique of 'western' understandings of Sikhism and disciplinary knowledge sets it apart. Sodhi, for example, insists that Khalsacentric research eschews 'the use of European social science methods' and instead grounds scholarship in a belief 'in essence, wholism [sic], introspection' and that, as a result, Khalsacentric scholarship describes 'Sikh realities from a subjective faith point of view of the Khalsa values and ideals'.²³

While, at an important level, this approach exhibits the same deep concern with the maintenance of a prescriptive normative order that typified the older Tat Khalsa tradition, Khalsacentric scholarship is characterised by its thorough rejection of 'western critical scholarship'. Where the Tat Khalsa tradition developed out of an urbanized late nineteenth century Punjabi elite that was receptive towards colonial education and western disciplines, the

²¹ Jasbir Singh Mann, Surinder Singh Sodhi and Gurbakhsh Singh Gill, 'Introduction', *Invasion of Religious Boundaries: a critique of Harjot Oberoi's work* (Vancouver, n.d.), 1.

²² S.S. Sodhi and J.S. Mann, 'Construction of Religious Boundaries', *ibid.*, 167.

²³ S.S. Sodhi, 'Eurocentrism vs. Khalsacentrism', *ibid.*, 342.

Khalsacentric tradition repudiates the authority claims of disciplines like history, sociology, anthropology, women's studies, and religious studies. Gurdarshan Singh Dhillon, for example, has asserted that 'a proper study of religion ... is beyond the domain of Sociology, Anthropology and History', while Sukhmander Singh has argued that '[m]ethodologies relevant to Christian ideology where scriptures developed as a result of history and culture, [are] inapplicable to Sikhism where scripture is revelatory and authenticated by the prophet himself.'²⁴ It follows on from this that Sikhism can only be understood from a 'scriptural' basis:

As Sikhism is not a history grounded religion, the application of Judo-Christian [sic] principles in Sikh studies will bring about the wrong results. Sikhism is not a product of history. Rather, the Sikh thought is its cause, and the historical events that followed, represent the unfolding of the philosophy preached by the Gurus, and enshrined in Sri Guru Granth Sahib.²⁵

This rejection of western disciplines is energized by the social concerns of a conservative section of a transnational Sikh elite, many of whom are professionals based in North America, anxious about the maintenance of tradition in a diasporic age. Although the Khalsacentric model has drawn some support from non-Sikh scholars, most notably Noel King, it is enabled by a nativist politics that simply rejects the authority of non-Sikh scholars and dismisses many professional Sikh historians in *ad hominem* attacks as 'brain-washed', 'role-dancing' or 'fallen'.²⁶

It is important to recognise that Khalsacentric critiques of western scholarship are partly motivated by a legitimate concern about the colonial origins and the Eurocentric freight of many academic disciplines. The Khalsacentric refutation of 'western knowledge' rests upon the supposed materialism of all western scholarship (an assertion that seems dubious in the wake of post-structuralism, post-modernism, gender studies and the linguistic turn) and an engagement, albeit a scant and seemingly haphazard one, with the work of Edward Said, Talal Asad and other critics of Orientalism.²⁷ Given

²⁴ Gurdarshan Singh Dhillon, 'Review of *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*', *Sikh Press*, 4:33 (May 1994), 4; Sukhmander Singh, 'A Work of Scholarly Indulgence', *Invasion of Religious Boundaries – a critique of Harjot Oberoi's work* Jasbir Singh Mann, Surinder Singh Sodhi and Gurbaksh Singh Gill eds., (Vancouver, 1995), 257.

²⁵ Mann, Sodhi and Gill, 'Introduction', *ibid.*, 7-8.

²⁶ Noel Q. King, "'Modernity', 'Fundamentalism' and Sikhism: a *tertium quid*", *Invasion of Religious Boundaries*, 106-111; 'The Siege Perilous (Hot Seat) and the divine Hypothesis', *ibid.*, 11-116; 'Capax imperii – Scripture, Tradition and European style critical method', *Advanced Studies in Sikhism* Jasbir Singh Mann and Harbans Singh Saraon eds., (Irvine, CA, 1989), 3-15.

²⁷ E.g. Mann, Sodhi, and Gill, 'Introduction', 3.

this, however, it is ironic that the Khalsacentric critique of ‘western knowledge’ replicates the binary logic that structured the most pernicious forms of colonial discourse, merely reversing the moral and political value attached to spirituality as opposed to science, tradition to modernity, faith to scholarship.

Khalsacentrism is, fundamentally, an ‘Occidentalising’ discourse that caricatures western culture and academic disciplines in an effort to insulate the community from the ‘invasive’ effects of professional scholarship and to enable the construction of an autonomous, self-contained and privileged interpretative tradition within the community. Not surprisingly, Khalsacentric discourse replicates many of the arguments made by the Hindu right against ‘western scholarship’ and the ‘historical religions’ of the ‘West’, while simultaneously closing down debates about history and identity with ‘outsiders’.²⁸ At a fundamental level, such arguments merely reinforce long-established Orientalist stereotypes of South Asia as a land of unchanging and eternal spirituality, the very tradition that much recent post-Orientalist scholarship on South Asian has been working against.²⁹

Yet, there is much to admire in Sodhi’s exposition of a program for Khalsacentric scholarship, particularly his insistence that as an approach it is grounded in ‘humanistic and emancipatory anti-racist awareness’ and that will ‘screen out oppressive assumptions’.³⁰ But on the basis of the work produced by Khalsacentric scholars to date, there seems to be the likely possibility that this model may itself create and enforce ‘oppressive assumptions’, a likelihood that seems very real in light of the polemics against the personality, morals and families of Harjot Oberoi, Hew McLeod, Pashaura Singh and others. By insisting that scholarship be should be produced from within the Khalsa and should affirm its values and program, this approach to the Sikh past calls into question the faith and identity of those Sikhs who do not accept all of the practices and identity markers of the Khalsa. This is clear, for example, in the work of Manjeet Singh Sidhu, who dubbed Oberoi a ‘mendacious gleaner’ and dismissed the Sanatan faction of the Singh Sabha as ‘Hindu saboteurs’ and ‘conspiratorial and peripheral Sanatan Sikhs’.³¹ Used in this way, Khalsacentrism can only reify community boundaries, disempower non-Khalsa

²⁸ Just as the popular journal *Hinduism Today* declared that ‘history is always inaccurate and often injurious. The good news is that India and Hinduism live beyond history’, Sodhi, Mann and Gill argued that ‘[t]he Sikh religion or its identity cannot be studied with such parameters as are applied to Judeo-Christian studies ... as their religion and scriptures, which numbering over 60, make it a history grounded religion’ where ‘Sikhism is not the product of history’. ‘Introduction’, 7; *Hinduism Today*, 16 (December, 1994).

²⁹ On the possibilities of a ‘post-orientalist’ history see Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia: history, culture, and political economy* (London, 1998).

³⁰ S.S. Sodhi, ‘Eurocentrism vs. Khalsacentrism’, 342-3.

³¹ Manjeet Singh Sandhu, ‘Harjot Oberoi - Scholar or saboteur’, *Invasion of Religious Boundaries*, 192-3.

Sikhs and prevent the possibility of any positive dialogue with other South Asian religious communities or with non-Sikh scholars.

Regional Approaches: Sikhism in its Punjabi Context

While these internalist models often recognise that the Sikh community has been moulded by the broader structures, institutions and cultural patterns of Punjabi life (even in the diasporic context), they share a tendency to abstract Sikhism from this crucial regional context.³² At a fundamental level, of course, this is a product of the Tat Khalsa insistence on the originality, internal coherence, and incomparability of Sikh tradition. As a result, internal scholarship tends to privilege religious identity over social and commercial affiliations or regional identity and Sikhism is extracted from the dense webs of economics, social relations, and political traditions that have moulded its development in Punjab and beyond.

Several historians break with the internalist tradition through their explicit emphasis on the importance of this regional context. Indu Banga, whose writings cover the late eighteenth century through to the twentieth, has consistently foregrounded the importance of Punjab as a context. In part, this seems to be a product of her groundbreaking work on Ranjit Singh's kingdom, a state that is frequently imagined as being explicitly Sikh, yet rested upon the Maharaja's skilful balancing of different faiths and ethnicities in both his administration and military establishment. Banga's emphasis on the importance of the regional context also reflects her strong interest in the economic and agrarian history of the region, the crucial milieu within which Sikhism emerged and developed.³³

J. S. Grewal has consistently grounded his explorations of Sikhism in the history of Punjab. Of all the historians working on Sikhism, Grewal has published the most widely on Punjabi history more generally and his research consistently foregrounds the importance of the region's geography, its institutions and political structures, its economic fortunes and its cultural ethos. In light of this insistence, his work typically uses a broader range of sources and deploys a range of approaches – from literary analysis to discussions of political economy – in teasing out the multi-faceted nature of Sikh history. For Grewal, Sikh history is a dynamic story of the shifting relationship

³² This tendency varies between approaches and individual historians: it is much more pronounced in the Tat Khalsa normative tradition than in the political approach of Barrier or the cultural history produced by Oberoi.

³³ Indu Banga, *Agrarian System of the Sikhs: late eighteenth and early nineteenth century* (Delhi, 1978); edited with J.S. Grewal, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh and His Times* (Amritsar, 1980); 'Agrarian System in Punjab during Sikh Rule', *History of Agriculture* 2:1 (1980), 35-65.

between this community and its regional environment. It is telling that the recent *festschrift* for Grewal was entitled *Five Punjabi Centuries: policy, economy, society, and culture*³⁴

For the colonial period, the work of Kenneth W. Jones firmly located Sikh debates over identity and Sikh socio-religious reform movements within a wider regional and national context.³⁵ His landmark 1973 *Journal of Asian Studies* article on Arya Samaji-Singh Sabha relations located the articulation of an increasing clearly defined Sikh identity within the broader context of educational change, urbanization, and class formation in Punjab.³⁶ For Jones, it was clear that the religious reform and the definition of clear-cut boundaries between Hindus and Sikhs was not only the product of the encounters between the communities, but was also the result of struggles within the community between newly-powerful urban elites and the older 'orthodox world' of rural life. Although Jones's exploration of these struggles within the Sikh community have been elaborated and refined by Oberoi, there has been limited effort to extend his pioneering work on the relationship between Arya Samajis and Singh Sabha reformers. Anil Sethi's recent Cambridge PhD thesis provides some insight into this process within his broader analysis of the changing operation of community boundaries in key spheres of Punjabi popular culture and daily life, including commensality, festivals and popular entertainment.³⁷

Externalist Approaches: Sikh Identity as a Colonial Product

A smaller group of historians have privileged imperial power relations over regional structures as they emphasise the centrality of colonialism in the making of Sikhism. This approach is most obvious in Richard Fox's *Lions of the Punjab*, which argued that the British played a central role in constituting the orthodox 'Singh' [i.e. Khalsa] identity as they hoped a distinctive and loyal Sikh soldiery would form a bulwark to British authority.³⁸ In short, Fox suggested that the British pursued a project of 'domestication', as they used

³⁴ Indu Banga ed., *Five Punjabi Centuries: policy, economy, society, and culture, c. 1500-1990: essays for J.S. Grewal* (New Delhi, 1997).

³⁵ Kenneth W. Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India* (Cambridge, 1990); *Religious Controversy in British India: Dialogues in South Asian Languages* (Albany, 1992).

³⁶ Kenneth W. Jones, 'Ham Hindu Nahin: Arya-Sikh Relations, 1877-1905', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 32:3 (1973), 457-475. Also see his earlier 'Communalism in the Punjab: the Arya Samaj contribution', *Journal of Asian Studies* 28:1 (1968), 39-54.

³⁷ Anil Sethi, 'The Creation of Religious Identities in the Punjab, c.1850-1920', (University of Cambridge Ph.D. 1998).

³⁸ Oberoi's arguments in *The Construction of Religious Boundaries* can be read as an extended response to Fox's work.

military recruitment ‘to turn the Singhs into guardians of the Raj’ while using ‘Sikhism’s religious institutions to discipline them [Sikh soldiers] to obedience.’³⁹ Through the mechanism of the ‘martial races’ policy the British were thus instrumental in the constitution of a new ‘orthodoxy’, a religious identity that fulfilled the needs of the British, not Punjabis themselves. Although Fox suggests that ‘antecedent conditions of class relations and religious identities set the material and cultural limits for the making ... of the Punjab’s culture’, his monograph foregrounds the instrumentality of the colonial state and fails to acknowledge the significance of pre-colonial structures, practices, and identities.⁴⁰ Thus, in contrast to the long dominant internalist historiographical tradition, Fox’s work was characterised by an ‘externalist’ approach. In stressing the pivotal role of British cultural assumptions and the mechanisms of the colonial state in the creation of modern Sikh identity, Fox effectively relocated the drive-wheel of historical change from within the Sikh community to British offices, libraries and drill-halls. Fox’s work challenged the tendency to treat the Sikh community as self-contained, underlining the transformative power of colonialism and identifying colonial rule as the major rupture in Punjabi history.

Bernard Cohn developed similar arguments in his important essay on the symbolic and political importance of clothing, including the Sikh turban, in South Asian society. Cohn argues that the ‘British rulers in nineteenth-century India played a major part in making the turban into a salient feature of Sikh identity’. While Cohn briefly reviews Sikh history, beginning with the age-old (and erroneous) assertion that Sikhism ‘grew out of syncretic tendencies in theology and worship among Hindu and Muslims in north India’, his discussion of the *dastar* or *pagri* (turban) fails to note its significance in eighteenth century texts such as the *Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama* and its prominence in the ranks of Ranjit Singh’s army.⁴¹ Such evidence suggests that the turban had already become an important marker of identity for some Sikhs, at least some Sikh men, long before the extension of the East India Company’s authority over Punjab in 1849. Certainly, Cohn is correct in suggesting that during the colonial period the turban increasingly became a standard marker of Sikh identity, but his neglect of the pre-colonial period allows him to overplay the extent of this transformation. By privileging the

³⁹ Richard G. Fox, *Lions of the Punjab: culture in the making* (Delhi, 1990), 140.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 207.

⁴¹ Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: the British In India* (Princeton, 1996), 107; *The Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama* W.H. McLeod (Dunedin, 1987). The changing place of the turban in Sikh identity is explored in W.H. McLeod, ‘The Turban: Symbol of Sikh Identity’, *Sikh Identity: Continuity and Change* Pashaura Singh and N. Gerald Barrier eds., (Delhi, 1999), 57-68. Elsewhere McLeod has insisted that the *rahit-namas* are important agents and markers of continuity between the seventeenth century and nineteenth century Panth. W.H. McLeod, *Early Sikh tradition: a Study of the Janam-Sakhis* (Oxford, 1980), 105.

prescriptive power of the colonial state, Cohn also effaces the role of indigenous reformers, especially the members of the Tat Khalsa, in promulgating the turban as a distinctively Sikh symbol in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Thus both Cohn's and Fox's externalist interpretation of the genesis of modern Sikh identity are enabled by truncated chronological frameworks which effectively erase the pre-colonial period. By defining the rise of a distinct Sikh identity as the direct product of the initiatives of the colonial state, ironically these visions of Sikh history actually make it difficult to gauge the exact nature, extent and legacy of the colonial moment in Sikh history. Indeed, this story may seem very different, if the question of modern Sikh identity was re-imagined within a broader exploration of the problem of identity under *imperial regimes in general* rather than *under British colonialism in particular*, for then we might have a fuller understanding of how the imperial systems of the Mughals and Ranjit Singh dealt with the heterogeneous nature of Punjabi society. We await a study that will place the reformist zeal of the final three decades of the nineteenth century in a broad chronological context, allowing us to assess the true extent of British power and the cultural programme of the Tat Khalsa.

Diasporic approaches: Sikhism in a global frame

The most recent approach to the Sikh past that has emerged is grounded in the study of the Sikh community as a trans-national and diasporic social formation. At one level, this approach grew out of an older tradition of work on Sikh (and Punjabi) immigration, such as Arthur Helweg's sociological studies of the British Sikh community and W. H. McLeod's pioneering work on Punjabis in New Zealand.⁴² These early studies largely dealt with the staples of immigration history as it developed in the 1970s and 1980s, such as the decision to immigrate, the nature and organization of the community in its 'host country', and questions of 'assimilation' and 'acculturation'.

This immigration history paradigm has been called into question recently as some scholars have adopted a range of approaches that have emerged out of the analytical problematic of 'diaspora'. As Verne Dusenbery has argued, this shift towards a diasporic model marked a significant reconceptualisation of the position of the Sikh community and the project of Sikh studies. Where earlier histories of Sikh communities beyond Punjab were written in the vein of 'immigration history' and as such took the 'host nation' nation as its analytical unit, imagining a Sikh diaspora invoked a very different

⁴² Arthur Helweg, *Sikhs in England: the development of a migrant community* (Oxford, 1979); W. H. McLeod, *Punjabis in New Zealand: a history of Punjabi migration, 1890-1940* (Amritsar, 1986).

model. The term ‘diaspora’, originally used to describe the Jewish experience and well established as an analytical category in Jewish studies, suggested that diasporic Sikhs were a people unified by a common culture and who had been dispersed, either temporarily or permanently, from their ‘homeland’.⁴³ At an analytical level, the concept of a Sikh diaspora was both promising and troubling. In conceiving of the ‘diaspora’ itself as the analytical focus (rather than the Sikh community in a particular nation), the possibility of a genuinely trans-national approach to Sikh studies was opened up, a strategy through which we might not only recover the social networks, institutional structures and cultural traffic that has linked Sikhs living overseas with the Punjab, but also the ties that directly connect different diasporic communities (say, for example, in Britain and Canada).

Brian Keith Axel’s recent *The Nation’s Tortured Body* developed a rereading of the last 150 years of Sikh history through the lens of the contemporary transnational and diasporic global Sikh community. Most provocatively, Axel argued that the notion of Punjab as the ‘Sikh homeland’ was not something created in India and carried out into the world by migrants, but rather it was the diasporic experience of displacement that actually created the notion of the homeland. Axel’s transnational approach allowed him to produce and juxtapose ethnographies and histories of a range of important sites for various Sikh communities, ranging from Harmandir Sahib in Amritsar to Southall’s Glassy Junction pub. Not only does Axel return these ‘local’ sites to the broader field of the diaspora, he also examines the ways in which these various sites and communities are connected. He makes a convincing case that it is the circulation of images of the male Sikh body – with Maharaja Dalip Singh serving as the exemplary case – that mediate between far-flung Sikh communities.

Most importantly, Axel argues that since 1983 it has been images of the tortured bodies of Sikh ‘militants’ and Khalistanis, which now freely circulate on the internet, that have played a central role in creating the social relations that constitute the diaspora. Axel shows that these images remind diasporic Sikhs of the constant threat of violence they face and foreground the dislocation, longing for home and struggle for power that are implicit in the diasporic condition.⁴⁴

But diaspora, Axel’s foundational category, remains a contested term in the Sikh case. As Dusenbery, McLeod and Karen Leonard have pointed out, the notion of a ‘Sikh diaspora’ may in itself be misleading as it privileges religious identity at the expense of other social markers, economic ties, and

⁴³ Verne Dusenbery, ‘A Sikh Diaspora? Contested Identities and Constructed Realities’, *Nation and Migration: the Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora* Peter van der Veer ed., (Philadelphia, 1995), 17-42.

⁴⁴ Brian Keith Axel, *The Nation’s Tortured Body: violence, representation, and the formation of a Sikh “Diaspora”* (Durham, NC, 2001).

kinship networks.⁴⁵ Dusenbery has demonstrated that diasporic Sikhs are not simply motivated by projecting a publicly recognizable Sikh identity, but rather manifest concern with maintaining a range of what he terms ‘ancestral genera’, the linguistic usages, occupational traditions, marriage patterns, and village connections that shape Punjabi culture as a whole.⁴⁶ Not only do we have to guard against the fetishization of religious identity implicit within the notion of a ‘Sikh diaspora’, but we also have to be cautious in the concept’s changing analytical purchase across time. While Axel’s work demonstrates the very real strengths of a diasporic interpretation of Sikh identity formation in the post-World War II period, both McLeod and Leonard have suggested that the concept may be of limited use for work on migration and community-formation amongst Punjabi migrants in the early twentieth century because early Punjabi settlers in Britain, Canada, the United States and Australasia, like many rural Punjabis, did not necessarily define themselves in terms of their religious community. These knotty analytical problems again underscore the ways in which both regional context and historical contingency disrupt the easy creation of new paradigms, reminding us that while concepts such as a ‘Sikh diaspora’ are useful heuristic tools, they should be deployed with care and self-reflection.

Towards a New Approach: The Question of ‘Tradition’

Thus far I have presented a schematic ‘map’ of Sikh historiography and have highlighted some of the major epistemological and methodological difficulties that face each of the positions. In the remainder of the essay, I will briefly elaborate on this critical commentary and sketch the foundations of an alternative vision of Sikh history, one that tries to reconnect the pre-colonial past, colonialism and diaspora. This vision remains rudimentary and is not meant in any sense to be paradigmatic. Rather, I hope, it will raise a series of questions concerning the ways in which we produce knowledge about the past of Sikh communities and it will highlight some fruitful avenues for future research.

⁴⁵ Dusenbery, ‘A Sikh Diaspora?’; W. H. McLeod, ‘The First Forty Years of Sikh Migration: Problems and Possible Solutions’, *The Sikh Diaspora* N.G. Barrier and Verne Dusenbery eds., 29-48; Karen Leonard, ‘Pioneer Voices from California: Reflections on Race, Religion and Ethnicity’, *ibid.*, 120-140.

⁴⁶ Verne Dusenbery, ‘On the Moral Sensitivities of Sikhs in North America’, *Divine Passions: the social construction of emotion in India* (Berkeley, 1990), 239-261 and ‘The Sikh Person, the Khalsa Panth, and western Sikh Converts’, *Religious Movements and Social Identity: Volume 4 - Of Boeings and Bullock-carts* (Delhi, 1990), 117-135.

As the foregoing discussion of the notion of a ‘Sikh diaspora’ suggests, an important starting point for re-imagining Sikh history is the assessment of the sub-discipline’s existing conceptual vocabulary and the exploration of new analytical concepts. Given the contentious status of ‘history’ as an interpretative discipline and the centrality of hermeneutic debates over the interpretation of sacred texts, historians of Sikhism have paid considerable attention to translation. This has been a particular hallmark of the textualist approach pioneered by McLeod and much of his work proceeds from the close analysis and discussion of a particular key term or concept. McLeod firmly respects linguistic and cultural difference, highlighting the problem of translation and has frequently argued that Sikhism, where possible, should be understood on its own terms, rather than according to a Judaeo-Christian framework. He has, for example, been a firm advocate of the use of the term ‘Panth’ to describe the Sikh community, preferring it to other terms such as ‘sect’ or ‘denomination’.⁴⁷ McLeod has been even-handed in his attentiveness to questions of translation: he is just as concerned with the way in which English terms are mapped onto Punjabi concepts as he is with the accurate renderings of Punjabi words into English.

Harjot Oberoi has also paid close attention to this issue, particularly with regards to the origins and use of the term ‘Sikhism’. Drawing upon the work of other historians of South Asian religions, most notably Romila Thapar, Oberoi has highlighted the difficulties in translating the very notion of ‘religion’ into the South Asian context (especially before 1900) and the centrality of the colonial state in fashioning and consolidating ‘religion’ as a concept in South Asia.⁴⁸

One term that is in wide currency amongst Sikh historians, however, requires careful scrutiny and that is ‘tradition’. Historians of Sikhism use ‘tradition’ as a catchall phrase that describes the textual corpus, practices and discourses produced by Sikhs. Yet this term is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, ‘tradition’ frequently stands in contradistinction to modernity, representing the authentic essence of a pre-modern community. While historians generally see ‘tradition’ as being disrupted, undermined and frequently supplanted by modernity, in Sikh studies ‘tradition’ is frequently used in discussions of the contemporary moment and diasporic communities.⁴⁹ This is not surprising given the strength of the internalist approach and the tendency to insulate the Sikh past from the transformative power of

⁴⁷ W. H. McLeod, ‘A Sikh Theology for Modern Times’, *Sikh History and Religion in the Twentieth Century* J.T. O’Connell et al eds., (Toronto, 1990), 32-43.

⁴⁸ Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*, 1-35; also see Romila Thapar, ‘Syndicated Moksas?’, *Seminar*, September 1985, 14-22 and Gunther Sontheimer and Herman Kulke eds., *Hinduism Reconsidered* (New Delhi, 1989).

⁴⁹ E.g. Sardar Singh Bhatia and Anand Spencer eds., *The Sikh tradition: a continuing reality: essays in history and religion* (Patiala, 1999).

colonialism and migration. The category of ‘tradition’ itself has not been subject to sustained analysis, even though the work of both Lou Fenech and Harjot Oberoi seems to suggest that the very notion of tradition was itself the product of the Singh Sabha movement. Secondly, and following on from this, the use of ‘tradition’ as a concept tends to imagine a homogeneous and strictly unified community, evacuating the Sikh past of struggle and contestation. This tendency is partly marked in the scholarship for the pre-colonial era, partly because of the predominance of textualist readings of the pre-1849 period: a more sophisticated social and cultural history that attended to pre-colonial social differentiation and political struggle would fundamentally transform our understandings of the pre-colonial past in the way that Oberoi revised our vision of the 1870 to 1930 period.

What I am suggesting here then is to extend our critical interrogation of the ways in which concepts such as ‘tradition’ have been produced. The work of Fenech on martyrdom and Oberoi on the Tat Khalsa episteme mark important starting points for this project, but despite their pioneering work there are fundamental aspects of the colonial period that require careful re-examination. The cultural values and political pressures that shaped the ‘Punjab school’ of colonial administration remain largely unquestioned, reflecting a central unevenness in the scholarship on the colonial period. Thanks to Oberoi, we have a rich anthropological understanding of Punjabi culture under colonialism, but the values and motivations of British actors remain un-anthropologized.⁵⁰ As it stands, Sikh historiography is in danger of replicating the long-established and pernicious assertion that natives have culture, while Europeans have history. A two-sided rereading of the colonial period, as my discussion of Fox and Cohn above suggests, must also attend carefully to questions of both power asymmetries and agency, recognising the importance of long-established community dynamics and the important reformist and prescriptive literature produced by Sikhs themselves (both in the pre-colonial and colonial periods).

Points of Recognition

One way we might avoid privileging the instrumentality of the colonial state is to delineate what can be termed the ‘points of recognition’ that shaped the cultural terrain of colonial Punjab: those values, ideals, and practices that

⁵⁰ Two essays mark an important start on this project: Harold Lee, ‘John and Henry Lawrence and the origins of Paternalist Rule in the Punjab, 1846-1858’, *International Journal of Punjab Studies* 2:1 (1995), 65-88 and Brian Caton, ‘Sikh Identity Formation and the British Rural Ideal, 1880-1930’, *Sikh Identity*, 175-194. More generally, Clive Dewey has offered some important insights in his *Anglo-Indian Attitudes: the mind of the Indian Civil Service* (London, 1993).

Britons and Sikhs believed that they shared. These points of recognition, especially notions of masculinity and martiality, were spaces where Sikh leaders could win cultural recognition and economic benefits (especially through military service) from the colonial state and where colonial policy in turn could gain purchase, creating new institutions and reshaping cultural patterns with the aim of shoring up imperial authority.

It is crucial to insist that while these processes constructed and affirmed cross-cultural commensurability, this production of affinity rested on the identification and marginalisation of other groups who lacked those qualities that Sikhs and Britons supposedly shared. In other words, the production of sameness also required the production of difference.⁵¹ The British celebration of the ‘manliness’ and ‘warrior ethos’ of Khalsa Sikhs depended upon a complex series of comparisons made between monotheistic Sikhs and polytheistic Hindus, the sturdy Punjabi and the effeminate Bengali, the manly meat eater of the north and the physically weak vegetarians of the Gangetic plains and the south, as well as the almost complete erasure of Sikh women from colonial discourse.

The most crucial shared discursive formation articulated by Tat Khalsa reformers and British scholar-administrators was ‘Sikhism in danger’. The British recruiting officer R. W. Falcon expressed this anxiety clearly when he noted the ‘great slackness there is at the present time in taking the *pahul* (Khalsa initiation rite), very many who call themselves Singhs ... omit to take the *pahul* though adopting the surname and keeping some of the observances.’⁵² In a similar vein, the missionary Henry Martyn Clark noted in *Panjab Notes and Queries* that he had encountered a group of seasonal-workers who observed the injunctions of the *rahit* at home, but would cut their hair and openly smoke when they were working away from their villages. Surely this was evidence of the decay of Sikhism?⁵³

In short, the British saw their role as the policemen of tradition, installing *granthis* for Sikh regiments, supplying *jhatka* meat for Sikh soldiers, and collecting a dense archive of ethnographic information about patterns of popular practice. They had to protect Sikhism from the ‘all-consuming jungle’ of popular Hinduism.

This brings us to the work of the most important western interpreter of Sikhism before W. H. McLeod, Max Arthur Macauliffe. Macauliffe was posted to the Punjab as an Indian Civil Service (ICS) officer in 1862 at the age

⁵¹ The relationship between affinity and difference in the history of colonialism is critically explored in *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History. Special issue: From Orientalism to Ornamentalism: Empire and Difference in History*, 3.1 (2002).

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_colonialism_and_colonial_history/toc/cch3.1.html>

⁵² R.W. Falcon, *Handbook on Sikhs for Regimental Officers* (Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1896), 21.

⁵³ H.M. Clark, ‘The Decay of Sikhism’, *Panjab Notes and Queries*, 3 (1885), 20.

of twenty-five. In 1893 he resigned from the ICS after a distinguished career in the Punjab administration, serving as a Deputy Commissioner between 1882 and 1884 and as a Divisional Judge from 1884. From the mid-1870s Macauliffe became interested in the ethnography and religious history of the Punjab. In 1875 he produced an article in the *Calcutta Review* on the shrine to Pir Sakhi Sarvar in the Suliman Mountains, which marked the beginning of a distinguished career, establishing Macauliffe as an important interpreter of Sikh tradition.⁵⁴

Macauliffe's *The Sikh Religion* (six volumes, 1909) created a vision of Sikh scripture and history that has remained tremendously influential within the Sikh Panth. Macauliffe insisted that Sikhism was a distinctive religion and that its history was characterised by a constant battle against Hinduism. Popular Hinduism, he argued, was like a 'boa constrictor of the Indian forests ... it winds round its opponents, crushes it in its fold, and finally causes it to disappear in its capacious interior.' Sikhism was threatened with this same fate: 'the still comparatively young religion is making a vigorous struggle for life, but its ultimate destruction is...inevitable without state support.'⁵⁵ This argument dovetailed nicely with the agenda of the Tat Khalsa reformers Macauliffe worked closely with, who were proclaiming '*ham hindu nahin*' (we are not Hindus). The proclamation of a leading Sikh periodical that as a result of Macauliffe's translation 'the promiscuousness in Sikh ideas will vanish, and Tat Khalsa will begin to start on a new career' reveals the close interdependence of the two views.⁵⁶

These shared visions conditioned the British use of military recruitment as a means of preserving the Khalsa identity. R.W. Falcon's 1896 recruiter's manual enshrined this official understanding, suggesting that recruitment should be aimed only at those 'Sikh tribes which supplied converts to Sikhism in the time of Guru Gobind Singh, who in fact formed the Singh people': more recent converts were to be avoided as they could not be considered 'true Sikh tribes'.⁵⁷ The ultimate test of 'Sikh-ness' was whether an individual maintained the external symbols of the Khalsa: 'Singhs, the members of the Khalsa; these are the only Sikhs who are reckoned as true Sikh The best practical test of a true Sikh is to ascertain whether calling himself a Sikh he

⁵⁴ M.A. Macauliffe, 'The Fair at Sakhi Sarvar', *Calcutta Review*, LX (1875), 78-101. For more recent analyses of the worship of Sakhi Sarvar in nineteenth century Punjab see Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries* 147-160 and 'The Worship of Pir Sakhi Sarvar: Illness, Healing and Popular Culture in the Punjab', *Studies in History*, 3 (1987), 29-55.

⁵⁵ Macauliffe, *Sikh Religion* I, lvii. In a similar vein David Petrie praised the colonial state for 'buttressing the crumbling edifice of the Sikh religion' but warned that the maintenance of a separate Sikh identity was an ongoing project. David Petrie, *Recent Developments in Sikh Politics, 1900-1911, a Report* (Amritsar, 1911), 52.

⁵⁶ Undated excerpt from *The Khalsa*, Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion*, xi.

⁵⁷ Falcon, *Handbook on Sikhs* 61-2.

wears uncut hair and abstains from smoking tobacco.’⁵⁸ The various non-*kes-dhari* (*sahaj-dharis*, shaven *mona* and *patit* Sikhs) groups who might have identified themselves with (elements of) the Sikh tradition were to be avoided. Khalsa Sikhs were ‘true’ Sikhs and Khalsa Sikhs alone could be relied on to exhibit the true values of a warrior. Falcon mapped these martial qualities across the different regions of Punjab, warning officers away from eastern and southern regions where the ‘Hindustani type’ was prevalent and against those regions where Sikh identity was ‘very diluted by Hinduism’.⁵⁹ Once recruited Sikh troops were placed in Sikh regiments, *kes-dhari* Sikhs who were not *amrit-dhari* were required to undergo the Khalsa’s *khande ki pahul* initiation rite and all Sikh troops were to maintain the external symbols of their Sikh identity and to accept the authority of the *granthis* appointed by the Army to perform Sikh rituals.⁶⁰ British officers believed that a sensitivity to religious identity and the fastidious maintenance of that identity was central to the *esprit de corps* of the Sikh troops and to the general effectiveness of the Indian Army, a force which was increasingly reliant on the ability and loyalty of its Sikh soldiers.

Thus, rather than ‘making a culture’ (as Fox suggests) the British were intent on fostering a Khalsa tradition revived by the new class of educated and energetic urban reformers driving the Singh Sabha movement. Within the dominant interpretative frameworks deployed by the British, these reformers were heirs to the reforming spirit that was at the heart of the Sikh tradition. For the British the Sikhs were a product of an ‘Indian Reformation’, which, like the European Reformation, was an ongoing process not some distant historical fact. The gains that the Khalsa had made needed to be carefully guarded, lest they be swallowed and destroyed by the relentless pressure of the ‘boa constrictor’ of Hinduism.

The Polylogics of Identity at ‘Home’ and ‘Away’

One useful model for making sense of these exchanges comes not from Punjabi historiography, but from colonial South India. In his excellent *Dialogue and History*, Eugene Irschick insisted that the colonial social order was ‘a negotiated, heteroglot construction shaped by both weak and strong, the colonized and colonizer, from the present to the past.’ Irschick’s study of land tenure in the Madras hinterland traced the interplay between the demands

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 71-3, 98-102.

⁶⁰ For a first-hand account of this see Vincent Eyre, *The Sikh and European Soldiers of Our Indian Forces: A Lecture* (London, 1867), 7-8. On the *kes-dhari/amrit-dhari* distinction see W. H. McLeod, *Who is a Sikh: the problem of Sikh identity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 110-115.

of colonial administrators and the authority of indigenous knowledge traditions, stressing the 'dialogic' nature of British colonial knowledge.⁶¹ He warned that 'we can no longer presume' that British understandings of India were the 'product of an "imposition" by the hegemonic colonial power onto a mindless and subordinate society.'⁶² Local aspirations and colonial agendas were in a constant dialogue, a dynamic process of exchange where claim and counter-claim led each interest group to modify its position almost constantly.

In the Punjabi case, we can perhaps think of the construction of knowledge and identity as being polylogic rather than dialogic. Where Irschick's case study explored the encounter between peasant cultivators and a small cadre of British officials in the Madras hinterland, the negotiation of Sikh identity was a more diffuse and open process. Not simply the product of an encounter between coloniser and colonised, the renegotiation of Sikhism was produced by contestations within the community as well as encounters with various Hindu reformers, Christian missionaries, and colonial officials. Pamphleteers and preachers were aware of the multiplicity of arguments that they were responding to and the divergent audiences they were addressing: their texts seem deeply imprinted by these multiple engagements and the necessity to construct multifaceted arguments suited to heteroglot population of the region.

This argument for the creation of an approach that explores the complex and polylogic negotiation of identity under the uneven power relations of colonialism reflects an insistence on the inherent heterogeneity of Punjabi society. The region's inherently diverse and hybridised population reflects the reality that Punjab has long stood at the confluence of the Islamic and Indic worlds and the cultures of Central and South Asia. As a result, the British encountered a heterogeneous society in Punjab, a society where numerous social groups were differentiated by a range of socio-economic, cultural and political factors. Given this, any search for one representative Sikh, yet alone one representative Punjabi, voice in the colonial archive is futile in the face of the multiplicity of local actors whose pamphlets, speeches and testimonies survive in British and Punjabi archives. Tracing the inter-relationships between these various Punjabis, establishing points of recognition and as well as points of conflict between these colonised groups and various British interests, and fighting against the limits of the colonial archive to recover the experiences of under-represented groups (especially tribals, Dalits and women), will allow us to locate the negotiation of Sikh identity within the deep structures and complex dynamics of Punjabi life.

More broadly still, this insistence on the polylogic construction of culture and identity also recognises that Sikhs were incorporated into the

⁶¹ Eugene F. Irschick, *Dialogue and History: constructing South India, 1795-1895* (Berkeley, 1994), 10.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 8.

British empire and that this imperial system worked as system of mobility, where certain ideas, commodities and people circulated. Sikhs, especially Sikh soldiers, were conspicuous in this imperial world and the turbaned Sikh soldier became one of the most potent imperial symbols. Unfortunately, to date, most scholarship on the Sikh 'diaspora' focuses on Sikh 'settlers', those migrants who left Punjab and established permanent homes in North America, Britain, Europe, Africa, Asia or Australasia. We know much less about 'sojourners', those Sikhs who lived outside the Punjab for a short period of time or who travelled backwards and forwards from Punjab. In part, this lacuna is the product of our limited knowledge of the early decades of the diaspora and, in particular, the absence of work that explores the important connections between British imperialism and the very genesis of the diaspora in the second half of the nineteenth century. Most of the early Sikhs who ventured outside South Asia did so as soldiers, yet we have little in the way of extended analysis of their experience: the path-breaking work in this area, such as Susan VanKoski's work on Sikh soldiers in Europe during World War I, is largely descriptive and offers limited insights into the culture of Sikh military service before 1914.⁶³ Ideally, trans-national histories of Sikhism will grapple with the nineteenth century and allow us to explore the relationships between mobility, fixity and colonialism that are currently being explored by scholars of other colonised societies.⁶⁴

Thus, the new vision of modern Sikh historiography that I am gesturing towards calls into question the rigid divisions commonly drawn between the colonial period and the age of the diaspora and it highlights the various forms of mobility that have shaped Sikh experiences. It also underlines the importance of encounters, both within and outside South Asia, in shaping Sikh identity. Although Kenneth W. Jones and Himadri Banerjee have explored some of the important intellectual connections between Bengal and Punjab, we still know relatively little about the experiences of Sikhs living in other parts of South Asia. This leaves significant gaps in our understanding of the relationship between Sikhs and the project of building a national Indian culture and means that some crucial processes, such as the Punjabization of Delhi, remain largely unexplored.⁶⁵ Similar questions can be raised about the scholarship on the diaspora, where much work has focused on development of community institutions and relations with the 'host' state, rather than assessing

⁶³ Susan VanKoski, 'Letters home, 1915-16: Punjabi soldiers reflect on war and life in Europe and their meanings for home and self', *International Journal of Panjab Studies*, 2:1 (1995), 43-63.

⁶⁴ Most notably Radhika Mongia, 'Race, nationality, mobility, a history of the passport', *Public Culture* 11:3 (1999), 527-56.

⁶⁵ Jones, 'Ham Hindu Nahin'; Himadri Banerjee, 'Bengali Perceptions of the Sikhs: the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', *Sikh History and Religion in the Twentieth Century*, 110-135 and 'Sikh Identity Question: a view from eastern India', *Sikh Identity* 195-216.

the ways in which Sikh identities have been shaped by daily encounters with non-Sikhs. Thus much work on the diaspora continues to treat Sikhs as a self-sufficient community insulated from other individuals and collectivities, leaving the relations between Sikhs and other prominent South Asian diasporic communities, such as Gujaratis and Sylhetis, unexplored and the encounters between diasporic Sikhs and Asian, Afro-Caribbean and European migrant communities uncharted.

Conclusion

In urging a move towards a mobile and transnational history of Sikhism, this paper encourages historians of Sikhism to increasingly engage with broader debates in history, anthropology, sociology and gender studies. This is not to suggest that Sikh studies should shift its focus from addressing the Panth, but rather it is a call for what we might term 'Janus-faced' scholarship, which is attentive both to the historical questions that interest Sikhs and the epistemological, methodological and theoretical debates that animate humanities scholarship more generally. By recovering the complex cultural traffic and diverse encounters that have moulded the Panth, such an approach is not only more in keeping with recent directions in cross-cultural historiography but also recognises that although the Panth is united by its devotion to the Gurus and the *Guru Granth Sahib*, Sikhs occupy diverse cultural locations and articulate a multiplicity of identities. Recognition of the cultural exchanges and hybridised social patterns borne out of the inequalities of colonialism and the upheavals of migration necessitate the creation of new historiographical visions and forms of practice. With the recent celebration of the 300th anniversary of the Khalsa and 150th anniversary of British annexation, it now seems a good time to begin to explore the possibilities that such an approach to the Sikh past might offer.

Download full-text PDF. Looking Back, Looking Forward: The Historiography of Sikhism. Article (PDF Available) · July 2002 with 164 Reads. How we measure 'reads'. A 'read' is counted each time someone views a publication summary (such as the title, abstract, and list of authors), clicks on a figure, or views or downloads the full-text. Learn more. Cite this publication. Tony Ballantyne. A historian of Sikhism. McLeod introduced a new methodological rigour and. interpretive strategy into the study of the Sikh past: textual criticism. Published in 1968, one year before the quincentennial of Nanak's birth, McLeod's Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion was at odds with the reverential. and even hagiographical tone of the numerous volumes that marked this. important celebration.