


RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Reform in fragments: Sovereignty, colonialism, and the Sikh tradition

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(Received 12 September 2020; revised 27 June 2021; accepted 28 June 2021)

### Abstract

This article rethinks how we understand religious reform under colonial rule by examining Maharaja Duleep Singh, the deposed ruler of the Sikh empire, and how the Singh Sabha, a Sikh reform movement, debated, deployed, and organized around him in the late nineteenth century. I demonstrate how religious reform was a site of intense conflict that reveals the processes of argumentation within the contours of a tradition, even as the colonial state sought to continually mediate the terms. Embedded within a frame of inquiry provided by the Sikh tradition, the contestations that constituted reform within the tradition remained intimately tied in with the question of sovereignty. Ranjit Singh's empire in Panjab had only been annexed 30 years earlier in 1849 and remained a central reference point for thinking about the political at the turn of the century. These debates surrounding Duleep Singh, therefore, disclose the contentious engagements within a tradition that cannot be reduced to binary designations such as colonial construct/indigenous inheritance or religious/political.

**Keywords:** Sikhism; reform; sovereignty; Punjab; orthodoxy

### Introduction

In the early months of 1873, four Sikh students at the American Mission School in Amritsar—Aya Singh, Attar Singh, Sadhu Singh, and Santokh Singh—announced that they wished to convert to Christianity.<sup>1</sup> As the news spread,

<sup>1</sup> Harbans Singh, *The Heritage of the Sikhs* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1983), p. 210. For Christian missionaries and conversions in Panjab, see Jeffrey Cox, *Imperial Fault Lines: Christianity and Colonial Power in India, 1818–1940* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002); John C. Webster, *A Social History of Christianity: North-West India Since 1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Christopher Harding, *Religious Transformation in South Asia: The Meanings of Conversion in Colonial Punjab* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

it created widespread distress among Sikhs since it became coupled with an already existing unease within the Sikh community fostered in part by encroaching Christian missionaries and the outgrowth of other socio-religious movements in Panjab.<sup>2</sup> Confronting these threats, on 1 October 1873, a diverse assortment of Sikhs assembled in Amritsar and founded the Sri Guru Singh Sabha Amritsar, which sought to, Jagjit Singh writes, 'provide the Sikh tradition [with] a correct and coherent mode of ethical being', to bind an orthodoxy in the face of these threats.<sup>3</sup> Soon thereafter a Singh Sabha emerged in Lahore in 1879 and affiliates spread across Panjab.<sup>4</sup> Yet the nature of the unity remained tentative, since each organization emerged with, Norman Gerald Barrier argues, their 'own personality and peculiar interest despite similarity in composition and programme'.<sup>5</sup> These organizations were not a site of agreement. 'The meetings, lectures, and discussion were held in an atmosphere of controversy and denunciation', as Teja Singh describes.<sup>6</sup> Still, in 1883, striving toward coherence through these disputations, Sikhs centralized the Sabhas under a larger umbrella organization, the Amritsar Khalsa Diwan. Controversies and conflict, however, continued and, in 1886, the Khalsa Diwan fragmented into two separate organizations: the Amritsar Khalsa Diwan, which was constituted by the Singh Sabhas in Amritsar, Faridkot, and Rawalpindi, and the much larger Lahore Khalsa Diwan.

Parallel to these developments, in 1884, a founder and the initial president of the Singh Sabha at Amritsar, Thakur Singh Sindhanwalia, left Panjab and travelled to England. His goal was to reveal to his cousin, the deposed and exiled Maharaja of Panjab, Duleep Singh, the extent of Singh's riches that had been stolen by the British Crown.<sup>7</sup> Sindhanwalia brought with him news of a community not only excited, but also prepared for their sojourned

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth W. Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 109. The emergence of these movements had led to numerous attacks on the Sikh Gurus and the boundaries of the Sikh tradition, especially from the Arya Samaj.

<sup>3</sup> Jagjit Singh, *Singh Sabha Lahir* (Amritsar: Guru Ramdas Printing Press, 1941), p. 13. Translation is mine.

<sup>4</sup> Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 296.

<sup>5</sup> Norman Gerald Barrier, *The Sikhs and their Literature: A Guide to Tracts, Books and Periodicals, 1849-1919* (Delhi: Manohar Book Service, 1970), p. xxv. For example, *The Tribune*, 16 February 1881 reported, 'It is said that the Singh Sabha at Umritsur has been split into different sections on account of the religious difference which exists among its Sikh Members.'

<sup>6</sup> Teja Singh, 'The Singh Sabha Movement', in *The Singh Sabha and Other Socio-Religious Movements in the Punjab, 1850-1925*, (ed.) Ganda Singh (Patiala: Publication Bureau Punjabi University, Patiala, 1997), p. 32. Murphy argues similarly. She writes: the 'Singh Sabha Movement was thus the site of the articulation of multiple visions of what it meant to be Sikh in the period': see Anne Murphy, 'The Formation of the Ethical Sikh Subject in the Era of British Colonial Reform', *Sikh Formations*, vol. 11, nos. 1-2, 2015, p. 150.

<sup>7</sup> The literature on Duleep Singh is vast. See Brian Keith Axel, *The Nation's Tortured Body: Violence, Representation, and the Formation of a Sikh 'Diaspora'* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Christy Campbell, *The Maharajah's Box: An Imperial Story of Conspiracy, Love, and a Guru's Prophecy* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000); Tony Ballantyne, *Between Colonialism and Diaspora: Sikh Cultural Formations in an Imperial World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

sovereign's return. The Sikh community's expectancy, Sindhanwalia explained, was cultivated through the extensive circulation of Sikh prophecies, attributed to Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh.<sup>8</sup> These prophecies asserted that Khalsa Raj (Sikh rule/sovereignty) would emerge through a Deep Singh, who was the chosen one to lead the Sikhs against the British.<sup>9</sup> Living in London, where he quickly became bankrupt, Duleep Singh had become increasingly dissatisfied with British rule. Moreover, Sindhanwalia found a sympathetic ear because Duleep Singh's mother, Maharani Jind Kaur, had already apprised him both of his lost fortune and the prophetic claims. Soon thereafter, in 1886, Duleep Singh, believing himself to be the prophesized Singh, traversed continents and built up a network of far-flung alliances, including Irish revolutionaries, Russian agents, Muslim political activists, and Theosophists. These connections led to an attempt to organize the princely states for revolution and cut off British access to the Suez Canal and the Khyber Pass with the aim of creating a state outside of British rule and influence.

As significant sites of political mobilization at the end of the nineteenth century, the Singh Sabhas and Duleep Singh's intrigues were imbricated. The distinction between 'religious' and 'political' was not a dichotomy as such and political sovereignty remained at the fore in relation to religious reform.<sup>10</sup> The continuous struggle to obtain political sovereignty, which occurred in conjunction with religious contestations, however, is obscured since scholars focus exclusively on the consolidation and construction of religious boundaries by colonial technologies, changes in communications, and the rampant commercialization of the rural countryside.<sup>11</sup> Sidelining the struggle to reinstitute political sovereignty, scholars have instead emphasized the purification of religious communities in relation to colonialism and how it negated dissent. They highlight how reform movements instituted a modular and reified religious form. In so doing, scholars construct a colonial epistemic totality that overcomes a similarly totalized, but fluid and hybrid, past.<sup>12</sup> Yet by

<sup>8</sup> From 1469–1675 there were ten Sikh Gurus in human form, before the inauguration of the eleventh Sikh Guru, embodied in textual form known as the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

<sup>9</sup> Sirdar Attar Singh, *Sakhee Book: The Description of Goroob Gobind Singh's Religion and Doctrines. Translated from Goroob Mukhi into Hindi and Afterwards into English* (Benares: Medical Hall Press: 1873). There is no consensus on the authenticity of the *sakhi*.

<sup>10</sup> It is, of course, as Partha Chatterjee writes, 'hardly surprising to discover that the ideology which shaped and gave meaning to the various collective acts of the peasantry was fundamentally religious': Partha Chatterjee, 'Agrarian Relations and Communalism in Bengal, 1926–1935', in *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, (ed.) Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 9–38; p. 31.

<sup>11</sup> The literature is vast. For example, see Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements*; Bernard Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia', in his *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 224–254.

<sup>12</sup> For a heterogeneous past in Panjab, see Farina Mir, *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Timothy S. Dobe, *Hindu Christian Faqir: Modern Monks, Global Christianity, and Indian Sainthood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Anshu Malhotra, *Piro and the Gulabdasis: Gender, Sect, and Society in Punjab* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017). For an important critique of heterogeneity as an essentialism, see David Scott, *Formations of Ritual: Colonial and Anthropological Discourses on the Sinhala*

emphasizing the 'religious' nature of reform, scholars leave the questions of political sovereignty and its ties to tradition unexplored, awaiting the arrival of anti-colonial nationalism,<sup>13</sup> and also uphold the very binaries central to the colonial state between religious/political, urban/rural, elite/subaltern, and good/bad.<sup>14</sup>

The organization around Duleep Singh offers a different narrative in which the struggle over political sovereignty is not a failed negation of a segmented community, but an unplumbable site for struggle that would eventually cohere into further political struggles.<sup>15</sup> The central point of inquiry into reform, then, is not to determine if a tradition became bounded due to colonial power nor is it about the superficiality of the colonial order, but how, David Scott states, 'claims about the presence or absence of boundaries are *made*, fought out, yielded, negotiated'.<sup>16</sup> Debates about Duleep Singh in the Sikh tradition in the late nineteenth century are important precisely because they show how Sikhs struggled towards coherence within particular rules of engagement about political sovereignty, even as the authority to intervene in such matters shifted to the colonial state.<sup>17</sup> Put another way, the contradictions in this pursuit of coherence, political and religious, reveal how reform did not inaugurate a rupture. Instead, it remained a site of contestation, Talal Asad

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Yaktovil (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); and D. Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Writing on a later period and on internationalism, Manu Goswami notes this how 'the preponderant focus on the presumptively primary narrative of nationalism' produces all anti-imperial struggles as 'a staging ground for the modular developmental endpoint of a sovereign nation-state rather than an open-ended constellation of contending political futures': Manu Goswami, 'Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms', *The American Historical Review*, vol. 117, no. 5, 2012, pp. 1461–1485; p. 1462. This is a broader problem in history. See Ethan Kleinberg, *Haunting History: For A Deconstructive Approach to the Past* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), pp. 53 and 137.

<sup>14</sup> Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, p. 375. Tony Ballantyne is an exception, arguing we need to pay attention to the debates and contestations around Duleep Singh. But, he concludes, 'a more detailed assessment of the response to Dalip Singh's life and death could be assembled'. This is an attempt towards this assessment. See Ballantyne, *Between Colonialism and Diaspora*, p. 100.

<sup>15</sup> For example, see the Akali agitations that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century about what constituted the relation between *miri* and *piri* (spiritual and temporal). In other words, self-governance central to the Akali movement, too, has a long presence within the Sikh tradition as questions of reform in gurdwara management and education remained central to considering the relation between the Sikh tradition (*Sikhi*) and the state, the relation between *miri* and *piri*. For a counter reading, see Richard Fox, *Lions of the Punjab: Culture in the Making* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 182. Fox argues it was British colonialism that 'set in motion confrontation over cultural meanings and religious organizations between temple managers and Singh reformers, which led reformers to look for coverts in the rural areas.' I am grateful to the first anonymous reviewer for this insight.

<sup>16</sup> Scott, *Formations of Ritual*, p. xviii.

<sup>17</sup> Anand Pandian, 'Tradition in Fragments: Inherited Forms and Fractures in the Ethics of South India', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2008, p. 470.

contends, between ‘narrator and audience’, between so-called elites and the community. In this struggle, a subject, elite or subaltern, could not speak in total freedom from the community, no matter how silent or elated they claimed they were.<sup>18</sup>

This article rethinks these struggles for reform and sovereignty by centring Sikh understandings of sovereignty. In the Sikh tradition, the spiritual (*piri*) is intimately bound within the temporal (*miri*) as the Gurus denied their separation while recognizing they remained in antagonistic relation to each other.<sup>19</sup> The first section ties reform and sovereignty together, explaining the importance of tradition in considering such struggles, including the tensions between *miri-piri*. In the following section, Suspicions and the Singh Sabha, I examine how colonial officials conceptualized these struggles around Duleep Singh within the Sikh tradition. Though the colonial state reduced these disputes to individual manoeuvring, I explore how these debates, which occurred within native networks, were a site to conjoin divergent aims. Then, in Secrets and exposure, I demonstrate how, though Sikhs tried to keep the manoeuvring around Duleep Singh a secret, the colonial state became an arbiter within the Sikh tradition as institutional authority (*miri*) became increasingly located with colonial officials. Finally, in the last section, Subaltern community, I end by highlighting the interconnections between elite and subaltern networks in their fragmentary form, even while there remained continuous attempts to cohere orthodoxy. The section shows how these struggles and debates do not restore intelligibility around Duleep Singh or the Singh Sabha. Instead, reform shows the impossibility of neatly tying binds around historical relations, such as between the Singh Sabhas. These past possibilities then, centred on Duleep Singh, do not reveal consolidation or a division, but rather the presence of contradiction that the community strived to make coherent on their own terms, and their efforts to cohere an orthodoxy in which political sovereignty remained a crucial question, much more so than boundaries within the tradition. Reform, therefore, demonstrates the ongoing and altering processes of argumentation as the colonial state intervened in the Sikh tradition and its code of political ethics which refuses closure through a masterful suturing gesture inaugurated by a colonial regime or our own scholarly tendencies.

### Sovereignty and reform

Since the political and religious were braided together, to contest ‘religion’ was to simultaneously contest sovereignty and vice-versa. Scholars of South Asia have taught us this lesson well: sovereignty was multiple and nested in the pre-colonial period. There were, Norbert Peabody rightly argues, ‘various tensions

<sup>18</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 210.

<sup>19</sup> Kapur Singh, ‘The Church and The State’, in *Pārāśarapraśna: An Enquiry into the Genesis and Unique Character of the Order of the Khalsa with an Exposition of the Sikh Tenets*, (eds) Piar Singh and Madanjit Kaur (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1989), pp. 192–201.

and disjunctions in the meanings associated with political relations'.<sup>20</sup> Much like Peabody, Purnima Dhavan shows how the Khalsa and attendant kinship networks limited claims of individual political sovereignty from the seventeenth century to Ranjit Singh's empire.<sup>21</sup> Such contestations did not dissipate, but shuttled as new distinctions and possibilities emerged with the advent of British rule.<sup>22</sup> Periodization is not law and, Sudipta Sen writes, there remained 'undigested remainders of indigenous regimes not fully incorporated', leaving room for more radical questionings and, therefore, openings in how sovereignty was imagined.<sup>23</sup> These possibilities surrounding sovereignty were not 'something monopolized by some ruling elites and hierarchs' but 'present in all', to follow Milinda Banerjee.<sup>24</sup> This is definitely the case among Sikhs where royal authority, with the institution of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh, became, Priya Atwal contends, 'diffused and spread in a radically new form throughout the entire Sikh *panth*',<sup>25</sup> even though, as Atwal traces quite vividly, a sense of hierarchy did develop since the tensions of creating and maintaining sovereign rule did not dissipate.<sup>26</sup>

These constant formations, contestations, and fragmentations within the struggle to secure sovereignty reveal the political nature of reform, as the Sabhas and Khalsa Diwans refuse easy adjudication into archetypes that analyses of reform in the subcontinent typically entail.<sup>27</sup> To explain, reform

<sup>20</sup> Norbert Peabody, *Hindu Kingship and Polity in Precolonial India* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> Purnima Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks: The Making of the Sikh Warrior Tradition, 1699–1799* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 9 and 176. My goal, however, is not to demonstrate how the Khalsa itself is fragmented, but how it troubles historical context. That is, rather than context inflecting the Khalsa looking to resolve tensions, the Khalsa inflects context, thereby rerouting our very understanding of contradiction.

<sup>22</sup> For example, see Milinda Banerjee, *The Mortal God: Imagining the Sovereign in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) and Caleb Simmons, *Devotional Sovereignty: Kingship and Religion in India* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>23</sup> Sudipta Sen, 'Unfinished Conquest: Residual Sovereignty and the Legal Foundations of the British Empire in India', *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2013, p. 233.

<sup>24</sup> Banerjee, *The Mortal God*, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> Priya Atwal, *Royal and Rebels: The Rise and Fall of the Sikh Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 34.

<sup>26</sup> See Atwal, *Royal and Rebels*, pp. 35–36, 167–169. Atwal brilliantly demonstrates how Ranjit Singh and his family become dominant political players, working through these tensions which became exacerbated with Ranjit Singh's death. For an earlier time period and these negotiations, see Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks*, pp. 99–148 and Karamjit K. Malhotra, *The Eighteenth Century in Sikh History: Political Resurgence, Religious and Social Life, and Cultural Articulation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 69–94.

<sup>27</sup> C. S. Adcock, *The Limits of Tolerance: Indian Secularism and the Politics of Religious Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 47. On this shift of tradition in South Asia, see Fox, *Lions of the Punjab*; Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bharatendu Harischandra and Nineteenth Century Banaras* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997); Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and The Mystic East* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Brian K. Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented? Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Teena Purohit, *The Aga Khan Case: Religion and Identity in Colonial India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). For an excellent challenge to this understanding of reform, see Shruti Patel, 'Beyond the Lens of Reform: Religious Culture in

remains largely understood as a sanitizing gesture rather than a struggle; reform is understood to cleanse particular historical conditions. For one group of scholars, reform as sanitization safeguards a formerly lost past by eliminating accumulated foreign contaminants in Sikhism,<sup>28</sup> leading to revival; for others, reform annihilates earlier progressive, but heterogenous, conditions within Sikhism, in turn preserving colonially inflected formulations of identity.<sup>29</sup> Both understandings of reform reveal how previously surpassed Sikh pasts were themselves already developed to match contemporary visions of progress, necessitating recovery. For example, the arguments go: (1) Reformers reified boundaries in a previously authentic amorphous and polyglot landscape, and (2) The undisciplined community introduced foreign practices into a formerly pure Sikh tradition thereby demanding reform. Progress emerges, then, as a concept not in the temporal organization of colonial modernity, but in the actions of reformers or the prior practices of a heterogenous community. Though dislodged from modernity's horizons, historical perfectibility remains located and accessible within the modern's very temporal form, in which authenticity, signalling a historical end, remains both the organizational frame and the desirous object of discovery.<sup>30</sup>

But we cannot reduce reformist contestations in the Sikh tradition to a form of closure eliminating a heterogenous past, a ruptured contemporary moment that signals the advent of a colonized tradition and the emergence of modernized religious identity, or the differentiation into a multiplicity of positions.<sup>31</sup>

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Modern Gujarat', *The Journal of Hindu Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2017, pp. 47–85. For an account on how an earlier Sikh past was conceptualized through the trope of reform which collapsed Sikhism into Hinduism within colonial logics, see Brian Hatcher, 'Situating the Swaminarayan Tradition in the Historiography of Modern Hindu Reform', in *Swaminarayan Hinduism: Tradition, Adaptation and Identity*, (eds) Raymond Brady Williams and Yogi Trivedi (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 6–37.

<sup>28</sup> See Singh, *The Heritage of the Sikhs*. Also see Gurdarshan Singh Dhillon, 'Origin and Development of the Singh Sabha Movement: Constitutional Aspects', in *The Singh Sabha*, (ed.) Singh, pp. 45–58. Reform implies this very notion. As Brian Pennington argues, 'the idea of reform functions by means of an idiom of return or correction. Reform implies a tradition gone astray, one that must be directed back into the channels of its original inspiration': Brian Pennington, 'Reform and Revival, Innovation and Enterprise. A Tale of Modern Hinduism', in *The Protestant Reformation in a Context of Global History: Religious Reforms and World Civilizations*, (eds) Heinz Schilling and Silvana Seidel Menchi (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 2017), pp. 149–169; p. 155.

<sup>29</sup> Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*. Arvind-Pal Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Though perfectibility is located in a now past *Sikhi*, the goal remains to accelerate towards a future expectation broken from present experience—put differently, a temporality without limit, a promise of rupture. See Reinhardt Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, (trans.) Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). This desire to recover what is now lost to provide an authentic historical representation remains a central historiographical thrust in Sikh studies. My concern is with the very impossibility of such authenticity.

<sup>31</sup> As Samira Haj writes in relation to reform in the Islamic tradition: 'various actors failed to carry out their "prescribed" roles as reformers or as traditionalists' because 'the actors involved in responding to day-to-day realities on the ground found themselves shifting positions that in many ways defied simply causal explanations': Samira Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform*,

Instead, these contestations were unified—hence my singular use of Sikh tradition. This use of Sikh tradition, however, does not imply a static essence. As Asad teaches, an essence cannot be retrieved from a non-perspectival position; rather, it is ‘the search for what is essential itself [that] provokes argument’.<sup>32</sup> These arguments about what is essential are efforts to cohere orthodoxy; this is especially so, Asad writes elsewhere, since ‘it is too often forgotten that the process of determining orthodoxy in conditions of change and contest includes attempts at achieving discursive coherence, at representing the present within an authoritative narrative that includes positive evaluations of past events and persons’.<sup>33</sup> Contestations and debates underscore how contradictory positions remained possible as Sikhs disputed and shifted judgements in relation to the internal grammar of the Sikh tradition and new, emerging historical contexts. It reveals a singular, albeit fragmentary, form that marks, Anand Pandian compellingly reveals, ‘the impossibility of a whole and seamless horizon of experience’ that still strives towards its own coherence within particular rules of engagement.<sup>34</sup> In other words, although Sikhs took oppositional stances, their goal was to persuade fellow Sikhs of their position, as tradition remained a site of learning—learning which is necessarily an opening.<sup>35</sup> And ‘another Asadian word for learning is, of course “tradition”’ as Gil Anidjar underscores.<sup>36</sup>

To use a metaphor, contestations in a tradition were a complex interplay that created an intricate and, at times, concealed and disruptive network from which orthodoxy, directly tied to political sovereignty, mushroomed,

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*Rationality, and Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 186–187. In a contrasting theoretical approach, Murphy argues, ‘Reform as a whole was also a colonial project’: Murphy, ‘The Formation of the Ethical Sikh Subject’, p. 151.

<sup>32</sup> Talal Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 95. James Laidlaw, in relation to the Jain tradition, too, notes how people ‘hold values which are in irreducible conflict’, making the task of easily identifying ‘logical consistency’ difficult since it ‘takes work to create, reproduce, and maintain’: James Laidlaw, *Riches and Renunciation: Religion, Economy and Society Among the Jains* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 22.

<sup>33</sup> Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, p. 210.

<sup>34</sup> Anand Pandian, ‘Tradition in Fragments: Inherited Forms and Fractures in the Ethics of South India’, *American Ethnologist*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2008, p. 470. In relation to Islam, SherAli Tareen astutely rejects the utility of such binary constructions that are the products of Western scholarship on Islam. Instead, he argues for a conceptual approach that views rival narratives on the boundaries of religion as ‘competing rationalities of tradition and reform’: SherAli Tareen, ‘The Limits of Tradition: Competing Logics of Authenticity in South Asian Islam’, PhD thesis, Duke University, 2012, p. 260.

<sup>35</sup> On learning, I follow Gil Anidjar who writes: ‘learning—the deceptively simple task of taking a step toward a knowledge of self or other—does mean exposing oneself to an enormous mass of unknowns. To uncertainty and to incompleteness. Or to denial, and to the possibility of failure. Is there, in fact, a self? And is it ours? Can we really know ourselves?’ We should recall that here ‘Sikh’ means ‘learner’. See Gil Anidjar, ‘Sapientia’, *Identities: Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture*, 14 April 2020, <https://identitiesjournal.edu.mk/index.php/IJPGC/announcement/view/36>, [accessed 1 October 2021].

<sup>36</sup> Gil Anidjar, ‘Homo Discens’, *Critical Times*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2020, pp. 443–449.



but never as a totality since it struggled both with and against itself.<sup>37</sup> The metaphor is crucial since mushrooms do not emerge from an essence, to return to Asad, but grow and organize from disorder. For Anna Tsing, mushrooms force us to consider how indeterminacy is a process that learns the landscape—a landscape that might be ruined even as the fungi themselves remain both generous and exclusive.<sup>38</sup> Or, as Slavoj Žižek details in relation to Hegel, this mushrooming (the arising of necessity out of contingency) functions through autopoiesis, which signals a ‘process of the emergence of necessary features out of chaotic contingency...contingency’s gradual self-organization, of the gradual rise of order out of chaos’.<sup>39</sup> Phrased through Asad, contestation within the form of tradition creates ‘the possibility of changing elements of circumstances that are changeable’ in which tradition provides ‘an invitation to change contingent aspects of one’s tradition, the circumstances in which it is embedded, or both’.<sup>40</sup> Importantly, these contestations, this chaos, does become ordered; they do not remain fluid or dead matter.<sup>41</sup> It is this discord at the heart of orthodoxy that continually orders itself, even within ruins, and that refuses our scholarly closures within reassurances of static heterogeneity or authenticity.

This struggle to dispute and authorize sovereignty also occurred through the Sikh tradition’s ‘framework of inquiry’, its generative principles, which provided a form in which Sikhs could contest the meaning of politics and reform.<sup>42</sup> Rather than an abstract inquiry into Indian sovereignty or Sikh sovereignty, such an approach requires that we engage the ground of specificity within a tradition from which debates about sovereignty mushroomed without reducing the tradition to a stable inheritance or fluid matter. As previously mentioned, a key aspect in this framework of inquiry in the Sikh tradition is

<sup>37</sup> See Sigmund Freud, ‘The Interpretation of Dreams [Second Part] and On Dreams’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 5*, (trans. and ed.) James Strachey (1900–1901; London: Hogarth, 1953), p. 525. Noting the limits of interpretation, Freud writes, ‘This is the dream’s navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown. The dream-thoughts to which we are led by interpretation cannot, from the nature of things, have any definite endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought. It is at some point where this meshwork is particularly close that the dream-wish grows up, like a mushroom out of its mycelium.’ Said otherwise, there is no final interpretation, no final word to determine an objective essence to a dream. A mushroom does not have a seed from where we can trace an origin and, therefore, teleology.

<sup>38</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 50 and 137.

<sup>39</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 467.

<sup>40</sup> Talal Asad, ‘Thinking About Tradition, Religion, and Politics in Egypt Today’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2015, p. 167.

<sup>41</sup> Though there are similarities with J. Barton Scott’s notion of a ‘reform assemblage’, which he defines as ‘an open-ended network of unstable elements’ that ‘operated according to principles of connection, heterogeneity, and multiplicity’, my concern is with how this heterogeneity was a struggle that created order and orthodoxy through encounters—encounters of learning. J. Barton Scott, *Spiritual Despots: Modern Hinduism and the Genealogies of Self-Rule* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 90.

<sup>42</sup> I borrow ‘framework of inquiry’ from Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition*, pp. 4–5.

the notion that the spiritual (*piri*) is bound within the temporal (*miri*), refusing stability.<sup>43</sup> It is not an object to be inherited. Kapur Singh explores this very point, noting ‘the Guru does not assert that this perpetual dichotomy and antagonism of the Church and the State must be resolved, or even that it is capable of being resolved, by the suppression or subjugation of the one by the other’.<sup>44</sup> What we find then is not a reconciliation within a shared space or a firm grounding of sovereignty, but a tense space of conflict. Even in the reign of Ranjit Singh, tensions abounded as the relationship between Sikh institutions and the Khalsa Raj remained fraught with such conflict.<sup>45</sup> There was, put differently, no singular authorized version of the Khalsa Raj or Duleep Singh, or even a settled relation between *miri-piri*, awaiting subscription.<sup>46</sup>

### Suspicious and the Singh Sabha

A focus on Duleep Singh reveals these aporias and, therefore, openings because he became a sharply contested node in debates about the Sikh tradition precisely because he intersected with predominant questions of the time, which centred on political sovereignty and reinstating Ranjit Singh’s Khalsa Raj (Sikh rule).<sup>47</sup> The Khalsa Raj had only been annexed 30 years earlier in 1849 and remained an essential reference point for thinking about the political at the turn of the century, which was conceptualized through the putatively ‘religious’. Since sovereignty was contested, replacing the Khalsa Raj with the British did not substitute one stable power for another in which Duleep Singh was a nostalgic or irrelevant note in a more important transition. Rather, contestation remained a central task for the Khalsa in the 1880s. These challenges were not simply radical undertakings, as we shall see, but

<sup>43</sup> Singh, ‘The Church and The State’, pp. 192–201.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>45</sup> For more on Ranjit Singh, see J. S. Grewal, *The Reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Structure of Power, Economy and Society* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1981) and, more recently, Sunit Singh, ‘The Sikh Kingdom’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, (eds) Pashaura Singh and Louis Fenech (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 59–69. For the difficulties in maintaining the Khalsa Raj and conflicts that arose within it, see Atwal, *Royals and Rebels*, p. 74. The problem is a broader one. As Partha Chatterjee writes, ‘... the same set of ethical norms or religious practices which justify existing relations of domination also contain, in a single dialectical unity, the justification for legitimate revolt’: Partha Chatterjee, ‘More on Modes of Power and the Peasantry’, in *Subaltern Studies II: Writing on South Asian History and Society*, (ed.) Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 311–349; p. 338.

<sup>46</sup> I borrow from Shahid Amin, ‘Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921–2’, in *Subaltern Studies III: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, (ed.) Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 55.

<sup>47</sup> Though I am translating Khalsa Raj as Sikh rule, this might obfuscate more than it clarifies. For a historical outline of the shifts in understanding of Khalsa Raj, see Karamjit K. Malhotra, ‘The Khalsa Raj (1765–99)’, in *The Eighteenth Century in Sikh History: Political Resurgence, Religious and Social Life, and Cultural Articulation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 60–94. One of the problems is, as Malhotra writes, ‘The doctrine of Guru Panth, with its inbuilt equality and collective authority, was not institutionalized, though individual Sikh chiefs ruled in the name of the Khalsa’ (p. 67).

also led to collaborations with the colonial state.<sup>48</sup> There were, Omnia El Shakry contends, ‘an array of possible responses to the range of historical negotiations created by the colonial experience’.<sup>49</sup> Still, though scholars have noted the importance of the Mughal imperial imagination in shaping, providing associations with, as well as challenging colonial rule after its fall, the Khalsa Raj and the conflicts it stirred are conceptualized as lost the moment it ends.<sup>50</sup>

The colonial administration did not harbour these illusions. Instead, for officials, the Singh Sabhas were threatening precisely for this reason. The question of sovereignty in Panjab remained a crucial and troubling one for colonial administrators well past the Khalsa Raj’s demise.<sup>51</sup> The fomenting debates around the nature of the colonial state’s sovereignty in the Singh Sabhas demonstrate how the Khalsa Raj remained the nodal point onto which debates were quilted, providing coherence to the contestations themselves. Many Sikhs themselves made such arguments. A pensioned *havildar* (sergeant) in Ludhiana argued that the institutions of the ‘Singh Sabha’ alongside the expected return of Maharaja Duleep Singh were key indications of the ‘re-establishment of the Sikh kingdom’.<sup>52</sup> Tying the two together, William Mackworth Young, at the time the secretary to the Panjab government, reported ‘there is no doubt that considerable activity has of late been manifested among the “Singh Sabhas” or Sikh societies, partly in connection with the Maharaja Duleep Singh’s affairs’.<sup>53</sup>

As news of his rumoured return spread through organizations such as the Singh Sabha, tumult manifested in Panjab against the British. Captain John Paul Warburton, deputy superintendent of police in Amritsar, claimed, ‘The rural people (Punjabi Sikhs) make no attempt at concealing their sympathies for Maharaja Dalip Singh, who, they say, will very soon come and assume the government of this country’.<sup>54</sup> Warburton continued that a ‘Mission Lady’ had assured him that ‘of late the behavior of the Sikhs has quite changed in the villages’. They had become ‘defiant and insolent now to Mission ladies and order them out of their houses saying—We do not want you: in a short time you will see what will happen’.<sup>55</sup> Warburton concluded by cautioning

<sup>48</sup> I am grateful to the first anonymous reviewer for this important reminder.

<sup>49</sup> Omnia El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 14.

<sup>50</sup> The debate around the influence and continuation of Mughal imperial custom is vast and contentious. See Bernard Cohn, ‘Representing Authority in Victorian India’, in his *An Anthropologist Among the Historians*, pp. 632–682; Sudipta Sen, *Distant Sovereignty: National Imperialism and the Origins of British India* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Robert Travers, *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth Century India: The British in Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007); Jon Wilson, *The Domination of Strangers: Modern Governance in Eastern India, 1780–1835* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>51</sup> Sen, *Distant Sovereignty*, pp. xii–xiv.

<sup>52</sup> The India Office Records, British Library, London (henceforth IOR) L/P&S/18/D152.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* The archival records oscillate between multiple transliterations of the name ‘Duleep’, including ‘Dalip’ and ‘Dhuleep’.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

colonial officials against the Singh Sabhas and other such organizations, arguing that they were 'dangerous political elements, and movements intended to increase disloyalty among the people against the British Government, and it is impossible to say when the volcano we are sitting on, with a feeling of security, may break out'.<sup>56</sup>

Sikh elites, however, were not so singularly tied as they renegotiated their own roles in the colonial regime. Against the simmering violence that sought to reinstitute political sovereignty, Attar Singh of Bhadaur, the founding president of the Sri Guru Singh Sabha, Ludhiana, and patron of Lahore Khalsa Diwan, denigrated Duleep Singh. Attar Singh sought the favour of the colonial state, whom he regarded as legitimate sovereigns. He argued that Sikhs were decidedly loyal and offered intelligence on Duleep Singh's proceedings in Panjab. Challenging reports such as Warburton's, Attar Singh wrote to H. M. Durand, the private secretary to the lieutenant-governor of Panjab on 9 August 1887, arguing that these accounts were the result of other communities maligning Sikhs as they vied for the colonial state's favour. He wrote 'among rival communities attempts are constantly being made by members of one sect to set the Government against members of another, and I am also aware that attempts are being made to blacken the character of Sikhs'.<sup>57</sup>

Still, colonial officials continually sought to arbitrate and manage the Sikh tradition. This management hinged on improvement and required the state to monitor, as Brian Hatcher notes, 'the relationship between reform as an expression of the quest to purify religious truth and reform as a slippery slope leading to dissent, viewed with suspicion as a source of competition, enmity, and ill will'.<sup>58</sup> The danger of this oscillation in the colonial imagination prompted the state to become one intervening intermediary of the Sikh tradition. For example, even with assurances from elites such as Attar Singh that their principal objective was to provide moral and material improvement to the backward masses, the state remained uncertain and troubled by the

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. On the question of insecurity and fanaticism, see Christopher Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Kim Wagner, "'Treading Upon Fires": The "Mutiny"-Motif and Colonial Anxieties in British India', *Past and Present*, vol. 218, no. 1, 2013, pp. 159-197; Julia Stephens, 'The Phantom Wahhabi: Liberalism and the Muslim Fanatic in Mid-Victorian India', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2013, pp. 22-52; Julia Stephens, 'The Politics of Muslim Rage: Secular Law and Religious Sentiment in Late Colonial India', *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 77, no. 1 (2014), pp. 45-64; Elizabeth Kolsky, 'The Colonial Rule of Law and the Legal Regime of Exception: Frontier "Fanaticism" and State Violence in British India', *The American Historical Review*, vol. 120, no. 4, 2015, pp. 1218-1246; Harald Fischer-Tine (ed.), *Anxieties, Fear and Panic in Colonial Settings: Empires on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Mark Condos, *The Insecurity State: Punjab and the Making of Colonial Power in British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Chandra Mallampalli, *A Muslim Conspiracy in British India? Politics and Paranoia in the Early Nineteenth-Century Deccan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>57</sup> IOR R/1/1/62.

<sup>58</sup> Hatcher, 'Situating the Swaminarayan Tradition', p. 19. In relation to how martial theory oscillated between loyalty and sedition in relation to Sikhs, see Gajendra Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

proliferation of the Singh Sabha. In November 1886, colonial officials undertook various enquiries 'to ascertain if possible whether the *real* object of these "Sabhas" was political' or 'a moral, social, and religious' one.<sup>59</sup> Attempting such a partition proved difficult and, the state recorded, 'nothing was elicited confirming this view'.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, in June 1887, Young recorded that when government officials attended the Singh Sabha meetings, they commonly found that Sikhs uttered 'strong expressions of opinion', at times 'verging on seditious'. Young lamented the situation, arguing 'these societies are very little under our control'.<sup>61</sup>

Young's disquiet about the state's control rested on its inability to firmly conclude that the Singh Sabhas were political organizations, thereby precluding overt official interference due to the British Crown's policy of non-interference and neutrality in religious matters.<sup>62</sup> Unable to distinguish if the Singh Sabhas had a political or religious dispensation, the colonial state had to take the Singh Sabha at their word: the Singh Sabhas existed to reform Sikhism, which, in colonial terms, was a matter of private custom. But the state feared religious reform would create political upheaval, especially if a 'population' such as the Sikhs was anthropologically determined to be excitable.<sup>63</sup> With this tension in mind, Young argued that though many district officers upheld this policy and refused to interfere and regulate the wide array of opinions and expressions at the Singh Sabha meetings, the colonial state could not 'afford to allow an organization of this character to proceed to the length of organization against Government measures or in favor of opponents of Government'.<sup>64</sup> To prevent such disaffection and tumult, Young concluded that even though he did 'not think that Government could in accordance with law take any direct measures for interfering with such societies', district officers, through loyal allies in the Singh Sabha, had to 'keep themselves acquainted with their proceedings, and to endeavor to control the tone of their debates' and 'keep discussions within proper bounds'.<sup>65</sup>

The political nature of the Singh Sabhas was not a figment of the colonial imagination.<sup>66</sup> The threat to the colonial state was not an imaginary one,

<sup>59</sup> IOR L/P&S/18/D152.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> The literature on the paradoxes of the policy on non-interference is vast; as scholars have noted, its rhetorical force rarely matched its application. For example, Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: The Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Adcock, *Limits of Tolerance*; Mitra Sharafi, *Law and Identity in Colonial South Asia: Parsi Legal Culture, 1772–1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>63</sup> Condos, *The Insecurity State*, p. 102. For how this was gendered, see Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

<sup>64</sup> IOR L/P&S/18/D152.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> On the imaginary threat, see Mallampalli, *A Muslim Conspiracy in British India?* and Condos, *The Insecurity State*. The recent focus on the colonial state's anxiety, however, has removed the possibility of a subaltern resistance since the overwrought focus, following C. A. Bayly, is on how religion, rumours, and threats were 'more often reflections of the weakness and ignorance of the

but had been ongoing for several years since Sikhs did not capitulate nor did they consider the political and religious separate entities; rather, Sikhism functioned as a repository to think about sovereignty even within a newly emerging political context.<sup>67</sup> Elaborating on these political ethics that refused to separate the spiritual from the temporal, numerous highly positioned members of the Singh Sabha had actively cultivated ties with Duleep Singh. After his return from England, the aforementioned Sindhanwalia travelled across the subcontinent visiting central Sikh temporal authorities (*takhts*) at Hazoor Sahib in Nandair and Patna Sahib, organizing on Duleep Singh's behalf. Eventually, 'after a stay of about three months at Patna', the British spy Munshi Aziz-ud-din reported that 'Sardar Thakur Singh returned to Punjab' where 'he carried on preaching Dalip Singh's case'. Sindhanwalia found a sympathetic response from fellow founding members of the Amritsar Singh Sabha such as Khem Singh Bedi and Raja Bikram Singh of Faridkot and the president of the Lahore Singh Sabha, Diwan Buta Singh.<sup>68</sup> Soon thereafter, in 1887, recognizing that the British had discovered his intrigue, Sindhanwalia, with Duleep Singh's sanction, formed an exiled Sikh state in Pondicherry as the newly appointed chief minister of the Khalsa Raj.<sup>69</sup>

Itinerant, albeit institutionalized, *granthis* (readers of the Eleventh Sikh Guru, which in text form is the *Guru Granth Sahib*) played a central role in these efforts. To give one example: Bhai Sumer Singh, the head *granthi* at Patna Sahib, one of the four temporal Sikh authorities, was also involved in Duleep Singh's intrigues. He was in Faridkot in 1887, engaged in a project funded by Raja Bikram Singh of Faridkot to produce a counter exegesis to Ernst Trumpp's translation and analysis of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, which the colonial state had commissioned.<sup>70</sup> A native agent, Amrik Singh Hasanwalia, travelled to Patna on 22 March 1887 to garner more information about Sumer Singh and met with Bawa Bir Singh, Bedi, the deputy of Bhai Sumer Singh and Bhai Gulab Singh of Patna. He advised colonial authorities that Gulab Singh, unsuspecting of Amrik Singh's duplicity, had divulged that 'Bhai Sumer Singh is only ostensibly employed in translating the Granth at Faridkot.'<sup>71</sup> This duplicity, Amrik Singh warned, meant that Sumer Singh's role was not religious, but political—and one in which he could use the

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colonisers than a gauge of hegemony'. This reading can reduce attempts to organize against colonial rule as apparitions in colonial minds. See Bayly, *Empire and Information*, p. 143. Instead, I accord with Gyan Prakash in considering how even though these efforts did not radically change 'the relations of power that is no reason to conclude that these challenges were insignificant': Gyan Prakash, *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labor Servitude in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 225.

<sup>67</sup> Ranajit Guha, 'The Prose of Counter-Insurgency', in *Subaltern Studies II*, pp. 1–42. Yet this inseparability of religion and politics cannot be reduced to the coupling of the religious to the modern state form, which is, after all, a distinct historical formation. See Haj, *Reconfiguring the Islamic Tradition*, p. 18.

<sup>68</sup> IOR R/1/1/62.

<sup>69</sup> Sindhanwalia, for example, would mark his letters with a seal bearing the inscription 'Akal Sahai' following Maharaja Ranjit Singh's days.

<sup>70</sup> For Trumpp, see Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West*.

<sup>71</sup> IOR R/1/1/95.

guise of religion to manipulate others for political purposes.<sup>72</sup> Exegesis, in this logic, was rendered inauthentic in relation to the political. Proper exegesis, in these terms, would be one that did not engage in overtly anti-colonial politics.

Inhabiting this interstice, *granthis* such as Bhai Sumer Singh played a particularly important role since they were embedded within the subaltern community while remaining outside the purview of the colonial state—engaged as they were in now putatively defined religious affairs. Within this narrowly defined space, colonial officials could only read this practice as inauthentic preaching that *granthis*, under the pretence of religion, engaged in for personal political gain.<sup>73</sup> This grammar, exegesis, or *katha*, which intertwines narratives from *sakhis* through persistent questioning of a socio-political context, could not function in itself as providing an anti-British context through its refusal to separate the religious and political. Instead, *katha* became rendered as a duplicitous tool deployed by self-indulgent *granthis*. Put another way, *katha* was first stripped of political meaning and then, if political meaning was attached to it, as it is in the Sikh tradition, this politicization was rendered an artful cunning.<sup>74</sup> And this is precisely how Sindhanwalia and Sumer Singh's attempts to intervene in the Sikh tradition functioned in the colonial state, reducing the overdetermined nature of the political to an originary moment located in individual intention. Amrik Singh argued that not only was he positive of these connections, but he considered 'Sumar Singh as at the bottom of all intrigues' and he was influenced, Amrik Singh concluded, by monetary gain and Sindhanwalia's duplicity, reporting, 'Thakur Singh had been very generous to Sumar Singh in Patna, and he had a persuasive tongue.'<sup>75</sup>

Even though the colonial state noted that there was a split in Panjab over the management of the Sabhas, the state argued these sides could only come together due to nefarious individual manoeuvring that harnessed the discontent. In fact, Amrik Singh recorded that it was Sumer Singh himself who brought about an agreement between disparate parties—Khem Singh Bedi, the Raja of Faridkot, and Thakur Singh Sindhanwalia—after being awarded the *gaddi* (seat) at Patna Sahib. Except it was not individual plotting, but disputations, exegesis, and claims about the past that allowed Sindhanwalia

<sup>72</sup> The secular forces us into this logic since, as Hussein Ali Agrama argues, 'it is secularism itself that makes religion into an object of politics'. Once made into an object of politics, religious claims only produce suspicion, existing as a potential deception for both the scholar and the state. Hussein Ali Agrama, *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 33.

<sup>73</sup> Bayly, *Empire and Information*, p. 6.

<sup>74</sup> For the individual bourgeois self and determining authentic religious meaning in a tradition, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Brian Hatcher, *Bourgeois Hinduism, or, The Faith of the Modern Vedantists: Rare Discourse from Early Colonial Bengal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). This produced the religious elites as untrustworthy figures which coalesced in the figure of the Brahman and *mullah* in colonial India. See Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions. The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Robert Yelle, *The Language of Disenchantment: Protestant Liberalism and Colonial Discourse in British India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Scott, *Spiritual Despots*.

<sup>75</sup> IOR R/1/1/68.

to coalesce support. For example, Khem Singh Bedi, a central figure in the Amritsar Singh Sabha and descendant of Guru Nanak, did not initially back Duleep Singh's intrigues until he became convinced by arguments made by Sumer Singh and Sindhanwalia. That is, disputation, through religious authority, could cohere and convince oppositional sides. Maharani Jind Kaur's *dasi* (favourite maid), Mangala, who served in a motherly role to Duleep Singh, confirmed this to Amrik Singh. According to Mangala, Khem Singh Bedi was not originally involved with Duleep Singh intrigues, but had been persuaded to join the maharaja's cause through the efforts of Bhai Sumer Singh of Patna.<sup>76</sup> Mangala's information coincided with the evidence that Amrik Singh had gathered at Patna, where he learned that Khem Singh Bedi had affirmed his ties to Duleep Singh at a marriage ceremony. He reported:

During the marriage festivities at Faridkot, a compact was made between the Raja, Bawa Khem Singh, Sardar Bur Singh of Mangheria (Hoshiarpur District), Motabir of Shabzada Shahdeo Singh, and other persons to the effect that they would aid in bringing back Dalip Singh. This compact, they said, was made on the day after that on which Bhagu Mall had publicly alluded to Dalip Singh. In an open Darbar, Bhagu had risen and said, on the previous day 'while we are all feasting here, Dalip Singh is in distress in Europe, get him back, put up some prayers for his sake.' Khem Singh replied publicly 'He will come: we are with him.'<sup>77</sup>

Though the British sought to limit the placement of politics and religion, Sikh contestations exceeded these placements. Marriage, in this example, was not reduced to a private affair for merging familial ties, but for coalescing politics, as attested to by Bedi's open announcement, a practice that went back to Ranjit Singh.<sup>78</sup>

These challenges and shifting placements, which were central to disputations, signal the important role of native networks in conjoining divergent aims. Numerous *granthis* took charge and supported Duleep Singh. The colonial state documented that '*granthis* of the four principal Sikh shrines' were both circulating and furthering Duleep Singh's cause among Sikhs.<sup>79</sup> The colonial state gathered that at least 16 *granthis* and *nihungs* from the four principal *takhts* at Amritsar, Patna, Anandpur, and Nander, and Akal Bungah and Baba Atal Gurdwara in Amritsar were involved in the intrigues.<sup>80</sup> *Granthis* were especially difficult to confront, and through their *katha* remained broadly embedded within the community. Rather than being contained within

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks*, p. 176.

<sup>79</sup> IOR R/1/1/68.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. The colonial state recorded the names of: 1. Bhagat Singh, Garanthi of Golden Temple, Amritsar; 2. Narang Singh, Garanthi of Golden Temple, Amritsar; 3. Hira Singh, Garanthi of Golden Temple, Amritsar; 4. Choti Sarkar Sodhi of Anandpur; 5. Majhli Sarkar; 6. Gulab Singh, Garanthi of Patna; 7. Bhagat Singh, Garanthi of Patna; 8. Nann Singh, Garanthi of Nander, Deccan; 9. Gian Singh, Akali, Fakir of Nander.



cosmopolitan networks or temple officiants, the community was, therefore, central in working within this framework of *miri-piri* and coalescing orthodoxy in order to make sense of political sovereignty.<sup>81</sup> Or, to follow Partha Chatterjee, ‘religion to such a community provides an ontology, an epistemology as well as a practical code of ethics, including political ethics’.<sup>82</sup>

Denying the possibility of this political ethics, the colonial state argued that the organization around Duleep Singh was only elite manipulation, even when tumult existed in the community. To take one example, an officer of the 15th Sikhs reported that one of his officers, Bishun Singh, mentioned ‘there was much excitement amongst the people respecting Dalip Singh’. Yet this attachment to the former sovereign was dismissed as irrational. As Bishun Singh said, ‘these people are uneducated and believe anything’.<sup>83</sup> Bishun Singh therefore concluded that the community, although ‘in a state of “expectancy”’, was not actively disloyal, but manipulated by elites. Another officer of the Panjab Frontier Force confided that these agents were Sikh *granthis*, whom Duleep Singh had organized through Sindhanwalia. Colonel F. E. Hastings too revealed that his troops remained embedded within these networks, challenging the presumed loyalty of the native Sikh army. He provided information that ‘Sikhs invariably amongst themselves speak of him as their “Maharaja” which custom shows the light in which they regard him’.<sup>84</sup> This prior form of sovereignty, then, existed as a code of practical and political ethics, which circulated through *granthis* and *katha*. Hastings argued that this left ‘no doubt that Dalip Singh’s presence with a Russian army engaged in hostilities on our North-West Frontier would have a most prejudicial effect on the loyalty of the Sikh community’.<sup>85</sup> Hastings noted a conversation with a Sikh soldier attesting to this danger, since he ‘freely stated that under such circumstances there would be risings among the Sikhs, though he was of opinion they would fail for want of due organization’.<sup>86</sup>

### Secrets and exposure

Singh Sabhites not only used pre-established Sikh networks to circulate their contestations around Sikh sovereignty and theology, they also tried to organize through new modes of communication, most notably the printing press. For example, the Raja of Faridkot printed books and pamphlets which were then distributed to the community, which Sikhs lauded.<sup>87</sup> As Rachel Sturman notes, within community struggles, ‘the limitations of colonial political space encouraged the parties to adopt the forms and modalities of colonial civil society—petitions, pamphlets, newspaper articles, public meetings, and

<sup>81</sup> For cosmopolitan networks in relation to Duleep Singh, see Seema Alavi, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>82</sup> Chatterjee, ‘Agrarian Relations and Communalism in Bengal’, p. 31.

<sup>83</sup> IOR R/1/1/66.

<sup>84</sup> IOR R/1/1/62.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Khalsa Akhbar*, 1 June 1887.

the like—and colonial institutions provided multiple venues for jockeying over community claims'.<sup>88</sup> Relying on these new networks meant these internal contestations about sovereignty also became visible to a discerning colonial government's watchful eye, especially with the publication in 1885 of a work in Urdu, the *Khurshid-i-Khalsa* by Bawa Nihal Singh, a police chief in the Kalsia state. Nihal Singh caused controversy by referring to Ram Singh, the leader of the Namdharis, as Guru—another persistent and ongoing concern for the British state—as well as proclaiming that Duleep Singh should be restored to his throne.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, Nihal Singh declared that John Lawrence had deposed Maharaja Duleep Singh through unlawful threats against members of the court. Appealing to British sensibilities and censuring the more revolutionary overtures, Nihal Singh argued that this unlawful removal meant that

the people are now in hopes that by the royal and imperial favors of the Empress of India, the throne of Lahore will be restored to Maharaja Dhulip Singh...Sardar Thakur Singh, Sandhanwalia, who has, by his perfect belief in the Sikh faith and by his excellent undertakes, exonerated himself from the disgrace attached to his family, is expecting to be made a Wazir.<sup>90</sup>

The Singh Sabha was closely tied to the publication. Surmukh Singh, the author's brother and secretary of the local Singh Sabha, oversaw the printing of the book at a press in Jalandhar owned by the founding president of Singh Sabha Lahore, Diwan Buta Singh. Moreover, the work garnered favourable reviews, which were printed on the last two pages, from many prominent members of the Singh Sabhas as well as the aforementioned Sumer Singh from Patna. The reviewers all approved the work and considered 'it would be useful to the Khalsa community'.<sup>91</sup> Soon, the book began circulating, even among the prized military. Colonial officials recorded that 'early in November 1886, it was ascertained that men of the 9<sup>th</sup> Bengal Lancers and 23<sup>rd</sup> Pioneers had subscribed for the *Khurshid-i-Khalsa*', even though, the state conjectured, 'without intimate knowledge of its contents'.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Rachel Sturman, *The Government of Social Life in Colonial India: Liberalism, Religious Law, and Women's Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 204. For Oberoi, this technological shift explains the hegemony of Khalsa normative values. See Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*.

<sup>89</sup> Also known as 'Kukas'. The Namdhari movement can also be considered as a contestation over orthodoxy within the Sikh tradition as it worked within the parameters of the tradition even if it was more distant from normative Sikh understandings as we understand them today. For more, see Condos, *The Insecurity State*; Fauja Singh, *Kuka Movement: An Important Phase in Punjab's Role in India's Struggle for Freedom* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1965); Harjot Oberoi, 'Brotherhood of the Pure: The Poetics and Politics of Cultural Transgression', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1992, 157–97; Joginder Singh, *The Namdhari Sikhs: Their Changing Social and Cultural Landscape* (Delhi: Manohar, 2013).

<sup>90</sup> National Archives of India (NAI), Foreign Department Secret I, June 1886, Nos. 12–196.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> IOR L/P&S/18/D152.

Since the political constituted a site of disputation about sovereignty, the central location assigned to Duleep Singh in the *Khurshid-i-Khalsa* did not go unopposed. Following the publication of Nihal Singh's work, on 23 October 1885, Bhai Gurmukh Singh, a lecturer at the Oriental College in Lahore and the secretary of the Singh Sabha Lahore, circulated a notice through the Khalsa Diwan, challenging the printing of the positive reviews as well as the content of the *Khurshid-i-Khalsa*, especially that in the post-Guru period. The public notice read that after contacting the reviewers in the Singh Sabha, they had not given 'any opinion on the historical sketch [of the Sikh conquests after the death of Guru Gobind Singh] and on the genealogical trees, and they are not, in consequences, responsible for them'.<sup>93</sup> Following this enquiry, Gurmukh Singh challenged the coalescing of authority around the book and advised that Bawa Nihal Singh be 'asked why he published the reviews of the aforesaid gentlemen as applying to the entire work (when the said reviews only referred to a portion of the book)'.<sup>94</sup>

On 8 February 1886, Gurmukh Singh issued a further notice, stating that Nihal Singh had been called to explain his 'expressions against Government and of statements calculated to bring the *Khalsa* faith in disrepute'.<sup>95</sup> This required, he argued, that Nihal Singh be excluded from the Singh Sabha altogether, especially since he had not replied to any of Gurmukh Singh's questions.<sup>96</sup> If he failed to 'give a satisfactory answer', Gurmukh Singh claimed, 'the case would be placed before the Khalsa Diwan'.<sup>97</sup> On 14 February 1886, the Khalsa Diwan met and they were 'unanimously of opinion that the author should be given another opportunity to acquit himself of the blame'.<sup>98</sup> Despite this warning, however, Nihal Singh still did not respond. Instead, Gurmukh Singh stated, Nihal Singh 'joined in opposition to the Sabha in several matters'.<sup>99</sup> In April 1886, 'a notice was issued under the same signature, declaring the book to be unauthorized on behalf of 15 Sabhas, and the author to be excluded from the Singh Sabhas'.<sup>100</sup> Likewise, 'it was also decided that anybody, whether a Sikh individually, or Sabha collectively, who might hereafter express disapproval of this proceedings of the Lahore Khalsa Diwan would be dealt with in the same manner as the author of the book in question had been treated'.<sup>101</sup> This was a direct threat to the Amritsar Khalsa Diwan as divisions between the two widened.

This public notice assured the state of Sikh loyalty. On 24 May 1886, Young argued 'the issue of the present notice excluding Bawa Nihal Singh from the Singh Sabhas is noteworthy, inasmuch as the objections taken to the *Khurshid-i-Khalsa* are professedly on the account of its disloyalty to the

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> NAI, Foreign Department Secret I, June 1886, Nos. 12–196.

<sup>97</sup> IOR L/P&S/18/D152.

<sup>98</sup> NAI, Foreign Department Secret I, June 1886, Nos. 12–196.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> IOR L/P&S/18/D152. Also see *Khalsa Akhbar*, 16 April 1887.

<sup>101</sup> NAI, Foreign Department Secret I, June 1886, Nos. 12–196.

Government'.<sup>102</sup> One colonial official recorded how the excommunication was 'a gratifying testimony to the loyalty of the leaders of the Sikh Community'.<sup>103</sup> Yet doubt remained about where the institutional authority to disbar Nihal Singh had emerged from. Even though, as *The Pioneer* reported, the Khalsa Diwan was 'the last Court of appeal in matters connected with the Sikh religion and ordinances',<sup>104</sup> the state was suspicious that Bhai Gurmukh Singh 'circulated it on his own authority, since it was known that dissensions had lately arisen in the society'.<sup>105</sup> Once again, the question of individual manipulation came to the fore.

Within this dissent, the opposition, too, contacted the colonial state. Looking to cohere their own authority against Bhai Gurmukh Singh, in October 1886—and despite their own plotting against the colonial state—the Raja of Faridkot, Khem Singh Bedi, and Sardar Man Singh, the superintendent of the Golden Temple at Amritsar, sent a letter to the lieutenant-governor 'repudiating the acts of Gurmukh Singh'.<sup>106</sup> They too conferred authority on themselves, conveying to the state that 'no document purporting to come from the Khalsa Diwan should be considered authentic, without the signatures of at least two of its members'.<sup>107</sup> Importantly, following Nihal Singh's excommunication, the Amritsar group countered and excommunicated Gurmukh Singh from the Sikh fold in March 1887. The Khalsa Diwan Amritsar, through the Akal Takht and Darbar Sahib, issued a *hukamnama* (order) excommunicating/separating (*alhidā kitā*) Gurmukh Singh from the Khalsa.<sup>108</sup> The *hukamnama* announced that Gurmukh Singh had affronted the *Guru Granth Sahib* in his writings and lectures, which went against the entirety of the Sikh tradition. This intervention then called for Gurmukh Singh's isolation. The order went on to say that if anyone persisted in associating with Gurmukh Singh, they would meet a similar fate.<sup>109</sup> With two excommunications in play, one issued from the Khalsa Diwan Lahore and the other through the Khalsa Diwan Amritsar, dissension came to a head due to the institutional political vacuum from which Sikh institutions drew their power and the possibility of consolidating an orthodoxy became an impossibility.<sup>110</sup> Put otherwise, the temporal (*miri*) and spiritual (*piri*) became dislocated from their antagonistic relation within the Sikh tradition to become a resolved one, with the colonial state using its sovereignty to determine spiritual matters.

On 16 April 1887, the *Khalsa Akhbar*, the main organ of the Singh Sabha Lahore, reported the controversy and the split between the Singh Sabhas,

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<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *The Pioneer*, 20 May 1886.

<sup>105</sup> IOR L/P&S/18/D152.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> If the Khalsa *panth* is a unity, as a *sangat*, *alhidā* reminds us that one can become disjoined from within.

<sup>109</sup> A copy of the *hukamnama* is printed in Singh, *Singh Sabha Lahir*, p. 35.

<sup>110</sup> Dhavan notes this tension, as does Kapur Singh. See Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks* and Singh, 'The Church and State'.

tracing it to the publication of Nihal Singh's book. The *Akhbar* explained that Gurmukh Singh's extended efforts had created a vibrant Khalsa Diwan in the Singh Sabha Lahore, which had become eroded by the Khalsa Diwan Amritsar. This erosion became exacerbated, the *Akhbar* explained, when Nihal Singh published the *Khurshid-i-Khalsa*, within which much was written that opposed Sikh teachings, such as the use of Guru for Ram Singh. The *Khalsa Akhbar* chided Nihal Singh for recommending to the English state that all Sikhs had reached a uniform agreement that Maharaja Duleep Singh should receive the *takht* of Lahore and Sardar Thakur Singh Sindhanwalia should receive the title of vizier. For the *Khalsa Akhbar*, this moment constituted a breach, creating irreconcilable differences between the Singh Sabhas, which the article detailed vividly. Its central concern around this breach, however, originated in Khem Singh Bedi's ties to the colonial state. The *Akhbar* reported that Khem Singh Bedi went to Lieutenant Governor Aitchison and told him that he was 'The hallowed and main Guru of the Sikhs' and also that he was 'all of Panjab's *vakil* [delegate/custodian of tradition]'.<sup>111</sup> The *Akhbar* lamented this self-proclaimed authority that challenged both Sikh tenets and the parameters of authority in Panjab. The *Akhbar* asked: when was he named *vakil* and how did he become authorized?<sup>112</sup>

The *Akhbar*, therefore, reveals not only internal discord, but the role of the colonial state in adjudicating *Sikhi*. Bedi's declaration that he was a representative of all Sikhs was dangerous because it could unduly influence the state, which, in turn, would authenticate and arbitrate between practices such as further entrenching caste practices in the Sikh community—practices that Gurmukh Singh and others vehemently opposed. But in refusing to allow dissension and contestation within the parameters of tradition, authority shifted from Sikh institutions, which cultivated multiple strands of argumentation—as we saw with the exegesis on the *Guru Granth Sahib*—in the colonial state. The shift was crucial since the colonial state sought to sanitize disagreement through, for instance, the management of Sikh institutions and the creation of encyclopedic knowledge. Political and theological matters around the publication became the backdrop to a wider struggle centred on where institutional authority—sovereignty—lay. In this struggle, disagreement became routed through individual authority tied to the colonial state's legal apparatus, which sought to eradicate difference through the uniformity of law. And, indeed, as the debates raged, Bedi would eventually sue for libel, solidifying the reach of the colonial state in managing Sikh affairs.

Therefore, though trying to maintain secrecy while cohering to an orthodoxy in order to remain outside the purview of the British state, the Singh Sabha's contestations could not avoid the encroaching jurisdiction of the state. Since the state had become the arbiter of tradition through its ability to grant favours, thus demonstrating its sovereignty, Sikhs then could make direct appeals and expose their fellow Sikhs to the colonial state and legitimate their own hold over the tradition. For example, Attar Singh of Bhadaur wrote

<sup>111</sup> *Khalsa Akhbar*, 16 April 1887.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

to the lieutenant-governor of Panjab, divulging the secret circulation of a book written by Major Evans Bell on Duleep Singh. Attar Singh sent the state 'four pages of a matter lithographed in Gurmukhi character and Hindi language which is intended to show up the hardships suffered by Maharaja Dalip Singh at the hands of British Government'.<sup>113</sup> Attar Singh notified the colonial authorities of the possible horror of such circulation, decrying that 'the object of the writer seems to me to be to turn the hearts of the people of this province from the English. Now-a-days it is being discussed here and partly believed that the British Government have treated Dalip Singh with severity and injustice.'<sup>114</sup>

Using the same demarcations between an unsettled community on the brink of collapse coupled with the loyal Sikhs in his favour, Attar Singh lauded 'the good sense and loyalty of the members of the Singh Sabha of Lahore who sent me the enclosed pages'.<sup>115</sup> In contrast to these loyal members, Attar Singh argued that it was likely that intriguing lay with 'Amritsar people' who were 'greatly exercised by the prophecy contained in the *Sakhi* book that Dalip Singh will come to the Punjab and will be victorious over his enemy'.<sup>116</sup> Instead of engaging in contestations within the Sikh fold itself, which were necessarily fractious, Attar Singh appealed to state power to adjudicate these claims—to uphold *piri*—providing them with the context in which they could intervene. He held that the statements of the Amritsar Sikhs could be 'satisfactorily answered' and, moreover, enclosed 'a list of references to the *Sakhi* book for His Honor's kind attention to the contents of the small volume'.<sup>117</sup> Attar Singh continued that, armed with this knowledge, it was incumbent on the government to respond to possible publications, by 'showing the fair character of their dealing with Dalip Singh has no good cause of complaint'.<sup>118</sup>

### Subaltern community

While there were indeed controversies that Sikhs appealed to the state to settle, overvaluing Attar Singh's and Gurmukh Singh's rendition also creates an unnecessarily stark division within the Singh Sabhas writ large. This division removed the possibility of the two reaching a common position, which had remained a distinct historical possibility even as the two sides jockeyed for position in relation to the colonial state. Conceptual trouble emerges from our desire to locate clearly demarcated subjects in relation to colonial authority, a problem David Arnold has diagnosed.<sup>119</sup> The problem is exacerbated

<sup>113</sup> IOR R/1/1/62.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> David Arnold, 'Bureaucratic Recruitment and Subordination in Colonial India: The Madras Constabulary, 1857–1947', in *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, (ed.) Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 2.

when, as Verne Dusenbury cautions, we ‘read directly from the programmatic texts of the reformers to actual Sikh behavior’ since ‘one of the mistakes of an earlier orientalism was to assume that South Asian social life corresponded to how it was represented in the classical texts and elite discourses’.<sup>120</sup> Yet what emerges underneath the essentialized elite discourse is not just the heterogeneity of South Asian religious life, but attempts to achieve coherence about life through struggle, argumentation, and organization.

Therefore, although the locus of institutional power did shift towards the colonial state, its reach remained incomplete as it failed to grasp its desired totality. In this sense, when studying reform, we cannot privilege the elite as the site that reveals the Other. Instead, we must recall, as Gayatri Spivak trenchantly demonstrates, ‘the colonized subaltern *subject* is irretrievably heterogeneous’, which is an impossibility.<sup>121</sup> We encounter then, in our efforts to demarcate reform, an unplumbable site—what Spivak calls ‘an undifferentiated preoriginary space’ that supports both the histories of authenticity and coloniality that structure theories of reform (to return to the earlier typology).<sup>122</sup>

Both authenticity and inauthenticity, which include our own pursuit to historicize claims to discover what lies behind them, remain grounded in an ontological realism—the certainty that an event occurred even while it was routed through an epistemological uncertainty, as Ethan Kleinberg notes.<sup>123</sup> But perhaps positioning the subaltern community as a site of impossibility that remains irretrievably heterogeneous means we can turn our attention to the fact that constructing orthodoxy always encountered a limit, an impossibility, from which orthodoxy emerged and cohered (mushroomed), though never as a closed totality, which is, we must recall, the very logic of *miri* and *piri* as well.

Centring this gap in both our own and past historical possibilities—the antagonistic relation between *miri* and *piri* in *Sikhi*—undoes the totality of the Singh Sabhas and their eventual subsumption into an episteme.<sup>124</sup> A concrete historical example might be helpful here. Institutional meetings were not as stable as they appear at first glance, especially when situated in relation to the Sikh community—a community that sought to reinstitute Duleep Singh’s rule by bypassing the colonial infrastructure. Such meetings defied the overtly non-political stance ascribed to the Singh Sabhas and desired by some elite Sikhs. These meetings were, to follow Ranajit Guha, ‘an autonomous domain’ since they did not originate from elite politics nor did their existence depend

<sup>120</sup> Verne Dusenbury, ‘The Word as Guru: Sikh Scripture and the Translation Controversy’, *History of Religions*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1992, p. 401.

<sup>121</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, (eds) Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 284.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

<sup>123</sup> Kleinberg, *Haunting History*, p. 1.

<sup>124</sup> I further discuss antagonism in relation to Sikh history in Rajbir Singh Judge, ‘There Is No Colonial Relationship: Antagonism, Sikhism and South Asian Studies’, *History and Theory*, vol. 57, no. 2, 2018, pp. 195–217.

on the latter.<sup>125</sup> Colonial intelligence gathered that ‘at a meeting of about 2,000 Sikhs held in the house of Chaudris Lehna Singh and Jiwan Singh of Amballa city, in the first week of June 1886, it was given out that the Maharaja would soon arrive at Lahore.’<sup>126</sup> Again, on 8 January 1887, the aforementioned Bawa Nihal Singh, Thanadar of Kalsia, argued ‘there was no doubt that Dalip Singh would ascend his throne at Lahore this year’.<sup>127</sup>

These meetings refused the partitions between the political and religious enacted by the colonial state. Early in 1887, an official recorded that a Namdhari Sikh had started to offer prayers during their meetings for Duleep Singh.<sup>128</sup> In Amballa too these meetings functioned similarly. Seventy Sikhs assembled on 11 December 1886 to hear the *Guru Granth Sahib*, and afterwards ‘it was given out that Dalip Singh would come to Lahore in 1887, and the people would place him on the throne’.<sup>129</sup> This happened again during another meeting on 16 December 1886, when Tara Singh, a Granthi from Amritsar, stated that ‘Dalip Singh was at present with the Russians, who would assist him’.<sup>130</sup> Another *granthi*, Natha Singh, offered similar prayers. He prayed publicly at a Singh Sabha meeting in Ambala that ‘Guru Gobind Singh would bring Dalip Singh back to the Panjab and set him on the throne at Lahore’.<sup>131</sup>

As noted above, *granthis* played a significant role in cultivating political aspirations, not only among the elite, but also among the broader subaltern community because of their itinerant nature. Tara Singh, to continue with our example, was ‘an agent of the “Singh Sabha”’, deployed ‘to visit all the places in the Amballa direction where the society had branches, and to direct them to collect funds’ and ‘submit a complete list to the President of the Singh Sabha of Lahore of those who had been admitted to the Sikh religion during the previous month and enrolled in the “Singh Sabha”’.<sup>132</sup> Though ostensibly travelling to gather empirical data for the Sabha, reifying identity in scholarly parlance, Tara Singh also spread rumour and intrigue among the community.<sup>133</sup> And, undeniably, these prayers were not confined to Amballa, for he travelled from Amballa to Chachrowli to Hurdwar and returned to Amritsar via Bassi in Kalsia territory, Kharrar, Kotehra, and Sohana.<sup>134</sup> Furthermore, Sikhs who attended such meetings were themselves from diverse backgrounds. For example, though members of the Amritsar Singh Sabha—such as Khem

<sup>125</sup> Ranajit Guha, ‘On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India’, in *Subaltern Studies I*, p. 4.

<sup>126</sup> IOR L/P&S/18/D152.

<sup>127</sup> IOR R/1/1/62.

<sup>128</sup> IOR L/P&S/18/D152.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> The literature on rumours is vast. See Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999 [1983]); James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Homi Bhabha, ‘By Bread Alone: Signs of Violence in the Mid-Nineteenth Century’, in his *Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>134</sup> IOR L/P&S/18/D152.



Singh Bedi—notoriously upheld caste distinctions, some of its affiliates promoted caste equality. One colonial official recorded that a member of the Amritsar Singh Sabha, Nihal Singh, and his allies ‘advocated (unsuccessfully) the cause of the Mazhabi Sikhs [rendered ‘Untouchable’ under the dictates of Hinduism, but a central part of the Sikh tradition and history], by trying to induce the general body of Sikhs to admit them on equal terms to all social gatherings’.<sup>135</sup> As a consequence, contestations about what sovereignty meant in such an autonomous domain opened multiple questions about difference and inclusion that did not mirror the programmes and policies of the institutional authorities in Amritsar or Lahore.

Mirroring broader debates on religious reform in South Asia, the historiographical consensus in Sikh studies remains that one particular strand—the Lahore Singh Sabha—gained ascendancy. This hegemony emerged not through organizational prowess nor the direct intervention of the colonial state, but because of the ‘immense seduction of their discourse’ which captured the ‘restless and upwardly mobile Sikh elite’ propelled forward by changes wrought by the colonial state, as Oberoi has written about in detail.<sup>136</sup> This seductive discourse conjoined local sabhas with the Lahore branch. Oberoi argues ‘in conformity with the metropolitan paradigm, local sabhas convened annual and weekly meetings, organized processions, marked the anniversaries of the Sikh gurus, employed missionaries to propagate the faith, printed and distributed Sikh histories and literature, and often backed the official line as it emerged from Lahore’.<sup>137</sup> Oberoi confirms his argument by pointing to discourse, noting that ‘the proceedings of these local Sabhas are well documented in the *Khalsa Akhbar*’.<sup>138</sup>

Against these static demarcations, however, the debates and circulation of information around Duleep Singh and the question of sovereignty, as we have seen, reveal a much more tenuous historical terrain as meaning could not be stabilized so easily. Indeed, meaning cannot be reduced to mere coloniality or criminality.<sup>139</sup> The most salient evidence of the Sabha remaining historically marked by contestations emerges again at a meeting held in Amballa on 5 February 1887. The district superintendent of police at Amballa reported that the meeting of the Singh Sabha was held in the house of Lehna Singh, Chaudri of Amballa City, at which about 50 Sikhs were present.<sup>140</sup> Sardar

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*, p. 303.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.* For another work that takes the *Khalsa Akhbar* at face value, see Louis Fenech, *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition: Playing the ‘Game of Love’* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>139</sup> Ranajit Guha contends that the pressures of insurgency required both the colonial state and elite discourse to ‘reduce the semantic range of many words and expressions, and assign to them specialized meanings in order to identify peasants as rebels and their attempt to turn the world upside down as crime’: Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, p. 17. The British, however, did try to limit the possible meaning of Duleep Singh, designing a specific role for him to play, as Atwal explains—a meaning that shifted as geopolitical concerns changed. See Atwal, *Royal and Rebels*, p. 198.

<sup>140</sup> IOR L/P&S/18/D152.

Harnam Singh, Rais of Kharrar, made a speech, saying ‘the time for Sikh rule was close at hand, and that Maharaja Duleep Singh would sit on the throne at Lahore’.<sup>141</sup> He exhorted the community ‘to be faithful to their religion and told them to join the subscription that was going to be started’.<sup>142</sup>

Colonial officials made numerous enquiries as to the truth of this report, looking to determine the reach of Duleep Singh’s intrigue and the amount of financial support he had garnered. On 10 May 1887, the district superintendent wrote that ‘his informant had given a correct version of what happened and that a notice in the *Khalsa Akhbar* of the 12 February 1887, of the meeting was incorrect and misleading, and intended to hoodwink the authorities’.<sup>143</sup> Yet Oberoi explicitly points to this edition of the *Khalsa Akhbar* to uphold his argument that Singh Sabhas fomented a singular episteme that followed colonial demarcations. When arguing that many Sabhas emulated the Lahore Sabha, he footnotes the Ambala Singh Sabha as a prime example and asks us to consult the proceedings in the *Khalsa Akhbar*, 12 February 1887, as proof.<sup>144</sup> The *Khalsa Akhbar*, however, does not reveal the hegemony of a particular vision of *Sikhi* in the reproduction of its proceedings. Instead, rather than imbibing colonial categories, members of the Singh Sabha used them—the state’s own demarcations between the political and religious—to create another domain to reinstitute a different relation between the religious and political. The report of the meeting sent to the papers was falsified through this very distinction.<sup>145</sup> In the report, Lehna Singh and Jiwan Singh of Amballa gave it the appearance of ‘a purely religious meeting’ to purposely deceive the authorities who they knew were monitoring the newspapers.<sup>146</sup> Instead of backing the official line as it emerged from the Lahore Singh Sabha, as scholars argue, the Singh Sabha at Amballa concluded that it would send the money to Diwan Buta Singh in order ‘to form a fund to cover all expenses for printing and sending letters, &c., about the country, and paying their different agents’.<sup>147</sup>

What do we make of this discrepancy? We might need to rethink efforts that provide historical depth to Sikhs through native vernacular writing and their rhetorical strategies. These attempts challenge the colonial state’s technologies that read and fixed martial bodies, an ethnographic surface that was mirrored by Sikhs themselves.<sup>148</sup> The problem is that such depth precludes the possibility of a fragmented body by mirroring the authoritative gaze inwards. By foregrounding the community, which spread information without an originary

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<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*, p. 298.

<sup>145</sup> The Arya Samaj too deployed this logic. See Adcock, *Limits of Tolerance*, p. 107.

<sup>146</sup> IOR L/P&S/18/D152.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> For example, when examining ethics and lived aspects of reform, Anne Murphy claims that ‘the terrain for this exploration of the ethical is the flourishing new print environment of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Punjab’. She then highlights the importance of one text by Mohan Singh Vaid. See Murphy, ‘The Formation of the Ethical Sikh Subject’, p. 152.

centre through itinerant *granthis* and Sikhs in relation to Singh Sabha, we undo the supposed authority of a particular discursive regime reducible to an authoritative centre in Lahore or Amritsar. As Florenca Mallon has argued about peasant communities, they were 'never undifferentiated wholes but historically dynamic entities whose identities and lines of unity or division were constantly being negotiated'.<sup>149</sup> Within these negotiations, the community could adjudicate and spread information without recourse to either Lahore or Amritsar visions, while denying the state and scholars the ability to fix and integrate their contestations, as the false report in the *Khalsa Akhbar* demonstrates.

## Conclusion

Though labelled a reform organization, the Singh Sabha unravels our desire for a fixed placement of tradition in a historical setting, a point that inaugurates purification. By foregrounding the Sikh tradition, which spread information through itinerant *granthis* intimately tied to the Singh Sabha, the supposed authority of a particular discursive regime, indigenous or colonial, becomes undone. Moreover, these debates and organizing attempts within the Sikh tradition around Duleep Singh offer an important corrective to how we understand the encounter between religious traditions and colonial rule more broadly. The fragmentary nature of reform challenges narratives that locate reform as an expression of a colonized mindset or as continuities of an authentic pre-colonial practice, either heterogeneous or homogenous. They demonstrate how tradition remained a question, refusing easily assigned binary designations that then confront each other in a dialectical movement of history in which the Lahore Singh Sabha overcomes the Amritsar Singh Sabha, thereby inaugurating a new historical moment.

But these contestations within the Singh Sabhas in relation to Duleep Singh are not a historical footnote to the eventual triumph of the Lahore version, which, following the scholarly consensus, reformed the Sikh tradition from a previously heterogeneous and fluid indigenous identity into a homogenous and distinct identity—what Oberoi calls the Tat Khalsa episteme.<sup>150</sup> As we have seen, these boundaries within the Singh Sabha did not emerge immediately nor as a totality and, instead, offered multiple untold possibilities, including political ones. Therefore, rather than neat breaks and divisions, these subaltern networks persevered, struggling with (and against) presumed narrators of orthodoxy, thereby cohering and dissolving it. Such networks would themselves steadily gain importance into the twentieth century as Sikhs mobilized their traditions to reconsider the reach of the colonial state even as many elites did indeed reaffirm its authority. The tensions between *miri-piri*, political and religious, narrator and audience, elite and subaltern, force us to consider how attachments are not static, since meaning itself is

<sup>149</sup> Florenca Mallon, *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 11.

<sup>150</sup> Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, p. 33.

not inherent in a sovereign or a tradition. Put another way, an attachment to a sovereign is not mystification or nostalgia, but continuous struggle and an attempt to persuade—a site of learning.

**Acknowledgements.** I am thankful to Logan Clendenen, Mark Dries, Omnia El Shakry, Zunaira Komal, and Laura Tavolacci for reading earlier iterations of this article. The critical engagement from the two anonymous reviewers of *MAS* was exceptional; I am grateful. I was able to travel to various archives thanks to the generous support of the American Institute of Indian Studies, the American Institute of Pakistan Studies, and the Fulbright Hayes Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Fellowship.

**Competing interests.** None.

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**Cite this article:** Judge, Rajbir Singh. 2022. 'Reform in fragments: Sovereignty, colonialism, and the Sikh tradition'. *Modern Asian Studies* 56 (4), pp. 1125–1152. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000342>