UC Riverside
UC Riverside Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title
Music in the Gurus' View: Sikh Religious Music, Memory, and the Performance of Sikhism in America

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6tq528kz

Author
Townsend, Charles Michael

Publication Date
2015

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Music in the Gurus' View: Sikh Religious Music, Memory, and the Performance of Sikhism in America

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Religious Studies

by

Charles Michael Townsend

March 2015

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Pashaura Singh, Chairperson
Dr. Jennifer S. Hughes
Dr. Amanda Lucia
Dr. Deborah Wong

Copyright by
Charles Michael Townsend
2015

The Dissertation of Charles Michael Townsend is approved:

____

____

____

____

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

Acknowledgments

This dissertation is the product of years of fieldwork, research, and writing. Its completion would not have been possible without the help and encouragement of a great number of people. I would particularly like to give my warmest thanks to my advisor, Pashaura Singh. Since I first met him at the beginning of my graduate education and discussed my interest in studying the Sikh tradition with him (specifically my interest in Sikh religious music), he has been an unfailing and ever-encouraging supporter of me and my research. He has been a very wise and nurturing advisor and our conversations have always gently pushed me to improve my work and to extend my knowledge. I thank him for all of his work and dedication in helping me along my academic path and for treating me as a colleague by including me in his academic projects. Jennifer S. Hughes has been a steadfast supporter of me and my research throughout my graduate career. I thank her for all of her encouragement (often when I needed it most), for her helpful feedback on this dissertation, and for including me in her academic projects. Amanda Lucia has provided thorough and helpful feedback that has improved this dissertation and she has my gratitude. Deborah Wong has been an enthusiastic supporter of my work throughout my graduate career and I thank her for providing feedback and guidance that have improved this dissertation. Jonathan L. Walton has been a dear mentor and steadfast supporter during my academic growth and I am grateful to him. I would like to thank other past and present members of the faculty of the Department of Religious Studies at UC Riverside: Vivian-Lee Nyitray, Michael Alexander, Andrew Jacobs, June E.

O'Connor, Ivan Strenski, Muhamad Ali, Sherri Johnson, and Justin McDaniel. My experiences taking graduate seminars with them and working with them as a Teaching Assistant have formed me as a scholar and teacher and I thank them for their fine examples and for supporting me in my academic pursuits. I also wish to thank members of the administrative staff of the Department of Religious Studies at UC Riverside. In particular, I have relied over the years on the help of Diana Marroquin and Ryan Mariano in many things and I thank them for their work. Marilyn Gottschall is my 'mother' in the field of Religious Studies who challenged me early on to develop as a scholar and I thank her for all of her ongoing help, nurturance, and guidance along my academic path.

With due gratitude to my mentors and those who provided helpful feedback and suggestions based on earlier versions of these chapters, the author takes sole responsibility for any errors or inadequacies that are included herein.

As this dissertation is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork, it could never have been possible without the open welcome and interest in helping with my research that I have been greeted with in Sikh communities throughout the United States and in India. My Sikh interviewees have spent countless hours of their personal time talking to me about their lives and inviting me into their communities, events, and homes. When I began my research, I could not have expected this level of enthusiastic support. I would like to give my most heartfelt thanks to all of the people who have spent their personal time helping me with my research. Many of my interviewees are friends and people who I admire very greatly, and I thank the Sikh Americans I have met for teaching me lessons

in *chaṛhdī kalā*. As I have done throughout this dissertation, I am avoiding personally identifying my interviewees here, but my sincere thanks to everyone is no less genuine.

Periods of my research have been partially or wholly financially supported by different bodies. I was awarded the Eugene Cota Robles Diversity Fellowship by UC Riverside (2006-2011), which very truly made my dream of pursuing an MA and PhD possible. I also benefited from one academic quarter of dissertation writing support through UC Riverside's Dissertation Year Program Award Fellowship. I thank the University and deciding committees for these opportunities. I particularly wish to acknowledge and convey my thanks for the financial support I have received from UC Riverside's Department of Religious Studies, which has taken the form of periodic grants to support my research costs, travel for my research, and conference travel. My work has also been supported by research and travel grants from UC Riverside's Institute for the Study of Immigrant Religions, and also the Center for Ideas and Society. Finally, I would also like to thank UC Riverside's Graduate Student Association for support in the form of travel grants to present my research at national and regional academic conferences.

Above all, I want to thank my wife, Suzie, for all of her unflagging support throughout this long process of research and writing. Her love, support, and encouragement have made it possible for me to complete this dissertation and to continue pursuing my academic career. I also wish to thank my family and friends for their love and support throughout my academic path.

Some sections of Chapters One and Three significantly reflect material published in an earlier form as “'Performance' and 'Lived Religion' Approaches as New Ways of 'Re-Imagining' Sikh Studies” in *Re-Imagining South Asian Religions: Essays in Honour of Professors Harold G. Coward and Ronald W. Neufeldt* (Numen Book Series: Studies in the History of Religions. Singh and Hawley, eds. Boston, MA and Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Publications, 2013). A portion of Chapter Two significantly reflects material published in an earlier form as “The Darbar Sahib” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies* (Singh and Fenech, eds. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). Some sections of Chapter Three significantly reflect material published in an earlier form as “*Gurbani Kirtan* and the Performance of Sikh Identity in California” in *Sikhism in Global Context* (Edited by Pashaura Singh. New York, Oxford, and New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011). An earlier version of Chapter Five was previously published as “'Keeping the Faith Alive': Teaching Sikh *Kirtan* in America” in *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory* (Routledge Periodicals, Taylor and Francis Group, Vol. 10, No. 3, Nov. 2014).

For Suzie, my partner and steadfast support along the path;

and for all of the Sikhs who have shared their time, ideas, and hospitality, and made my research possible—in hope that this document may be of some value to current and future generations of Sikhs.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Music in the Gurus' View: Sikh Religious Music, Memory, and the Performance of Sikhism in America

by

Charles Michael Townsend

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Religious Studies
University of California, Riverside, March 2015
Dr. Pashaura Singh, Chairperson

This dissertation is an ethnographic and historical study of transnational Sikhism through the lens of *Gurbani kirtan*, the living Sikh tradition and central religious practice of musically performing the hymns of the Guru Granth Sahib (the central Sikh scripture). It traces the history of *Gurbani kirtan* from the time of Guru Nanak (1469-1539, the first Guru of Sikhism) through its major developments and current practice in south Asia, and its role in the transference of Sikhism around the world, focusing especially on the Sikh community in America—which has roots dating back to the arrival of the first Sikh in the United States in the 1790s, but has grown rapidly since U.S. immigration reform starting in the 1960s. It is based on eight years of ethnographic research (primarily participant observation at Sikh sites and events, and formal and informal interviews) within American Sikh communities, especially among members of the mass movement to teach young generations of Sikhs in the United States how to perform Sikh sacred music. The latter chapters examine the internationally mobile population of students, performers, and teachers of the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition. It draws theoretical insights from performance

studies and diaspora theory to interpret communal performances of Sikh sacred music as spaces for plural aesthetic experiences of Sikh-ness in new contexts and explores how Sikh religious and cultural identities in the United States are being formed, performed, and re-interpreted through participants' relationship with the practice of *Gurbani kirtan*.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction..1
1.0 Introduction: *Gurbani Kirtan* and the Performance of Sikhism in the...........11
United States
2.0 Multi-sited Ethnography of a 'Field' and Community 'On the Move'.............15
3.0 The Methodological and Theoretical Influence of 'Lived Religion'...............19
Approaches on My Research for This Dissertation
3. 1 Lived Religion Approaches Tend To... View Religion/s as 'Local,'...............23
Non-Static, Always In-Process, and Constantly Being Re-Interpreted
3.2 Lived Religion Approaches Tend To... Focus on Embodied Practice and.......26
Performance
3.3 Lived Religion Approaches Tend To... Adopt Methodological and................28
Theoretical Approaches From Anthropology, and Reflect the 'Reflexive
Turn'
3.4 Lived Religion Approaches Tend To... Be Accepting of the Reality of...........30
'Sacred Presence' for Practitioners of Religions and of 'Multiple Ways of
Being in the World' (Lived Religion as a 'Third Way')
4.0 The Chapters of this Dissertation..34

Chapter 2: From Sultanpur Lodhi to San Jose: Sikh History and the *Gurbani Kirtan* Tradition 'On the Move'...42
Part One: Music in the Sikh Tradition..42
1.1 Guru Nanak (1469-1539) and Bhai Mardana..42
1.2 The Sikh Tradition..47
1.3 Developments Under the Later Sikh Gurus..49
1.4 Locating the Sikh *Kirtan* Tradition in its South Asian Milieu.........................56
1.5 'Sonic Theology' in the Sikh Tradition...60
1.6 The Form and Performance of the *Gurbani Kirtan* Tradition..........................69
1.7 The Experience of *Gurbani Kirtan*...73
Part Two: The Darbar Sahib: Sikhism's Sacred Heart and Model for Worship
Patterns Around the World...76
2.1 Introduction..76
2.2 The Early Gurus Period (1560s-1635)...77
2.3 Contestation, Destruction, and Rebuilding (1635-1802)................................84
2.4 The Sikh Empire and the 'Golden Temple'..88
2.5 The British Colonial Period (1849-1947)...89
2.6 The Modern Era (1947 to the Present)..92
2.7 A Walk Around the Darbar Sahib Complex...94
2.8 Religious Practice, Performance, and Service at the Darbar Sahib.................98
2.9 Daily Religious Practice...99
2.10 Special Events and Religious Festivals..104

2.11 The Use of Technology for Religious Purposes at the Darbar Sahib...........106
2.12 Global Darbar Sahib...107
Part Three: Sikhs Come to the United States...109
3.1 Early 'Visitors' and the Pioneer 'First Wave' of Sikh Immigrants (Early........109
1800s to 1965)
3.2 The Stockton Gurdwara and Sikh Religious Life in the United States During
the 'First Wave' of Immigrants...116
3.3 The Ghadar Party (1913-1917) and the Era of Decline (1917-1965)............123
3.4 The 'Second Wave' of Immigrants and the 'Brain Drain' (1965-1984)..........133
3.5 The 'Third Wave' of Immigrants to the Present (1984-2015).........................137

Chapter 3: *Gurbani Kirtan* and the Performance of Sikhism in the United States..149
1.0 Introduction...149
2.0 'Performance Studies' Approaches and Sikh Studies....................................151
2.1 Individual Identity and Social/Cultural Identity as 'Performance'.................155
2.2 Performances as Providing for 'Heightened'/ Shared Experience/s...............157
2.3 Performances as 'Doing Things With Words' and Making Sacred Presence..162
Real For Religious Practitioners
3.0 The Centrality of Gurbani Kirtan in Sikhism, and in American Sikh............164
Communities
4.0 *Gurbani Kirtan* and the Performance of Sikh Identity.................................167
4.1 *Gurbani Kirtan* as Formative of Sikh Identities..169
4.2 *Gurbani Kirtan* as Providing a Point of Religio-Cultural Pride and.............171
Sense of Uniqueness
4.3 *Gurbani Kirtan* as Providing a Sense of Connection to History and to.........172
Punjab
4.4 Gurbani Kirtan as Special Event for Remembrance and..............................174
Self-Commemoration
4.5 *Gurbani Kirtan* as a Mode of Identity Protection and Transmission............176
5.0 Differences Between Younger and Older Generations in Their....................178
Apprehension of *Gurbani Kirtan*

Chapter 4: 'Ritual Experts' of the Sikh Tradition, from the Gurus to the United States: Sacred Musicians, Keepers and Performers of the Scripture, Preachers, and Knowledge-bearers…............186
1.0 Introduction...198
2.0 The History of Religious Leadership and Ritual Expertise in the Sikh.........199
Tradition
2.1 Ritual Officiants, Caretakers, Preachers, and Knowledge Bearers:..............202
Granthīs, *Pujārīs*, *Kathākars*, *Bhais*, *Gīānīs*, and Others
2.2 Sacred Musicians: *Rabābīs*, *Rāgīs*, *Kirtaniyas*/*Kirtankars*, *Ḍhaḍīs*.............213
3.0 Applicability of the Terms 'Ritual' and 'Expert' to the Sikh Tradition...........218

4.0 The Current Situation of Sikh Religious and Ritual Leadership in the United States.........229
5.0 Profiles of *Granthīs* and *Rāgīs* Working in American Sikh Communities....232
5.1 A Permanent Granthī Working in a Large Gurdwara....................................233
5.2 A Mobile *Granthī* 'For Hire'...237
5.3 A 'Temporary' *Granthī* Working in a Mid-Sized Gurdwara..........................241
5.4 An Internationally Mobile Traveling *Rāgī*...247
5.5 A Permanent *Rāgī* Working in a Mid-sized Gurdwara.................................250
5.6 A Famous Internationally Mobile *Rāgī*..258
6.0 Current Issues in Sikh Religious and Ritual Leadership in the United States.....................269
6.1 A 'Lay' Tradition With High Expectations of Ritual and Leadership 'Expertise'............270
6.2 Gender Imbalance..276
6.3 Linguistic and Cultural 'Disconnect' between Immigrant *Granthīs* and *Rāgīs* and American-Born Sikhs........278
6.4 Pay, Treatment, and Respect and Authority of *Granthīs* and *Rāgīs* within American Communities..............280
7.0 Comparison of Current Sikh Communities With Earlier Immigrant Groups in American History............291
8.0 Conclusion: The Future of Leadership in Diaspora Sikh Communities........298

Chapter 5: Teaching *Gurbani Kirtan* in the United States...303
1.0 Introduction...303
2.0 Organized *Kirtan* Teaching Academies and Organizations..........................305
2.1 The International Institute of Gurmat Studies..305
2.2 The Gurmat Sangeet Project..308
2.3 The Raj Academy Conservatoire..309
3.0 Professional Teachers...312
3.1 Professor Dalbir Singh..312
3.2 Professor Ranjit Singh...313
3.3 Bhai Manmohan Singh..314
4.0 Well-known *Kirtaniyas* Who Teach Occasional Workshops in the U.S. …..316
4.1 Bhai Baldeep Singh...316
4.2 Dr. Gurnam Singh...318
4.3 Bhai Kultar Singh...319
5.0 Issues of 'Authority' and 'Authenticity'...321
6.0 Volunteer Teachers...324
7.0 *Gurbani kirtan* In the Emergence of an 'American Sikhism'........................327

Chapter 6: Conclusion......339

Bibliography......359

List of Figures

Figure 1.1 San Jose Gurdwara fountain and entry building (photo by the author)............39

Figure 1.2 One wing of the Langar Hall of the San Jose Gurdwara (photo by the............39
author).

Figure 1.3 Guru Granth Sahib's arrival at the grand opening of the San Jose..................40
Gurdwara (photo by the author).

Figure 1.4 Guru Granth Sahib is installed for the first time in the new San Jose.............40
Gurdwara (photo by the author).

Figure 1.5 California Governor Jerry Brown at the grand opening of the San Jose..........41
Gurdwara (photo by the author).

Figure 2.1 A typical three *rāgī kirtan* ensemble (left) with Sikhs waiting to pay...........144
respect to Guru Granth Sahib (right).

Figure 2.2 Map of the Darbar Sahib (Map data ©2012 GeoEye, legend by the............144
author).

Figure 2.3 First view of Harimandir Sahib and Amrit Sarovar entering the Darbar........145
Sahib complex (photo by the author).

Figure 2.4 Langar Hall and *bungas* of Darbar Sahib (photo by the author)....................145

Figure 2.5 Dukh Banjanee Ber and Ath Sath Tirath at the Darbar Sahib (photo by........146
the author).

Figure 2.6 Sikhs wait on the causeway approaching the Harimandir Sahib (photo........146
by the author).

Figure 2.7 The Harimandir Sahib and its causeway to cross the Amrit Sarovar.............147
(photo by the author).

Figure 2.8 *Sevadars* prepare the free *langar* meal at the Darbar Sahib (photo by...........147
the author).

Figure 2.9 The interior of a Northern California gurdwara (photo by the author)..........148

Figure 4.1 A *granthī* performs *chaur seva*, fanning the air around Guru Granth............302
Sahib (photo by the author).

Figure 4.2 Bhai Kultar Singh performs *kirtan* (photo by the author).............................302

Figure 5.1 IIGS teachers and students perform *kirtan* (photo by the author).................333

Figure 5.2 The author with Professor Surinder Singh of the Raj Academy....................333
Conservatoire (photo courtesy of Suzanne Townsend).

Figure 5.3 Professor Surinder Singh and students of the Raj Academy.........................334
Conservatoire perform kirtan on traditional instruments associated with Sikh history—left to right: *dilruba*, *sarangi*, *rabāb* (back row), two *sarandas*, *tabla* (drums), *saranda* (back row), and *dilruba* (photo by the author).

Figure 5.4 Professor Dalbir Singh stands with his students as they win an award at......334
a *kirtan* competition (photo by the author).

Figure 5.5 Professor Ranjit Singh and his family *jatha* perform *kirtan* (photo..............335
by the author).

Figure 5.6 The author with Bhai Baldeep Singh in Sultanpur Lodhi, India...................335
(photo courtesy of Suzanne Townsend).

Figure 5.7 Bhai Kultar Singh (center) performing *kirtan* with his *jatha* (photo by.........336
the author).

Figure 5.8 Class schedule hanging at a gurdwara school (photo by the author)............336

Figure 5.9 Children learning *kirtan* in a class at a gurdwara school (photo by..............337
the author).

Figure 5.10 Adolescents learning *kirtan* in a class at a gurdwara school (photo............337
by the author).

Figure 5.11 Bhai Tajvinder Singh performs *kirtan* in a large gurdwara (photo by..........338
the author).

Figure 6.1 Sikh Americans at the head of a *nagar kirtan* parade (photo by the.............358
author).

Chapter 1:
Introduction

On April 10, 2011, I joined over twenty thousand people in San Jose, California to attend the festivities for the grand opening of the Sikh Gurdwara of San Jose. At the time of its opening, the 110,000 square foot *gurdwara* (Sikh place of worship) was already being called the largest gurdwara in North America, and likely the largest gurdwara in the world.[1] The final grand opening ceremony—a day filled with performances of Sikh religious music, scriptural recitations, and Sikh martial arts; the serving of thousands of free meals to visitors; and speeches by politicians and religious leaders—was the culmination of a month of celebratory and preparatory performances by Sikh musicians, scripture reciters, and preachers. Moreover, the grand opening represented the culmination of fifteen years of planning and construction and decades of fund-raising by the community (the final phase of construction alone cost twenty million dollars). Seen in a broader scope, the gurdwara and its opening represented an eminently visible new milestone in the over one-hundred year history of Sikhs in the United States, which the community marked by the very public performance of Sikhism and Sikh identity in the streets of the city.

1 The San Jose Gurdwara has frequently been referred to in news media as the "largest gurdwara in the U.S." and "biggest gurdwara outside India" (for example: Singh, Sheena. "15 Years in the Making—San Jose Gurdwara Celebrates a Very Grand Opening" Sikh Foundation, May 8, 2011). Since the "largest Gurdwara in Europe" is the Southall, U.K. gurdwara (Sri Guru Singh Sabha Gurdwara) which is about 65,000 square feet (http://www.hindustantimes.com/news-feed/nm2/biggest-gurudwara-outside-india-opens/article1-7400.aspx)—or half the size of the San Jose Gurdwara—and since most gurdwaras in India are much smaller than these 'giants' in the diaspora (though the complexes surrounding the gurdwaras 'proper' may exceed them in acreage), it seems safe to say that the San Jose Gurdwara is thus currently the largest gurdwara in the world.

As I arrived on the morning of the grand opening, crowds at the gurdwara were still small, but people from the community were already bustling around to prepare for the day's activities. The gurdwara's campus is in an affluent neighborhood, covering forty acres of land nestled in rolling golden foothills, with a stunning view overlooking California's 'Silicon Valley'. From many miles away, on the freeway or city streets, the gurdwara's massive golden 'onion' domes (typical of Sikh, and, more broadly, Indian architecture) are a visible marker of Sikh presence.[2] Driving or walking up the gurdwara's long driveway, a sheer vertical wall of stonework, perhaps thirty feet tall, forms a large fountain and the water cascading downward and catching the sunlight dominates the visitor's view as they enter the gurdwara's campus.

Arriving at the top of this driveway, a visitor's perspective is filled by a building that was once itself an already large gurdwara that the community utilized for worship during the years-long interim phase of constructing the massive new gurdwara structure (Figure 1.1). Now dwarfed by the new building behind it, this building serves as a giant foyer and entryway to the new gurdwara, in which visitors remove their shoes and cover their hair to demonstrate respect before entering the gurdwara. A '*gurdwara*' is literally the 'door' (*duwārā* ਦੁਆਰਾ) to the *Guru* (ਗੁਰੂ)[3]: signifying that one is entering into the

2 It is common for gurdwaras in California to have 'onion' domes highly visible from major freeways. It would be hard to believe that this is not a well-planned element of their placement and design—a public announcement of Sikh presence in the United States.

3 The term *Guru* is used across south Asian religions, usually to denote a teacher who can reveal sacred knowledge to a student. In the context of Sikhism, there are four specific ways in which the term '*Guru*' is used. Throughout the most sacred Sikh Scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, God is frequently referred to as "*Guru*," and modern day Sikhs refer to God as *Waheguru*, one translation of which might be 'The Great Teacher.' Both of these instances point to the Sikh understanding of God as the greatest of Teachers; in the sense that all wisdom and liberating knowledge are from God. *Guru* is also the title given to each of the ten spiritual masters or divinely inspired teachers of the Sikh tradition. The third

presence of both God as Guru, the source of all knowledge, and the primary Sikh scripture, Guru Granth Sahib ('Venerable Book [that is] Guru'), as the eternal living Guru of the Sikhs. In the foyer building—with its high domed ceiling beautifully illuminated with the ੴ *ik ōṇkār* (usually translated into English as 'One Supreme Reality' or 'One God'[4])—Sikhs prepare themselves to enter into the living presence of God and Guru embodied in the sound current of the Guru Granth Sahib's hymns that are performed within.

Walking behind the entry hall, a covered and carpeted walkway leads to the large gurdwara proper, a massive building, reminiscent of a high ceilinged hotel ballroom, which has the capacity to accommodate 2,500 worshipers at once. Since the early morning, groups of musicians have been performing *Gurbani kirtan*, the central Sikh religious practice of musically performing the hymns of the Sikh Gurus (ten inspired Teachers) and *Bhagats* (revered Devotees of God) that make up the majority of the content of Guru Granth Sahib. The hymn singing of the musicians is amplified throughout the gurdwara's campus. By mid-morning, hundreds of people are beginning to arrive at the gurdwara. Many begin to filter in and out through the main entrance to view

usage of the term *Guru*, refers to the Guru Granth Sahib (which can be translated as "Venerable Book that is *Guru*"). Finally, the term *Guru* in Sikhism is used to refer to *Guru panth*: the worldwide Sikh community as *Guru*. Since there is no 'Pope,' 'priesthood' or official hierarchy within Sikhism, practical and theological decisions are to be made at the local level or by individual Sikhs through consulting the Scriptures.

4 Sikhs say that ੴ *ik ōṇkār* is the root cosmic sound from which the whole Guru Granth Sahib emanates, and that the usual English translations reveal only part of its meaning and power. The character ੧ is the Gurmukhi ('from the Guru's mouth' script) numeral equivalent to the Arabic numeral 1. *Ōṇkār* is linked etymologically to the Sanskrit ॐ *Ōṃ*, the primordial, 'unstruck' creative sound current underlying all of existence, and the Panjabi active verb *kār* (ਕਾਰ), 'to do'. Thus the two short characters of ੴ can be said to point to the creative power of the sound current that underlies reality and its indivisible oneness.

the new gurdwara building and listen to *Gurbani kirtan*. Many more people move around the outside of the gurdwara building, conversing cheerfully with each other about the new gurdwara, and eating snacks served from the community's massive *langar* hall. A cherished institution within Sikh communities since the time of the early Sikh Gurus, *langars* are kitchens run through the voluntary service of the community that provide free food to any visitors. The new *langar* hall (Figure 1.2) of the San Jose Gurdwara community can simultaneously hold one thousand people and feed thousands more seated outside around the campus. As it is respectful of the community's service to partake of this freely provided food, throughout the day of the grand opening it is likely that nearly all of the 20,000 or more visitors ate a meal of delicious vegetarian[5] Panjabi food, lovingly provided by the community and its service.

In the late morning, crowds begin to gather around the front of the foyer building as groups of young Sikhs from around California began to perform demonstrations and sparring matches of *gatkā*, the Sikh martial art. A weapons based martial art, *gatkā* represents the living continuance of the tradition of Sikhs taking up arms to defend themselves and others against oppression by the Mughal empire and others throughout their history. All modern Sikhs maintain an awareness of the duty to stand up against oppression—particularly oppression of religious beliefs and practices—a major tenet of Sikhism that is embodied by the 'Five Ks', the symbols of this commitment worn by all

5 It is a tradition since the time of the Sikh Gurus that the food served at a *langar* hall is always vegetarian in order to avoid offending the religious or cultural sensibilities about eating meat—or certain kinds of meat—of any visitors. Sikhs have differing opinions about whether it is incumbent upon Sikhs—or at least beneficial—to avoid meat eating entirely.

‘initiated’ Sikhs.[6] Today, while *gatkā* is still a viable hand weapons based martial art, it has also evolved into a performance art and embodied remembrance of Sikh values, identity, and history that is extremely popular among Sikh youth, especially throughout the worldwide Sikh diaspora.[7] The young *gatkā* practitioners wear traditional Sikh clothing in bright colors (usually royal blue or Khalsa orange) and swing and twirl both neon-colored practice weapons (*shastars*), and even spar with real swords, while drummers loudly beat *ḍholaki* (large two headed skin drums played with sticks). Excitement among the onlookers grows, and their collective effervescence is marked by loud *jaikaras* (a Sikh cry of exultation) rising from individuals in the crowd: “*Bole so nihal*!” (“Happy are they who say!”), with loud shouted replies from the crowd of “*Sat Sri Akal*” (“True is the Timeless [One]”).

As *gatkā* performances continue, a crowd begins to grow near a large flatbed truck that has been decorated with brightly colored fabrics and streamers like a parade float. On the top of the flatbed, soft, clean white carpets have been placed. Atop the high roof of the truck's cabin, a throne-like platform covered with a 'royal' canopy has been

6 The 'five Ks' are highly visible markers of Sikh identity, worn by all men and women who have undergone the *Amrit Sanchar* ('rite of taking the nectar of immortality', often referred to as 'baptism' or 'initiation'), known this way because of the first letters of each item: *Kesh*: natural, uncut hair (for men, usually tied in a turban and accompanied by a beard); *Kanga*: a comb to keep the appearance of one's uncut hair tidy; *Kara*: a steel bracelet worn to remind Sikhs that they are bound in relationship to God; *Kachera*: a simple undergarment worn to remind Sikhs to maintain purity; and *Kirpan*: a small sword worn to symbolize protecting the weak and oppressed, and defending religious freedom.

7 *Gatkā* is massively popular among young Sikhs (especially in California) and is becoming a central part of Sikh identity throughout the diaspora. The growth of *gatkā* as a form of performance of Sikhism and Sikh identity throughout the Sikh diaspora is a topic that I hope to return to in future writings. The topic could easily be the focus of a book length project. Kamalroop Singh's chapter on *gatkā* in *TheOxford Handbook of Sikh Studies* is a seminal writing in English on the subject of *gatkā* (“Sikh Martial Art (Gatkā)”. *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*. Edited by Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

attached. This is where Guru Granth Sahib will be placed for a 'royal' procession through the streets of San Jose. Suddenly, the crowd around the *gatkā* practitioners grows quiet, as from within the gurdwara the thunderous beating of drums (*nagara*, a large timpani-like drum) is heard, and loud blasts from a *narsinga* (a large S-shaped horn) reverberate, heralding the 'royal' procession of Guru Granth Sahib toward the outside of the building. The *Panj Piare* ('Five Beloved Ones')[8] emerge from the gurdwara and foyer building, walking shoulder to shoulder carrying large swords that mark their commitment to protect the oppressed and symbolically 'guard' the procession of the Guru. Following behind them, the *granthi* ('keeper of the Book' who tends the Guru Granth Sahib) emerges, carrying Guru Granth Sahib on his head.

As the Guru passes, the massive crowd moves to lower their heads, some people rushing to remove their shoes and bow fully to the grass or concrete below them to show respect. The *granthi* carefully climbs to the top of the truck and the throne-like platform prepared on top of the truck's cabin, positioning himself behind Guru Granth Sahib. Behind him, *ragis* (Sikh sacred musicians) seat themselves on the flatbed of the truck, positioning instruments and microphones in order to amplify their singing of *Gurbani kirtan* via loudspeakers attached to the back of the truck. As the 'royal' retinue of Guru Granth Sahib finishes taking their places, the *granthi* begins leading the crowd—who

8 The tradition of choosing a group of five community members to represent the *panj piare* during major ritual and life events dates back to the stories surrounding the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh first initiating the *Khalsa* (the 'pure') order of Sikhs who wear the 'Five Ks'. In a dramatic episode frequently retold in Sikh literature, and also scholarly literature on the Sikh tradition, Guru Gobind Singh called the entire Sikh community together and requested that Sikhs give their heads to him in total loyalty. The first five Sikhs who stepped forward to offer even their heads for their Guru were exalted by Guru Gobind Singh as the *panj piare* (his 'five beloved ones') who became the first initiates into the Khalsa order, and who Guru Gobind Singh in turn asked to initiate him into the *Khalsa*.

bow their heads and bring their hands together in front of them—in *Ardās*, the Sikh prayer of 'supplication' that is prayed five times daily in gurdwaras or at the beginning of any undertaking. At the completion of the prayer, the procession begins to move down the driveway of the gurdwara. A barefooted group of *sevadars* (people providing voluntary service) wets down and sweeps the asphalt road to clean, cool, and prepare the path for the Guru as the *ragis* begin performing hymns of the Sikh Gurus.

As the *panj piare* walk with Guru Granth Sahib's vehicle moving slowly behind them, a helicopter emerges overhead, showering Guru Granth Sahib and the massive crowd of devotees with rose petals that slowly stream down in the bright sunlit sky. Higher above, a small plane flies with a streaming banner behind it: "Congratulations Sikh Gurdwara Grand Opening". The procession of Guru and devotees slowly moves out onto the road to cover a small parade route through the streets of San Jose. The musicians play their devotional hymns, singing in clear, jubilant voices. Loudly amplified, their kirtan reverberates through the city streets as Sikhs and non-Sikhs gather along their route to listen and catch a glimpse of the passing 'royal' retinue. Such *nagar kirtan* ('neighborhood devotional singing') parades recall similar processions of sacred and royal persons in South Asian history, and within American Sikh communities they are becoming an increasingly common mode for the public performance of Sikhism and Sikh identity within the American public sphere.[9]

9 I am currently writing a chapter-length piece about the *Nagar Kirtan* in Yuba City, CA, which is the largest Sikh parade of this type in North America. The Yuba City *Nagar Kirtan* recently celebrated its thirty-fifth consecutive year in 2014 and draws crowds of over 100,000 people each year.

A small number of devotees follow Guru Granth Sahib along the parade route, while most stay behind at the gurdwara, conversing and eating. When the procession of Guru Granth Sahib later returns, the events of the day reach their peak, as the community prepares to officially install Guru Granth Sahib within the new gurdwara building for the first time. The gurdwara fills to capacity and the thousands of people inside rise to their feet as the *Panj Piare* enter the building followed by the *granthi*, who is carrying Guru Granth Sahib on his head (Figure 1.3). The palpable jubilance of the crowd explodes with loud *jaikaras*, "*Bole so nihal*! *Sat Sri Akal*!", repeating again and again. I stand within a few feet of Guru Granth Sahib's path, joining hundreds of exuberant Sikhs in pressing close to see the Guru and take pictures of this moment, and then bow as the Guru passes. As Guru Granth Sahib finally arrives at the front of the Gurdwara, the *granthi* carefully steps up onto the several feet tall *manji sahib* ('venerable throne-like platform') on which the Guru will be enthroned (Figure 1.4). All in attendance shuffle in order to sit down close to each other, respectfully placing themselves below the level of the Guru. Reciting prayers, the *granthi* carefully pulls back the fine cloths that Guru Granth Sahib has been covered in up to now, and slowly opens the pages of the scripture to a random hymn. This is the first *hukamnama* ('statement of Divine Will') taken within the new gurdwara—a hymn from Guru Granth Sahib chosen randomly for the gathered Sikhs to hear, ponder, and meditate on:

> ਹਰਿ ਹਰਿ ਚਰਨ ਰਿਦੈ ਉਰ ਧਾਰੇ ॥
> ਸਿਮਰਿ ਸੁਆਮੀ ਸਤਿਗੁਰੁ ਅਪੁਨਾ ਕਾਰਜ ਸਫਲ ਹਮਾਰੇ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥
> ਪੁੰਨ ਦਾਨ ਪੂਜਾ ਪਰਮੇਸੁਰ ਹਰਿ ਕੀਰਤਿ ਤਤੁ ਬੀਚਾਰੇ ॥
> ਗੁਨ ਗਾਵਤ ਅਤੁਲ ਸੁਖੁ ਪਾਇਆ ਠਾਕੁਰ ਅਗਮ ਅਪਾਰੇ ॥੧॥

> ਜੋ ਜਨ ਪਾਰਬ੍ਰਹਮਿ ਅਪਨੇ ਕੀਨੇ ਤਿਨ ਕਾ ਬਾਹੁਰਿ ਕਛੁ ਨ ਬੀਚਾਰੇ ॥
> ਨਾਮ ਰਤਨੁ ਸੁਨਿ ਜਪਿ ਜਪਿ ਜੀਵਾ ਹਰਿ ਨਾਨਕ ਕੰਠ ਮਝਾਰੇ ॥੨॥੧੧॥੩੦॥
>
> I have enshrined the Lord's Feet within my heart. Contemplating my Lord, The True Guru, all my affairs have been resolved... The merits of giving donations to charity and devotional worship come from singing *kirtan* praising the Transcendent Lord—this is the true essence of wisdom. Singing the praises of the universal, infinite Lord [*Paramesur*], I have found immeasurable peace. The formless, infinite Lord [*Pārabrahm*] does not consider the merits and demerits of those humble beings whom He makes His own. Hearing, chanting and meditating on the The Name [of the Divine], I live; O Nanak, wear the Lord['s Name] as a necklace...[10]

It is fortuitous that this first *hukamnama* at the new San Jose gurdwara should be one so revealing for any non-Sikh visitors of the grand opening (or any non-Sikh readers of this narrative) about the centrality and efficacy assigned to singing *kirtan* and devotional praise within the Sikh tradition. After the installation ceremony, *ragi jathas* (Sikh devotional music groups) began singing passionate *Gurbani kirtan* renditions, and would continue doing so throughout the day and evening, as thousands of Sikhs waited in a line running out of the gurdwara to bow and pay their respect to Guru Granth Sahib, now enthroned within the new building.

Later in the day, *Gurbani kirtan* performances were temporarily punctuated by congratulatory speeches by politicians from local and state government (including the Mayor of San Jose, and local law enforcement) and clergy and leaders from local Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities. Governor Jerry Brown also attended the grand opening (Figure 1.5). It should be revealing to a visitor of the grand opening (or reader of this narrative) who did not understand much about Sikhism to take note of the

10 M5, *Ṭoḍī* (30), AG pg. 718 (translations from Guru Granth Sahib throughout this chapter are my own).

differing levels of fanfare surrounding the Governor of California's arrival versus the earlier events of the day. When Governor Brown stepped forward to give his speech, he was surrounded by hundreds of Sikhs milling around the gurdwara—either talking excitedly with each other, or waiting in the massive line of devotees to pay respect to Guru Granth Sahib. Governor Brown made repeated attempts to ask people to be seated: "down in front. You've gotta get down, I can't see anybody," as people continued to stand and move throughout the gurdwara. The Governor's brief speech praised the contributions of the Sikh community "to the well-being of our whole state" and promised that justice would be served in finding the perpetrators of the recent murders of two elderly Sikh men in Elk Grove, CA that were being investigated as a hate crime[11] (this drew a loud *jaikara* from the crowd). From my close vantage point, Governor Brown seemed a bit perplexed by the reception of his speech, with most people continuing to mill around the gurdwara or wait in the long line to the *manji sahib* in the center aisle of the building. Though many in attendance seemed appreciative of Governor Brown's appearance and speech, the real 'star' of the day had already arrived earlier, when Guru Granth Sahib was brought in by 'royal' procession, and respect of the Guru and excitement about the Guru's presence in the new gurdwara took precedence over the visits of any other dignitaries.[12]

11 On March 4, 2011, Surinder Singh (65) and Gurmej Atwal (78) were taking the daily walk that they often took together near their homes when a gunman or gunmen pulled up in a pickup truck and shot them both. Singh died at the scene, and Atwal died nearly a month later from his wounds. The case still remains unsolved as of the writing of this dissertation. The case has been investigated as a 'hate crime' by Federal law enforcement, as both men wore full beards and turbans as an expression of their Sikh practice.

12 In south Asian contexts, it is very common for political figures to be invited to 'grand opening's and installation ceremonies at religious sites in order to convey the 'blessings' on the site of the nation or polity (this, of course, goes back to the time when many such sites had royal patronage). In these contexts, as well, it is acknowledged that rulers and dignitaries are not really the 'stars of the show', but are also gaining the merit of participating in sacred presence (however it is understood) at the new site.

1.0 Introduction: *Gurbani Kirtan* and the Performance of Sikhism in the United States

This dissertation is a study of transnational Sikhism through the lens of *Gurbani kirtan*, the central Sikh religious practice of musically performing the hymns of the Sikh Gurus (inspired Teachers) and *Bhagats* (revered Devotees of God) that make up the majority of the Guru Granth Sahib, the primary Sikh scripture, revered and treated as the eternal Living Guru of the Sikhs. The performance of religious music has been central to Sikh practice and identity since the beginning of Sikhism as a distinct religious tradition in South Asia in the fifteenth century, and the performance of the hymns of the Guru Granth Sahib remains the central religious practice of Sikhs in the United States today (I will further discuss the centrality of *Gurbani kirtan* to Sikhism in Chapter Three).

When I first started intensely researching Sikhism and *Gurbani kirtan* in 2006, there was a bibliography of only a handful of sources in English about Sikh *kirtan*,[13] despite the fact that there was already a sizable body of scholarly literature within the field of Sikh Studies. I would compare this to approaching the whole body of scholarly literature on the study of Catholicism, to find only a few sentences scattered here and

13 As I complete this dissertation in 2015, there is a small, but growing body of scholars and scholarship on the subject. However, most of this small body of literature takes a musicological approach—focusing on musical structure, performance lineages, musical 'notation' within Guru Granth Sahib, concerns about 'correct' performance of *Gurbani kirtan*, and so on—rather than the interdisciplinary approach, and central focus on *religious* aspects, of Religious Studies. As examples: the work of Janice Protopapas, Inderjit Neelu Kaur, Bhai Baldeep Singh, and Gurnam Singh is mostly of this musicological nature. Nirinjan Kaur Khalsa's work is more similar to my own, though her approach is more ethnomusicological or anthropological than focused on religion, since her training is in Anthropology and my own is in Religious Studies.

there within that literature about the Eucharist! If we follow from James Livingston's assessment that ritual is the very “heart” of a religion[14] and Bruce Kapferer's view that ritual performances are sites where belief and practice are united and displayed,[15] then examining a tradition of religious practice and performance that is as central to people's lives as *Gurbani kirtan* is for Sikhs is like 'taking the pulse' of the Sikh religion. The comparison between *Gurbani kirtan* and the Catholic Eucharist is apt, insofar as exploring a communal worship and performative practice so central to a religion can reveal much about that religion (I will further make the case for this idea in Chapter Three). Especially by talking to practitioners of a religion about such a central performative tradition, one of the main things revealed is a diversity of interpretations about the ideals, feelings, central narratives, (and so on) that are generated, reinterpreted, and embodied (and so on) through, and within these performative practices.

I interpret *Gurbani kirtan* (musical performance of the Word of the Gurus) as an embodied Sikh way of being and knowing, and *kirtan* performances as a site for the performance of Sikhism, and Sikh identity and for continuously re-newing and re-living the co-presence of *Guru Granth* and *Guru Panth* (the Sacred Word as Living Guru, and the community blessed as the caretakers and interpreters of the Word). Another common name that is used to refer to this sacred musical tradition in Sikhism is *Gurmat Sangeet* —'*Sangeet*' is a Sanskrit-derived word for 'music', and '*Gurmat*' refers to the 'path', 'view', 'teachings', and 'way' of the Sikh Gurus—and thus '*Gurmat Sangeet*' can be rendered as

14 James Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion*, Fifth Edition, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2005), p. 81.

15 Bruce Kapferer, "Performance and the Structuring of Meaning and Experience" in *The Anthropology of Experience*, edited by Victor Turner, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

'Music in the Gurus' View'. The title of this dissertation, *Music in the Gurus' View*, then, references a dual meaning: referring both to Sikhs' desire to perform their sacred musical tradition in a way that is within the 'view' or 'intent' for the tradition set down by the Sikh Gurus; but, especially, to the Sikh belief that performing the hymns of Guru Granth Sahib brings about the mystical presence of God and the Divine Light common to all of the Sikh Gurus—thus each performance of *Gurbani kirtan* necessarily takes place "*in the Gurus' view*".

Gurbani kirtan—in similarity to central religious and cultural practices of other peoples—provides a locus for Sikhs to 'perform themselves for themselves.'[16] In this way, I argue that *Gurbani kirtan*, as the central Sikh worship practice, has contributed to making Sikhism 'portable'; in the sense of being open to being re-performed, re-interpreted, and re-lived in new contexts. In line with this, many of the Sikh Americans I have talked to in my field research in Sikh communities have expressed to me their feeling that *Gurbani kirtan* is integral to maintaining Sikh memory and remembrance of Sikh ways of feeling, being, and knowing, and thus to "keeping the faith alive" in the United States and throughout the world.

As Sikhs have migrated to places around the world, they have demonstrated remarkable abilities to adapt and thrive within diverse global situations, while sustaining and continuously re/interpreting Sikhism within new contexts, and I argue that one of the primary ways that Sikhs have carried Sikh ways of being and knowing with them has

16 As I will discuss in Chapter Three, further examples of scholarship exploring religion and culture as 'performance' include: Erving Goffman, 1959; Richard Schechner and Willa Appell, 1990; Barbara Myerhoff, 1995; and Robert Orsi, 1985.

been through their sacred musical and performative practices. The major points and findings of this dissertation flow outward from this core assertion that *Gurbani kirtan* has been one of the central threads (perhaps even *the* central thread) of the Sikh tradition that has made Sikhism 'portable' in new and changing contexts around the world. *Gurbani kirtan* is perhaps even more central today in continuing to shape Sikhism transnationally—as Sikhs around the world embrace technology to listen to *Gurbani kirtan* performances from the Darbar Sahib (also known as the 'Golden Temple', Sikhism's sacred center, which I will discuss in Chapter Two) and other Sikh sites as a means to connect with the Guru from anywhere in the world; and younger generations of Sikhs, who are further and further removed from Punjab, embrace listening to and performing *Gurbani kirtan* for a sense of continued connection to the Guru, and to Sikhism and Sikh identity.

In later chapters, I explore the centrality of *Gurbani kirtan* in the shaping of an emerging 'American Sikhism'. This is demonstrated in: the maintenance of the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition even during the difficult early years of the first small Sikh communities in the United States (discussed in Chapter Two); the attitudes toward the centrality of *Gurbani kirtan* in Sikhism among today's second- and third-generation Sikh Americans (the focus of Chapter Three); the amount of resources that Sikh communities are putting into bringing expert performers of *Gurbani kirtan* from outside of the United States to perform in American Sikh communities (discussed in Chapter Four); and the vast amounts of effort that Sikh communities in the United States are putting into teaching

young generations how to perform *Gurbani kirtan* (the focus of Chapter Five), to the extent of raising a ‘kirtan generation’ in the United States who are learning to perform *Gurbani kirtan* at a rate that may be unprecedented since the time of the Sikh Gurus.[17]

2.0 Multi-sited Ethnography of a 'Field' and Community 'On the Move'

Since 2006, I have been a participant observer, spending many, many hours engaged in, what Renato Rosaldo terms, “deep hanging out”[18] in American Sikh communities, mostly in southern and northern California, which has the largest population of Sikhs of any state in the United States (roughly one-quarter of a million Sikhs). Primarily, this has involved visiting every major gurdwara in California—keeping five mid-sized to large gurdwaras in southern and northern California as my main field-sites—and spending many, many hours listening to *Gurbani kirtan*, following the motions with the congregation during the worship and other activities of a given day, and then talking to people[19] during *langar* and/or helping in the *langar* kitchen, which are the

17 I am currently writing a chapter-length piece discussing the uniqueness of this 'kirtan generation' and its role in the shaping of Sikhism in the United States.

18 Rosaldo's term for describing fieldwork that is deeply engaged but—especially within modern urban contexts—perhaps does not involve the extended periods of living with a people that were typical of earlier “tent-in-the-village model[s]” of ethnographic work among (supposedly) 'pre-modern' societies (as cited in pgs. 56, 90. Clifford, James. Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). See also: Geertz, Clifford. “Deep Hanging Out” in *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.

19 Throughout this dissertation I have mostly avoided providing names or identifying information when discussing my interviews and interviewees (i.e., with students and teachers from within the Sikh communities where I conducted my fieldwork). Mostly this is because some of my interviewees have asked me to avoid using their real names because they are concerned about their views expressed in interviews and conversations with me ending up drawing them into “gurdwara politics”, and because I was in agreement with UCR's Human Subjects Committee's concern early in my research that I should maintain the anonymity of my interviewees. The only people whose real names I have used within this dissertation are people who can reasonably be called 'public figures' (i.e., well-known musicians and teachers frequently in the public eye) who expressly gave me permission to include identifying

main social times and spaces within most gurdwaras. From initial contacts and friendships that I built within these gurdwara communities, I would frequently be invited to visit the classes at gurdwara schools, to attend summer youth camps, and to attend special events at gurdwaras and other sites, such as: religious festivals celebrating *gurpurbs* (holidays associated with the lives of the Gurus), *Gurbani kirtan* programs, martial arts (*gatkā)* competitions, first turban tying and *amrit sanchar* (Khalsa initiation) ceremonies, weddings, and so on. The Sikhs who I met at gurdwaras or at any of these events would also often invite me to private social events (such as picnics in parks, *akhānd paṭhs* [unbroken recitations of Guru Granth Sahib]), and into their homes for extended interviews and discussions about their lives and about Sikhism. Each person who I met would usually introduce me to, or put me in contact with, another person "you should talk to," and often to multiple other people. This opened opportunities for several hundred informal conversations, some of which developed into ongoing friendships. In addition to informal conversations, I conducted about one-hundred more formal recorded interviews—sometimes partially utilizing fixed questions, but usually allowing the conversation to direct my questions. The intensity of my envelopment 'in the field' during my PhD research has ranged from frequently traveling on weekends to visit gurdwara communities (from 2006 to present) to living for a month in the largest gurdwara in California (during the summer of 2013) in order to conduct field research and take an intensive Punjabi language class. Additionally, I have taken basic lessons in performing the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition—including vocal performance and *rabāb* (stringed

information in my writing during my interview/s with them.

instrument) performance—from some of the teachers profiled in Chapter Five. This allowed me to see their teaching process in-person, as well as to interview them and meet some of their students.

The above description of my research should begin to paint the picture that, from very early on in my research, it became apparent to me that the nature of the diasporic Sikh community I was studying necessitated a multi-sited[20] approach to my ethnographic 'field'. That is, this dissertation is not a traditional 'parish' or 'congregational study', which has been typical of ethnographic studies of religion. Sikh Americans are a highly mobile community, and even among those who are not frequently traveling internationally (it is somewhat rare to meet Sikh Americans who do not travel “back” to Punjab relatively frequently), it is common for them to regularly travel significant distances to attend a gurdwara (or their chosen favorite gurdwara), to go to a special Sikh event, or to travel long distances to attend a Sikh camp or regional Sikh festival. Additionally, in the current era, performing Sikh musicians regularly travel to and from the United States and around the world; Sikh American children frequently attend camps and schools to learn *Gurbani kirtan* and other Sikh ways of being and knowing in India, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere; Sikh Americans fill their days with the sounds of *kirtan* from the Harimandir Sahib via satellite TV, the internet, and cellphone applications; and *Gurbani kirtan* students communicate via internet video chat with their teachers across the United States, in India, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere. Thus, to 'enter the field' in order to study

20 Marcus, George E. “Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography”. *Annual Review of Anthropology,* Vol. 24 (1995), 95-117.

'Sikhism in the United States' has meant to 'go where Sikhs are', and, for the particular purposes of my research, to go where Sikhs are performing *Gurbani kirtan*. I have often had the experience of knowing someone from seeing them in a southern California gurdwara community, and then running into them at special events or *Gurbani kirtan* competitions in northern California; or finding out that an interviewee from southern California also takes lessons in *Gurbani kirtan* via internet video conferencing from a teacher of *Gurbani kirtan* who I interviewed in rural Punjab.

I have organized the chapters of this dissertation to roughly cover what can be considered different 'sub-populations' among the highly transnationally connected and mobile population of Sikh Americans and non-U.S. Citizens who perform and teach *Gurbani kirtan* in Sikh communities in the United States: students of *Gurbani kirtan* and the youngest generation of Sikh Americans in Chapter Three, performers of *Gurbani kirtan* and the 'ritual experts' of the Sikh tradition in Chapter Four, and teachers of the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition in Chapter Five.

One way that I have deepened my relationships with people in a few of the gurdwara communities that have been my most steady field sites is that, for five years of my teaching of undergraduate classes at Whittier College and UC Riverside, I have been bringing my students from my “Asian Religions”, “Religious Diversity in America”, “Rituals Studies”, and other classes to visits at Sikh gurdwaras (this now amounts to over a dozen such visits). This pedagogy 'in the field' has been a very integral part of my relationships with local Sikhs and Sikh communities. In this way, the Sikhs who see me

within their communities as a researcher—and perhaps friend—are also able to see me in my broader role as a Professor of Religious Studies—as they have a chance to present who they are, in order to educate my students about their perspectives on Sikhism, on their cultural traditions, on their experiences being Sikh in the United States, and so on. As much as such time is a great gift by these Sikh communities in terms of their time and resources (especially of food prepared in the *langar* kitchen), it has always been my hope that this 'gift' is being reciprocated in some measure by my students who become better educated about Sikh Americans and Sikhism. In an era when, at best, Sikh Americans are often discriminated against, and, at worst, the United States can be a dangerous place to be Sikh (or religiously and ethnically 'other') I tell my students that they leave my classes as 'ambassadors' of a sort who know more about Sikhs and practitioners of other minority religions in the United States than the general population, and urge them to take advantage of opportunities, large and small, to educate others. It has always been my hope that this interaction between my students and Sikh communities is a kind of reciprocation that I can offer for all of the time and hospitality that individual Sikhs and Sikh communities have given to me throughout my research.

3.0 The Methodological and Theoretical Influence of 'Lived Religion' Approaches on My Research for This Dissertation

'Lived religion' is a still emerging (sub)field and methodological and theoretical orientation within the academic study of religion, and I think there is still much work that

will be done in shaping and charting the concerns, theories, and approaches associated with it. At the same time, there are some factors pointing to the relative maturity of the field, including a monograph dedicated specifically to describing the emerging field (Meredith McGuire's *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*), and an ongoing series of books on 'Lived Religions' from Johns Hopkins University Press (edited by David Hall, and Robert Orsi).

Discourse on 'lived religion' emerged out of the work of Robert Orsi and David Hall, particularly beginning (in somewhat preliminary form) with Orsi's *The Madonna of 115th Street* (1985), and being further framed and delineated by both Hall and Orsi in Hall's edited volume *Lived Religion in America* (1997). Their discourse on '*lived* religion' itself emerges from earlier scholarly discourse on '*popular* religion,' an approach which had been primarily concerned with studying the religious beliefs, practices, and identities of 'everyday folks.' The main critique that Hall, Orsi, and others have laid against much of the scholarship of the 'popular religion' paradigm is that in (rightfully) emphasizing the agency of 'everyday folks' and focusing the study of religion on them as a remedy to previous inattentiveness to anything outside of 'grand'/'high'/'elite' 'traditions,' many scholars of 'popular religion' in turn vilified 'elite' perspectives and practices, and valorized the beliefs and practices of 'everyday folks' as *more* '*authentic*' expressions of religion. On this subject, David Hall has described how 'lived religion' approaches depart from earlier discourse on 'popular religion':

> Lived Religion is an effort to shift historians' attention away from say the great institutions simply as institutions, or the great theologians simply as theologians,

> and to ask how all kinds of people, great people, small people, ordinary people, prominent people, engage with and work through the inevitable contradictions of religion in life. . . . Lived religion is an effort to step outside of the categories of high and low, that are necessarily part of the problematic of popular religion.[21]

Discourse on 'lived religions' has largely inherited from 'popular religion' an emphasis on the 'everyday'-ness of religious practice, but not preserved the bifurcation of 'high' and 'low' religion, instead attending to the religious beliefs, practices, and identities of both social 'elites' and 'folks' as equally 'everyday' parts of religion *as lived*.

I find that this break from bifurcating religion into 'elite' and 'popular' forms resonates especially well with the study of Sikhism, which is 'de jure' non-hierarchical in many respects, having no 'priesthood' or official higher office beyond 'democratically' chosen local leadership (in Chapter Four I will discuss historical sources for the Sikh ambivalence to religious and ritual 'experts'). Sikhs speak with pride about the universality of *Guru Panth*, the 'priesthood of all believers' (to put it in outside terms) in which religious authority is vested in the worldwide Sikh community. However, as a better example of how a 'lived religion' approach's breakdown of the elite/popular bifurcation informs my ethnographic approach to studying Sikhism and Sikh performative practices, I have deliberately sought to interview Sikhs with a broad range of perspectives: from those who profess to know very little about Sikhism or Sikh religious music, to *ragis* and *kirtaniyas* who are the 'ritual expert' musical performers of the sacred hymns; from young second and third generation Sikhs born in the United States who speak no Punjabi and do not understand the language of the Guru Granth

21 David Hall, "Lived Religion.", *The Spirit of Things with Rachel Kohn*, Radio Broadcast, February 7th, 2000, (Transcript accessed from: http://www.abc.net.au/rn/relig/spirit/stories/s103914.htm).

Sahib, to recently immigrated *granthis* trained in Gurbani recitation and interpretation. Several years ago, when I first presented a paper at an academic conference based on my initial set of research observations drawn from interviews with Sikh Americans, a few people in the audience spoke to me afterward and suggested that my “sampling was biased” because up to that point I had mostly spoken to young Sikhs who were not experts in performing *Gurbani kirtan*. However, from a 'lived religions' perspective, my sampling of interviewees would be equally if not *more* biased if I *only* spoke to 'ritual experts' about a performative practice that is central to the lives of *all* Sikhs.

In my opinion, 'lived religion' as an approach to the academic study of religion has been most fully expounded and theorized within the work of Robert Orsi, especially his 2005 book *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*. Meredith McGuire's 2008 book *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* extends from the work of Orsi, and seeks to further clarify the methodological and theoretical concerns of a 'lived religion' approach. For the purposes of this section of this introduction, I will refer most extensively to both Orsi and McGuire's work in characterizing 'lived religion' approaches, but also to the writings of other scholars who overtly place their work as coming from within a 'lived religion' approach. I will discuss four common features of 'lived religion' approaches that resonate with and have informed my approach to my fieldwork. Specifically, scholarly discourse on 'lived religion' tends to: 1. view religion/s as always local, non-static, always in-process, and constantly being re-interpreted; 2. focus on embodied practice and

performance; 3. adopt methodological and theoretical approaches from Anthropology and other 'cultural' approaches, and reflect the 'reflexive turn' within Anthropology and other disciplines; and 4. be accepting of the reality of sacred presence for religious practitioners and of 'multiple ways of being in the world'. Related to this last point, I will discuss Orsi's locating of 'lived religion' approaches as a “third way” between radically 'secular' (or perhaps 'scientistic' or 'empiricist') approaches on one hand, and 'confessional' or theological approaches on the other. With each of these points I will give examples of how they overlap with the ways I am thinking about Sikhism in my current research.

3.1 Lived Religion Approaches Tend To... View Religion/s as 'Local,' Non-Static, Always In-Process, and Constantly Being Re-Interpreted

Scholars utilizing 'lived religion' approaches often note that religion/s and religious identities are 'messy.' They warn of the tendency for scholars of religion to follow with much of the dominant public discourse on religion, which tends to idealize 'religions' as 'things' that are 'pure,' 'unambiguous,' 'sanitary,' and 'smooth.' Orsi argues that scholars of religion must allow for the ambivalence and multiplicity of religious phenomena, stating that, “the central methodological commitment [of a 'lived religion' approach] is to avoid conclusions that impose univocality on practices that are multifarious.”[22] From a 'lived religion' perspective, 'religions' are never 'static,' unchanging, or monolithic—they are not even 'things'—and the local and particular

22 Robert Orsi, “Everyday Miracles: the Study of Lived Religion” in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, Edited by David Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 11.

cannot always be extrapolated to grand 'traditions,' and vice versa. To give an example drawn from Sikhism in the United States: a *khatri* ('high' caste) Sikh living in southern California, having migrated from Punjab after the violent aftermath of 1984, cannot have had the same life experiences as a *jat* (agriculturalist caste) Sikh living in Michigan, having come to the U.S. via South Africa in the 1970s, and yet the experiences of these two are often extrapolated within scholarly discourse to talk about something called 'Sikh*ism*' (or perhaps particularized slightly more as 'American Sikhism'). Likewise, the histories, experiences, beliefs, and practices of low caste Tamil Śaivas in London, will not be the same as those of high caste Gujarati Vaishnavas in Los Angeles, yet both may be invoked in talking about something called 'Hindu*ism*' or a 'Hindu diaspora.' Although, for purposes of concision, there may be no way around speaking of religion/s and religious identities under such blanket language of 'traditions,' 'lived religion' approaches call for scholars to be critically attentive to the vast plurality of experiences, beliefs, practices, and identities that are pointed to by such terms. The academic study of religion cannot be an uncritical, oversimplified study of grand 'traditions' or 'isms'.

Echoing Orsi's call for scholars of religion to avoid imposing univocality on multifarious religious phenomena, Meredith McGuire posits that "at the level of the individual, religion is not fixed, unitary, or even coherent. We should expect that all persons' religious practices and stories with which they make sense of their lives are always changing, adapting, and growing."[23] Adopting Michel de Certeau's[24] usage of the

23 Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 12.

24 De Certeau himself extends Claude Levi Strauss' usage of the concept of 'bricolage' in *La Pensée Sauvage*. Paris: Librairie Plon, 1962.

concept (who himself followed from Levi Strauss), McGuire discusses religious identities in terms of "bricolage," the creative combination of disparate elements:

> Bricolage is a social practice by which an individual constructs a creative assembly by eclectically pasting together seemingly disparate, preexisting bits and pieces of meaning and practice. The pieces may appear disparate to the outside observer, but they are not nonsensical to the person engaging in such creative synthesis, which make sense and are effective in his or her world of meaning and experience.[25]

On the subject of such 'placing together of elements', Orsi comments:

> Men and women do not merely inherit religious idioms, nor is religion a fixed dimension of one's being, permanent attainment or a stable self. People appropriate religious idioms as they need them, in response to particular circumstances. All religious ideas and impulses are of the moment, invented, taken, borrowed, and improvised at the intersections of life.[26]

Both McGuire and Orsi point out frequent implicit (or explicit) repugnance toward religious 'bricolage' or 'syncretism' in the work of scholars of religion, which, they argue, arises out of a desire to see religions as 'pure' 'static' 'traditions.' However, in addition to religious *identities* not being 'static,' or 'pure,' and being constituted in bricolage, 'lived religion' approaches tend to see religions themselves as non-static, always being interpreted, and constituted in bricolage. In this light, Catherine Albanese writes that: "lived religions are always combinations and recombinations in which 'official' traditions are sanded down and glued on, so to speak, to create a customized religious structure that fits the overall context of a life."[27]

---

25 Ibid., pg. 195.
26 Robert Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: the Study of Lived Religion", pg. 8.
27 Catherine Albanese, "Exchanging Selves, Exchanging Souls: Contact, Combination and American Religious History" in *Retelling U.S. religious history*, edited by Thomas A. Tweed, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) pg. 225.

This understanding of all religious identities, and indeed all religions, as being constituted through recombination and bricolage speaks directly to an issue that continues to vex Sikhs and scholars of Sikh Studies alike: the long standing and still repeated charge, appearing especially within many introductory level textbooks, that Sikhism is a (mere) 'syncretism' of Hinduism and Islam. From a 'lived religions' perspective, Sikhism, like all religions, did not emerge in a vacuum, but neither is it merely a 'recombination' of pre-existing elements in any way that would make it distinct from any other religion. Also, from a 'lived religion' approach's understanding of religions as non-static, always being interpreted, and constituted in bricolage, Sikh*ism* is not 'one thing', but a multiplicity of voices, a living nexus of intertwining threads of influences, beliefs, practices and identities. I have tried in my research to understand, and in writing this dissertation, to represent, this multiple-ness of living Sikh voices in the United States and echoing from Sikh history.

3.2 Lived Religion Approaches Tend To... Focus on Embodied Practice and Performance

I have already mentioned above the dearth of available scholarly literature within Sikh Studies that focuses on Sikh practices and performances and how my research seeks to be part of a 're-imagining' of Sikh Studies by turning a focused awareness to practice. This is one of the ways that lived religion approaches resonate most with my research. Scholars of 'lived religion/s' tend to assert the central importance of attending to practice,

performance, and the body—in contrast to many dominant approaches to the study of religion/s which often focus on texts, and, especially, on belief as the central category of religion. Orsi argues that this understanding of belief as the central category of 'religions' is based on Protestant-normative biases and presuppositions about what gets counted as 'religion' that have been present since the foundations of Religious Studies as a discipline. A theme that appears in the work of scholars of lived religion, but especially in Robert Orsi's work, is that scholars of religion need to recognize and critically assess the Protestant-normative and 'secular' biases that remain entrenched in Religious Studies. In *Between Heaven and Earth*, Orsi narrates in detail how, especially among American scholars of religion, the discipline of Religious Studies emerged into the 'secular academy' with distinctly Protestant presuppositions about what 'religion'—or at least 'good religion'—was/is. On this secularized but Protestant-normative model, 'good' religion is based on belief and faith, it should be private, and focused on personal experience, especially of quiet contemplation, individual scriptural study, (and so on)—and 'bad' religion is emotional, demonstrative, ritualistic, noisy, overfocused on veneration of objects or devotion to people, (and so on). The often more holistic and embodied approaches to religion outside of the Protestant belief/faith-centric focus, especially Islam and Asian religions, including Sikhism, have often confounded scholars throughout the history of the study of religions. This has led them to question aspects of the lives of religio-cultural 'others': is this religion? Culture? Ethnicity? (and so on).

From a 'lived religion/s' perspective, 'religions' are also about the things that people do, not just what they believe, or what is contained in their scriptures or doctrines. To give an example from Sikh studies of why taking beliefs/doctrines or Scripture as the central categories of 'religions' can be problematic: (as I will discuss further in Chapter Three) most Sikhs, especially in the United States, do not fully understand the language of the Guru Granth Sahib, but even if they do not, they relate with the scripture on the level of practice. For instance, in my interviews with Sikhs, it is common for them to state that one receives benefit from *hearing* the Guru Granth Sahib recited, even if they do not *understand* its words. Even beyond this, one receives benefit from simply being in the *presence* of Guru Granth Sahib, and by observing the proper body postures of respect and reverence of the Guru—and also by being in the presence of the *Guru Panth*, the Sikh community. I will address the issue of sacred presence for religious practitioners in 'lived religion' approaches in more detail below.

3.3 Lived Religion Approaches Tend To... Adopt Methodological and Theoretical Approaches From Anthropology, and Reflect the 'Reflexive Turn'

The small handful of scholars who, in previous decades, wrote about Sikhism in the United States were primarily anthropologists[28] whose work mostly focused on Sikhs as an ethnic minority in the United States and did not focus on Sikh *religion* or religious practice. Several scholars of Sikh Studies, including Bruce La Brack and Tony

28 Bruce LaBrack, Karen Leonard, and Verne Dusenbery are the three scholars who have made the most sustained contributions in this respect.

Ballantyne, have pointed to the dearth of ethnographic and interview-based studies of Sikhs, and have suggested that this is a next step in advancing and 're-imagining' the field of Sikh Studies. The obvious need for in-depth qualitative, interview-based research on Sikhs in the United States is another reason why 'lived religion' approaches resonate with my research.

Most of the work by scholars of lived religion to date has tended to adopt methods and theories from Anthropology and other 'cultural' approaches to the study of religion. David Hall writes in his "Introduction" to *Lived Religion in America* that 'lived religion' approaches are "...rooted... in cultural and ethnographic approaches to the study of religion...".[29] However, Hall also asserts later in the same chapter that "...the study of lived religion does not depend on any single method or discipline."[30] This is reflected in the fact that much of the available literature to date coming from a 'lived religions' approach has in fact been a blending of historical and ethnographic research methods, and my approach has similarly embraced both historical and ethnographic methods, maintaining a focus on the lived practices and experiences of both living and historical people.

What is known as 'the reflexive turn' in anthropology and sociology is a now nearly twenty years old shift in paradigms, toward scholars who study cultural (and religious) 'others' being more aware of, and forthcoming about the ways their own life stories and experiences bias and inflect their interactions with, and writings about, their

29 David Hall, "Introduction" in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, edited by David Hall, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. vii.
30 Ibid., pg. x.

human subjects. This began with awareness among anthropologists of the impossibility of being an 'unbiased observer'. Reflexivity[31] also calls for researchers to maintain a disciplined methodological humility about the limits of their own subjectivity and scholarly 'gaze'. In its adoption of anthropological methods and theories, 'lived religion' approaches also reflect this 'reflexive turn' to studying the religious lives of 'others', and this leads me to my final point about 'lived religion' approaches.

3.4 Lived Religion Approaches Tend To... Be Accepting of the Reality of 'Sacred Presence' for Practitioners of Religions and of 'Multiple Ways of Being in the World' (Lived Religion as a 'Third Way'):

Finally—and I think this is Orsi's most provocative contribution to critically assessing the work of scholars of religion—Orsi describes a 'lived religion' approach as a 'third way', one set between 'radically empiricist' 'secular' scholarship and 'confessional' or theological approaches. He writes that this 'third way':

> ...is characterized by a disciplined suspension of the impulse to locate the other... securely in relation to one's own cosmos. It has no need to fortify the self in relation to the other... an in-between orientation, located at the intersection of self and other, at the boundary between one's own moral universe and the moral world of the other... this in-between ground upon which a researcher in this third way stands belongs neither to herself nor to the other but has come into being between them, precisely because of the meeting of the two.[32]

31 See: Bourdieu, Pierre and Loïc J. D. Wacquant. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. For a work from a scholar of religions frequently cited as exemplifying this reflexive approach to ethnographic fieldwork, see: Brown, Karen McCarthy. *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

32 Pgs. 198-199. Orsi, Robert Orsi. *Between Heaven and Earth*.

I have already discussed Orsi's urging for scholars of religion to uncover the Protestant-normative biases in the history of the academic study of religion, and the implicit Protestant normativity underlying the 'secular' study of religion. Orsi narrates how this nominally 'secular' study of religion comes to see religious practitioners' claims of sacred presence as a 'problem' for scholarly scrutiny. How are scholars to assess the experiences of their human subjects which they are themselves unable to experience subjectively, or which may be beyond 'objective' empirical assessment, but are nonetheless central to the lives and identities of religious practitioners? In answer to this, Orsi offers that if sacred presence is 'real' in the beliefs and practices of the religious practitioners who he studies and interacts with, that that is “real enough” for him.[33] Coming to this standpoint though, requires that scholars of 'lived religion' are willing to recognize their own imperfect subjectivity and the limits of their own (perhaps 'rational'/'scientific') scholarly 'gaze.' Yet Orsi argues that this can be done without being 'uncritical.'

Again, reflecting the 'reflexive turn' in Anthropology, what Orsi is advocating is a disciplined methodological humility. Orsi describes ethnographic fieldwork as “comparing notes” on multiple ways of being in the world.[34] Orsi is not advocating an 'unscientific' or 'irrational' approach to studying religion, but an approach that does not 'irrationalize' the practices and ways of being in the world of 'others' (i.e. the human subjects of scholarly research on religion), for whom there may be ways of knowing and being which take primacy other than the 'radically empirical' or 'scientific'. I think that

33 Pg. 18. Ibid.
34 Pg. 174. Ibid.

this is the central challenge of 'lived religion' as an emerging (sub)field, at least as it is framed by Robert Orsi. Orsi is 'calling out' scholars of Religious Studies toward a new methodological stance from which to view the human 'subjects' of our research. What Orsi calls for is, in my reading, an eminently empathetic approach, one which allows for 'multiple ways of being in the world'.[35] This approach aims to achieve the 'fusing of horizons' between researchers and the people that they study, by humbly setting the 'way of being in the world' of the researcher alongside the 'ways of being' of those being studied. From this methodological standpoint, both fieldwork and historical study can be described as 'comparing notes' on 'ways of being in the world', rather than scholars of religion providing constant disclaimers or distancing themselves from the worldviews of their human subjects with 'but this is what *they* believe... but this is what *they* believe" formulations. In line with this, Orsi writes: "...Scholarship on other worlds, other times, is always chastened by a sense of difference and exhilarated by the experience of recognition."[36] Personally, this type of disciplined 'in-between-ness'—empathetically finding connections with religio-cultural others while also critically understanding the sources of differences and conflicts between worldviews—is what I am trying to generate in the learning experiences of my students. I think that Orsi's 'third way' resonates for me as the 'way' that I have approached my study of transnational Sikhism—because it is the way that I have approached the academic study of religion since I took my first class in Religious Studies years ago. Maybe this is the case because of the ethnographic nature of

35 I have also compared this, in my other writings, to the central Jain principle of *anekantwad* (literally 'no-one-view')
36 Pg. 161. Ibid.

most of my research, which relies on relationship building and often close mutual revealing of personal views between interviewer and interviewee.

Some might ask if Orsi's questioning of the 'secular' study of religion is not a regression of sorts. Is the separation of the study of religion from ecclesiastical power and from questions of faith not foundational to Religious Studies as a discipline? I do not think that Orsi would deny this, his critique is more that we as scholars of religion have to be clear what we mean when we use the term 'secular', and more importantly, what we mean when we use the term 'religion'. The purpose of Religious Studies, in the least, cannot be to smugly 'know better' than the religious practitioners we study, or to desire or attempt to 'disabuse' them of their 'flawed perceptions of reality'. At least this is the case if the sometimes antipathetic relationship between religious practitioners and scholars of Religious Studies is to be improved on.

There has been a significant amount of such antipathy toward scholarship on Sikhism from a vocal minority among Sikhs. This brings us back, again, to Orsi's 'third way' and his challenge for scholars of religion to accept the realness of sacred presence for religious practitioners. Insofar as a minority of people within Sikh communities have greeted the academic study of Sikhism with hostility or suspicion, some of these negative reactions have seemingly rested on assertions that everyday Sikhs 'have not been consulted' by scholars of Sikhism, or that scholars writing about Sikhism are 'disconnected' from Sikh communities and the effects that their writings may have on them. My own concern for letting Sikhs 'speak for themselves'[37] (sometimes literally, by

37 My own interpretations of the appropriate relation/s of the ethnographer to their ' human subjects' or

reproducing long quotes, but always by maintaining a view toward writing in such a way that Sikhs could recognize themselves in, now, or many years from now, if someone reads this document) motivates my ethnographic and 'lived religion' approaches to my research. It is my hope that further use of ethnographic and other interview-based research methods—methods that are inherently dependent on cooperation and interaction with, and collaborative input from Sikh communities—might make some contribution toward easing apprehension about academic research on Sikhism. An approach open to representing Sikhs in a way they themselves will recognize themselves in, that seeks to interpret and understand Sikh beliefs and practices without 'explaining them away', will be key to achieving this goal in the future of Sikh Studies.

4.0 The Chapters of this Dissertation

In Chapter Two, I trace the history of the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition and Sikh religious practices “from Sultanpur Lodhi”—the traditional place of Guru Nanak's (the first Sikh Guru's) initial revelatory experience—“to San Jose, California” (home to the largest Sikh gurdwara in the world and one of the largest Sikh communities in north America), representative of the current era of transnational Sikhism's growth. The chapter is organized into three parts. In the first part, I discuss the history of the *Gurbani Kirtan* tradition from its beginning with the life of Guru Nanak (1469-1539) and through major

interlocutors are influenced by Karen McCarthy Brown, who writes: “What the ethnographer studies is how people create meaning or significance in their lives, how they interpret objects and events. An ethnographic study… is thus an exercise in bridge building… a corollary of this position is that *the people who are being studied should be allowed to speak for themselves whenever possible*, *for they are the only true experts on themselves*” (pg. 14, italics mine. *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*).

points in its development during the period of the other nine human Gurus of Sikhism (1539-1708). In the second part, I narrate the history—from the beginning of its construction in the late fifteenth century to current lived practice today—of the Darbar Sahib (the 'Venerable Court', also known as the 'Golden Temple') in Amritsar, Punjab (India), the major religious site that has been widely regarded by Sikhs as the sacred 'heart' and center of Sikhism since at least the eighteenth century. This middle section of the chapter links the first and last sections together, as daily religious practices and performances at the Darbar Sahib still set the pattern for the religious practices of Sikhs globally today and Sikhs around the world use various forms of technology to stay connected with the Darbar Sahib. In the third part of the chapter, I outline the history of Sikhs in the United States, from the first recorded Sikh 'visitor' around the turn of the nineteenth century, to the first small 'wave' of arrivals of Sikhs to North America starting in the 1890s, and to the large influx of Sikh Americans in the post 1965 era. I give special attention to the role of *Gurbani kirtan* in the transmission, continuance, and growing affirmation of Sikh ways of being and knowing in the United States, even within an atmosphere of discrimination, and sometimes violence, against Sikhs.

Chapter Three draws insights from my ethnographic fieldwork within American Sikh communities into conversation with theoretical approaches informed by performance studies and diaspora theory. As the field of Sikh studies is still in a relatively young, though rapidly growing stage (only in the past few decades has Sikhism begun to come into view as a distinct religious tradition within 'world religions' textbooks and the curricula of departments of Religious Studies), much of the foundational literature in the field

has come primarily from the work of textual historians and South Asianists. Thus, Sikh Studies, in similarity with the broader fields of History and Asian Studies, has often focused on the study of Sikh history, texts, and doctrines, sometimes even to the exclusion of studying living Sikh practices. As Sikhs have migrated to places around the world, they have demonstrated remarkable abilities to adapt and thrive within diverse global situations, while sustaining and continuously re/interpreting Sikhism within new contexts, and I argue that one of the primary ways that Sikhs have carried Sikh ways of being and knowing with them has been through their sacred musical and performative practices. I begin the third chapter by presenting reasons why approaches informed by Performance Studies resonate with the study of Sikhism generally, and especially with my particular research on Sikh *Gurbani kirtan*, offering new avenues of analysis in Sikh Studies. After briefly portraying the centrality of *Gurbani kirtan* to Sikhism and within American Sikh communities, I present findings from my interviews and ethnographic research within American Sikh communities, in order to examine how congregational performances of *Gurbani kirtan* serve as spaces for the formation, performance, and re-interpretation of transnational Sikh identity/ies and the re-memory and re-newal of Sikhism in the United States.

Chapter Four is a discussion of 'ritual expertise' within the Sikh tradition. The opening of the chapter is a 'thick description' of daily Sikh worship practices at the largest gurdwara in North America, viewed primarily through the daily religious practices and performances of a *granthi* (caretaker and reciter of the Sikh scripture). The second part of the chapter traces the history of religious leadership and 'ritual expertise' in the Sikh tradition, discussing both historical and current leadership roles, including: sacred

musicians: *ragis*, *rababis*, *kirtaniye*, and *dhadis*; and other religious roles: *manjis*, *masands*, *mahants*, g*ranthis*, *pujaris*, *kathakars*, *bhais*, and *gianis*. The third part of the chapter presents some of the issues surrounding the defining of Sikh leadership roles in the modern era, including discussion of the ambivalence within the normative Sikh tradition to 'ritual' as a concept, and toward according clergy-like 'expertise' to religious leaders. In the fourth part of the chapter, I discuss insights from my fieldwork about current Sikh leadership patterns in the U.S. (which largely mirror leadership patterns throughout the worldwide Sikh diaspora) and present ethnographic profiles of *granthis* and *ragis* (sacred musicians) working in American Sikh communities. The final section of the chapter examines current questions and issues related to leadership in gurdwaras in the United States, drawing attention to points of similarity between the current patterns of Sikh religious leadership in the United States and patterns of religious leadership in earlier immigrant religious communities from/in American history.

Chapter Five examines how, since the large influx of Sikhs to the United States that began with immigration reform in the 1960s (also outlined in Chapter Two), Sikhism has continued to plant roots and come into view as an 'American religion'. Throughout the United States today, Sikhs are devoting vast amounts of time, resources, and effort toward keeping continued generations of Sikh Americans connected with Sikh communities, traditions, history, and ways of being and knowing. One of the primary ways that many communities are teaching younger generations how to be Sikh in the United States is through teaching the performance of *Gurbani kirtan*. The fifth chapter

explores observations from my field research and interviews among people who are teaching the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition in the United States, and their students. I discuss how those teaching the tradition fall into several groups: organized *kirtan* teaching academies, well known *kirtaniye* (Sikh sacred musicians) who are internationally mobile and hold periodic workshops in the United States, professional music teachers, and volunteer instructors working within gurdwara communities. I present insights from my interviews conducted with representatives from each of the groups about their pedagogical methods, reasons for teaching, and hopes and concerns for the future. I conclude the chapter with some observations on the role of *Gurbani kirtan* in the emergence of Sikhism as an 'American Religion'.

The sixth chapter is a short conclusion that discusses the atmosphere of discrimination and even violence that Sikhs have faced in the United States, especially since September 11, 2001. I juxtapose two key events that both took place in 2012—the Wisconsin Sikh Temple Massacre, in which a white supremacist murdered six Sikhs at their place of worship; and the Sikh Centennial events at Stockton, CA, held to celebrate the one-hundred year anniversary of the building of the first and oldest Sikh gurdwara in the United States—to portray the resilience and enduring 'high spirits' of Sikh Americans as their communities grow and thrive, even in the face of racism and religious phobia in 'post-9/11' America.

Figure 1.1 San Jose Gurdwara fountain and entry building (photo by the author).

Figure 1.2 One wing of the Langar Hall of the San Jose Gurdwara (photo by the author).

Figure 1.3 Guru Granth Sahib's arrival at the grand opening of the San Jose Gurdwara (photo by the author).

Figure 1.4 Guru Granth Sahib is installed for the first time in the new San Jose Gurdwara (photo by the author).

Figure 1.5 California Governor Jerry Brown at the grand opening of the San Jose Gurdwara (photo by the author).

Chapter Two:
From Sultanpur Lodhi to San Jose: Sikh History and the *Gurbani Kirtan* Tradition 'On the Move'

Part One: Music in the Sikh Tradition

1.1 Guru Nanak (1469-1539) and Bhai Mardana

Nanak[1] spent many hours deep in prayer and meditation. By the time he was thirty years old, he was a well respected accountant[2] working for Daulat Khan, a local administrator who would later become the governor of Lahore. Nanak was a devoted husband to his wife Sulakhni.[3] They had two sons together. Though he was fully enveloped in his family and professional life, Nanak maintained a practice of frequent, deep prayer and meditation. Since childhood, he had displayed a deep inquisitiveness into the nature and meaning of existence and profound inquiry into—and questioning of—the received religious teachings of his time and place. Part of his daily spiritual practice was to bathe within a river near his home while he conducted his prayer and meditation. One day, members of Nanak's village of Sultanpur Lodhi saw him submerge himself beneath the waters of the Kali Bein river—but Nanak did not emerge. After searching for him, the people of Sultanpur Lodhi gave up hope that he could have survived. Daulat Khan,

1 As he was called before beginning his ministry and being called 'Guru Nanak' by his followers.
2 The *Puratan Janam Sakhi*, one of the oldest traditional sources on the life of Guru Nanak, describes his work as administrative in nature, perhaps keeping accounts or counting revenue in the form of agricultural or other products.
3 The name of Guru Nanak's wife is not recorded in the earliest traditional sources. By tradition, she is respectfully referred to as Mata Sulakhni ('Mother' Sulakhni).

distraught over the loss of Nanak had the river dredged for his body, but it was not found. Nanak's friends and family members fell into profound mourning.[4]

On the third day after his disappearance in the river, Nanak shocked everyone in Sultanpur Lodhi by re-appearing unharmed. Adding to their vexation, Nanak initially did not speak or explain what had happened or where he had been. Some of the earliest traditional narratives about his life say that Nanak was miraculously taken into the presence of Akal Purakh (God) and returned after having received God's message directly in the form of *Amrit*, the Divine nectar of God's Name and Word. Some modern Sikhs take a somewhat less miraculous interpretation of the event, stating that Nanak could have swam underwater to the other bank of the river, or further downstream, and then spent three days in deep meditation and prayer—his direct experience of Akal Purakh nonetheless occurring during that time. What the earliest narratives, as well as modern Sikh interpretations agree about is that Nanak had undergone a profound transformative experience, and that when he finally spoke, he said to those around him: ਨਾ ਕੋਈ ਹਿੰਦੂ ਨਾ ਕੋਈ ਮੁਸਲਮਾਨ (*Nā koī hindū, nā koī musalamāna*) "There is no Hindu, there is no

4 The historicity of the *Janam Sakhis*, the traditional narratives about the life of Guru Nanak, has been heavily debated and contested since the first 'Western' academic interest in the Sikh tradition (see W.H. McLeod's *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janam Sakhis*, [Oxford University Press, 1980] in which he famously reduced the amount of material from the *Janam Sakhis* that could be historically verified to a single paragraph). Here, I present a narrative of the life of Guru Nanak that is consistent with the earliest and most widely attested (by multiple sources) narratives about his life drawn from the *Janam Sakhis* and also repeated to me as common knowledge by many Sikh interviewees in the U.S. and India. These stories are widely known, repeated, and beloved by modern Sikhs throughout the world, including my interviewees. As I am most interested in these narratives for the ways that they remain resonant within the lives of modern Sikhs, for the purposes of this chapter, I am mostly content to leave debates about 'the historical Nanak' and/or the historicity of the *Janam Sakhis* aside (for Sikhs themselves to debate—as they certainly do—and for textual historians already deeply involved in this discussion).

Muslim". (According to some traditions) Nanak continued, "...so whose (religious) path shall I follow? I shall follow God's path. God is neither Hindu nor Muslim."[5] Everyone who heard this puzzled over what Nanak meant in saying it. Nanak lived in a time of intense interaction—and sometimes overt conflict—between Hindus and Muslims. Raised in a Hindu[6] family and having grown up with, and worked with Muslims his whole life, Nanak certainly knew many Hindus and Muslims, so what did his statement mean? Most modern Sikhs point to this famous statement as the pivotal moment when Nanak became 'Guru Nanak', the founder of a new and distinct religious path and tradition. Other Sikhs, and some scholars, read into Nanak's statement at least a rejection of participating in the most obvious religious sectarian conflict of his time, instead affirming the Oneness of God and the meaninglessness of such human religious divisions. Of course, these two interpretations of Nanak's statement are not mutually exclusive. It is clear that Nanak began his ministry around the time in his life this narrative describes, and that his teachings—which we have access to through their inclusion in the primary Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib—portray the distinctness of the spiritual path he advocated through his questioning of the dominant beliefs and practices of the Hindus, Muslims, and others with whom he interacted during his life.

Guru Nanak began to publicly reveal his inspired teachings. Uniquely, he did this almost entirely through singing poetic hymns set to musical melodies. One of the most frequently mentioned and a beloved figure from the earliest narratives about the life of

5 Pg. 20. Cole, W. Owen. *Understanding Sikhism*. Edinborough: Dunedin Academic Press, 2004.
6 One should note what a fluid term 'Hindu' was in Guru Nanak's time—and which it still is—actually pointing to a vast diversity of religious beliefs, practices, and traditions.

Guru Nanak is Bhai Mardana ('Brother Mardana').[7] Said to have been a close friend of Nanak's from his childhood, Bhai Mardana was born into a Muslim family of the *Mirāsi* class (caste) of musicians and bards who served as the folk historians of their time, retelling stories and genealogical narratives—especially those of wealthy patrons—through song. Traditional narratives speak of the strong bond and deep friendship between these two fellow travelers. All traditional sources agree that it was Bhai Mardana who accompanied Guru Nanak on all of his extended travels to preach his message. In fact, according to the Janam Sakhi narratives, Bhai Mardana was not only present when Guru Nanak received Divine inspiration for his poetic hymns, he was called on to accompany the Guru on his *rabāb* (a skin-headed, stringed instrument with heritage in Afghan and Islamic music) whenever Guru Nanak felt Divine inspiration.

According to one *Janam Sakhi* narrative, Guru Nanak was once sitting and meditating, when he suddenly exclaimed “Mardana! Touch the strings, the Word is descending.” Bhai Mardana, who was tending to a horse that he and Guru Nanak were traveling with replied, “But Master, the horse is grazing and my hands are occupied holding the reins, lest the animal run away”. Guru Nanak told Mardana, “let go of the horse.”[8] This story points both to the urgency of Guru Nanak's revelatory experience, and to the central importance of Bhai Mardana's musical accompaniment in this revelatory process.

7 A Sikh folk etymology of the name *Mardānā* has it that Guru Nanak told Bhai Mardana that, having heard the True knowledge from the Guru, he would “not die” (*maradā nā*). In Persian, *mardāna* means 'manly', 'brave', or 'courageous'.

8 Pg. 142. Singh, Pashaura. “Sikhism and Music” *Sacred Sound: Experiencing Music in World Religions*. Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006. Quoting a narrative from *Janam Sakhi Bhai Bala*.

Guru Nanak spent much of his life traveling widely, preaching, and performing his hymns with Bhai Mardana. At the end of his travels, and after the death of Bhai Mardana, Guru Nanak settled for the rest of his life into farming and leading a growing community of Sikhs in the new 'intentional community' of Kartarpur ('Creator's Abode'). The Kartarpur community's dual focus on hard work and family life, coupled with spiritual practice centered on musical recitation of the Word, has continued as a core of Sikh practice and experience throughout Sikh history. It is clear that, within the Kartarpur community, Guru Nanak established a pattern of communal religious practice, the centerpiece of which was the communal performance of his hymns .[9] Bhai Gurdas (1551-1636)—who is regarded as one of the first great Sikh scholars to such a degree that his poetic historical compositions are one of the only works, other than the Sikh scriptures, that are authorized to be performed in gurdwaras—describes the centrality of devotional music and the musical instruments used for worship in the Kartarpur community, comparing musical performance to the pilgrimages undertaken in other religious traditions: "Hindus adore the [sacred river] Ganges and [pilgrimage place of] Banares, and Muslims consider the Kaaba as a holy place. But to the accompaniment of *mridaṇgaṃ* [a two-headed drum] and *rabāb* [the stringed instrument associated with Bhai Mardana] the hymns of Guru Nanak [*Baba*] are sung in every household."[10] Bhai Gurdas further relates that Guru Nanak's *Jāp* ('Recitation) was recited by Sikhs in the early

9 Pg. 22. Singh, Pashaura. "An Overview of Sikh History" in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*. Edited by Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

10 ਗੰਗ ਬਨਾਰਸ ਹਿੰਦੂਆ ਮੁਸਲਮਾਣਾਂ ਮਕਾ ਕਾਬਾ। ਘਰਿ ਘਰਿ ਬਾਬਾ ਗਾਵੀਐ ਵਜਨਿ ਤਾਲ ਮ੍ਰਿਦੰਗੁ ਰਬਾਬਾ। *Vāran Bhai Gurdās*, 24:4 (translations from Punjabi and of verses from Guru Granth Sahib throughout this chapter are my own).

morning at Kartarpur and the singing of his *Sodār* and *Āratī* hymns was carried out communally every evening: “[In Kartarpur] discussions for the sake of knowledge and the melodies of the unstruck sound of the Word were ever heard there. *Sodār* and *Āratī* were sung, and in the ambrosial hours [*amritu vele*] *Jāpu* was recited.[11] Musical recitation of these hymns still remains a central part of the daily prayer cycle of Sikhs throughout the world today.

1.2 The Sikh Tradition

The Sikh tradition began with the life of Guru Nanak in the fifteenth century (CE) in the fertile Punjab ('five rivers') region that encompasses parts of modern day northwestern India and eastern Pakistan. The lives of the ten Sikh Gurus—the Divinely inspired teachers of the Sikh tradition—coincided with the rise of the Muslim Mughal Empire (descendants of the Mongols) in South Asia. During the reign of Mughal Empire (1526 – 1857), a minority Muslim ruling class ruled a religiously diverse, predominantly Hindu population, a situation which spawned religious interaction, but also often overt conflict. Within this social environment, the Sikh Gurus, beginning with Guru Nanak, began to teach a distinct religious path, centered on devotion to One Universal God for all of humanity (*Akal Purakh*, the 'Timeless Being'). They rejected the caste hierarchy and mistreatment and subordination of women common to their time, instead promoting

11 ਗਿਆਨੁ ਗੋਸਟਿ ਚਰਚਾ ਸਦਾ ਅਨਹਦਿ ਸਬਦਿ ਉਠੇ ਧੁਨਕਾਰਾ। ਸੋਦਰੁ ਆਰਤੀ ਗਾਵੀਐ ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤ ਵੇਲੇ ਜਾਪੁ ਉਚਾਰਾ। *Vāran Bhai Gurdās*, 1:38.

equality of peoples, castes, and genders. They also rejected the religious efficacy of asceticism and what they regarded as the idolatry and hollow ritualism of the religions of their time, emphasizing instead the sacred value of a dedicated work ethic and duty in society, and relatively simplified worship of God, without the use of forms or images.

In similarity with other Indian religions, the Sikh tradition views humans as bound by *karma*[12] (the effects of one's thoughts and actions) and *samsara*[13] (the cycle of continuing rebirth marked by suffering), but the Sikh belief is that *Hukam* (the 'Divine Will' or 'Divine Order'), and *kripa* (the gracious mercy of God) can take precedence over one's *karma*, freeing one from suffering and continued rebirth. Sikhs strive to achieve egolessness through meditation, hard work, and service (*seva*) in order to lead lives guided by *Hukam*, and not by *haumai*, the self-centered ego, which is the cause of wrong actions and distance from God.

Three concepts—*Nām*, *Dān*, and *Ishnān*—are often used to describe the chief ideals of the Sikh tradition as it formed during and after the Sikh Gurus. *Nām* is literally 'The Name,' and Guru Nanak and the later Gurus used this word to encompass and signify all of the attributes, qualities, and titles of the One God. *Nām* also points to the central Sikh concept and practice of *Nām simran*, which is 'remembering The Name' (i.e., remembering God)—through reciting God's Name and praises, and through remembering God within one's daily activities, thereby purifying one's consciousness and actions. *Dān* is literally 'giving,' and this encompasses the idea that Sikhs should work hard to earn an

12 *Karam* (usually written ਕਰਮ) in the gurmukhi of Guru Granth Sahib.
13 *Sansar* (usually written ਸੰਸਾਰੁ) in the gurmukhi of Guru Granth Sahib.

honest living, and then give some of their wealth and service (*seva*) to those in need. *Ishnān*[14] is purity, in the sense of performing pure actions, purifying the mind, as well as avoiding sexual impropriety. Thus *Nām*, *dān*, and *ishnān* can be seen as emblematic for Sikh relations with God, society, and the self, respectively.

1.3 Developments Under the Later Sikh Gurus

The term *guru* is used in South Asian languages to denote a (usually spiritual) teacher, but there are four specific ways in which the term '*Guru*' is used in the context of the Sikh tradition. Throughout the most sacred Sikh Scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, God is frequently referred to as "*Guru*," and modern day Sikhs refer to God as *Waheguru*, which may be translated as 'The Great Teacher.' Both of these instances point to the Sikh understanding of God as the greatest of Teachers, in the sense that all wisdom and liberating knowledge are from God. *Guru* is also the title given to each of the ten spiritual masters, or divinely inspired teachers of the Sikh tradition (see below). The third usage of the term *Guru*, refers to the primary Sikh scripture, Guru Granth Sahib (which can be translated as "Venerable Book that is *Guru*"). Finally, the term *Guru* in Sikhism is used to refer to *Guru Panth*: the worldwide Sikh community as *Guru*. Since there is no 'Pope,' 'priesthood' or official hierarchy within the Sikh tradition, theological decisions are to be made at the local community level or by individual Sikhs through consulting Guru Granth Sahib as the Eternal Living Guru of the Sikhs.

---

14 *Ishnān* can also mean bathing, especially purifying ritual bathing within the *gurmukhi* of Guru Granth Sahib (derived from the sanskrit *snāna*, 'bathing', 'bath').

Guru Nanak (1469-1539) was the first of the ten human *Gurus* of Sikhism, and, as outlined above, lived during a time of religious interaction, and sometimes conflict, between the Muslim Mughal Empire and the majority Hindu[15] population under their rule. After beginning his religious path at about age thirty, he traveled and preached for the rest of his life. Guru Nanak's teachings, which emphasize devotion to One Universal God and a rejection of asceticism for householder life, were revealed in the form of poetic hymns set to musical accompaniment. 974 of Guru Nanak's hymns, which were composed on nineteen *rāgas* (musical modes) and their seventeen *rāga* forms, appear in the Guru Granth Sahib[16] (I will discuss the *rāgas* utilized in Guru Granth Sahib in more detail below). The varying language (including non-Punjabi words) and diverse musical styles and forms utilized in Guru Nanak's hymns provide documentary evidence of his extensive travels with Bhai Mardana, as Guru Nanak employed local linguistic and musical idioms to appeal to his audiences.[17]

The second *Guru*, Guru Angad (1504-1552, Guruship 1539-1552) formalized the *gurmukhi* ('from the mouth of the Gurus') script that the Guru Granth Sahib would later come to be written in. He also composed sixty-two poetic couplets (*salokas*), utilizing nine *rāgas*, which are included in the Guru Granth Sahib.[18] In addition to continuing the

15 The word 'Hindu' itself is a term applied by the Mughals to the religion(s) of those people who lived 'beyond the Indus' river. The Mughal Empire ruled over a religiously plural group of people, including Christians, Jains, Jews, Zoroastrians, and others, but the vast majority of the people of the Indian subcontinent at the time practiced diverse religious traditions that would now fall under the umbrella term of 'Hinduism'.

16 Pg. 399. Singh, Gurnam. "Sikh Music" in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*. Edited by Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

Sikh communal practice started by Guru Nanak at Kartarpur of singing the *Sodār*, *Āratī*, and *Jāp* hymns, Guru Angad also initiated the performance of Guru Nanak's *Āsa dī Vār* ('Ballad of Hope') as part of daily Sikh morning prayers.[19]

The third *Guru*, Guru Amar Das (1479-1574, Guruship 1552-1574) composed 907 of the hymns in the Guru Granth Sahib in seventeen *rāgas* and their six *rāga* forms.[20] Guru Amar Das' composition *Anānd Sahib* ('Hymn of Bliss') is today sung at the conclusion of Sikh ceremonies.[21] Additionally, Guru Amar Das is credited with further institutionalizing the *langar* ('community kitchen') that had started in the time of Guru Nanak. Community-sponsored meals are still today served to all people who visit any *gurdwara* (Sikh place of worship) throughout the world, without any respect given to race, caste, or social status.

Guru Ram Das (1534-1581, Guruship 1574-1581), the fourth Guru of the Sikh tradition, composed 679 hymns included in the Guru Granth Sahib utilizing thirty *rāgas* and their twelve *rāga* forms.[22] Guru Ram Das is celebrated by Sikhs as an accomplished musician who added eleven new *rāgas* in addition to utilizing the *rāgas* that his predecessor Gurus had.[23] Guru Ram Das' hymn compositions include the *Lāva*, which is used as the Sikh wedding hymn, and twenty four *chānts* (verses of four to six lines) that are included in the daily performance of *Āsa dī Vār kirtan* during the early morning. As discussed below in the middle section of this chapter, Guru Ram Das also established the

19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Pg. 67. Pashaura Singh. *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*. Oxford and New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006.

town of Ramdaspur, is now known as Amritsar, which today is the most sacred city for Sikhs around the world.

The fifth Guru, Guru Arjan (1563-1606, Guruship 1581-1606) composed 2,218 hymns in the Guru Granth Sahib utilizing thirty *rāgas* and their fourteen *rāgas* forms,[24] making him by far the most prolific contributor to the primary Sikh scripture. Guru Arjan was trained in music by his father and also the *rabābis* of his father Guru Ram Das' court.[25] Guru Arjan compiled his own hymns with those of the first four Gurus, and with selected hymns of the *Bhagats* ('devotees'[26] from Muslim and Hindu sects whose hymns were included for being seen as part and parcel with the teachings of the Sikh Gurus[27]) into a written canon, the *Ādi Granth* ('primary' or 'first' scripture). Guru Arjan also planned and oversaw the construction of the *Harimandir Sahib* (known as the 'Golden Temple'), the most sacred site for Sikhs, in the city of Amritsar (I will discuss this in greater detail in the next section of this chapter). In 1606, Guru Arjan became the first martyr of the Sikh tradition when he was tortured to death under the authority of the Mughal Emperor Jahangir. This event would have an indelible impact on Sikh history.[28] I will further discuss Guru Arjan's central contributions to the evolution of the Sikh tradition in the next section of this chapter.

24 Pg. 399. Singh, Gurnam. “Sikh Music”.
25 Pg. 67. Pashaura Singh. *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*.
26 From the Sanskrit *bhakta*, 'devotee', 'one who practices the devotional path'.
27 For further discussion of the *Bhagats* and the inclusion of their hymns in Guru Granth Sahib, see Pashaura Singh's *The Guru Granth Sahib: Canon, Meaning and Authority* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000) and *The Bhagats of the Guru Granth Sahib: Sikh-Self-Definition and the Bhagat Bani* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).
28 For the most fully developed reconstruction of the events surrounding the martyrdom of Guru Arjan and discussion of this events formative impact on Sikh history, see Pashaura Singh's *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*.

Guru Hargobind (1595-1644, Guruship 1606-1644), the sixth *Guru* of the Sikh tradition, and the son of Guru Arjan, introduced the dual concepts of *miri* (worldly authority) and *piri* (spiritual authority) to the Guruship. From this point in history the Guruship assumed more political authority as subsequent *Gurus* oversaw the Sikhs while they defended themselves against varying levels of oppression by the Mughal Empire. As a symbol of his *miri* 'worldly authority' role, Guru Hargobind constructed the Akhal Takht ('Throne of the Timeless') facing the Harimandir Sahib built by his father. I will further discuss the Akhal Takht in the next section of this chapter.

The seventh *Guru*, Guru Har Rai (1630-1661, Guruship 1644-1661) was *Guru* during a time of relative stability, and he oversaw a period in which the number of Sikhs was rapidly expanding. Guru Har Krishan (1656-1664, Guruship 1661-1664), the son of Guru Har Rai, became the eighth *Guru* at the age of just five years old. He is popularly revered for his great compassion. While caring for victims of a small pox outbreak, Guru Har Krishan succumbed himself at the age of only eight years old. During their Guruships, both Guru Har Rai and Guru Har Krishan dispatched musicians throughout their local regions to preach about the Sikh path by performing *Gurbani kirtan* for crowds of listeners.[29]

The ninth *Guru*, Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621-1675, Guruship 1664-1675) contributed 115 hymns to the Guru Granth Sahib utilizing fifteen *rāgas* and their two *rāga* forms.[30] He established the town of Anandpur Sahib, which today is an important

29 Pg. 400. Singh, Gurnam. “Sikh Music”.
30 Ibid.

Sikh religious and historical site. Guru Tegh Bahadur was beheaded on the order of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, who had sought to convert his entire empire to Islam, after refusing to convert to Islam under threat of death. Guru Tegh Bahadur is revered as a great martyr—and not only by Sikhs—because he died after having approached Emperor Aurangzeb in an effort to defend the rights of Hindus to freely practice their religion.

The tenth *Guru*, Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708, Guruship 1675-1708), was the son of Guru Teg Bahadur, and became the *Guru* during a time in which Sikhs were particularly under attack by the Mughal Empire. Although Guru Gobind Singh did not add hymns to the Guru Granth Sahib, by tradition,[31] Guru Gobind Singh is the author of the entire 1,428 page Dasam Granth (the 'Book of the Tenth Guru'), the second most revered Sikh Scripture. In 1699, Guru Gobind Singh inaugurated the *Khalsa* ('the pure') an initiated group of Sikhs who were sworn to defend the weak and oppressed and oppose religious persecution. Though not all Sikhs today are initiated into the *Khalsa*, all Sikhs take the middle or last names given to Sikhs of the *Khalsa* by Guru Gobind Singh: *Singh* ('lion') for men and *Kaur* ('princess') for women. Additionally, the five symbols (known as the 'five Ks') which *Khalsa*-initiated Sikhs are required to wear are commonly worn by most Sikhs. Especially among Sikh men outside of India—because of their uncut beards and turban-covered hair—the 'five Ks' make for highly visible markers of Sikh

31 Though some of the hymns included in the Dasam Granth are used in daily Sikh prayers around the world, questions surrounding Guru Gobind Singh's authorship of the entirety of the Dasam Granth are currently a hotly contested issue among both Sikhs and scholars of Sikh Studies. Many scholarly works have discussed this "Dasam Granth controversy", but for an excellent overview of the situation, see Robin Reinhart's "Dasam Granth" in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*. Edited by Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

identity. The ‘five Ks,’ known this way because of the first letters of each item, are as follows:

1. *Kesh*: natural, uncut hair (for men, usually tied in a turban and accompanied by a beard)
2. *Kanga*: a comb to keep the appearance of one's uncut hair tidy
3. *Kara*: a steel bracelet worn to remind Sikhs that they are bound in relationship to God
4. *Kacha*: a simple undergarment worn to remind Sikhs to maintain purity
5. *Kirpan*: a small sword worn to symbolize protecting the weak and religious freedom

In 1708, Guru Gobind Singh ended the line of human Gurus and proclaimed the Guru Granth Sahib (the most Sacred Sikh Scripture) as his successor.

The Guru Granth Sahib is revered and treated by Sikhs as their Eternal, Living Guru. The scripture contains the inspired devotional hymns of six of the human Gurus (as outlined above), as well as hymns by fifteen *Bhagats* (Hindu and Muslim devotional poets whose teachings are considered to be in line with and equal in sanctity to those of the Gurus). Sikh worship consists primarily of musical and oral recitation of the hymns of the Guru Granth Sahib, either in private homes, or in congregational settings.

1.4 Locating the Sikh *Kirtan* Tradition in its South Asian Milieu

The practice of performing *kirtan*—singing hymns of praise as a form of religious devotion—was already rooted in multiple religious traditions in South Asia before the beginning of the Sikh tradition. In the Hindu context, the word *kirtan* is derived from the Sanskrit *kīrtina* ('chanting'), and further, from the root *kīrti*, which carries the meanings of 'glory', 'renown', and also 'speech' and 'to make mention of'.'[32] Hence, the term *kirtan* has been used to signify singing the glories and praises of a particular deity. In the Punjabi language, the term *kirtan* is linguistically related to the word *kīrat*-, 'praise', which is itself obviously derived from the Sanskrit *kīrti*.[33] In the Sikh context, *kirtan* refers exclusively to the singing of devotional praise of *Akāl Purakh* ('the Timeless One'/God) through the hymns of the Sikh scriptures. Both Sikh and Hindu forms of *kirtan* have their musical roots in the *prabhanda* ('classical song') style, which goes back to the fourth century Gupta era, and the *dhrupad* ('fixed word') style of vocal performance.[34] From the confluence of folk musical styles with these longstanding 'classical' musical styles—which were particularly performed as 'art music' for patrons in royal courts—emerged the South Asian *bhakti* concept of music, in which "it is ultimately for God and not for an earthly audience that the devotee plays and sings."[35] The influence on the Sikh *kirtan* tradition of the religiously diverse, predominantly Hindu and Muslim context of medieval South Asia, as well as the *bhakti* concept of music, are apparent. The medieval era

---

32 http://spokensanskrit.de/index.php?script=HK&tinput=kirti
33 Pg. 397. Singh, Gurnam. "Sikh Music".
34 Pg. 141. Singh, Pashaura. "Sikhism and Music".
35 Pg. 157. Wulff, Donna Marie. "On Practicing Religiously: Music as Sacred in India" in *Sacred Sound: Music in Religious Thought and Practice*. Edited by Joyce Irwin. Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983.

(1100s-1400s) closely leading up to, and contemporary with the life of Guru Nanak, was the time period in which the most well-known and beloved of the Hindu and Muslim poet-saints and *bhaktas* ('devotees')—such as Kabir, Namdev, Sheikh Farid, and Sri Caitanya—and the devotional movements surrounding them were most active. It was thus the peak time of the 'bhakti concept of music'. Also, as Pashaura Singh points out, "the ministry of Guru Rām Dās and Guru Arjan," two of the Sikh Gurus after Guru Nanak who are most well known for being skilled musicians, "occurred during the reign of Emperor Akbar, which was certainly the peak time of North Indian Music."[36]

Though Islamic musicality was undoubtedly an influence on the Sikh *kirtan* tradition,[37] it is readily apparent that the Sikh *kirtan* tradition shared much of the language and concepts of medieval Hindu *Bhakti* traditions. This stands to reason when one realizes how much devotional religion and music were part of the linguistic and cultural milieu into which the Gurus were born. The *kīrtana*, *rāga* ('musical mode'), and *tāla* (rhythm) concepts and structures of the older Hindu *Bhakti* devotional musical traditions were reinterpreted in distinct idioms (but under the same language) in the Sikh tradition. The tradition of *nām-kīrtan*, which for Hindu traditions is a musical remembrance and

---

36 Pg. 157. Singh, Pashaura. "Sikhism and Music". Similarly, Gurinder Singh Mann writes: "The role of *kirtan* in Sikh devotion and the principle of *rag* in organizing the Sikh scriptural text came to the Sikhs from the religio-cultural context of sixteenth-century India. The Sikh gurus knew enough about music to set their own hymns to thirty-one *rags*, both classical and regional" (Pg. 88. Mann, Gurinder Singh. *The Making of Sikh Scripture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). For an excellent source on the period of Emperor Akhbar's reign as the peak period of North Indian music, see Wade, Bonnie C. *Imaging Sound: An Ethnomusicological Study of Music, Art, and Culture in Mughal India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

37 The inclusion of Muslim *Bhagats* in the Sikh scripture and the presence of the Muslim *rabābī* tradition beginning with Bhai Mardana (whose musical training doubtlessly was influenced by his Muslim, *mīrāsī* upbringing) and his travels with Guru Nanak provide strong evidence for this taken by themselves.

praise of the Divine Names of God,[38] is cognate to the concept of *Nām simaran* of the Sikh tradition, which often takes the form of remembrance of the Divine Name through repetition of *Waheguru*, a primary title used for God by Sikhs. Additionally, the Hindu concept of *śabda* and the Sikh concept of *shabad*—both denoting the 'Divine Word'—are linked and deeply similar. As Pashaura Singh explains: "…the revelation in the Ādi Granth has its heritage in the rich concept of *śabad* (sacred sound) in Indian thought."[39] In both Sikh and Hindu traditions, the 'Sacred Sound', or 'Sacred Word' of the *śabda/shabad*, is seen as 'Eternal', as Divine in origin (or as the Divine origin itself), as synonymous with existence, and as the source and means of human liberation. Guy Beck explains that, "[t]he ancient [Hindu] texts of the Vedas and the Upanishads, said to be eternal and authorless, are believed to embody the eternal and primeval sacred sound that generated the universe, represented by the syllable *Om* (AUM)."[40] From this *Om*, this eternal uncreated sound vibration, all of existence is manifested: "*Om* is comprised of the elemental sound *śabda*, and therefore is also known as *Śabda-Brahman* ['sound that is the root and the whole of existence'], which manifests on earth through the power of sonic expression."[41] As I will discuss further below, the Sikh Gurus similarly embraced the term '*shabad*' to denote the totality of truth and root source of existence as Sound/Word.

The hymns of fifteen earlier Hindu and Muslim poet-saints of the medieval peak of the *bhakti* devotional movements—some of them among India's most well-known—

38 Pgs. 131-135. Beck, Guy L. "Hinduism and Music" in *Sacred Sound: Experiencing Music in World Religions*. Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006.
39 Pg. 412. Singh, Pashaura. "Recent Trends and Prospects in Sikh Studies". *Studies in Religion*, Volume 27, No. 4 (1998) pp. 407-425.
40 Pg. 114. Beck, Guy L. "Hinduism and Music".
41 Pg. 114. Beck, Guy L. "Hinduism and Music".

are included in the primary Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib. Although these *Bhagats* ('*Bhaktas*'/'Devotees') preceded the lives of the Gurus chronologically, and they are not given primacy over the Gurus within Sikh tradition, the inclusion of their hymns in the Sikh scripture has made their voices and words part of the unified voice of Guru Granth Sahib, the Living Guru of the Sikhs. Included in the Sikh scripture by Guru Arjan because their teachings were seen as being part and parcel with the teachings of the Sikh Gurus,[42] the Bhagats' emphasis on worshiping and connecting with the Divine through musical performance, and the 'hymn' form of their teachings likely—in some cases certainly—predates the Sikh tradition. This is especially true of Kabir,[43] but also of other poet-Saints who were part of the musical and spiritual milieu of medieval India. Gurinder Singh Mann writes that "…skill in music is demonstrated in the compositions of all other saint-poets of this [pre-Nanak] period."[44] The musical forms that the hymns of these poet-Saints took drew on two of the dominant musical styles of the period, the *prabandha* ('classical song') and *dhrupad* ('fixed word') styles (discussed above). According to Pashaura Singh "most of the songs of medieval poet-saints were sung in the *dhrupad*

42 For the most complete discussions about the inclusion of the hymns of the *Bhagats* in the Guru Granth Sahib, see Pashaura Singh's*The Bhagats of the Guru Granth Sahib: Sikh-Self-Definition and the Bhagat Bani* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); and *The Guru Granth Sahib: Canon Meaning and Authority* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000. Reprint, New Delhi: Oxford India Paperbacks, 2003).

43 Remarking on the compositions of Kabir, Linda Hess writes, "it is usually assumed that [Kabir's] *pad* [song] form is meant to be sung, and that Kabir probably sang his own compositions. Some people claim that he knew enough music to sing in *ragas*, and that the *raga* divisions in the collections [the Guru Granth Sahib and the Kabir literature outside of it] can be traced back to the poet" (pgs. 115-116. "Three Kabir Collections: A Comparative Study" in *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*. Edited by Karine Schomer and W.H. McLeod. Berkeley: Religious Studies Series and Motilal Banarsidass, 1987).

44 Pg. 88. Mann, Gurinder Singh. *The Making of Sikh Scripture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

style by trained professional singers, and this was one of the styles that became the model for *shabad kīrtan* (hymn singing) in the early Sikh tradition."[45] Thus, Sikh *Gurbani kirtan* emerged as a distinct tradition, but from within a rich milieu of sacred music, partly utilizing different styles that were already extant in medieval South Asia, some of the earlier famous exponents of which were embraced as part and parcel with the new tradition.

1.5 'Sonic Theology' in the Sikh Tradition

It would not be difficult to make the case that the Sikh tradition is the 'most musical'—or at least uniformly positive toward music—of the major religious traditions of the world. Pashaura Singh writes, "[d]evotional music has always been part and parcel of the Sikh tradition," and "…*shabad kirtan* [musical performance of the Sikh scriptures] has always been an integral part of Sikh worship from the very beginning."[46] Gurnam Singh concurs with Pashaura Singh, stating that, "…*shabad kirtan* has been made an inseparable part of the Sikh way of life."[47] The centrality of music and sacred sound within the Sikh tradition is not just found in the tradition's clearly positive attitude toward the performance of sacred music in a religious setting. Rather, fundamentally, Sikh theology[48] is a 'sonic theology'. Here, I am utilizing Guy Beck's term for describing the

45 Pg. 141. Singh, Pashaura. "Sikhism and Music".
46 Pgs. 129, 149. Singh, Pashaura. *The Guru Granth Sahib: Canon Meaning and Authority*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000. Oxford India Paperbacks, 2003.
47 Pg. 1. Singh, Gurnam. *Sikh Musicology: Sri Guru Granth Sahib and Hymns of the Human Spirit*. New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers, 2001.
48 I am aware of some of the objections made by scholars that the term 'theology' may be seen as a 'Western' imposition on the Sikh tradition (see, for example: Mandair, A.S. *Religion and the Spectre of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality and the Politics of Translation*. New York, Columbia

centrality of sacred sound within the theologies of various Hindu traditions. Beck defines the 'sonic theology' of these Hindu traditions, writing: "[a]ll of the different divisions and sects [of the Hindu traditions]... reflect this basic concern for *deliverance from an evil* or nescient world, *employing sonic themes in their theologies* and *advocating sonic techniques in their theologie*s."[49] In similarity with the Hindu traditions Beck describes under the label of 'sonic theolog[ies]', the Sikh tradition (across the hymns of the Gurus and through to the interpretations of modern Sikhs) portrays sacred sound—in the form of the inspired utterances of the Gurus (Gurbani) as they were revealed in musical form (shabad/kirtan)—as the mode by which Divine deliverance entered the mundane world, and the technique by which to be delivered from evil and to experience the Divine presence.[50] I would argue, in fact, that the Sikh tradition is a highly developed 'sonic theology' *par excellence* among the major world religions.

In the Sikh tradition, the word *Nām*, the 'Divine Name,' is used by the Sikh Gurus to signify all of the attributes of the Divine—the sum total of which is synonymous with

---

University Press, 2009). For my purposes here, I am using the term 'theology' with a typical dictionary definition in mind hewing close to the word's plain etymological meaning: "the field of study and analysis that treats of God and of God's attributes and relations to the universe; study of divine things or religious truth; divinity" (dictionary.reference.com/browse/theology). It would seem to be inoffensive to say that the Sikh Gurus and the Sikh tradition are concerned with analyzing the attributes of God/the Divine, God/the Divine's relation with the universe, and the study of religious truth. For what it is worth, the Greek *theos* of 'theology' is etymologically related to the Indo-European *deva* ('god', 'divinity'), and the logos in the word may be related to the Sanskrit root *lag-*/*lig-*, 'to bind'—as in being 'bound' to a sacred law (or to the 'Word of God')— which is also the root of the Latin words *lex* (law) and *religio* ('to bind', from which English derives the word religion). Thus the word 'theology' has at least an ancient etymology of non-'western' origin.

49 Pg. 14, italics mine. Beck, Guy. *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1995.

50 For a prominent Sikh *rāgī's* own further explication of this, see Bhai Kultar Singh's comments regarding the unity of Guru/Word/Sound (*Gurbani*/*Shabad*/*Nād*) in the excerpts from my conversations with him as presented in Chapter Four.

the root and totality of existence. *Shabad* is then the 'Divine Sound/Word', through which the 'Divine Name', this source of existence, is made known to the human mind. Pashaura Singh elucidates the relationship of these two central Sikh concepts:

> These two key terms *naam* and *shabad* must be understood in the context of the teaching of the Sikh Gurus. Guru Nanak employs the word *Naam* to express the nature of divine revelation in its totality. Accordingly, the *naam* reflects the manifestation of divine presence everywhere, yet the people fail to perceive it due to their *haumai* or self-centredness.[51]

Akal Purakh is revealed through the Guru uttering the *shabad* (Divine Word) "...which communicates a sufficient understanding of the naam (divine name) to those who are able to 'hear' it". The Gurus are thus "...the 'voice' of Akal Purakh, mystically uttered within the human heart, mind, and soul (*man*)," and *shabad* is the actual 'utterance' of the Guru, "... upon 'hearing' [which] one awakens to the reality of the Divine Name, immanent in all that lies around and within one[self]."[52] Liberation (*mokh*/*mukt*) from death and suffering is achieved through the gracious mercy (*nadar/kripā*) of Akal Purakh, and by living 'in harmony' with the Divine Sound-current (*Shabad*) and Divine Order (*Hukam*). This is achieved by practicing *Nām simaran*—turning one's focus entirely away from the self-centered ego-mind (*haumai*) and 'remembering the Name'—through meditation and orienting oneself toward The One (*Ik Oankar*), thereby bringing oneself into harmony with the "divine rhythm."[53] Performing *kirtan* is presented by the Sikh Gurus as the most

---

51 Pg. 144. Singh, Pashaura. "Sikhism and Music".
52 Ibid.
53 Pg. 3. McLeod, W.H. *The Sikhs: History, Religion, and Society*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.

effective method humans can utilize to bring themselves into this harmony with the *Nām* and to earn the kind of *karam* needed for release from rebirth.[54]

It is Guru Nanak who first makes the connection of music and sacred sound with worship of the Divine unequivocal within the Sikh tradition. Pashaura Singh writes "a careful analysis of Guru Nānak's works reveals that he stressed on the mode of devotional singing as the only efficacious means of liberation: 'It is through singing of Divine praises that we find a place in the Lord's court'."[55] Guru Nānak's strong emphasis on musical sound as the primary means of connecting with the Divine portrays his 'sonic theology' and was of utmost influence in shaping the later Sikh tradition. Further portraying the fundamental importance of music to his theology, Guru Nanak is also unique as "...the only founder of a major world religion who was himself a performing musician."[56] In several hymns included in Guru Granth Sahib, Guru Nanak describes his role as that of a 'mouthpiece' through which the Divine Word (*shabad*/*bāṇī*) is revealed. In a key passage, Guru Nanak proclaims: "As the Lord's Word [*bāṇī*] comes to me, in that way do I reveal it, O Lalo."[57] This passage particularly makes it clear why many Sikhs and non-Sikhs compare Guru Nanak's role in the Sikh tradition to that of the Prophets of other religious traditions. In another passage, Guru Nanak compares himself to a minstrel singer (a *ḍhāḍī*[58]), who the Lord chose for the purpose of revealing His Word through his teachings (*Gurmat*):

54 Pgs. 50-51. Ibid.
55 Pg. 129. Singh, Pashaura. *The Guru Granth Sahib: Canon Meaning and Authority.*
56 Pg. 142. Singh, Pashaura. "Sikhism and Music".
57 ਜੈਸੀ ਮੈ ਆਵੈ ਖਸਮ ਕੀ ਬਾਣੀ ਤੈਸੜਾ ਕਰੀ ਗਿਆਨੁ ਵੇ ਲਾਲੋ ॥ M1, *Tilang* (5), AG pg.722. "Lalo," who is addressed in this hymn, is thought to be one of the important early Sikhs (disciples) of Guru Nanak.
58 I will discuss the Sikh *ḍhāḍī* tradition in the next section of this chapter and again in Chapter Four.

> ਹਉ ਢਾਢੀ ਵੇਕਾਰੁ ਕਾਰੈ ਲਾਇਆ ॥
> ਰਾਤਿ ਦਿਹੈ ਕੈ ਵਾਰ ਧੁਰਹੁ ਫੁਰਮਾਇਆ ॥
> ਢਾਢੀ ਸਚੈ ਮਹਲਿ ਖਸਮਿ ਬੁਲਾਇਆ ॥
> ਸਚੀ ਸਿਫਤਿ ਸਾਲਾਹ ਕਪੜਾ ਪਾਇਆ ॥
> ਸਚਾ ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤ ਨਾਮੁ ਭੋਜਨੁ ਆਇਆ ॥
> ਗੁਰਮਤੀ ਖਾਧਾ ਰਜਿ ਤਿਨਿ ਸੁਖੁ ਪਾਇਆ ॥
> ਢਾਢੀ ਕਰੇ ਪਸਾਉ ਸਬਦੁ ਵਜਾਇਆ ॥
> ਨਾਨਕ ਸਚੁ ਸਾਲਾਹਿ ਪੂਰਾ ਪਾਇਆ ॥੨੭॥ ਸੁਧੁ
>
> I was a useless minstrel singer [*ḍhāḍī*], [when the Lord] drew me [into His] service.
> From the beginning, He gave me His Order to sing ballads of His praises day and night.
> [My] Lord has led me, His minstrel singer, into the True palace [of His Presence].
> He has clothed me in the robes of His True Praise.
> The true nectar of immortality, the Name, has become my food.
> Through the Guru's teachings [*gurmatī*], this food is eaten, and peace and satisfaction come.
> The [Lord's] minstrel singer sings and spreads the Word [*Shabad*].
> O Nanak, perfect fulfillment comes through praising the True [One]...[59]

This passage portrays Guru Nanak as both the humble musician chosen by God to convey the Word, and also as the teacher by which the 'food for the soul' that is the Name is distributed to humanity.

Elsewhere in the Guru Granth Sahib, Guru Nanak describes existence as permeated by—even composed of—the 'Unstruck Sound' (*anhad nāda*) eternally emanating from Akāl Purakh, which is the source of all knowledge: “The Guru's Word [*Gurbāṇī*] embodies all scriptural knowledge (*Veda*) and the eternally sounding vibration (*nāda*) that permeates all space.”[60] This passage further reveals Guru Nanak's role as the 'mouthpiece' through which the all-pervading *nāda* reveals itself. This eternally sounding

59 M1, *Mājha*, AG pg. 150.
60 ਸਭਿ ਨਾਦ ਬੇਦ ਗੁਰਬਾਣੀ ॥ M1, *Rāmakali* (10), AG pg. 879.

vibration reveals itself through Guru Nanak's *bāṇī* (words), which are conveyed by him in the medium of *rāgas*, musical 'modes' that evoke powerful moods and sentiments. In the 'sonic theology' of the Sikh tradition, all of the *rāgas* of *Gurbānī* "...exist eternally and some of them are merely discovered from time to time by inspired musicians", and the Gurus are those who were able to 'hear' this "unstruck melody" and convey it to humanity.[61] Guru Nanak identifies these eternal *rāgas* as containing the very essence and nectar of immortality, a gift from the Divine Creator: "The [precious] jewel *rāgas* and their families of *rāginīs*[62] are the source of the essence of the 'nectar of immortality' [*amrit*]. O Nanak, this wealth is the gift of the Creator, even if few understand this."[63] In Guru Nanak's *Jāp-ji*, which has been part of the daily prayers performed by Sikhs since Guru Nanak interacted daily with his Sikhs in the Kartarpur community, Guru Nanak affirms devotional singing as the path to freedom from suffering:

> ਆਖਹਿ ਮੰਗਹਿ ਦੇਹਿ ਦੇਹਿ ਦਾਤਿ ਕਰੇ ਦਾਤਾਰੁ ॥
> ਫੇਰਿ ਕਿ ਅਗੈ ਰਖੀਐ ਜਿਤੁ ਦਿਸੈ ਦਰਬਾਰੁ ॥
> ਮੁਹੌ ਕਿ ਬੋਲਣੁ ਬੋਲੀਐ ਜਿਤੁ ਸੁਣਿ ਧਰੇ ਪਿਆਰੁ ॥
> ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤ ਵੇਲਾ ਸਚੁ ਨਾਉ ਵਡਿਆਈ ਵੀਚਾਰੁ ॥ [. . . .]
> ਨਾਨਕ ਗਾਵੀਐ ਗੁਣੀ ਨਿਧਾਨੁ ॥
> ਗਾਵੀਐ ਸੁਣੀਐ ਮਨਿ ਰਖੀਐ ਭਾਉ ॥
> ਦੁਖੁ ਪਰਹਰਿ ਸੁਖੁ ਘਰਿ ਲੈ ਜਾਇ ॥

---

61 Pg. 144. Singh, Pashaura. "Sikhism and Music".

62 According to classical treatises and classification systems, *rāginīs* are the paired musical modes or 'wives' of particular *rāgas*. Here, I follow Shackle's *A Guru Nanak Glossary* in translating the *parīā* of this selection as '*rāginī*', even though it can also have the meaning of 'fairy', or 'lovely woman'.

63 ਰਾਗ ਰਤਨ ਪਰੀਆ ਪਰਵਾਰ ॥
ਤਿਸੁ ਵਿਚਿ ਉਪਜੈ ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤੁ ਸਾਰ ॥
ਨਾਨਕ ਕਰਤੇ ਕਾ ਇਹੁ ਧਨੁ ਮਾਲੁ ॥
ਜੇ ਕੋ ਬੂਝੈ ਏਹੁ ਬੀਚਾਰੁ ॥੪॥੯॥
M1, *Āsa* (9), AG pg. 351.

> People beg and pray, “Give to us, give to us”, and the Great Giver gives His Gifts.
> So what offering can we place before Him by which we might see His Court [*Darbār*]?
> What words can we speak to evoke His love?
> In the ambrosial hours before dawn [*amrita velā*], chant the True Name, and contemplate His Glorious Greatness. . . .
> O Nanak, sing of [the Lord], the Treasure of excellent virtues.
> Sing, listen, and let your mind be filled with love.
> [Then] suffering [*dukh*] will be cast aside, and contented bliss [*sukh*] will come to your home.[64]

Thus, in Guru Nanak's 'sonic theology', devotional singing is the primary offering to lay before God, by which one may be freed from suffering, and hope to enter into the Divine presence.

Such an emphasis on music as the primary mode of connection with the Divine continued through the succession of Gurus after Guru Nanak who continued to reveal their teachings in the form of musical hymns, and (as I will discuss further in the second section of this chapter and in Chapter Four) sponsored and encouraged sacred music in their courts. In line with Guru Nanak's hymns, the hymns of the later Gurus of the Sikh tradition portray sacred sound as the means of connecting with the Divine, as the primary means of worship, and as the source and mode of liberation from suffering and death. This liberation can only be achieved through meditating on the Divine Name (*Nām*) and the music of the Divine Word (*Shabad*). Thus, music is the means of liberation through the potential it opens for the establishment of a metaphysical connection with Akāl Purakh, which by His grace is facilitated through hearing the sacred sounds of *Shabad*.

64 M1, *Jāp*, AG pg 2.

Further elucidating the role of *rāgas* as the medium by which Divine Sound (*Nāda*) and Truth are delivered, the fourth Guru, Guru Ram Das states "[t]he *rāga* and Divine Sound [*Nāda*] are the entire Divine Truth [*Sachu*], and their value is beyond description. Those who are ignorant of this Divine music cannot comprehend the Divine Order [*hukam*]."[65] The hymns of the fifth Guru, Guru Arjan, are particularly fruitful for understanding the Sikh tradition's 'sonic theology'. Enthusing about sacred music, Guru Arjan says "[t]he true aim of my life lies in absorption in religious discourse, *kirtan*, and vibration of the Divine Word through singing and music."[66] Portraying devotional singing as the primary form of worship, from Guru Arjan's hymns, we read that "singing *kirtan* in the congregation of the True ones [*Sādh Sangat]* is the highest of all actions,"[67] as well as "the righteous duty incurred by taking birth in this human body."[68] Revealing this primacy of kirtan in a most direct way, Guru Arjan says that "[i]n this dark age of Kali Yuga,[69] *kirtan* is the primary, most excellent [*paradhānā*][70] [form of worship]."[71] Guru Arjan also ascribes soteriological efficacy—manifested in the ability to overcome suffering and death—to singing kirtan. Thus, in Guru Arjan's hymns, we read, "the

65 ਰਾਗੁ ਨਾਦੁ ਸਭੁ ਸਚੁ ਹੈ ਕੀਮਤਿ ਕਹੀ ਨ ਜਾਇ ॥ ਰਾਗੈ ਨਾਦੈ ਬਾਹਰਾ ਇਨੀ ਹੁਕਮੁ ਨ ਬੂਝਿਆ ਜਾਇ ॥ M4, *Salok Varan te Vadhik* (24), AG pg. 1423.

66 ਕਥਾ ਕੀਰਤਨੁ ਰਾਗ ਨਾਦ ਧੁਨਿ ਇਹੁ ਬਨਿਓ ਸੁਆਉ ॥ M5, *Bilaval* (6), AG pg. 818.

67 ਹਰਿ ਕੀਰਤਿ ਸਾਧਸੰਗਤਿ ਹੈ ਸਿਰਿ ਕਰਮਨ ਕੈ ਕਰਮਾ ॥ M5, *Sorāthi* 149 (7), AG, p. 642: "Singing *Kirtan* in the *Sādh Sangat* [the congregation of the True] is the highest of all actions."

68 ਰਮਣੰ ਕੇਵਲੰ ਕੀਰਤਨੰ ਸੁਧਰਮੰ ਦੇਹ ਧਾਰਣਹ ॥ M5, *Salok Sahaskriti* (26), AG, p. 1356: 'To sing *Kirtan* is the righteous duty incurred by taking birth in this human body".

69 Our current final cosmic age, comparable to the 'end times' of other tradition in terms of being a perceived era of declining human righteousness and impending destruction of the world.

70 In *A Guru Nanak Glossary*, Christopher Shackle renders the term *paradhānā* as "chief; the best, outstanding, most excellent..." (Page 183). This is derived from the Sanskrit *pradhāna*, meaning 'most important, prime, chief, major'.

71 ਕਲਜੁਗ ਮਹਿ ਕੀਰਤਨੁ ਪਰਧਾਨਾ ॥ M5, *Mārū Solase* (5), AG pg. 1075

messenger of death cannot even touch one who sings kirtan,"[72] "the cycle of birth and death is ended… singing *kirtan,*"[73] "the false thinking of both performers and hearers is destroyed when they participate in *kirtan* [*Hari kīratana*],"[74] and "[r]emembering the Name, doubt and fear depart... suffering can never come to the person who performs and listens to *kirtan.*"[75] The hymns of Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Guru, similarly portray *kirtan* as the ultimate method for achieving release from death and the suffering and evil of this world. In Guru Teg Bahadur's hymns, we read that one who sings *kirtan* "has performed all religious rituals,"[76] and "...one crosses over the terrifying ocean [of existence] by singing the songs [*gīta*] of the Lord..."[77] Elsewhere, Guru Tegh Bahadur asks the audience of his hymn, "...why not sing of the Lord's glory, so that you can destroy the body's evil thinking?..."[78] Another hymn of Guru Tegh Bahadur reminds the hearer to recognize the quick passing of their lifetime and to occupy their short amount of time alive singing God's praises:

> ਛਿਨੁ ਛਿਨੁ ਅਉਧ ਬਿਹਾਤੁ ਹੈ ਫੂਟੈ ਘਟ ਜਿਉ ਪਾਨੀ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥
> ਹਰਿ ਗੁਨ ਕਾਹਿ ਨ ਗਾਵਹੀ ਮੂਰਖ ਅਗਿਆਨਾ ॥
> ਝੂਠੈ ਲਾਲਚਿ ਲਾਗਿ ਕੈ ਨਹਿ ਮਰਨੁ ਪਛਾਨਾ ॥੧॥

72 ਜੋ ਜਨੁ ਕਰੈ ਕੀਰਤਨੁ ਗੋਪਾਲ ॥ ਤਿਸ ਕਉ ਪੋਹਿ ਨ ਸਕੈ ਜਮਕਾਲੁ ॥ M5, *Gond* 19 (2), Ādi Granth, p. 867: "One who sings *Kirtan*, the Messenger of Death cannot even touch that humble being".

73 ਰਹੰਤਾ ਜਨਮ ਮਰਣੇਨ ਰਮਣੰ ਨਾਨਕ ਹਰਿ ਕੀਰਤਨਹ ॥੭॥ M5, *Gāthā* (12), AG, p. 1360: "The cycle of birth and death is ended, O Nanak, singing *Kirtan*".

74 ਜੋ ਜੋ ਕਥੈ ਸੁਨੈ ਹਰਿ ਕੀਰਤਨੁ ਤਾ ਕੀ ਦੁਰਮਤਿ ਨਾਸ ॥ M5, *Kanara*, AG pg. 1300.

75 ਸਿਮਰਤ ਨਾਮੁ ਭੈ ਪਾਰਿ ਉਤਰੀਆ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ॥ [...] ਸੁਣਿ ਕੀਰਤਨੁ ਸਾਧ ਪਹਿ ਜਾਇ ॥ ਜਨਮ ਮਰਣ ਕੀ ਤ੍ਰਾਸ ਮਿਟਾਇ ॥੩॥ M5, *Gauṛi* (121), AG, pg. 190.

76 ਸਰਬ ਧਰਮ ਮਾਨੋ ਤਿਹ ਕੀਏ ਜਿਹ ਪ੍ਰਭ ਕੀਰਤਿ ਗਾਈ ॥੨॥ M9, *Rāmakalī* 75 (1), AG, p. 902: 'Understand, that whoever sings *Kirtan*, has performed all religious rituals'.

77 ਨਾਨਕ ਭਉਜਲੁ ਪਾਰਿ ਪਰੈ ਜਉ ਗਾਵੈ ਪ੍ਰਭ ਕੇ ਗੀਤ ॥੨॥੩॥੬॥੩੮॥੪੭॥ M9, *Devgandhārī*, AG pg. 536. "O Nanak, one crosses over the terrifying ocean [of existence] by singing the songs [*gīta*] of the Lord...".

78 ਨਾਨਕ ਹਰਿ ਜਸੁ ਕਿਉ ਨਹੀ ਗਾਵਤ ਕੁਮਤਿ ਬਿਨਾਸੈ ਤਨ ਕੀ ॥੨॥੧॥੨੩੩॥ M9, *Āsa*, AG pg. 411. "O Nanak, why not sing of the the Lord's glory, so that you can destroy the body's evil thinking? ...".

> ਅਜਹੂ ਕਛੁ ਬਿਗਰਿਓ ਨਹੀ ਜੋ ਪ੍ਰਭ ਗੁਨ ਗਾਵੈ ॥
> ਕਹੁ ਨਾਨਕ ਤਿਹ ਭਜਨ ਤੇ ਨਿਰਭੈ ਪਦੁ ਪਾਵੈ ॥੨॥੧॥
>
> Each and every moment, your life is passing away, like water from a cracked pitcher...
> Why do you not sing the Praises of the Lord, you ignorant fool?
> Attached to greed and lust, you do not even recognize death [is near].
> Yet even now, nothing is yet ruined if you will only sing God's Praises.
> Nanak says, by singing devotional praise, you will obtain to the state [*padu*] of fearlessness [*nirbhai*]...[79]

It is poignantly prophetic that Guru Arjan and Guru Tegh Bahadur dwell so much in their hymns on putting forward kirtan as the method to overcome death and the fear of death, since both Guru Arjan and Guru Tegh Bahadur were killed in horrific ways by Mughal authorities. According to traditional accounts[80] Guru Arjan and Guru Tegh Bahadur greeted their violent deaths at the hands of Imperial authorities with calm repose through singing devotional hymns. For this, modern Sikhs revere Guru Arjan and Guru Tegh Bahadur as martyrs whose lives, and deaths, portray a physical enactment of the 'sonic theology' they taught as the primary means of liberation from fear, suffering, and death.

1.6 The Form and Performance of the *Gurbani Kirtan* Tradition

As touched on above, *rāgas*—musical modes that evoke particular moods and sentiments—are extremely important in the Sikh tradition. In fact, the entire Guru Granth Sahib[81] is organized according to *rāgas*, which serves to provide performative

---

79 M9, *Tilang Kāphī*, AG pg. 726.

80 Pashaura Singh writes that Bhai Gurdas, who "...was the only person allowed to see [Guru Arjan] before his death..." was, in writing about it "...[perhaps] so overwhelmed by the Guru's steadfast response of reciting hymns while he was subjected to... horrific tortures that he could only describe [this] in poetic metaphors in his var..." (pg. 232. *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*).

81 Barring a few short sections, such as Guru Nanak's *Jāp*, for which a *rāga* is not provided.

instructions and parameters specifically to each poetic hymn.[82] The Sikh Gurus were so developed as practicing musicians, that it is likely that they are the originators of five *rāgas*—*mājh*, *āsā*, *vadahans*, *māru*, and *tukhari*—that appear only in Guru Granth Sahib and not in any other South Asian listings or collections of *rāgas*.[83] In the Sikh tradition, the purifying and transforming effects ascribed to sacred devotional music do not extend to secular music or to music in a secular setting. From the beginning of the Sikh tradition, the *rāgas* which the Gurus chose to accompany their hymns—though utilizing various classical and folk forms—were carefully chosen for sharing a specific characteristic: the ability to evoke 'worshipful' states of mind within both performers and hearers. Explaining this, Pashaura Singh writes:

> In musical theory, *rāgas* are suited to various moods, intervals of time, and specific seasons, and each *rāga* has acquired its own particular spiritual significance on the basis of tradition and usage. Guru Nānak and the succeeding Gurus selected the *rāgas* very carefully. They explicitly stated that only those *rāgas* should be used which produce a peaceful effect in the mind of both listeners and performers. Any *rāga* that arouses passion of any kind must, ipso facto, be omitted… In their choice of *rāgas*, the Gurus' aim was to create a mood of sobriety and to avoid extremes.[84]

This mood of "sobriety", and avoidance of passionate extremes, was maintained for the purpose of allowing the primacy of the Word over its presentation in musical performance:

> In actual *kīrtan* performance it is of the utmost importance the music always be subservient to the divine word. It must be simple, sublime, and dignified so that

82 For more about the *rāga* organization of Guru Granth Sahib and the logic behind it, see chapter four of Pashaura Singhs' *The Guru Granth Sahib: Canon Meaning and Authority*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000. Oxford India Paperbacks, 2003.

83 Pg. 158. Singh, Pashaura. "Sikhism and Music".

84 Ibid.

> 'the listener does not get unduly enraptured in its embellishments, and lose the bearings of the Word.'[85]

Though Sikh sacred music should maintain a certain "sobriety" in order to allow for concentration on the Divine Word, this does not mean that Sikh sacred music should be 'somber', or in any way 'dull' or monotonous, as ideally, "music should be neither somber nor exuberant, but should produce a feeling of divine bliss."[86] In distinction from other Hindu *kirtan* and Sufi *qawwali* traditions current in their time and South Asian milieu, the Sikh Gurus eschewed dancing and clapping as distractions from the ideal tranquil atmosphere that allows focus on the Divine Word.[87] The sometimes frenetic and highly ornamented musical styles of South Asian classical music were thus rejected in the Sikh sacred musical tradition, especially since the former represented a 'secular' form of music which was created solely for entertainment purposes.

As discussed above, the *rāgas* utilized by the Sikh Gurus portray connections to both classical and folk forms and also to regional variations. This diverse 'color palette' of *rāgas* indicates both that the Gurus traveled and were aware of different musical forms, and that they employed these various musical forms because their "...primary intention... was to reach out to various audiences," such that, "[i]f they wanted to address a Sufi audience, they would employ the *Kāfi* class of *rāgas* in singing. Similarly, they would employ folk tunes to address the rural people," and so on.[88] In light of this, it seems that

85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid. Interestingly, some Sikh sects who perform *kirtan* in a more 'energetic' way, incorporating more percussion instruments and even hand clapping, draw criticism from other Sikhs as 'pushing the envelope' of Sikh *kirtan* toward non-Sikh 'styles'.
88 Pg. 159. Singh, Pashaura. "Sikhism and Music".

though music was given primacy as a vehicle for connection with God, musical form or style was malleable and subordinate to the message of the Word. The commingling of folk and classical musical styles seems also to have ended up influencing the compilation and structuring of the Ādi Granth:

> The final sequence of ragas in the Ādi Granth was a blend of a number of popular and regional music systems of north India at that time. In doing so, Guru Arjan created a theological and musicological coherence in the very structure of the Ādi Granth. Furthermore, the classical and folk tunes were simultaneously employed keeping in mind the sociological significance of the folk tradition. The primary intention of the Gurus was to reach out to various audiences from different parts of India through the medium of musical styles.[89]

Thus, different styles of music, including folk tunes, were incorporated into the Sikh *kirtan* tradition, even into the musical instructions within the Sikh scripture itself, in order to convey the message of the Gurus to a wider audience.

In the early Sikh communities, the hymns of the Gurus were primarily transmitted in oral/musical form before they were written.[90] Even when the hymns of the Ādi Granth were eventually compiled in written form by Guru Arjan, "…the written text of the Ādi Granth [was understood to have] power only as it [was] sung devotionally."[91] Communal singing of *kirtan* was a feature of Sikh communities beginning with the Kartarpur community of Guru Nanak. It continued as the primary mode of worship within the Goindwal community surrounding the third Guru, Guru Amar Das, and also in the Ramdaspur/Amritsar community surrounding the Guruship of Guru Ram Das and Guru Arjan (I will further discuss the early Ramdaspur/Amritsar community in the next section

89 Pg. 149. Ibid.
90 Pg. 145. Ibid.
91 Pg. 157. Ibid.

of this chapter). In the modern congregational setting, *Gurbani kirtan* is usually performed by a group of three or four professional hymn singers (see Figure 2.1), called *rāgīs* or *kirtaniyas* (see Chapter Four). The line between 'performer' and 'audience' that is often presumed in modern 'Western' secular music is not present in Sikh *kirtan*, since non-specialists are encouraged to join in the singing, as they are able and moved to do so. Because of the great power that *kirtan* and *rāgas* are understood to contain—as vehicles of the Divine Sound (*nāda*) and Word (Shabad/*bāṇī*)—*rāgīs* and *Granthis* take great care "…to ensure that these sacred sounds are replicated exactly as they are thought to have been enunciated by the Sikh Gurus and the other poets whose divinely inspired utterances are collected in the Ādi Granth."[92] Some examples of the great care taken in recitation include washing of the mouth to avoid impurities entering the sounds, and the care that is taken during an *akhaṇd pāṭh* (a forty-eight hour continuous recitation of the complete Guru Granth Sahib) to pass from one reader to the next with no break in the sacred words.

1.7 The Experience of *Gurbani Kirtan*

In the Hindu context, *Darśan* is understood as a "transaction through seeing"—that is, of seeing and being seen by a deity. Sikhs interpret listening to the hymns of Guru Granth Sahib as experiencing a connection with the Guru and the Divine as a "transaction through hearing". On this central act of auspicious hearing of the sacred sounds (*Shabad*)

92 Pg. 79. Dusenbery, Verne A. "The Word as Guru: Sikh Scripture and the Translation Controversy" in *Sikhs at Large: Religion, Culture, and Politics in Global Perspective*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008.

of the Guru Granth Sahib, Gurnam Singh explains that, "the basic purpose of *shabad kirtan* [or *śabad kirtan*] is to imbibe the light of *shabad* into the human mind."[93] When performing or hearing *Gurbani kirtan*, Sikhs strive to align their consciousness with that of the Guru—i.e., God and God's Divine Light (*Gurjot*) that passed through each of the human Gurus—through attuning themselves to the Sound/Word of the *Shabad*. In line with this, G. S. Mansukhani writes:

> The highest benefit of *kirtan* is obtained by linking one's consciousness with the meaning and significance of the contents of the hymn. It is not enough that we understand the theme of the *shabad*; it is equally essential that we enter into its spirit and partake of the feeling of the Guru when he sang that hymn.[94]

Again, this linking of the practitioner's consciousness with that of the Guru is also understood as a practice of *Nām simaran*. Through achieving such meditative harmony with the *Nām*, by means of the *Shabad*, humans can achieve liberation from the sufferings of life and the cycle of rebirth. Harold Coward evocatively describes the Sikh understanding of the process of 'harmonizing' oneself with the Divine: "Through such *kirtan* (singing) the individual attunes himself to vibrate in harmony with the divine word, just as the violin string is made one with the sound of the tuning fork. For the Sikh... participation in the divine word has power to transform and unify one's consciousness."[95] In addition to these violin and tuning fork metaphors, Harold Coward further discusses how Sikhs view listening to *Gurbani kirtan* as "...combing of negative

93 Pg. 13. Singh, Gurnam. *Sikh Musicology: Sri Guru Granth Sahib and Hymns of the Human Spirit*. New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers, 2001.
94 Pg. 85. Mansukhani, G.S. *Indian Classical Music and Sikh Kirtan*. New Delhi: Oxford and IBH Publishing Co., 1982.
95 Pg. 133. Coward, Harold. *Sacred Word and Sacred Text: Scripture in World Religions*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988.

thoughts from one’s heart and mind that occurs as a regular part of one’s daily discipline[96]”. The words of Guru Arjan in Guru Granth Sahib seem to justify Coward’s interpretation: “the false thinking of both performers and hearers is destroyed when they participate in devotional singing.”[97]

Several other scholars have described the perceived transformative power of sacred music within the Sikh tradition. Pashaura Singh writes that “... the Sikh belief [is] that the recitation of daily prayers by heart has transformative and purifying effects”, and “the simple repetition of the sacred word sanctifies the whole life of the individual…”[98] Verne A. Dusenbury takes up the metaphor often employed by modern Sikhs, that *Gurbani kirtan* is 'food for the soul', and explains the Sikh view of the transformative powers of *Gurbani kirtan* as an 'imbibing' of the sacred Word:

> “…[the Gurus] through channeling divine worship substances to the devotee… *transform* the person in body as well as spirit... Sounds [of the *shabad*]…have material/physical/physiological as well as spiritual/mental/cognitive affects upon their recipients. . . . exact recitation of the *gurbāni*… and performance of *sevā*... appear to be considered especially efficacious in incorporating the Guru’s divinely coded substances and to play a central role in *recomposing Sikh persons as a divine human genus*… in reciting *gurbāni*, both performer and audience actively take into their persons the natural sacred sounds of the Guru.[99]

Through such an 'imbibing' of the sacred Sound and Word, Sikhs thus hope to transform their body and consciousness, through being ‘recomposed’ within a special relationship with the Divine. I will return to a discussion of how Sikhs experience *Gurbani kirtan*, based on my interviews with Sikh Americans, in Chapter Three.

96 Ibid.

97 ਜੋ ਜੋ ਕਥੈ ਸੁਨੈ ਹਰਿ ਕੀਰਤਨੁ ਤਾ ਕੀ ਦੁਰਮਤਿ ਨਾਸ ॥ M5, AG pg. 1300.

98 Pgs. 145, 148. Singh, Pashaura. “Sikhism and Music”.

99 Pg. 78, italics mine. Dusenbery, Verne A. “The Word as Guru: Sikh Scripture and the Translation Controversy”.

Having discussed the fundamental centrality of *Gurbani kirtan* and sacred sound to the Sikh tradition, the South Asian antecedents to the Sikh *kirtan* tradition, the 'sonic theology' of the Sikh Gurus, and the format and experience of *kirtan's* performance, in the next section, I will discuss the history and ongoing religious life of the Darbar Sahib—Sikhism's sacred center, which under Guru Arjan began a tradition of continuous singing of Gurbani kirtan and other worship patterns that still today sets the model for devotional music and worship at Sikh religious sites around the world.

Part Two: The Darbar Sahib: Sikhism's Sacred Heart and Model for Worship Patterns Around the World

2.1 Introduction

Darbar Sahib is literally the 'Venerable Court' (*darbar* is a Persian word meaning 'court'–as in a 'royal court'–and *sahib* is the ubiquitous Punjabi honorific showing respect for that which is sacred or worthy of veneration). The term is used to signify the Sacred Court of the Sikh Gurus, and, most especially, the 'Divine Court' of Akal Purakh ('The Timeless One'/God) on Earth. Sikh use of the term *darbar* points to the period when the ten human Gurus 'held court' or a 'royal' audience with their community of Sikhs. Today, *darbar* is applied within Sikh gurdwaras around the world, in the sense that to enter the 'Darbar Hall' ('sanctum sanctorum' or 'prayer hall') where Guru Granth Sahib is enthroned is to enter into the Divine Court of the Living Guru, and the presence of God. Thus God

as Guru (Waheguru, God as the source of all knowledge) and the Granth Sahib as Guru 'hold court' in *darbars* around the whole world today. The title 'Darbar Sahib' is most especially used to refer to the complex around the Harimandir Sahib (literally '[Most] Venerable House of God') in Amritsar, India, Sikhism's sacred center. Worship patterns at the Darbar Sahib, especially the continuous musical performance of the hymns of Guru Granth Sahib, set a standard for Sikh worship patterns throughout the worldwide Sikh diaspora.

The Harimandir Sahib is usually referred to as the 'Golden Temple' in English, due to its top stories having been covered in gold plating during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1799-1839). It is common for Sikhs to use the names 'Darbar Sahib' and 'Harimandir Sahib' interchangeably, though 'Darbar Sahib' most accurately refers to the courtyards and entire complex of shrines and buildings that surround the Harimandir Sahib. The history of the Darbar Sahib complex can be organized into several historical periods: the time of the early Sikh Gurus, a period of contestation and destruction following the early Gurus, the Darbar Sahib under Sikh rule, the British colonial period, and the modern era.

2.2 The Early Gurus Period (1560s-1635)

There are multiple legends about the healing powers of the site that would later become the Darbar Sahib and surrounding city of Amritsar. One legend has it that (the future Guru) Amar Das found an herb at the side of a naturally occurring pond that healed

a skin ailment the second Guru, Guru Angad was suffering from. Another common, more elaborate legend was retold to me by a fellow visitor to the Darbar Sahib in 2011. A young woman, named Rajani, was asked by her father, Duni Chand, a wealthy revenue collector, "who provides your food?" Rajani's answer that "God alone provided for her" infuriated her father, and, as a punishment, he saw that she was married to a leper. Rajani accepted this as the Will of God and carried her frail husband with her in a basket everywhere that she went. One day, Rajani left her husband underneath a tree near a limpid pond. While Rajani was gone, her husband saw a black crow dive into the pond, and emerge pure white. He bathed in the pond, using the tree to support himself, and when he emerged, his body was restored to full health and youth. When Rajani returned to the pond, she thought that this handsome young man had killed her leprous husband, but he was able to convince her of the miracle.[100] In one version of this legend, Bhai Jetha (the future fourth Sikh Guru, Guru Ram Das) happened upon the couple right at this moment; in another version, Bhai Jetha heard of this story and came to investigate for himself, later bringing Guru Amar Das to visit the site.

Traditional sources agree that the third Sikh Guru, Guru Amar Das was drawn to the site "... by the peace and tranquility he found in a small pool set in a forested terrain", and that he decided to build a small mud hut at the edge of the *sarovar* ('pool') for his personal meditation.[101] When he became the fourth Sikh Guru in 1574, Guru Ram Das came to live in this small hut, and, in 1577, he began a project to expand the sarovar and

100 This story is related similarly in pgs. 8-10. Shankar, Vijay N. and Ranvir Bhatnagar, The Golden Temple: A gift to humanity. New Delhi: Ranvir Bhatnagar Publications, 2004.

101 Pg. 31. Singh, Patwant, *The Golden Temple*. New Delhi: Time Books International and Manohar, 1988.

build a new town surrounding it that would come to be called Guru ka Chak ('The Guru's Town') or Ramdaspur ('Ram Das' Town'). There are two popular traditions about how the Gurus came to own the land surrounding the sarovar. One tradition states that Guru Amar Das purchased the land from residents of the nearby village of Tung, while a second tradition maintains that Guru Amar Das was offered the land as a revenue-free grant by the Mughal Emperor Akbar. The Guru refused the gift, "in keeping with the Sikh tradition of self-reliance", so the land was given to the Guru's daughter, Bibi Bhani, wife of (the future Guru) Ram Das.[102] Most historians agree that the two versions are based on oral tradition and that no contemporary historical records exist. However, it is clear that the site was selected by the Gurus themselves and that it was recognized as revenue-free by later Mughal rulers, and even by the British.[103] There is reason to believe that the two traditions may both be true, and that the land purchased from the residents of Tung was contiguous with the land granted by Emperor Akbar.[104]

It is clear that the *sarovar* and town were planned by the Gurus as a new place of pilgrimage for the growing Sikh community. In choosing to establish a permanent Sikh community, Gurus Amar Das and Ram Das could look to Guru Nanak's Kartarpur community as a model. Guru Amar Das had also already constructed the "first Sikh pilgrimage center", a *baoli* ('steps for bathing' in a pool) at Goindwal.[105] In the context of the rapidly growing Sikh community at this time, establishing such a pilgrimage center

---

102 Pgs. 31-32. Ibid.
103 Pg. 8. Kaur, Mandajit, *The Golden Temple: Past and Present*. Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University Press, 1983.
104 Pg. 107. Singh, Pashaura, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*.
105 Pgs. 105-107. Ibid.

was a “logical step forward” in serving the needs of the community.[106] The site of Ramdaspur was also centrally located for future trade routes between India and Afghanistan, and had fertile soil and a nearby river for supporting agriculture.[107] As loyal Sikhs came to live near the Guru and aid in the building project and pilgrims began to visit the Guru, the town and a market, the *Guru ka Bazaar* ('Guru's Market'), began to rapidly grow and flourish.

Sources disagree on whether the project to dig and enlarge the natural pond into a stepped *sarovar* was begun under Guru Amar Das [108] or Guru Ram Das.[109] However, it is agreed that work on expanding the *sarovar* began in the 1570s, and was continued when Guru Arjan became Guru in 1581. Guru Arjan who began the project to construct the Harimandir and the causeway that leads to it in 1588.[110] It is Guru Arjan himself is also the person most credited with envisioning the Harimandir Sahib's symbolically rich design, with a main shrine that appears to float as if on an island, which evokes the pan-Indian religious symbol of a lotus blossom, rising from under the dark waters to float pristinely above. The design of the 'floating' Temple of God, linked to the outside world by a causeway, also poises devotees to act out crossing the 'ocean of existence', a

---

106 Pg. 96. Grewal, J.S., *The Sikhs: Ideology, Institutions, and Identity*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

107 Pg. 108. Singh, Pashaura, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*.

108 E.g., pg. 32. Singh, Patwant, *The Golden Temple*. New Delhi: Time Books International and Manohar, 1988; and pg. 8. Kaur, Mandajit, *The Golden Temple: Past and Present*.

109 E.g., pg. 108. Singh, Pashaura, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; and “Harimandar” in *The Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*, Volume II, E-L. Editor in Chief Harbans Singh. Patiala: Punjabi University, 2001 (First Edition 1996).

110 Pg. 112. Singh, Pashaura, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*.

prominent metaphor within the Guru Granth Sahib for the defeat of death through drawing nearer to God.[111]

There are two traditions about the laying of the foundation stone of the Harimandir Sahib, with the earliest Sikh sources maintaining that Guru Arjan himself laid it.[112] Another tradition states that the Sufi Saint Mian Mir (1550-1635) laid the foundation stone at the invitation of Guru Arjan. This Mian Mir tradition is in keeping with other examples of the pluralistic openness of the Sikh Gurus, and was even endorsed by the SGPC in 1929,[113] however there is no contemporary historical record of this tradition, and most historians writing on the topic question its veracity.[114] Pashaura Singh's opinion is that Guru Arjan laid the foundation, and Mian Mir may have been present and laid subsequent stones.[115] It is clear that the Harimandir Sahib was built through donations of money and voluntary service from the Sikh community.[116] The original appearance of the Harimandir Sahib is uncertain. However, especially in light of its construction through donations, it is clear that the original structure was of simple “brick and lime [mortar]” construction,[117] with the gold plating, marble work, and fine artisanship visible at the site today coming much later, during the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

---

111 Pg. 114. Ibid.

112 Pgs. 11-12. Kaur, Mandajit, *The Golden Temple: Past and Present*.

113 Pg. 10. Arshi, P.S., *The Golden Temple: History, Art and Architecture*. New Delhi: Harman Publishing House, 1989.

114 Pg. 133. Cole, W. Owen, *Understanding Sikhism*. Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2004.

115 Pashaura Singh presents a detailed discussion of the two traditions on pgs. 112-114 of *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*.

116 Pg. 38. Singh, Patwant, *The Golden Temple*.

117 Pg. 33. Rai, Gurmeet and Kavita Singh, “Brick by Sacred Brick: Architectural Projects of Guru Arjan and Guru Hargobind.” *Insights Into Sikh Art*. Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2003.

There are multiple hymns by Guru Arjan which appear in the Guru Granth Sahib that address the Harimandir and the town of Ramdaspur directly. In a hymn that appears to have been composed upon the completion of the *amrit sarovar* (pool of [the nectar of] immortality') and Harimandir, Guru Arjan enthuses: "You Yourself came and stood up to do the work of the saints, O Lord. You poured ambrosial water into the beautiful pool situated in the beautiful land. You poured ambrosial water, completed the work, and all our desires are fulfilled..."[118] Elsewhere, Guru Arjan affirms again the majesty of the growing town and the power of the *amrit sarovar*: "I have seen every place, but found none like you. The Creator has himself constructed you, O Lord's Temple! Therefore, you are the most beautiful. The city of Ramdaspur is thickly populated, unparalleled, and beyond praise. Says Nanak: O Harihan! People's impurities depart by bathing in the sacred pool of Ram Das."[119] It is from the sacred *amrit sarovar* that Ramdaspur has taken its modern name, Amritsar.

In 1604, Guru Arjan completed the *Ādi Bir* ('first recension'), the original written compilation of the hymns of the first five Gurus, and installed the Scripture within the Harimandir Sahib, appointing Baba Buddha as the first *granthī* ('keeper of the Book'—see Chapter Four). This moment, and the rest of Guru Arjan's tenure as Guru, marked highly significant developments in Sikh religious practice. Sikh practices at the Darbar Sahib that began during this period which still continue today (many of which are practiced or approximated around the world) follow the pattern of daily practice said to

118 M5, *Suhee* 10, AG, p.783.
119 M5, *Phunahe* 10, AG, p. 1362.

be set by Guru Arjan himself, including: the daily procession and 'royal' treatment of the Scripture (carrying on a palanquin, placing on a 'throne' under a canopy, tending with a whisk–see below); twenty-four hour singing of the hymns of the Scripture; and pilgrims bathing within the *amrit sarovar* and circumambulating the Harimandir before entering it.[120] With the Harimandir and *sarovar* complete and a stream of pilgrims continuing to come, the town of Ramdaspur and the Sikh community continued to prosper and grow. Undoubtedly, the flourishing town was a factor in drawing the negative attention of the Mughal Emperor Jahangir. Guru Arjan was executed by Jahangir's order in 1606.[121]

After the execution of his father, Guru Hargobind became the sixth Sikh Guru in 1606. In the context of the danger growing for the Sikh community within the Mughal Empire, Guru Hargobind introduced the concepts of *miri* (worldly authority) and *piri* (spiritual authority) to the Guruship, and began constructing the Akal Takht ('Throne of the Timeless') as a place to carry out his authority over 'worldly' matters within the Sikh community. The site of the Akal Takht is directly in front of the Harimandir Sahib, and it is said that this spot had been a mound of earth that Hargobind played on as a child.[122] During Guru Hargobind's time, he had the Akal Takht constructed as a simple raised platform, "3.5 metres high"[123] on which he would give sermons and 'hold court' (*darbar*) "in the manner of a king"[124]—attended to with symbols of royal authority, such as the

120 Pg. 16. Kaur, Mandajit, *The Golden Temple: Past and Present*.

121 For the most developed work discussing the martyrdom of Guru Arjan, see Pashaura Singh's *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*.

122 Pg. 57. Singh, Patwant, *The Golden Temple*.

123 Pg. 42. Rai, Gurmeet and Kavita Singh, "Brick by Sacred Brick: Architectural Projects of Guru Arjan and Guru Hargobind." *Insights Into Sikh Art*. Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2003.

124 Pg. 19. Arshi, P.S., *The Golden Temple: History, Art and Architecture*. New Delhi: Harman Publishing House, 1989.

chauri ('fan/whisk') and *chhatri* ('parasol')—hearing and administering the affairs of the Sikh community. Traditional accounts also mention the performances of *vār* ('heroic ballad') singers within the Guru's Darbar, a practice that continues in front of the Akal Takht today.[125]

As a sign of the increasing antagonism of the Mughal Empire toward the Sikhs, Guru Hargobind was imprisoned in the Gwalior Fort for two years by Emperor Jahangir. Guru Hargobind's return to Ramdaspur in 1619 is commemorated each year during the festival of Diwali (see below). Later, a dispute over a hunting expedition led to the first battle between the Sikhs and Mughals, and in 1635 Guru Hargobind left the Darbar Sahib for Kiratpur and the Shivalik hills, never to return.

2.3 Contestation, Destruction, and Rebuilding (1635-1802)

With Guru Hargobind gone, there was a struggle for control of the Darbar Sahib. For the next 61 years, control of the site fell to the *Mina* ('deceitful') sect. Miharban, the son of Guru Ram Das' disowned son Prithi Chand, took control of the Darbar Sahib from 1635-1639, and then his son Harji controlled the site from 1639-1696.[126] This was the beginning of an extended period in which the Darbar Sahib was often out of the control of the mainline Sikh Gurus and leaders. During this time, the seventh Guru, Guru Har Rai visited the Darbar Sahib only once for Diwali in 1651. The eight Guru, Guru Har Krishan (1656-1664) died at the age of eight, and was never able to visit the Darbar Sahib.[127]

125 Pg. 22. Kaur, Mandajit, *The Golden Temple: Past and Present*.
126 Pgs. 100-101. Grewal, J.S., *The Sikhs: Ideology, Institutions, and Identity*.
127 Pg. 24. Kaur, Mandajit, *The Golden Temple: Past and Present*.

According to tradition, when the ninth Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur visited in 1664, he was barred entry to the Harimandir Sahib by the priests under Harji.[128] The Gurdwara Thara Sahib shrine (see below) is said to commemorate the spot where Guru Tegh Bahadur bowed in front of the Harimandir Sahib and prayed before he left. The tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh was Guru during a period (1675-1708) in which the Sikhs were occupied with defending themselves from Mughal oppression, and never had occasion to visit the Darbar Sahib. However, Guru Gobind Singh heard of the mismanagement of the Darbar Sahib and soon after the founding of the Khalsa (1699), he dispatched Bhai Mani Singh to take control of it. In 1733, as custodian of the Darbar Sahib, Bhai Mani Singh requested from Zakariya Khan, the governor of Lahore, permission to hold Diwali festivities at the Darbar Sahib. Khan allowed the festival on the condition that Bhai Mani Singh pay 5,000 rupees as a tax. However, Khan dispatched troops around the city, scaring away most of the pilgrims, and this meant that Bhai Mani Singh was unable to raise the 5,000 rupees. Khan imprisoned Bhai Mani Singh, gave him the option to convert to Islam, but had him executed by dismemberment when he refused[129] (as Bhai Mani Singh is one of the most famous *granthīs* in Sikh history, I will further profile him in Chapter Four).

After this, the Mughal Empire seized control of the Darbar Sahib and placed Massa Rangar in control of the town of Ramdaspur. Rangar stationed the horses of his police garrison around the *sarovar* and entertained himself with *nautch* dancing women

---

128 Pg. 25. Ibid. However, P.S. Arshi casts doubt on this tradition (pg. 20. *The Golden Temple: History, Art and Architecture*).

129 Pgs. 72-73. Singh, Patwant, *The Golden Temple*.

within the Harimandir Sahib. This desecration infuriated Sikhs, and in 1740 Bhai Matab Singh of Mirankot and Bhai Sukkha Singh of Mari Kambo sneaked into the Harimandir Sahib and beheaded Rangar, escaping before his guards could give chase.[130]

Between the 1740s and 1760s, the Darbar Sahib was subject to frequent desecration and destruction by Afghan and Mughal attackers. In particular, Ahmad Shah Abdali (a.k.a. Ahmad Shah Durrani), founder of the Afghan Durrani Empire, attacked the Darbar Sahib multiple times on his campaigns through India. In one of the most well-known episodes during this period of destruction, Durrani attacked the Harimandir Sahib and desecrated the *sarovar* by throwing the waste and entrails of slaughtered cows into it. Following this, Baba Deep Singh—said to be a seventy-five year old man who had been initiated into the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh himself—led a group of Sikhs to retake the Darbar Sahib. On the way, the Baba was mortally wounded—traditional sources say his head was severed—but he continued on fighting, finally falling when his eyes caught sight of the Harimandir Sahib (I discuss the shrine at the Darbar Sahib dedicated to Baba Deep Singh below).

Several historians place the number of times that the Harimandir Sahib was completely destroyed and completely rebuilt during this period as three times.[131] P.S. Arshi states that this may have happened “as many as seven times”, with the Harimandir being rebuilt each time.[132] Given that it initially took at least ten years to excavate the

---

130 Pg. 75. Ibid.

131 E.g., pg. 16. Kaur, Mandajit, *The Golden Temple: Past and Present*.; pgs. 82-83. Singh, Patwant, *The Golden Temple*.; and pgs. 24-26. Arshi, P.S., *The Golden Temple: History, Art and Architecture*.

132 Pg. 12. Arshi, P.S., *The Golden Temple: History, Art and Architecture*.

amrit sarovar and as many more years to build the Harimandir,[133] it seems unlikely that the *sarovar* could be completely re-excavated and the Harimandir Sahib completely rebuilt this many times[134] within the short intervals given between each proposed date of destruction (the most frequently cited dates being 1746, 1757, 1762, and 1764). This seems especially implausible during a time when many Sikhs had been killed, and those remaining were occupied with defending themselves and often forced to scatter. Sikhs certainly had no Imperial or monetary support for such a massive undertaking. Also, Ahmad Shah Abdali is described as 'passing through' India on plundering campaigns each of these times, and this makes it seem unlikely that he would have expended the manpower and extensive time necessary to destroy the Harimandir Sahib and *sarovar* each time as completely as some sources describe. It would have taken an incredible amount of manpower to fill the (thirty-one-million gallon) sarovar, and then for Sikhs to re-excavate it each time. What is quite clear is that the Darbar Sahib was attacked and defiled multiple times during this period, and that it must have suffered varying levels of destruction each time. It was completely destroyed and its *sarovar* was leveled to the top with sand at least once–1762 is the date most commonly cited–and then the Darbar Sahib complex was completely rebuilt starting in the late 1760s.[135]

During this time, a number of Sikh Sardars ('noblemen') from the confederate *misl* states of the time began to construct permanent *bungas* ('residences') around the

---

133 Singh, Pashaura, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*.

134 I am in agreement with M.L. Ahluwalia on this point (see: "The Harimandir Sahib–in Historical Perspective." *Golden Temple*. Edited by Parm Bakhshish Singh, Devinder Kumar Verma, R.K. Ghai, and Gursharn Singh. Patiala: Punjabi University, 1999).

135 Pg. 89. Singh, Patwant, *The Golden Temple*.; and pg. 27. Arshi, P.S., *The Golden Temple: History, Art and Architecture*.

Harimandir, which they and their guests would stay in on their visits to the Darbar Sahib. Many of these *bungas* also came to serve as guest houses, places of learning, and even hospitals.[136] Most sources agree that by 1776 the Harimandir, *Darshani Deohri* (gateway to the causeway), causeway, and main gate to the Darbar Sahib complex had been completely reconstructed. During the period of destruction and contestation, it is clear that the Darbar Sahib had become increasingly solidified as the "rallying centre for Sikh religion and politics."[137] This point is made obvious by the sacrifices that many Sikhs made to protect and maintain control of it.

2.4 The Sikh Empire and the 'Golden Temple' (1802-1849)

In 1808, Ranjit Singh became Maharaja of a Sikh empire that united the confederate *misl* states and the greater Punjab region. It is said that as a young man and a devout Sikh, Ranjit Singh made frequent visits to the Darbar Sahib. As Maharaja, Ranjit Singh continued to make frequent visits to the Darbar Sahib and established his authority in the affairs of the site.[138] It is during the Sikh Empire, and largely through the patronage of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, that the Darbar Sahib began to take on the appearance that we see today. In 1808, the Maharaja made an initial donation of 500,000 rupees to begin gold-plating the upper stories of the Harimandir and install marble work within the Harimandir and on the walkway around it. This was the first of several donations of

136 Pg. 49. Singh, Kirpal, "Darbar Sahib Amritsar and Maharaja Ranjit Singh." *Golden Temple*. Edited by Parm Bakhshish Singh, Devinder Kumar Verma, R.K. Ghai, and Gursharn Singh. Patiala: Punjabi University, 1999.

137 Pg. 27. Arshi, P.S., *The Golden Temple: History, Art and Architecture*.

138 Pgs. 52-55. Kaur, Mandajit, *The Golden Temple: Past and Present*.

hundreds of thousands of rupees that the Maharaja made for the beautification of the Darbar Sahib which are recorded in his royal records.[139] During his reign, the Maharaja gave a showing of the Harimandir Sahib to some of its first European visitors. It is at this time that English speaking travelers first wrote of the site as a 'Golden Temple', due to the Maharaja's gilding projects (today, the Harimandir is sometimes called '*Swaran Mandir*', roughly translated as 'Golden Temple'). There are stories of distress among the religious officiants of the Darbar Sahib when some of the European visitors were ignorant of the respectful protocol of removing their shoes within the Darbar Sahib (and some rudely refused to do so), but the Maharaja made the concession of allowing some visitors to cover their shoes.[140] Much of the gilding and marble work seen today at the Darbar Sahib was completed within the Maharaja's lifetime. After his death in 1839, the beautification continued under his successors during the short time (ten years) that the Sikh Empire continued.[141] All authors on the subject agree that Maharaja Ranjit Singh's rule had been a time of stability, prosperity, and growth for the Darbar Sahib, when architectural and artistic embellishment were continuous.

2.5 The British Colonial Period (1849-1947)

After two Anglo-Sikh wars, the British annexed the Punjab in 1849. From the beginning, the British were ambivalent about the Darbar Sahib as a religious site, and there were arguments among the colonial authorities about whether they should be

139 Pg. 110. Grewal, J.S., *The Sikhs: Ideology, Institutions, and Identity*.
140 Pgs. 56-57. Kaur, Mandajit, *The Golden Temple: Past and Present*.
141 Pg. 121. Singh, Patwant, *The Golden Temple*.

administering such sites.[142] However, by most accounts, the colonial authorities were quite aware of the central importance of the Darbar Sahib for Sikhs, and saw control of it as a key factor in maintaining power over them.[143] To this end, the Darbar Sahib became the only religious institution in India that was directly controlled by the British.[144] Upon initially taking control of the site, the British allowed the existing management to continue, but soon began directly appointing *Sarbrahs* ('managers') to oversee the religious activities of the Darbar Sahib. According to the Punjab Administration Report of 1848-1850, the *bungas* around the Harimandir had continued as Sikh institutions, and "...Amritsar had been an important Sikh seat of learning... [Within the bungas] Gurmukhi was taught and students were admitted for teaching the Adi Granth... Sikh theological knowledge was imparted to the pupils free of charge". Within these *bungas*, students also lived free of charge, their room and board being paid for by donations from the community.[145] Despite protesting by Sikhs, some of these *bungas* were torn down in 1862 under British colonial authority for the building of a 'gothic' clocktower. The clocktower was completed in 1874. Many Sikhs viewed this structure as a symbol of colonial power, with its architectural style out of place and its height apparently meant to overshadow the Harimandir[146] (subsequently this clock tower was pulled down shortly after Indian Independence in 1947).

142 Pgs. 231-232. Grewal, J.S., *The Sikhs: Ideology, Institutions, and Identity*.

143 Pgs. 88-90. Kerr, Ian J. , "Handle with great care: 'British Actions Towards the Sikhs and the Golden Temple in the Last Half of the 19th Century." *Golden Temple*. Edited by Parm Bakhshish Singh, Devinder Kumar Verma, R.K. Ghai, and Gursharn Singh. Patiala: Punjabi University, 1999.

144 Pg. 239. Grewal, J.S., *The Sikhs: Ideology, Institutions, and Identity*.

145 Pg. 48. Singh, Kirpal, "Darbar Sahib Amritsar and Maharaja Ranjit Singh".

146 Pg. 134. Singh, Patwant, *The Golden Temple*.

Despite the offense caused by the clocktower, the period of British control is credited with a few building projects. Electricity was installed within the Darbar Sahib in 1898 (despite the protests of some traditionalists[147]), and the *hansali* ('canal') that supplied water to the *sarovar* was extended to the Upper Doabi river.[148]

In the early twentieth century, joining protest movements against British rule that were growing in India, Sikhs began to protest what they saw as the corrupt management of the Darbar Sahib by the British-supported *Sarbrahs*. These tensions, coupled with massive outrage brought on by the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of 1919 (in which over 400 unarmed Indians were killed and over 2000 were wounded when British General R.E.H. Dyer ordered his troops to open fire on them as they gathered during Baisakhi) brought about massive non-violent protest movements that led to the British passing a declaration in 1920 that they would hand control of the Darbar Sahib over to an elected committee of Sikhs.[149] However, when the initial committee was formed, the British refused to recognize their authority. In November of 1921, a representative of the British forcibly took away the keys to the *tosha khana* (the temple treasury inside of the Darshani Deorhi). This again triggered a massive wave of non-violent protests until the keys were returned in January 1922. At the end of this 'keys affair', M.K. Gandhi famously wrote in a telegram to the Sikhs of Amritsar: “First Battle of India's Freedom won. Congratulations.”[150] In 1925, with the official passage of the 'Gurdwara Reform

147 Pg. 82. Kaur, Mandajit, *The Golden Temple: Past and Present*.
148 Pg. 50. Arshi, P.S., *The Golden Temple: History, Art and Architecture*.
149 Pg. 70. Kaur, Mandajit, *The Golden Temple: Past and Present*. Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University Press, 1983.
150 Pgs. 77-78. Ibid.

Act', control of the Darbar Sahib (as well as all other Sikh religious sites) was passed to the democratically elected SGPC (Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandak Committee).[151] The Darbar Sahib has remained within the control of this governing body through to today.

Still during the British colonial period, the SGPC began building and renovation projects around the Darbar Sahib. In 1928-9, the *parikrama* was widened, and covered bathing areas for women were installed. In 1931, the Guru Ram Das Sarai was built as a large 'rest house' for accommodating pilgrims, and in 1943 a number of *bungas* were demolished to further widen the *parikrama*.[152] During the chaos of Partition in 1947, the Darbar Sahib "...provided food and shelter to thousands of refugees from Pakistan."[153]

2.6 The Modern Era (1947 to the Present)

After Indian independence and Partition, the Darbar Sahib went through a period of relative calm under the management of the SGPC. Some building projects continued to transform the area surrounding the Darbar Sahib. In the 1960s, most of the remaining *bungas* were torn down to finish the widening of the *parikrama*, which was also finally completely covered in marble,[154] and in 1982, a canal project was completed that was meant to provide a permanent solution for maintaining the water level of the *sarovar* (which had once gone almost completely dry during a drought in 1783).[155]

---

151 Pg. 82. Ibid.
152 Pg. 35. Arshi, P.S., *The Golden Temple: History, Art and Architecture*.
153 Pg. 97. Kaur, Mandajit, *The Golden Temple: Past and Present*.
154 Pgs. 163, 166. Ibid.
155 Pg. 95. Singh, Patwant, *The Golden Temple*.

Since before Partition, there had existed a desire among many Sikhs for the establishment of a Sikh nation-state, Khalistan ('Land of the Khalsa'). In 1984, armed Sikh separatists led by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale (1949-1984) took up residence within the Darbar Sahib complex. The Indian government responded by sending the Army into the Darbar Sahib. The military operation that followed–code-named 'Operation Blue Star'–resulted in severe damage to the Darbar Sahib as tanks crushed the marble of the *parikrama*, bullets riddled many buildings (including the Harimandir), and the Akal Takht was damaged so badly by tank and rocket fire that it needed to be torn down. 'Operation Blue Star' resulted in the death of Bhindranwale, but also a death toll of between 500 and 10,000 (depending on the sources cited)[156] armed and unarmed civilians, many of whom were pilgrims caught in the crossfire. The Sikh Reference Library, which housed historic treasures, including a number of manuscripts bearing the Gurus' signatures was also destroyed.[157] As news and images of the battered Darbar Sahib spread, Sikhs around the world reacted with grief and horror, many seeing the attack as an act of ultimate sacrilege, a sign of contempt for Sikhs on the part of the Indian government, and even an attempt at genocide. The Indian Army continued to occupy the Darbar Sahib for nearly three months, and the government under Rajiv Gandhi had the Darbar Sahib repaired and the Akal Takht quickly rebuilt within this time. However, many Sikhs saw this Akal Takht structure as 'tainted' through having been built by the same government that had staged

156 Pg. 69. Mann, Gurinder Singh, *Sikhism*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004.

157 Pgs. 82-83. Nesbitt, Eleanor, *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

the attack, and this Akal Takht was torn down in 1986. A new Akal Takht, constructed through *seva* (voluntary 'service'), was completed in 1999.

The events of 1984 are now memorialized yearly at the Darbar Sahib as *Ghallughara Diwas* ("Day of Genocide"). Bullet holes from the attack have deliberately been left on the SGPC offices and other buildings throughout the complex as 'scars' reminding visitors of the violence. Though bearing these scars, the Darbar Sahib has remained alive and well in the decades since 1984. The number of yearly pilgrims continues to grow and the SGPC has overseen continuous construction projects within and around the Darbar Sahib complex.

2.7 A Walk Around the Darbar Sahib Complex

Like many large cities in India and around the world today, the streets of modern Amritsar are full of the dust and din of bustling cars and people. As soon as one begins to enter through the main gate of the Darbar Sahib (Figure 2.2, map point 1), with its clock tower visible from the outside streets, the cacophony of the city outside begins to dissolve behind you. The change in atmosphere is quite palpable, as the sonorous amplified *Gurbani kirtan* (devotional singing of the Word of the Gurus) begins to fill one's hearing. Standing within this gate, devotees get their first *darshan* ('auspicious sight') of the Harimandir Sahib, its reflection gleaming brightly in the Amrit Sarovar (Figure 2.3). Once within, they bow deeply toward the Harimandir Sahib (map point 2), many touching their heads to the marble floor and the 'dust of the feet of the saints' from

generations who have passed through here. From this spot, devotees begin to walk around the *parikrama* (derived from the Sanskrit meaning 'walk/revolve around', i.e. 'to circumambulate', map point 3), keeping the Harimandir Sahib to their right. Walking the *parikrama* from this point, the two towers of the Ramgarhia Bunga (map point 4) and langar hall rise high before you (Figure 2.4). On most days, hundreds of bathers are taking a sacred bath in the clear waters of the Amrit Sarovar (map point 5). Colorful fish also swim calmly at the surface of the limpid water (in fact, they contribute to keeping the water clean from algae and microorganisms).[158]

Upon turning the first corner around the *sarovar*, one encounters a large and regal tree, the Dukh Bhanjani Ber (the Jujube 'Tree that Ends Sorrow', map point 6) with a small gurdwara underneath it. It is said that it was underneath this very tree that the leprous husband of Rajani, daughter of Duni Chand, was healed, and “Sikhs from all over India flock to this place to get relief from their various ailments.”[159] Beneath the shade of Dukh Banjani Ber is a small platform known as Ath Sath Tirath ('68 pilgrimage places', map point 7, and Figure 2.5), which gains its title from Guru Arjan's hymn composed upon the completion of the Harimandir: “Bathing in this pool is equal to bathing in [the] 68 places of pilgrimage [throughout India], to the bestowal of alms, and the performance of great purifications.”[160] Devotees hope to enjoy the fruits of pilgrimage to all of the 68 holy places of India by bathing in the *sarovar* near this spot, which overlooks *Har ki pauri* ('God's steps') at the back of the Harimandir Sahib.

158 Pg. 156. Kaur, Mandajit, *The Golden Temple: Past and Present*.
159 Pgs. 173-174. Ibid.
160 M5, *Suhee* 10, AG, p. 784

Turning the next corner around the *sarovar*, one encounters the shrine dedicated to Baba Deep Singh (map point 8), a Sikh martyr who died liberating the Darbar Sahib from Afghan forces. Above the *parikrama*, an image depicts Baba Deep Singh charging forward with his severed head in one hand, and raised sword in the other. Beneath this is the spot on the *parikrama* where it is said that the mortally wounded Baba Deep Singh finally fell, with the Harimandir in site. Devotees stop to pay their respects, or leave flowers on this spot.

Continuing around the next corner of the *sarovar*, a small gurdwara sits (to the right) under the Laachi Ber (a berry tree, map point 9), under which it is said that Guru Arjan would sit beside the sarovar and supervise the construction of the Harimandir. At this point in their walk around the sarovar, many devotees will turn to the other side of the parikrama (map point 10) and make a donation toward *karah parshad* ('blessed food', a sweetened 'pudding') to take with them to the Harimandir, where attendants will receive it and distribute it as a blessing from God to devotees as they leave.

With the Harimandir Sahib in sight, devotees passes through the large *Darshani Deohri* ('gateway to see and be seen by God', map point 11) and onto the causeway leading to the Harimandir. On the causeway (map point 12, Figures 2.6 and 2.7), the excitement of the devotees starts reaching a peak as they wait—for over an hour at busy times—to arrive within the Harimandir. Arriving at the entrance to the Harimandir, devotees press close to each other, waiting for an auspicious sight (*darshan*) of Guru Granth Sahib. Within the Harimandir, devotees bow deeply to pay their respect to Guru

Granth Sahib. Inside the floors of the main shrine, many Sikhs sit for hours, deeply absorbed in meditation and prayer, and the sacred sounds of continuous *kirtan*. On the lowest floor, devotees complete a circumambulation around the Harimandir, stopping to visit *Har ki Pauri* ('God's Steps') at the back of the shrine (map point 13), where many will cup some of the *Amrit* ('[nectar of] immortality') of the *sarovar*, sprinkling it on their heads or taking a small sip.[161] Leaving the Harimandir, Sikhs take some blessed *kara parshad*, a blessing from the Guru, before beginning to cross the causeway again.

While passing back through the Darshani Deohri, the Akal Takht ('Throne of the Timeless One', map point 14), the symbol of temporal authority established by Guru Hargobind stands before you, and to the right are the two saffron Nishan Sahibs ('venerable symbol', map point 15) rising into the sky, recalling Guru Hargobind's coupling of miri and piri (religious and worldly authority) in the Guruship. Behind and to the right of the Akal Takht is Gurdwara Thara Sahib (*thara* means 'platform', map point 16) a small, nearly cylindrical building that commemorates the site where Guru Tegh Bahadur is said to have rested and prayed when he was refused entry to the Harimandir by the priests under Harji in 1664.[162] Rounding the final corner of the *sarovar*, one comes to another ancient tree, Ber Baba Buddha Ji (map point 17), under which the first *granthī* of the Harimandir, Baba Buddha, is said to have sat and supervised the construction of the Harimandir.[163]

---

161 Pg. 152. Singh, Patwant, *The Golden Temple*.
162 Pg. 173. Kaur, Mandajit, *The Golden Temple: Past and Present*.
163 Pgs. 152, 157. Singh, Patwant, *The Golden Temple*.

Having made a complete circumambulation, most devotees will now head to the *Guru ka langar* ('the Guru's community kitchen'*, map point 18)* to eat a meal. Inside the langar hall, all visitors sit together in rows, with no regard given to caste, class, race, religion, or other outside distinctions. Leaving the Darbar Sahib, many devotees now bow their face to the *parikrama* once again, bidding farewell to the Harimandir Sahib. Of the many thousands of pilgrims who visit the Darbar Sahib each day, many stay at the several *Sarais*/*Niwas* ('guest houses') that are near to the western-most gate of the complex (map point 19).

Other important shrines within the Darbar Sahib complex include the Manji Sahib Diwan Hall (map point 20), which is constructed on the old site where Guru Arjan held court with his Sikhs and is “now used for special or large congregations,”[164] and the Gurdwara Baba Atal. The nine story octagonal Gurdwara Baba Atal is one-hundred-fifty feet tall; the tallest building in Amritsar. Its foundation was laid in the 1780s, and it was built to honor Guru Hargobind's gifted son Atal Rai, who died at age 9. The walls of its nine stories have many old mural paintings depicting stories of the Sikh Gurus.

2.8 Religious Practice, Performance, and Service at the Darbar Sahib

There are many religious practices and performances that take place on an ongoing basis every day at the Darbar Sahib, as well as various recurring special religious occasions. Many of these patterns of practice are emulated in Sikh communities around the world. Here, we can organize our discussion of religious practice, performance, and

164 Pg. 174. Kaur, Mandajit, *The Golden Temple: Past and Present*.

service at the Darbar Sahib along the following lines: daily practices surrounding the worship of God, reverent treatment of the Guru Granth Sahib as the Living Guru and musical performance of the hymns of the Guru Granth Sahib as the Word of God; the performance of religious service for the community (*seva*); special events and religious festivals that are conducted at the Darbar Sahib; and the use of technology for furthering these religious goals.

2.9 Daily Religious Practice

It can be said that the centerpiece of daily practices at the Darbar Sahib is the continuous musical performance of the Divine Word of the Guru Granth Sahib, and coming to hear and immerse oneself in the Divine Word as it is performed. Daily religious practice at the Darbar Sahib begins when the gates are opened during amrit *vela*, called the 'ambrosial hours' (literally the 'immortal time') of the early morning, between 2:00am and 3:00am (depending on the time of year). In this early morning period, *kirtaniyas* (sacred musicians) begin to perform Guru Nanak's *Āsa dī vār* ('Ballad of Hope' in *Āsa rāga*) as devotees arrive within the Darbar Sahib. This first 'sitting' of *kirtan* continues until between 4:00am and 5:00am, when the morning procession of the Guru Granth Sahib from *sukh āsan* (the 'position of rest') within the Akal Takht begins. Guru Granth Sahib's arrival is heralded by the thunderous booming of *nagara* (large drums) and trumpeting of the *narsinga* (a large S-shaped horn). Guru Granth Sahib is carried from the Akal Takht upon the head of one of the *granthīs* ('Granth attendants'). This is the

prakash ('shining forth') of the light of God and the Guru into a new day. Devotees shower the Scripture with flower petals and fragrant rose water (or freshen the surrounding air with aerosol air-fresheners, as I saw during a visit in 2011!). Guru Granth Sahib is placed on a finely decorated *palki* ('palanquin') that has been specially prepared to carry the Scripture across the causeway into the Harimandir. As the *palki* slowly makes its way, devotees jostle to have a chance to share in the carrying of Guru Granth Sahib. The process can take some time, as devotees try to share this honor, and often invite visitors to help. Devotional excitement reaches a peak as Guru Granth Sahib arrives within the Harimandir and is placed on the *manji sahib*, a lush 'throne' beneath an ornamented royal canopy. At this point, the first *Hukamnama* ('Divine command') of the day is taken by allowing the Scripture to open at random and reciting the first hymn on that page. After this, Sikhs perform the first *Ardās* ('supplication') prayer, which is repeated five times throughout the day. From this point, continuous singing of *Gurbani kirtan* continues throughout the day according to fixed *chaunkis* ('sittings'), in *rāgas* used by the Gurus deemed appropriate for particular times of day.[165]

The twenty-four-hour continuous performance of religious music at the Darbar Sahib is a wholly unique feature of Sikhism. Since the hymns of the Gurus are, for Sikhs, the revealed Word of God, the continuous performance of the hymns marks the continuous Divine presence—and listening to the Divine music is effectively having an 'aural' *darshan* of God's presence. Sikh communities around the world try to approximate

165 See Pashaura Singh's “Musical Chaunkis at the Darbar Sahib: History, Aesthetics, and Time” in *Sikhism in Global Context*. Edited by Pashaura Singh. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011; and also pgs. 119, 124-126. *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*.

this twenty-four-hour hymn singing at the Darbar Sahib, performing as many of the traditional *chaunkis* of *Gurbani kirtan* as their resources allow. At the Darbar Sahib, devotees continue to bathe in the *amrit sarovar* at all times of the day, at once soaking in the purifying *amrit*, and 'bathing' in the consciousness-purifying Divine sounds of the musically intoned Word of God ('bathing' or *ishnān* is recurrently used as a metaphor for spiritual purification in the hymns of the Guru Granth Sahib).

Many of the devotional practices that continue throughout the day at the Darbar Sahib are concerned with showing the proper humility and respect for God and the Guru Granth Sahib. At the basic level, all visitors to the Darbar Sahib follow some points of etiquette for respecting the Guru Granth Sahib and the Temple. Everyone who enters the complex removes their shoes (placing them in the safe keeping of tenders at any of the four entrances), washes their feet in a foot bath, covers their head with a turban, scarf, or simple piece of cloth, refrains from alcohol, tobacco or intoxicants, and helps to maintain the cleanliness of the entire complex. As a further sign of respect, all visitors bow before the Guru Granth Sahib upon entering the Harimandir. Other practices reflecting the devotion of Sikhs include bowing upon entering onto the *parikrama*, bringing flowers to place before the shrines throughout the complex and before the Guru Granth Sahib, and making donations to the community before the Guru Granth Sahib. Throughout the day, the Guru Granth Sahib is continuously cared for, being attended to at all times by *granthīs*, covered in fine, richly colored *rumalas* ('robes'), and fanned with a *chauri*

('whisk')–again, with the aim of preserving the Harimandir as the *Darbar*, the Royal Court of God and Guru on earth.

In addition to the central worship act of performing and hearing the sacred hymns, and the devotional respect shown for God and Guru Granth Sahib, seva—voluntary service performed selflessly—covers a broad range of the practices that devotees undertake at the Darbar Sahib. Performing *seva*, when it is undertaken in a spirit of humility and lack of care for reward, is itself a devotional act of service to God and the community. One can see countless acts of *seva* throughout the day, as almost all of the devotees who visit the Darbar Sahib perform services, small and large, such as continuously maintaining the cleanliness of the *parikrama* (even the areas underneath the ancient trees, where birds congregate, are kept spotless by devotees), the Harimandir floor, and other shrines. As an example of the 'selfless' spirit of *seva*, one of the most menial jobs around the Darbar Sahib is 'shoe *seva*'—carrying and storing the shoes of the thousands of visitors to the Darbar Sahib—but Sikhs vie with each other to perform this *seva*, which is so fundamental to the daily life of the Darbar Sahib.

One of the primary *seva* activities that Sikhs take part in at the Darbar Sahib is working in the *langar* kitchen. *Langar* is a Persian word, meaning a 'public kitchen', and such public kitchens predate Sikhism, as they were a common feature of Sufi centers in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[166] The Sikh institution of *langar* was carried out by all of the Sikh Gurus, having begun when Guru Nanak would see that anyone who came

166 "Gurū kā Laṅgar" in *The Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*, Volume II, E-L. Editor in Chief Harbans Singh. Patiala: Punjabi University, 2001 (First Edition 1996).

to visit him was well fed.[167] The working of the *Guru ka langar* ('Guru's langar') at the Darbar Sahib is an absolutely massive undertaking, feeding 40,000-50,000 people on regular days, and well over 100,000 people on busy festival days. As many as 3,000 people can be eating at any one time on each of the two floors of the *langar* hall. Almost all of the labor to make this happen is done by voluntary *sevadars* ('servers') (Figure 2.8). To facilitate the cooking of the enormous amounts of food necessary, the kitchen has many large purpose-built cooking machines, including: eleven large hot plates that fifteen people can work at at a time, massive machines for sieving and kneading dough, and a *roti* (flatbread) machine that fills a whole room and makes up to 3,000 *rotis* per hour. Each day, as many as one-hundred gas cylinders, five million kilograms of wheat flour, 1.8 million kilograms of beans, and twenty kilograms of tea leaves are consumed by visitors to the *langar* hall. Each dish that is used is washed five times by a fleet of *sevadars*, before being reused by devotees eating langar.[168]

The Akal Takht, in addition to functioning as a highly esteemed seat of authority for Sikhs, is also the site of religious activities throughout the day. It is common for *vār* (heroic ballad) singers to perform in front of the Akal Takht, a practice that goes back to the time of Guru Hargobind. Each evening, the *shastars* (weapons) of the Gurus and early Sikh heroes are displayed to the congregation. It is also within the Akal Takht that *Amrit Sanskar* ceremonies, initiating Sikhs into the Khalsa, are conducted on Wednesdays and Sundays.[169]

167 Pg. 8. Cole, W. Owen, *Understanding Sikhism*.

168 Pgs. 4-6. “Langar: The Power of Devotion, Some Eye Opening Facts.” *The Sikh Bulletin* 3:1&2, 2011: 4-6.

169 Pg. 170. Kaur, Mandajit, *The Golden Temple: Past and Present*. Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University

At the end of every day at the Darbar Sahib, after the final sitting of *kirtan*, the devotees perform the final *Ardās* prayer, and a final *Hukamnama* is taken from the Guru Granth Sahib. After this, the Guru Granth Sahib is reverently wrapped in fine clothing (*rumalas* or 'robes') as the head *granthī* recites *Kirtan Sohile* ('Song of Praise') from memory.[170] The *granthī* then carries Guru Granth Sahib on his head, to be placed again on the *palki* and carried in procession back to the Akal Takht. The *nagara* drums and *narsinga* horn are again blown to mark the royal procession. Once the Guru Granth Sahib is inside of the Akal Takht, the gates of the Darbar Sahib are closed for a nightly cleaning. Devotees clean the inside of the Harimandir, washing its floors with milk diluted with water from the *amrit sarovar*. While the *sevadars* clean the sacred precincts of the Darbar Sahib, they sing hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib from memory, thus continuing the twenty-four-hour musical presence of God and Guru. *Akānd pāṭh*, or unbroken reading of the Guru Granth Sahib also continues on the upper floors of the Harimandir during the cleaning.[171]

2.10 Special Events and Religious Festivals

Sundays, *Sangrand* (the first day of each month) and *Masaya* (the 'moonless' first night of the lunar month) see larger crowds at the Darbar Sahib than most other days. Many Sikhs believe that bathing in the *amrit sarovar* on *Sangrand* or *Masaya* is particularly auspicious. Of greater importance are several *Gurpurbs* ('Guru festivals'); in

Press, 1983.
170 Pg. 113. Singh, Pashaura, “Musical *Chaunkis* at the Darbar Sahib: History, Aesthetics, and Time”.
171 Pg. 121. Kaur, Mandajit, *The Golden Temple: Past and Present*.

particular the birth anniversaries of Guru Nanak, Guru Ram Das, and Guru Gobind Gobind Singh, and the anniversaries of the Guruship of Guru Hargobind and the installation of the Guru Granth Sahib draw large crowds to the Darbar Sahib. For these festival days, the Darbar Sahib complex is often brightly lit at night, special *kirtan* sessions and processions are held, and parades take place in and around the Darbar Sahib. Another activity that occurs on these special days is called *jalau*, which is the display of some of the weapons and treasures of the Gurus and Sikh heroes that are usually kept within the *tosha khana* ('treasure house') in Darshani Deohri.[172]

The other major religious festivals that take place yearly at the Darbar Sahib are Diwali and Baisakhi. Diwali is a pan-Indian multi-religious 'festival of light', but in the Sikh context it is celebrated as *Bandi Chhor Diwas* ('prisoner release day'), in commemoration of when Guru Hargobind was released from his imprisonment in the Gwalior Fort at the time of Diwali in 1619. In the evening on Diwali, the Darbar Sahib is brightly illuminated with strings of electric lights, and the sides of the amrit sarovar are surrounded with hundreds of candles. Baisakhi celebrates the founding of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh on the first day of the month of Baisakhi in 1699. On both Diwali and Baisakhi there are fireworks displays which thrill the thousands of assembled devotees as they light up the sky and reflect brightly on the amrit sarovar.

172 Pg. 183. Ibid.

2.11 The Use of Technology for Religious Purposes at the Darbar Sahib

The Darbar Sahib complex shows many examples of Sikhs' embracing of technology in order to further the religious practices and purposes of the site. By the westernmost corner of the *sarovar* is a large 'jumbotron' style television (installed with funds provided by Toronto-based Sikhs), which provides visitors with line-by-line text of the *Gurbani kirtan* or prayers currently being recited inside the Harimandir in both Gurmukhi script (the original text of the Scripture) and English translation. California-based Sikhs sponsored the installation in 2004 of a massive sand filtration system to continuously purify the 31 million gallons of water in the *amrit sarovar*.[173] Other examples of technology aiding the religious goals of the Darbar Sahib include: the *roti* machine and other large cooking machines that aid in providing meals to the thousands of daily visitors in the langar hall, large motorized battery-operated floor cleaners used to clean the *parikrama*, and the computerization of the S.G.P.C.'s offices. Plans for the near future include installing an ecologically-minded rainwater collection system and solar panels to aid in the cooking of the food for langar,[174] and a "special fire-proof fabric... 220-feet retractable awning... [that] will be motorized and operate with the click of a button..." to be placed over the causeway leading to the Harimandir Sahib. Not only will the awning protect waiting devotees from rain and sun, it "...comes equipped with infra-red lights which [will] keep the passage warm for devotees" in colder months.[175] All of

173 Jolly, Asit, "Sikh 'nectar' gets hi-tech clean-up." *BBC News, World Edition*. Friday, 13 December, 2002. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/2574025.stm
174 Bagga, Niraj, "Solar cooking system at Golden Temple soon." *The Tribune of India*. Sunday, April 15, 2012. http://www.tribuneindia.com/2012/20120416/punjab.htm#8
175 Gopal, Navjeevan, "Come rain or shine, awning to shield golden temple devotees Amritsar." *The Indian Express*. Saturday, February 25, 2012. http://www.indianexpress.com/news/come-rain-or-shine-

this embracing of technology for religious purposes[176] shows the willingness of the 'youngest world religion' to adapt its central religious site to the modern world, and also the impact of the *seva* and *dān* ('giving') activities of Sikhs within India and around the world on the continuous updating of the Darbar Sahib.

2.12 Global Darbar Sahib

The devotion among Sikhs around the world to the Darbar Sahib and their desire to remain connected with it are quite apparent. One of the obvious ways that this is manifested is in the commonness of pilgrimage and travel to the Darbar Sahib among Sikhs from around the world. Serving this need, there is now a modern international airport in Amritsar—renamed the Guru Ram Das International Airport in 2010—that is currently expanding and adding more international flights. However, physical pilgrimage to Amritsar is only one of the ways that Sikhs around the world stay connected to the Darbar Sahib. Since 1988, ETC Channel Punjabi has cooperated with the SGPC to carry a live broadcast of *Gurbani kirtan* and daily prayers from the Darbar Sahib "...to millions of viewers on every continent... from 4:30am to 8:00AM and 4:30pm to 6:30pm every day." In fact, the Darbar Sahib "...is the only place of worship [in the world] where a permanent Earth station is in place with a satellite dish, up-linking equipment and editing controls."[177] It is common for Sikhs in the United States (and throughout the diaspora) to

awning-to-shield-golden/916349/

176 I am currently writing a chapter-length piece further exploring Sikhs' very strong embracing of technology for religious purposes worldwide.

177 Pgs. 172-173. Shankar, Vijay N. and Ranvir Bhatnagar, *The Golden Temple: A gift to humanity*. New Delhi: Ranvir Bhatnagar Publications, 2004.

tune in to these broadcasts in order to integrate some of the daily activities at the Darbar Sahib into their daily religious life. The internet has also created a number of opportunities for Sikhs to connect with the Darbar Sahib: many Sikhs receive the daily Hukamnama from the Harimandir Sahib by Email (or through text messages, or on silent radios inside of gurdwaras), listen to *Gurbani kirtan* live from the Harimandir Sahib via the SGPC website (www.sgpc.net/liveaudio.asp) and other sites, and can make 'virtual pilgrimage' to the Darbar Sahib through websites such as http://www.sikhs.org/golden/ and http://darbarsaheb.com/virtual-tour/. As such media technologies, available especially to Sikhs in Europe and North America, become more and more sophisticated, integrating the Darbar Sahib into the everyday lives of Sikhs living thousands of miles away, it will interest scholars of religion to continue to observe if pilgrimage—or how 'pilgrimage' is conceptualized—may change. This remains to be seen. At the least, the broad embracing of technology for staying connected to the Darbar Sahib by Sikhs around the world points to the Darbar Sahib's status as the continuing living sacred center of Sikhism.

With the completion of the Harimandir Sahib and installation of the Ādi Granth, Guru Arjan established a pattern of religious ritual practice that continues today at the Darbar Sahib complex and provides the model for the ritual treatment of the Sikh scripture and performance of the hymns of the Guru Granth Sahib around the world today. Sikh gurdwara communities throughout the diaspora emulate the patterns of worship, respectful treatment of Guru Granth Sahib (including the two processions), and service (especially maintaining *langar* halls) that I have described above as they are

practiced at the Darbar Sahib. In this way, the Darbar Sahib—as the sacred 'beating heart' of the Sikh tradition—sets patterns of Sikh religious practice in the United States that will now be familiar throughout the rest of chapters of this dissertation.

Part Three: Sikhs Come to the United States

3.1 Early 'Visitors' and the Pioneer 'First Wave' of Sikh Immigrants (Early 1800s to 1965)

It is likely that the first Sikhs to come to the Americas arrived in the late 1700s as sailors who traveled to the United States on British and American trade ships. I.M. Muthanna relates that ships of the East India Company regularly visited the ports of Boston, New York, and New Orleans in the mid-to-late eighteenth century, and it is likely that Indian 'visitors' were among the crews of these ships.[178] The earliest definitive reference to a Sikh in the United States involves a Captain Stephen Phillips (1764-1838) who was one of the first sea captains to travel to the ports of India on ships flying the flag of the United States. From the 1780s through the 1790s he made many sea voyages from the United States to India (and other destinations in Asia) that included trading with the East India Company. By 1800 (possibly earlier),[179] when he had retired from his travels

178 Pgs. 48-49. Muthanna, I.M. *People of India in North America*. Enlarged Edition. Bangalore: Lotus Printers, 1982.

179 This dating follows from James Phillips quoting Captain Phillips own account that he had retired from sailing "...at the age of thirty-six years..." (Pg. 112. Phillips, James Duncan. "Captain Stephen Phillips, 1764-1838" in *Essex Institute: Historical Collections*. Vol. LXXVI, No. 2, April, 1940). Thirty six years after his birth in 1764 would be 1800, possibly late 1799. He may have brought 'George' to the United States with him earlier than his retirement from sailing.

by sea, Captain Phillips settled in Salem, Massachusetts, and apparently brought with him a Sikh man who the Phillips family called 'George'. 'George' had been a sailor under Captain Phillips during his voyages, but in his retirement, the Captain had hired him as a servant. A descendent of Captain Phillips, historian James Duncan Phillips describes how "['George'] wore usually the long white tunic of his people with loose trousers and a red sash. His black bearded face was surmounted by a great blue turban."[180] James Phillips further relates a story about how Captain Phillips preferred to attend a different church than his wife, and so each Sunday 'George' first conveyed Mrs. Phillips to her church by carriage, and then he returned to the Phillips' home to convey Captain Phillips to his favored church. In reading this story, one can imagine the strong impressions that a stout Sikh sailor in full beard and *bānā* (Sikh attire) probably made on the residents of a late-eighteenth to early-nineteenth century Massachusetts town. James Phillips intimates, however, that 'George' may have been one among other Sikhs (at least one among other Indians) who had come to this city in the young United States under similar circumstances:

> Salem must have been a colorful place in those days, for Lasca[181] sailors [merchant sailors from India] were not infrequent along the wharves and not a few captains had brought home servants from India who retained their native costumes. Many of the Salem negroes [*sic*] were descended from these East Indians and not from the unintelligent [*sic*] Congo slaves.[182]

180 Pg. 130. Phillips, James Duncan. "Captain Stephen Phillips, 1764-1838". Pashaura Singh suggested to me that the dress style of 'George', as Phillips describes it, reflects typical clothing of the Khalsa tradition of the late eighteenth century.
181 From the Persian *laskar* (Arabic *al-askar*) meaning 'guard' or 'soldier', in this case a 'sailor'.
182 Pg. 130. Phillips, James Duncan. "Captain Stephen Phillips, 1764-1838".

Historian Joan Jensen concurs that there were likely other Indian sailors who had come to the United States in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and some of them may have married African American women.[183] After these small numbers of early Sikh 'visitors' to the United States, Sikhs first began immigrating to North America in significant numbers in the 1890s.

In 1887, a detachment of Sikh soldiers in the British Army passed through Canada while they were returning to India from Queen Victoria's 'Golden Jubilee' celebrating fifty years of her reign.[184] Returning to Punjab, they brought word to friends and family of economic opportunities in North America. Following this, a small number of Sikhs—perhaps between one-hundred[185] and seven-hundred[186]—arrived in Canada and the Western seaboard of the United States throughout the 1890s. There has been significant scholarly interest in the reasons why these early Sikh 'pioneers' decided to move to North America,[187] and the consensus mostly rests on the 'pull' of the promise of economic incentives. For most of these early Sikh immigrants, the decision that they should come to North America was made as a family decision, in order that they could take advantage of economic opportunities, remit money back to their families, and then eventually return to India. Ronald Takaki summarizes this situation:

---

183 Pg. 12-13 Jensen, Joan M. *Passage from India: Asian Indian Immigrants in North America*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988.

184 Pg. 38. Gibson, Margaret A. *Accommodation without Assimilation: Sikhs in an American High School*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988.

185 Pg. 87. Muthanna, I.M. *People of India in North America*.

186 Pg. 38. Gibson, Margaret A. *Accommodation without Assimilation: Sikhs in an American High School*.

187 Bruce Labrack evaluates the different reasons that have been proposed for why the first Sikhs decided to come to North America on pgs. 58-64 of *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975* (New York: AMS Press, 1988).

> The decision to leave home was generally not an individual choice but rather a group decision, based on the family's needs. To pay for their transportation to Canada or the United States, many emigrants mortgaged one or two acres of their land in India... They earned only 10 or 15 cents a day in India, but they were told they would be paid as much as 2 dollars for a day's work in America.[188]

Many of these early Sikh immigrants were married, and most expected to eventually return to India. Of those who had served in the British Army, many had become disenchanted by a feeling of being treated with 'second-class' status and had decided not to re-enlist. In Canada, which was still a Dominion of the British Crown at the time, they hoped to be greeted as British citizens. In the United States, "...they readily identified with America for her... revolution and her Bill of Rights safeguarding individual and religious freedoms," and hoped for better treatment and prospects than in India under the British.[189]

This first trickle of immigrants from India was the beginning of what is referred to as the 'first wave'[190] of Asian Indian immigrants to the United States. By the 1910s, there were approximately six-to-seven thousand Asian Indians residing and working in the United States, 85-90% of whom were Sikhs (with roughly 10% being Muslims).[191] Most of these early immigrants were "illiterate laborers from agricultural and/or military

188 Pg. 24. Takaki, Ronald. *India in the West: South Asians in America*. New York and Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1989. Bruce LaBrack further discusses this profile of the early Sikh immigrants as men who left families behind, came to North America seeking to improve their economic situation, and then eventually return to India on pgs. 89, 96-97, and 416 of *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975* (New York: AMS Press, 1988).

189 Pg. 39. Gibson, Margaret A. *Accommodation without Assimilation: Sikhs in an American High School*.

190 Scholars of Asian American history frequently refer to immigrants who arrived previous to 1965 as 'first wave immigrants', those who immigrated between 1965 and the late 1970s and early 1980s as 'second wave immigrants', and those who immigrated from the late 1970s to the present as 'third wave' immigrants.

191 Pg. 43. Leonard, Karen Isaksen. *The South Asian Americans*. Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 1997. Bruce Labrack places this number at 75-90% (pg. 85. LaBrack, Bruce. *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975*).

backgrounds," though a very small number of them represented an "...educated elite... [of] professors and students."[192]

Although most of these early Sikh immigrants came from an agricultural background, initially, only a minority of them became farmers in the United States and Canada.[193] Most worked in menial jobs, such as in factories and lumber mills—often fulfilling roles that were deemed "too harsh for the 'white man'."[194] In 1907, there were "1,072 Hindu and Sikh immigrants" involved in a railway expansion project over the Sierra Nevada Mountains.[195] Thus, these Sikh 'pioneers' joined a vast labor force that included large numbers of other 'first wave' Asian American immigrants—including Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino immigrants—in the effort to industrialize and build up the infrastructure of the American West. Due to cultural understandings of gender roles, and the harsh work that these first Sikh immigrants undertook, there were no women among the earliest immigrants. In fact, the first Sikh woman to enter the United States was Rattan Kaur, the wife of a former member of the British Army named Bakhshish Dhillon, who was able to join her husband in the United States in 1910. Rattan Kaur and Bakhshish Dhillon's daughter Kartar Kaur (born 1915) was the first Sikh woman born in the United States (Kartar Kaur later married a Sikh American farmer who held a degree

---

192 Pgs. 68-69. LaBrack, Bruce. *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975*. Karen Leonard characterizes the earliest Sikhs who immigrated to the U.S. thusly: "The six or seven thousand Indians who came to the Western United States between 1899 and 1914 were chiefly peasants from India's Punjab province, men from martial castes and landowning families" (Pg. 42. *The South Asian Americans*. Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 1997).

193 Pgs. 104-105. LaBrack, Bruce. *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975*.

194 Pg. 124. LaBrack, Bruce. *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975*.

195 Pg. 103. Muthanna, I.M. *People of India in North America*. Photos of these Sikhs who worked building railroad infrastructure can be seen here: http://www.sikhpioneers.org/t_usphot.html.

in political science from UC Berkeley, and all of their children went on to earn PhD degrees).[196]

The arrival of these first Sikh immigrants coincided with rising 'nativist' 'anti-Oriental' sentiments surrounding the comparatively larger populations of Chinese and Japanese immigrants who had begun arriving in the United States a half a century earlier and who found similar employment. This atmosphere of 'anti-Oriental'-ism began a pattern in which Sikh laborers would encounter racist discrimination and sometimes 'anti-Hindoo'[197] rioting in a place, and then move further down the west coast—from Canada into Washington, from Washington into Oregon, from Oregon into California—seeking better local conditions in which to work. Finding themselves ill-treated, Sikhs who had settled in Vancouver began moving into Washington state and found work in lumber mills. This angered some of the local 'white' workers, and on October 2, 1907, a group of 'white' Washingtonians met Sikhs at the Canadian border in order to repel them from entering the U.S. .[198] Three days later, on October 5, 1907, "nearly five-hundred white men" attacked Sikh and Hindu laborers in their living quarters. In this incident, that became known as the 'Bellingham riots', six Indian immigrants were injured, 410 rioters were arrested, and, as a result, within a week "700 [Indian workers] fled northward [back] to Canada."[199] In an incident in 1910, three-hundred "Hindu" (actually

196 Pgs. 87-98. Gurinder Singh Mann, Paul Numrich, and Raymond Williams. *Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs in America*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

197 All immigrants from India were erroneously referred to as 'Hindus', even though the majority of Asian Indian immigrants were Sikhs. This was partly owed to the imprecision of early British census documents which also lumped Sikhs as 'Hindus'. The odd double-o spelling appears in some U.S. newspaper headlines of the time.

198 Pg. 61. Muthanna, I.M. *People of India in North America*.

199 Pg. 60. Muthanna, I.M. *People of India in North America*.

predominantly Sikh) workers at the John Lumber Company were attacked by a mob of two-hundred 'white' men who “felt that those 'Hindus' had usurped their places in the mill taking a salary of [$]1.80 per day when they received [$]2.50 per day.”[200] Responding to the backlash by 'white' workers, the mill owners defended “those 'strapping men' of India”, and responded “[we] cannot work without these Orientals.”[201] However, caving to the pressure, the mill owners eventually fired the Indian workers and replaced them with 'white' workers. In another incident that took place in 1911, eleven Sikhs were forced out of a work camp, allegedly for “annoying white girls”. In this atmosphere of prevailing racism, American newspapers of the time printed sensational headlines about a “Hindu Invasion” and a “Tide of Turbans” coming to the United States, and printed cartoons with racialized depictions of stereotypical 'Hindus'.[202] Seeing themselves as British subjects—many of them having held higher ranks in the British army—the early Sikh immigrants were surprised by such a reception and their ill treatment.[203]

By this point, some of the Sikh immigrants had begun pursuing their ancestral occupation as agricultural workers, settling predominantly in the rich farmlands of California's San Joaquin, Sacramento, and Imperial Valleys.[204] Having worked for local farmers for years to save money, some bought their own farmland, and many Sikh immigrants began have great success in farming, particularly in growing peaches, prunes, plums, walnuts, almonds, tomatoes, rice, and wheat. Viewing their growing

---

200 Pgs. 200-201. Ibid.

201 Pg. 89. Ibid.

202 Some such cartoons (as well as other historical photographs of Sikhs in the U.S. from this time period) can be viewed at: http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/SSEAL/echoes/chapter4/chapter4_1.html.

203 Pg. 93. Muthanna, I.M. *People of India in North America*.

204 Pg. 106. LaBrack, Bruce. *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975*.

successes in farming with alarm, “[m]any white American farmers... themselves pressed by difficult economic times and influenced by the pervasive anti-Asian sentiments of the day, resented Indian competition and lent their support to measures restricting Indians' ability to purchase their own farms...”[205] Thus the first Sikh immigrants to the United States were caught in an overflow of anti-'Asiatic' and anti-'Oriental' racism that had already been growing in some communities toward Chinese and Japanese immigrants, who had been present longer and in comparatively larger numbers, and who had also been successful in farming.[206] One culminating point in this rise in anti-'Oriental' sentiment was in 1913 when, responding to popular pressure, the California legislature passed (by sweeping majority) an 'Alien Land Law' which barred “aliens ineligible for citizenship” from owning land.[207] This law particularly affected Sikh immigrants who had followed their ancestral occupation of agriculture. Sikh immigrants were distressed by this experience but some would go on to fight legal battles to maintain their land and attempt to gain citizenship in the United States.

3.2 The Stockton Gurdwara and Sikh Religious Life in The United States During the 'First Wave' of Immigrants

In spite of the hardships that the first Sikhs in the United States faced, they worked hard to maintain their religious identity. By the first decade of the nineteenth

205 Pg. 40. Gibson, Margaret A. *Accommodation without Assimilation: Sikhs in an American High School*.

206 I. M. Muthanna writes that by 1920, immigrants from Asian owned 2% of all farmland in California, or 6,230,752 acres, with Sikhs owning or leasing 88,450 acres of farmland (pgs. 663-665. *People of India in North America*).

207 The text of California's 'Alien Land Law' can be viewed here: http://www.intimeandplace.org/Japanese%20Internment/reading/constitution/alienlandlaw.html.

century, Sikh communities in Vancouver, and parts of northern California had grown to the point that they began to hold informal religious meetings together. In 1904, the first *saroop* ('body', complete scriptural volume) of Guru Granth Sahib was brought to North America (it was also the first in the Western Hemisphere) in order to cater to the religious needs of the Vancouver Sikh community. This *saroop* was brought to Vancouver by Bhai Arjan Singh, a Sikh from Malak village, in Ludhiana District, in Punjab. Following this, Sikhs in Vancouver started to congregate regularly in people's homes to worship in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib.[208] Since it was customary for British Army regiments to carry a *saroop* of Guru Granth Sahib, and since many of the first Sikhs in the United States were former members of the British Army, it is likely that the first *saroop* of Guru Granth Sahib to come to the United States arrived shortly after this time,[209] as Sikh communities in the United States started to grow and worship together. In 1904, a group of Sikhs, including one Jawala Singh, started settling and buying farms around the northern California city of Stockton.[210] Within a few years, Jawala Singh was so successful in his farming ventures that he was hailed as the 'Potato King' of California.

In 1911, Jawala Singh and Basakha Singh arranged for a meeting of Sikhs to take place in Holt, CA, a city near Stockton. From among this group of Sikhs, a committee

208 Sikhpioneers.org.

209 I.M. Muthanna states that, since 1905, the Sikh community in Stockton had held formal worship ceremonies in a "small structure" on the property where the Stockton gurdwara would later be built (pg. 525. Muthanna, I.M. *People of India in North America*). It seems highly likely that this would have necessitated the presence of Guru Granth Sahib in this makeshift gurdwara, which Muthanna refers to as "...the first [gurdwara] in North America...", since it preceded the construction of the Vancouver gurdwara.

210 Pg. 121. Muthanna, I.M. *People of India in North America*.

was appointed to raise money in order to construct a gurdwara.[211] In 1912[212] the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan was founded, which became the first, and the primary Sikh religious organization representing Sikhs in North America. On October 14, 1912,[213] the Stockton Gurdwara—the first gurdwara in the United States—hosted its opening ceremonies, formally installing Guru Granth Sahib within, and raising the *Nishan Sahib* ('venerable symbol' of the Khalsa) in front of the gurdwara.[214] According to I.M. Muthanna (who quotes local newspaper sources from the time) "...the opening ceremony of the [Stockton gurdwara] was heralded by men of the town and Sikhs alike... about 200 residents of the town... and 400 Sikhs of California, who had migrated and settled working in the farms and orchards between Fresno and Marysville, gathered on that day."[215] The local newspaper, the Stockton Record, included an excerpt from an interview on the opening day of the gurdwara with a community member named Nand Singh, who explained that "[t]he Gurdwara maintains a free dinner room... We do not permit our people to become charges on public charity. If a man is hungry and out of funds we feed him. Our dining room is open at all hours of the day and is closed only for a few hours during the night.

---

211 Sikhpioneers.org.

212 Though most sources state that the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan was founded in 1912, Bruce LaBrack intimates that it may have been founded in 1910 (Pgs. 126-127. *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975*).

213 There appears to be some confusion between different sources about whether the Stockton gurdwara was built in 1912 or 1915. Most sources say it was completed in 1912, and the Sikh Centennial event in Stockton was held in 2012 to commemorate the Stockton gurdwara being built. A time-line on Sikhpioneers.org states that final construction of the gurdwara was completed on November 22, 1915. It seems plausible that construction of the gurdwara may have continued from 1912 until 1915, which would make both dates technically correct.

214 Members of the Stockton gurdwara community who I interviewed related to me a story about a Stockton Sheriff who, taking exception to the flying of a 'flag' other than the flag of the United States, repeatedly tore down this Nishan Sahib during the early years of the community.

215 Pg. 525. Muthanna, I.M. *People of India in North America*.

The unfortunate hungry American will be as welcome as our own people."[216] Built for a cost of roughly $3,000, the original two story wooden gurdwara was replaced by a larger gurdwara of brick construction in 1929.[217] However, the original two story wooden structure of the old gurdwara was not torn down, but moved, and, for decades, it was used as a residence for *granthīs*. In 2012, this original gurdwara was converted into a museum commemorating one hundred years of Sikh history in the United States.

The Stockton gurdwara became the centerpiece of Sikh social and religious life, not only for Sikhs who lived in Stockton, but for the entire community of Sikhs in the United States, which at the time numbered about six-thousand. Sikhs would travel from Oregon, Washington, southern California, and even Canada to attend the occasional special events held at the Stockton gurdwara. In fact, the Stockton gurdwara became a central social hub not only for Sikhs, but for Asian Indians who practiced other religions, especially Muslims. Bruce LaBrack describes the unique ecumenicism of the early community of Asian Indians surrounding the Stockton gurdwara:

> ...the Stockton gurdwara played a wider role as a cultural center for East Indians from throughout Northern California, including Hindus and Muslims. As there were no other centers in California at this time, it was natural that the gurdwara would evolve into a cultural and social focal point. Hindus and Muslims often attended both religious and non-religious functions during this period, mingling freely and enjoying the easy sociability which appears to have been characteristic of early East Indian social life.[218]

The small size of the Asian Indian community at the time, and the predominance of Punjabis among these early immigrants, created a tight-knit community where Indian

216 Covert, Martin, V. "Stockton Sikh Temple," *The* ***Stockton Record*** , November 22, 1915.
217 Pictures of both the 1912 and 1929 Stockton gurdwara structures can be viewed here: http://www.sikhpioneers.org/t_usphot.html.
218 Pg. 128. LaBrack, Bruce. *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975*.

identity or Punjabi identity overrode religious differences. This uniquely set the Stockton gurdwara, as the first Indian religious and cultural building in the United States, as a place"...where no Punjabi, including Muslims, was a stranger."[219]

During the early years of the Sikh community surrounding the Stockton gurdwara, attendance at religious services and ceremonies was sparse and irregular because of the seasonal and intensive nature of the farm labor jobs most of the immigrants had and because of the expense and difficulty of travel at the time. LaBrack writes that "...most Sikhs visited the temple from four to six times a year, generally on one of the major festival days such as Baisakhi, Guru Arjun's Martyrdom Day, Guru Nanak's Birthday, and Guru Gobind Singh's Birthday."[220] The busy calendar of weekly gurdwara visits plus special events and ceremonies that a devoutly religious Sikh might have kept in India could not be maintained in this first generation of Sikhs in the United States. LaBrack writes that

> Although Stockton was the only gurdwara location in [California]... for over half a century....Akhand-paths [unbroken recitations of the entire Guru Granth Sahib lasting forty-eight hours] and Sadharan-paths [recitation of the entire Guru Granth Sahib over an extended period of time] were infrequent, but present, throughout the 1919-1950 period. Likewise, performance of such life cycle rites as naming, birth celebrations, pahul [Khalsa initiation], weddings, etc. ranged from non-existent to rare. It was only funerals and memorial bhogs which were frequent, religiously reflecting what was occurring socially.[221]

In the early 'first wave' era, Sikhs conducted religious services the best ways that they could, largely without the benefit of trained 'experts' in reciting Guru Granth Sahib or

219 Pg. 134. Ibid.
220 Pg. 133. Ibid.
221 Pg. 301. Ibid.

performing *Gurbani kirtan*. In the early years of the community, the office of "*granthī*" rotated among members of the community who knew how to read gurmukhi and had learned how to sing hymns from Guru Granth Sahib from childhood. At the time that the Stockton Gurdwara was first opened, Vasakha Singh and ('Potato King') Jawala Singh were the first to take the role of *granthīs*.[222] LaBrack describes this lack within the community of formally trained *granthīs* and *rāgīs*, stating that "[a] number of Sikh men knew the scriptures, but none would have been considered the equal of a trained gyani or granthi in the full Punjabi sense of the term. In fact, this rather relaxed approach to religious specialists was a hallmark of California life until very recently.[223] Elsewhere, LaBrack further relates:

> ...neither the Muslims nor the Sikhs in this area were particularly orthodox. In fact, both groups were well known for their rather relaxed approach to religious orthopraxy. They would drink and relax together, cook food for each other, and generally ignore the more stringent injunctions of both Islam and Sikhism. Years of privation and discrimination had reduced their religious practices to the most simple and inconspicuous of ritual behavior.[224]

In spite of the difficulties posed to maintaining Sikh religious life—by lack of formally trained leadership, the spread out nature of the community, the sometimes hostile treatment by the 'host' community, and soon—there is evidence that that the early Sikh community in the United States put great effort into trying to maintain their religious practices. The Stockton Gurdwara community maintained some of its own records about preachers and Sikh musicians whose visits from India and other places the community

222 Sikhpioneers.org
223 Pg. 301. LaBrack, Bruce. *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975*.
224 Pg. 218. Ibid.

sponsored, even in the very earliest days of the community. Photos of the early community depict special events that brought such visiting preachers and musicians. One photo from the very earliest days of the Stockton gurdwara that is reproduced in Mahinder Dhillon's *A History Book of Sikhs in Canada and California*[225] labels a group of four seated, turbaned Sikh men as “mill workers”. The men in the photo may very well have worked in a mill, but one of them is depicted holding a *sarangi* (a stringed instrument), and another is holding a *ḍhaḍ* (a small hand drum), the characteristic instruments of a *ḍhaḍi jatha* (a Sikh musical ensemble that performs songs retelling historical narratives, usually about the lives of the Gurus). It seems obvious from the instruments in their hands that the image was meant to highlight their role as Sikh musicians—rather than as “mill workers”—undoubtedly on their way to or from performing music in the only venue that they would have had to perform in, the Stockton gurdwara. A 1916 image of the interior of the Stockton gurdwara[226] depicts the room filled with turbaned Sikh men seated on the floors, with the Guru Granth Sahib enthroned at the front of the room. Barely visible at the front of the room, next to Guru Granth Sahib, is what appears to be a harmonium in front of a turbaned Sikh. Even when such rare visiting musicians were not in the community, some of my interviewees who are members of the Stockton gurdwara community stated that “most of” the early members of the community “knew some” hymns of Guru Granth Sahib from memory, and that

225 This image can also be viewed here: http://www.sikhpioneers.org/images/millworkers.jpg. They also wear medals that are likely from their service in the British Army and appear to possibly be seated in the interior of the Stockton gurdwara.

226 This 1916 image of the interior of the Stockton Gurdwara can be viewed here: https://www.saadigitalarchive.org/item/20121224-1187

unaccompanied singing of these hymns was a part of the early meetings of the community.

Bruce LaBrack probably rightly characterizes the early years of the Stockton gurdwara during which "...the performance of the entire range of ceremonies [was] either difficult or unnecessary" as a "...long and difficult 'liminal' period in which isolated groups of largely migrant Sikh laborers coped as best they could in an often hostile environment."[227] LaBrack further states that,

> ...the first fifty years of the Sikh experience in North America seem to have been more a state of suspended animation; an interlude in which these values and practices were not so much forgotten as rendered impossible to practice. The Sikhs, in many ways a very pragmatic and adaptive group, simply chose to do what was necessary to live in their own country.[228]

Thus the first Sikh immigrants to the United States found ways to 'make do' in working to retain Sikh religious practices in a new country, adapting practices as they were able and abandoning others that were made unnecessary or impossible. As I will discuss in Chapter Four, this process of adapting and 'making due' by the earliest Sikh communities is similar to other immigrant religious communities from earlier eras of immigration to the United States.

3.3 The Ghadar Party (1913-1917) and the Era of Decline (1917-1965)

The founding of the Stockton Gurdwara and the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan closely coincided with the founding of another organization, the Ghadar Party

227 Pgs. 417-418. LaBrack, Bruce. *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975*.
228 Pg. 418. Ibid.

('Revolution Party').[229] Though membership in the Ghadar Party largely overlapped with the membership of the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan, the Ghadar Party was a non-sectarian (though predominantly Sikh,[230] like the Asian Indian population in the U.S. at the time) political organization dedicated to overthrowing British rule in India. As discussed above, many of the first Sikhs in the United States had been in the British Army and came to the United States and Canada because they had become disillusioned with life under the British Raj. Ironically, the ill treatment that Sikhs (and the smaller numbers of Hindus and Muslims) received as 'Orientals' in the United States and Canada further spurred their revolutionary spirit in seeking independence from British rule in their Indian homeland. Muthanna relates that the early Asian Indian immigrants "...readily identified with America for her own revolution and her Bill of Rights safeguarding individual and religious freedoms,"[231] seeing American values of freedom, self-sufficiency, and equality as in line with central Sikh ideals. To be treated with discrimination and even violence in the 'land of the free' was a surprise and an affront to the first generation of Asian Indian immigrants. LaBrack also correlates the rise of the Ghadar party to the members' time spent in the United States and their consciousness of its "...democratic ideas [but also] the reality of racism and discrimination" that they faced as presenting an ongoing contradiction of those values.[232] Muthanna elaborates an example:

> At the Indian settlements of the west coast towns of California, Oregon, and British Columbia (Canada) there ha[d] been frequent racial troubles, and when the

229 *Ghadar* is an Urdu word, derived from an Arabic word meaning 'revolt', or 'revolution'.
230 Pg. 129. LaBrack, Bruce. *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975*.
231 Pg. 39. Gibson, Margaret A. Accommodation *without Assimilation: Sikhs in an American High School*.
232 Pgs. 139-140. LaBrack, Bruce. *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975*.

> Bellingham riots broke out... the East Indian saw mill workers sought the help of the British Consulate at Seattle who flatly refused to go to their assistance.[233]

This is just one example of a situation that wounded the pride of the early Asian Indian immigrants, especially those who had served in the British Army, and who expected to be treated better than this as citizens of the British Empire. Finding themselves treated as 'second class' citizens as colonial subjects within British India, and often as 'unwanted' 'Orientals' in North America certainly must have been a contributing factor that fueled revolutionary zeal for seeing an independent India.

On April 23, 1913, the Ghadar Party held its first meeting at the Finnish Socialist Hall in Astoria, Oregon.[234] Over the next six years, the Ghadar Party printed pamphlets, fliers, and a newspaper, *The Ghadar*, advocating revolutionary overthrow of the British Raj. These printed materials were distributed throughout the Indian diaspora. The efforts of some factions within the Ghadar party included bombings, efforts to move weapons into India, and even, in the lead up to World War I, attempts to ally with Germany in hopes of receiving aid in overthrowing British rule.

Although the 'religious' organizations of the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan and the Stockton Gurdwara were separate entities from the 'political' organization of the Ghadar Party, the membership of these organizations largely overlapped. In fact, many of the leaders of the Ghadar party also served as *granthīs* in the Stockton gurdwara.[235] Further portraying the non-separation in the thinking of these early Sikh immigrants of the

233 Pg. 233. Muthanna, I.M. *People of India in North America*.
234 Sikhpioneers.org.
235 Muthanna mentions this at multiple points in *People of India in North America*, it was mentioned to me by several members of the Stockton gurdwara committee, and the exhibit content at the museum at the Stockton gurdwara makes this clear.

'religious' and 'political' spheres, Jawala Singh (mentioned above) was a founding member and sponsor of the Stockton gurdwara and one of its first *granthīs*—and he was also the first Vice President of the Ghadar Party in the United States. Through his wealth gained as a successful farmer ('The Potato King'), he donated the land that the Stockton Gurdwara was built on and also offered scholarships for Indian students to attend the University of California, Berkeley "...with the aim of bringing them up as revolutionaries who would play an effective role to bring about revolution or Ghadar."[236]

As World War I broke out, many of the leading members of the Ghadar Party left the United States and Canada to participate in an anticipated revolution in India. However, most were intercepted by British authorities. Many these arrested Ghadarites were summarily hanged and many more—including Jawala Singh—were imprisoned for long sentences. Though the Ghadar Party continued in name until being dissolved in 1948, it had largely lost its numbers and strength by 1918.

The Ghadarites, and especially their activities, are viewed with some ambivalence by modern Sikh Americans. When Bruce LaBrack interviewed members of the Stockton Gurdwara community in the mid-1980s, he reported that "...many of the older Sikh men were very unhappy about the amount and type of political activity associated with the gurdwara. Many felt that the church should not become involved in such an emotionally-charged and legally dangerous issue."[237] These feelings LaBracks interviewees' described three decades ago are consistent with the sentiments expressed to me by some members

236 Pg. 218. Muthanna, I.M. *People of India in North America*.
237 Pg. 129. LaBrack, Bruce. *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975*.

of the Stockton gurdwara community that I interviewed who felt that some of the Ghadar Party members “went too far” (especially by advocating violent means of overthrowing the British), and that they were “too focused on politics,” and that they were “not [good] religious men.”[238] At the same time, members of the Ghadar Party are widely memorialized by Indians and Indians in the diaspora as '*Ghadri Babas*' ('Fathers of the Revolution'), and 'Fathers of the Nation' for their catalytic role in promoting the cause of an independent India in a time when it was dangerous to do so. Today, the original (1915) building of the Stockton Gurdwara has been repurposed as a “Sikh History Museum”. Much of its content is dedicated to the '*Ghadri Babas*'. The original printing press on which the Ghadar Party printed its newspapers and other materials is displayed prominently.[239]

Responding to public anxiety about immigration, in 1917 the United States Congress passed a new Immigration Act aimed at excluding supposedly 'undesirable' immigrant groups. The Immigration Act of 1917 established map boundaries for what came to be called an “Asiatic barred zone”[240] which excluded entry of immigrants from most of Asia and the Middle East. This began an era of sharp decline in the number of Sikh immigrants, and, more broadly, Asian immigrants living in the United States as no

238 One interviewee at Stockton told me “Many of the Ghadarites were basically atheists. They were communists. They were not really Sikhs”.

239 I have briefly discussed the Ghadar Party, but there is more scholarly literature, by far, dedicated to discussing the Ghadar Party than any other topic surrounding the 'first wave' of Asian Indian immigrants to the United States. See, for example, the output of Mark Juergensmeyer on the topic, and most of the content of Muthanna's *People of India in North America*. There have also been multiple conferences in recent years dedicated to study of the brief period (less than ten years) of the Ghadar Party's peak of activity in the United States.

240 A map of the boundaries established by the “Asiatic barred zone” can be seen here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Asiatic_Barred_Zone.png

new immigrants were allowed to migrate, many people who had lived in the U.S. for decades were deported, and localized communities began to slowly 'die out'. With the already slow influx of new community members into Sikh communities in the U.S. now almost totally cut off, the pressure was felt more greatly on those who remained to 'assimilate' to American life. Photos from the period[241] depict Sikh men wearing turbans and full uncut beards at the time of their arrival in the United States and then show them clean shaven and short hair as they tried to gain respectability in the American environment. Muthanna states that by the late 1920s, most of the Sikhs who remained in the U.S. had decided to be clean-shaven out of a feeling that it was necessary to succeeding and maintaining a life in the United States.[242]

In spite of personal hardships, many Sikhs were determined to fight to stay in the United States as citizens on an equal footing with others. In one famous example, Bhagat Singh Thind, a Sikh man who had served in the U.S. Army during World War I, applied for and was denied citizenship based on U.S. Naturalization Law that had been in effect since 1790 which stated that only "free white" persons were eligible to become naturalized citizens. In 1923, Bhagat Singh Thind took his case to the U.S. Supreme Court. Part of his case was made by appealing to anthropological discourse current to his time that included Asian Indians as being among the "Caucasian races". The Supreme Court denied Bhagat Singh Thind citizenship because, in spite of the case he made citing anthropologists, he was "not white" "in accordance with the understanding of the

241 Some of such photos can be seen here: http://www.pbs.org/rootsinthesand/f_sai_home1.html
242 Pgs. 362-363. Muthanna, I.M. *People of India in North America*.

common man."[243] At the time, the 1917 Immigration Act and the Supreme Court decision in the Thind case nearly dealt a death blow to the Sikh and other Asian Indian immigrant communities that had only just begun to slowly grow during the 'first wave' era.

As stated above, at its peak, the predominantly Sikh 'first wave' of Asian Indian immigrants to the United States peaked at about 6,000 people.[244] Bruce LaBrack refers to the post-1917 era as a "...[a] period... of physical decimation and cultural decline for East Indians in America."[245] By 1946 there were "...fewer than 1,500 East Indians in the entire country. [Their] decline... brought about by death and deportation..."[246] Most of those who were able to stay continued working in agricultural communities in the central valleys of California, settling into trying to make lives for themselves permanently in the United States. Due to anti-miscegenation laws, many of the Sikh immigrants of the 'first wave' who were able to stay in the United States married the only women legally available to them: Mexican and Mexican American women.[247] Karen Leonard has written extensive and excellent work about the 'Punjabi Mexican' families in California that grew out of these marriages. Her aptly titled book, *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans*,[248] is an exploration of the flexibility of ethnic identity based on Leonard's extensive fieldwork interviewing the descendants of these families. The stories

243 See the text of the Supreme Court's ruling here: https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/261/204/case.html#214
244 Pg. 69. LaBrack, Bruce. *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975*. New York: AMS Press, 1988.
245 Pg. 67. Ibid.
246 Pg. 77. Ibid.
247 Such marriages were so common that Bruce LaBrack writes: "All of the data [up] to the 1950s points to one fact: East Indian Marriages in California were characteristically between East Indian men and Mexican-American women" (Pg. 181. *The Sikhs of Northern California*).
248 Leonard, Karen Isaksen. *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994.

of these Punjabi Mexican families portray an almost total loss of Sikh religious practice and identity as the Sikh men had almost all stopped observing the 'five Ks' and accepted their children being raised in the Christian (predominantly Catholic) religion of their wives. In Bruce LaBrack's fieldwork in Stockton in the mid-1980s, he reported that in the early days of these marriages, the Mexican wives and Punjabi Mexican children would "...attend the Stockton gurdwara a few times a year, but they remember it as a 'festival' or as the Mexican women recall, a 'fiesta'. It was a time of socializing... rather than a pilgrimage or a solemn religious event."[249] He further reports that no one in the community knew of any "half and halfs" (as they were called within the community) who knew Punjabi, had been raised as Sikhs, or who had been initiated into the Khalsa and observed the 'five Ks'. Rather, "for the majority of children a nominal Christianity was the rule" and most 'half and halfs' married non-Asian Indians.[250] The perception of many Sikh Americans who immigrated or were born in the United States after the 'first wave' is that the period of 1917-1946 was one of the "loss of Sikhism" by most measures.[251]

After thirty-one years of the "Asiatic barred zone" and a dwindling Sikh (and other Asian immigrant) population, President Harry Truman signed the Luce-Celler Act into law in 1946, which allowed a small amount of Indian (and Filipino) immigrants to

249 Pg. 223. LaBrack, Bruce. *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975*.
250 Pg. 234. Ibid.
251 On a personal note, once when I was teaching a class on "World Religions in California", I noticed that one of the students in the class had the last name Singh. Though he had a typically Christian first name and did not maintain the '5 Ks', I asked him after one class meeting if he was a Sikh, based on his last name. He explained to me that he knew that his last name came from his Sikh great-grandfather, but that he and his family were Catholic, and that he had taken my class because he "didn't know anything about Sikhism" or the story of the first Sikhs in California, and even knew very little about his family history, but he hoped to learn more from the class. He was an excellent student and was of course especially interested in the material we covered on Sikhs in the United States.

come to the U.S., and some Indian immigrants already in the U.S. to become citizens and apply for family reunification Visas. However, this represented a tiny trickle of Asian Indian immigrants, even by the standards of the pre-1917 era, as after the Luce-Celler Act "...from 1948-1965... 5,134 people from the subcontinent were admitted, or about 300 average per year."[252] During this extremely slow period of immigration, there was a small influx of young, highly educated, *sahajdhari* Sikhs (those who have not taken the Khalsa initiation or adopted the 'five Ks' and are usually clean-shaven) Sikhs who assumed leadership roles in the Stockton Gurdwara community. Those *sahajdhari* Sikhs,

> ...began to question some of the practices associated with Sikh worship, particularly the injunction of removing their shoes and covering their heads prior to entering the central hall. Most were *sahajdhari* and had been since entering the United States. They saw these practices as backward and unnecessarily strict interpretations of gurdwara etiquette. There was even a question about the [traditional] segregation of males on one side of the temple and women and children on the other during services.[253]

One particularly famous Sikh American of this era of migration was Dalip Singh Saund (1899-1973), who held a PhD in Mathematics from the University of California, Berkeley and became the President of the gurdwara committee in Stockton. In an episode (in)famously called the "chair controversy", Dalip Singh Saund and other like-minded members of the Stockton gurdwara community moved chairs into the gurdwara.[254] Later, more traditionally minded Sikh immigrants would see this as an affront to the tradition that anyone who came to see the Gurus would sit 'in *pangat*' (on the floor 'in rows') as a way of inculcating humility by placing all people on the same level regardless of caste,

252 Pg. 229. LaBrack, Bruce. *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975*.
253 Pgs. 223-224. LaBrack, Bruce. *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975*.
254 Photographs of the Stockton Gurdwara during the period when chairs were installed can be seen here: http://www.sikhpioneers.org/t_usphot.html.

class, or wealth (and placing everyone on a level lower than Guru Granth Sahib). After the passage of the Luce-Celler Act, Dalip Singh Saund was able to become a naturalized citizen in 1949. He went on to be the first Sikh American, and first Asian American member of the United States Congress, serving in the 29th District of California from 1957 to 1963.

In 1948, the small community of Sikh agriculturalists living in the U.S.-Mexico border town of El Centro purchased a building that had been a Japanese Buddhist temple, but was left vacant due to the wartime internment of Japanese Americans.[255] This became the second Sikh gurdwara in the United States, after the Stockton Gurdwara that had been completed in 1915. After this, no other gurdwaras would be purchased or built in the United States until the 1970s (see below). The short-lived Sikh community in El Centro can be seen as emblematic of the age of the decline of the 'first wave' of Sikh immigrants to the United States. The community was probably never larger than five-hundred Sikhs, and shortly after the purchasing of the gurdwara building, the community began to decline due to intermarriage, people leaving town, and no “new blood.”[256] In 1968, Robindra Chakravorty completed a study (a PhD dissertation)[257] of the Sikh community of El Centro. Upon visiting the El Centro Gurdwara in the mid-1960s, Chakravorty reports finding the gurdwara empty on a Sunday, but with a phonograph playing a recording of *Gurbani kirtan*. This small anecdote provides a poignant glimpse of the end of the 'first wave' era of Sikh immigration to the United States. Even when the Sikh

255 Pg. 217. LaBrack, Bruce. *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975*.
256 Pg. 265. Ibid.
257 Chakravorty, Robindra. *The Sikhs of El Centro: A Study in Social Integration*. Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Minnesota, 1968.

American community's ability to perform *Gurbani kirtan* was completely fractured by the collapse of the community, mostly caused by discriminatory immigration laws, someone desired to keep the 'eternal unstruck sound' vibrating, even in an empty gurdwara.

3.4 The 'Second Wave' of Immigrants and the 'Brain Drain' (1965-1984)

Dalip Singh Saund's story (above) is indicative of the beginning of an era when prejudices toward Asian Indian (and other) immigrants began to soften in the United States. Having been born in Punjab and immigrating to San Francisco in 1920 before obtaining MA and PhD degrees in Mathematics from the University of California, Berkeley, Saund was able to become a naturalized citizen in 1949 immediately following passage of the Luce-Celler Act, and eventually go on to become the first Sikh American and first Asian American elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. Saund's story is remarkable and far from representative of the experiences of most Indian Americans of his time, but it is indicative of the shifts that had occurred in public perception of Asian Americans by the late-mid twentieth century. These shifts in American attitudes rose to a watershed moment when the United States Congress passed the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965. This Act abolished the “quota system” of the earlier Luce-Celler Act that had allowed only a tiny amount of immigrants from Asia, and effectively eliminated the legal hold of the 1790 Naturalization Law's “free white persons” clause. With the abolishment of racialized “quotas”, the Immigration and Naturalization Act of

1965 would eventually create a vast sea change in the ethnic and national background characteristics of immigrants to the United States.

Although the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 eliminated the national quotas previously meant to bar so-called ethnic “undesirables”, it did not immediately open the door of immigration to the Statue of Liberty's “tired... hungry, huddled masses” from around the world. Especially in the context of Asian Indian immigrants of this 'second wave' of immigration, immigrants in the decades after 1965 are referred to as the 'brain drain' generation, since immigration preference was given to highly educated, highly skilled individuals. Asian Indian immigrants of the 'first wave' were predominantly Sikh (75-90%), and most were “illiterate laborers from agricultural and/or military backgrounds... [with a] very small class... [of] educated elite... professors and students.” [258] In 1940, well after the 1917 Immigration Act had essentially sealed off immigration from Asia, “...85 percent of all Asian Indians residing in the United States held blue-collar jobs, less than 4 percent professional positions.”[259] In sharp contrast, the vast majority of immigrants of the 'second wave' 'brain drain' era were almost entirely 'white collar' professionals who already held advanced degrees or were coming to the U.S. to pursue them and they were more religiously diverse (though the number of Sikh immigrants was still far greater than being proportional to the 2% of the population they represent in India).[260] In addition to the differences in education level and professions, the

258 Pgs. 68-69. LaBrack, Bruce. *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975*.

259 Pg. 41. Gibson, Margaret A. *Accommodation without Assimilation: Sikhs in an American High School*.

260 Margaret Gibson writes: “In sharp contrast to the early arrivals from rural Punjab, nearly 80 percent of all adult male immigrants arriving from India today are professional and technical workers or managers and administrators” (Pg. 43. Gibson, Margaret A. *Accommodation without Assimilation: Sikhs in an American High School*).

immigrants of the post-1965 'second wave' arrived in much larger numbers than the 'first wave', so much so that "...'by the years 1969, 1970, 1971... immigrants from Asia comprised between 15 and 20 percent of all immigrants, the highest percentage in U.S. history."[261] By 1980, the number of Asian Indian Americans had grown to over 50,000.[262] The immigrants of the 'second wave' were also more balanced in terms of gender than the almost entirely male 'first wave', with women accounting for roughly half of new immigrants from South Asia.[263]

Bruce LaBrack aptly refers to the post-1965 era as a period of the "reconstitution" of the Sikh community[264] marked by a "...renewed interest in the religious and ethnic aspects of Sikh identity... coupled with a sense of relief on the part of many resident Sikhs [who had immigrated earlier] that some semblance of their traditions and heritages would be preserved."[265] The large post-1965 influx of Sikhs settled in new areas throughout the U.S., especially in the urban centers of California, New York, and Illinois. Some also settled in the existing Sikh community of Stockton, to the extent that the new immigrants quickly outnumbered the immigrants of the 'first wave' and their descendants. These new immigrants tended to bring with them more 'orthodox' approaches to Sikh practice and belief compared to the less formal 'making do' approach created by the hardscrabble conditions of the very earliest immigrants and the isolation experienced by their descendants and the small number of immigrants who came post-1946. This meant

261 Pgs. 272-273. LaBrack, Bruce. *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975*.
262 Pg. 2. Gibson, Margaret A. *Accommodation without Assimilation: Sikhs in an American High School*.
263 Pg. 43. Ibid.
264 Pgs. 10-11. LaBrack, Bruce. *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975*. New York: AMS Press, 1988.
265 Pg. 241. Ibid.

the removal of chairs and covering of hair inside of the gurdwara, and the reintroduction of the prohibition of shoes and meat eating. For the Stockton community, the influx of 'second wave' Sikhs finally alienated the 'half and halves' and Mexican wives of the 'first wave' community.[266]

For the broader Sikh community in the U.S., the rapid growth in the number of Sikhs in the United States, coupled with the wealth brought by the educated professionals that dominated their demographics, meant that communities began to gather the resources to make purpose-built gurdwaras. In 1969, both the Yuba City Gurdwara in northern California and the Vermont Gurdwara in Los Angeles were built (these have been two field sites during my research). They were the third and fourth gurdwaras in the United States. The larger numbers and resources in these growing Sikh communities was coupled with an interest in recreating Sikh religious practice 'as it was in Punjab', and thus these communities began to 'import' trained professional *granthīs* and *rāgīs*. In the context of the Stockton Gurdwara community, LaBrack writes "[w]here religious leadership had been drawn from the available, untrained gurdwara membership for nearly sixty years, the mid-1960's had brought discussions about the advantages of 'improving' a granthi to oversee the... gurdwara."[267] By the late 1970s, the Stockton, Vermont, and Yuba City gurdwaras were using their resources to host *rāgīs*, *sants* (leaders of Sikh movements), and *kathākars* (preachers; see Chapter Four) visiting from India and elsewhere to perform *Gurbani kirtan*, preach, and teach.[268] By the early 1980s, some of

266 Pg. 321. Ibid.
267 Pg. 302. Ibid.
268 Pg. 316. Ibid.

the largest gurdwara communities began to hire full time *granthīs* to cater to the needs of large communities of Sikhs desiring ceremonies for births, weddings, Khalsa initiations, and scriptural recitations (*akhānd pāṭhs*) to commemorate various life events (see Chapters Three and Four).[269] Some Sikhs of the new generation began to maintain the 'five Ks' in the new country. Others had been initiated into the Khalsa before emigrating, and felt under less pressure than the 'first wave' immigrants had to abandon the 'five Ks' in order to 'assimilate' to American life. After generations of discrimination and decline, Sikhs in the United States were beginning to have enough resources and numbers to begin developing modes of community, religious practice, and religious and cultural retention that had been rendered all but impossible for their forebears of the 'first wave'.

3.5 The 'Third Wave' of Immigrants to the Present (1984 to 2015)

(As discussed in Part Two of this chapter) in 1984, armed Sikhs desiring a separate Sikh nation-state took up residence within the complex of buildings surrounding the Harimandir Sahib in Amritsar, Punjab, India. The Indian government responded by sending its Army into the grounds of this most sacred of Sikh sites. 'Operation Blue Star', the military operation that followed, resulted in severe damage to the Harimandir Sahib, Akal Takht, and surrounding buildings. The military operation alone resulted in the death of hundreds, even thousands of people, many of them unarmed civilians. In the aftermath of 'Operation Blue Star', India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards, and this incident kicked off an immediate wave of sectarian riots in

269 Pg. 303. Ibid.

which hundreds of innocent Sikhs were murdered, raped, and abused in the streets of India's major cities. In the years following 1984, the Indian government and local police forces cracked down violently on people perceived to be Sikh 'militants' or 'separatists'. Accusations of 'disappearances' and deaths by 'police encounter' of Sikhs mounted in the years following 'Blue Star' and continue to this day.[270]

The environment of violence against Sikhs in India after 1984 precipitated a large 'third wave' of immigration to the United States. This 'third wave'—in congruity with the 'third wave' identified by scholars of Asian American studies (made up in large part of immigrants from Southeast Asia)—was in large part made up of Sikhs who could claim 'refugee' status because of fleeing the violence and political unrest of their nation of origin. Between 1984 and the second decade of the new millennium, the Sikh population in the United States has grown from around 50,000 to over 500,000 through the arrival of new immigrants and the birth of multiple generations of Sikhs in the United States since the 1965 relaxation of anti-Asian immigration legislation. At the time of writing this dissertation, the current generation of Sikh Americans is primarily made up of the aging 'brain drain' generation, their children, and the immigrants—and now their children—of the 'third wave' era.

With the rapid growth of Sikh communities in the United States, there was an attendant increase in the human and monetary resources within Sikh communities that

270 It is common at Sikh public events for organizations to hand out magazines and fliers, have parade floats, or build displays that depict graphic photographs taken of Sikhs killed during this era in an effort to raise awareness about the situation of Sikhs in India in the post-1984 era. I am currently writing a chapter-length piece that will discuss the display of such 'martyr' imagery in the American public sphere.

met with an American environment that had become (comparatively) more multi-religious and multi-cultural. This has enabled today's Sikh communities to flourish and affirm Sikh identity and practice in the United States in ways that their forbears of the 'first wave' could barely have imagined. Since the beginning of the 'third wave' era, Sikh communities have increasingly devoted vast amounts of time, effort, and resources toward keeping new generations of Sikh Americans connected with Sikh communities, traditions, and ways of being and knowing. One of the primary ways that they have achieved this is through 'Punjabi schools' in gurdwaras that teach gurmukhi (the language of the Guru Granth Sahib), Punjabi, Sikh history and theology, and *Gurbani kirtan* classes. Bruce LaBrack[271] and Margaret Gibson[272] reported in their fieldwork that by the early 1980s, gurdwaras in the United States were beginning to make the first (short lived) attempts to host language classes, 'Sunday schools', 'youth camps', and *Gurbani kirtan* competitions. Today, these are all integral parts of how most young Sikhs across the U.S. learn how to be Sikh in the United States. These efforts to teach and pass on Sikh ways of being and knowing in the United States are the focus of Chapter Five (and also discussed in the remaining chapters).

Sikhism is currently the fifth largest religion in the world (by number of adherents) with approximately 25 million Sikhs worldwide (the majority of whom still live in India, making up about 2% of India's one billion people). In the United States today, there are roughly half a million Sikhs (650,000 is a frequently cited high estimate)

---

271 Pg. 318. LaBrack, Bruce. *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975*.

272 Pg. 319. Gibson, Margaret A. *Accommodation without Assimilation: Sikhs in an American High School*.

and roughly half of them (one quarter of a million) live in the state of California. There are over 250 gurdwara communities in the United States (Figure 2.9), and over sixty-five gurdwaras just in the state of California,[273] with more being planned. This era of growing gurdwara communities reached a new watershed moment in 2011 when the San Jose Gurdwara (in San Jose, California) held its grand opening. As discussed in Chapter One, the 110,000 square foot San Jose Gurdwara is currently the largest gurdwara in the world. Its large colorful domed structure stands visibly in the hills above California's 'Silicon Valley', a marker of the presence and achievements of Sikh Americans in the new millennium. Due to its famous size and grandeur, it has become something of a pilgrimage place for Sikhs from abroad visiting California. Such an achievement for the American Sikh community would likely have surpassed the wildest dreams of the immigrants of the 'first wave'.

The current generation of Sikh Americans are occupied with thinking about how they and their children can best negotiate and live out their 'Sikh-ness' and their American-ness. Bruce LaBrack's description of an era of the "reconstitution" of Sikhism in the United States during the 'second wave' has given way to the current era of the crystallization and defining of the shape that 'American Sikhism' will take. I will discuss in Chapters Four and Five how, as American-born Sikhs begin to become demographically dominant, the current generation of Sikh Americans are starting to look to what modes of 'home-grown' (American-born) leadership might emerge.

273 http://www.pluralism.org/religion/sikhism

In spite of the changes in American demographics and perceived embracing of 'multiculturalism' as a 'nation of immigrants', the discrimination and violence faced by the Sikh immigrants of the 'first wave' has not disappeared from the experience of Sikh Americans of the 'second' and 'third waves'. In fact, it may be the case that, in spite of (arguably) greater acceptance of cultural and religious diversity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century United States, Sikhs have faced even greater discrimination and threats in the past few decades. Sikhs, especially men who maintain the distinctive turban and untrimmed beard required of those who have been initiated into the Khalsa, are highly visible in American life. Margaret Gibson provides a list of some of the milder forms of institutional discrimination that Sikhs typically faced in the U.S. during the 'second wave' era.

> In 1978 an American Sikh citizen, accompanying his wife at her naturalization was ordered by the U.S. District Judge to remove his turban or leave the court.[274] In 1982 an American Sikh was told by his employer to comply with a new safety policy that directed men to be clean shaven. In 1984, a Deputy Registrar in Ohio refused to renew the driving license because the American Sikh would not agree to have his picture taken without his turban. As recently as 1990, a Sikh child in Ohio was told that he could not play basketball in his middle school because of a rule forbidding headgear during play.[275]

Such institutional forms of discrimination are a 'tip of the iceberg' in comparison to the everyday forms of prejudice that many Sikhs face. For example, it is common for young Sikh boys to face great hardship at schools, being bullied, having their long hair or turban

---

274 This incident brings into high relief how little the American public had learned about Sikhs in nearly one-hundred years of Sikhs in the United States when compared with an incident in the early 1910s when a Sikh man named Veer Singh was denied citizenship because he “refused to doff his turban” while taking the oath of citizenship (Pg. 121. Mann, Numrich and Williams. *Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs in America*).

275 Pg. 309. Gibson, Margaret A. *Accommodation without Assimilation: Sikhs in an American High School*.

pulled, and being called names such as 'raghead', or 'Osama bin Laden'. On September 15, 2001, four days after the attacks of September 11, 2001, Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh gas station owner was murdered in a misguided attempt at 'anti-Muslim' retaliation. In the years since September 11, 2001, thousands of Sikh Americans have been singled out for violent hate crimes—including several murders—and many more than that have experienced discrimination and harassment. Such attacks and discrimination have galvanized American Sikh communities—many see themselves as 'ambassadors' for Sikhism to their American neighbors and have formed Sikh organizations and alliances with other organizations to try to educate the American public about who Sikhs are. Though the atmosphere of prejudice in the United States has sometimes proven to be dangerous for people wearing the highly visible markers of the turban and beard, after the events of 1984, and especially in the post-911 era, it is now more common than ever for Sikh Americans to strictly observe the '5 Ks'. Many Sikh Americans chose to return to observing the '5 Ks', or to take the Khalsa initiation partly in response to the post-9/11 atmosphere and a feeling that the '5 Ks' represent exactly the kind of courage needed in such an environment. In Chapter Six, the conclusion of this dissertation, I will further discusses the current era of continued discrimination and violence against Sikhs, counterposing it with the hopefulness for the future that is palpable within American Sikh communities.

In this chapter, I have presented the fundamental centrality of music within the Sikh tradition since its founding with Guru Nanak at Sultanpur Lodhi, the history of the Sikh tradition's most sacred site—the Darbar Sahib—and its role in setting patterns of musical worship around the world, and the one-hundred year story of Sikh migration to the United States including the maintenance of the Sikh sacred musical tradition even through periods of great adversity. The remaining chapters of this dissertation explore the Sikh *Gurbani kirtan* tradition in the United States as it shapes and is shaped by a second and third generation of Sikh Americans coming of age since the beginning of the 'second wave' of immigration. In the following chapter, I present insights from my ethnographic fieldwork within American Sikh communities, examining the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition as one of the primary ways that Sikhs have carried Sikh ways of being and knowing with them. I draw findings from my ethnographic research into conversation with theoretical approaches informed by performance studies and diaspora theory in order to examine how congregational performances of *Gurbani kirtan* serve as spaces for the formation, performance, and re-interpretation of transnational Sikh identities and the re-memory and re-newal of Sikhism in the United States.

Figure 2.1 A typical three *rāgī kirtan* ensemble (left) with Sikhs waiting to pay respect to Guru Granth Sahib (right).

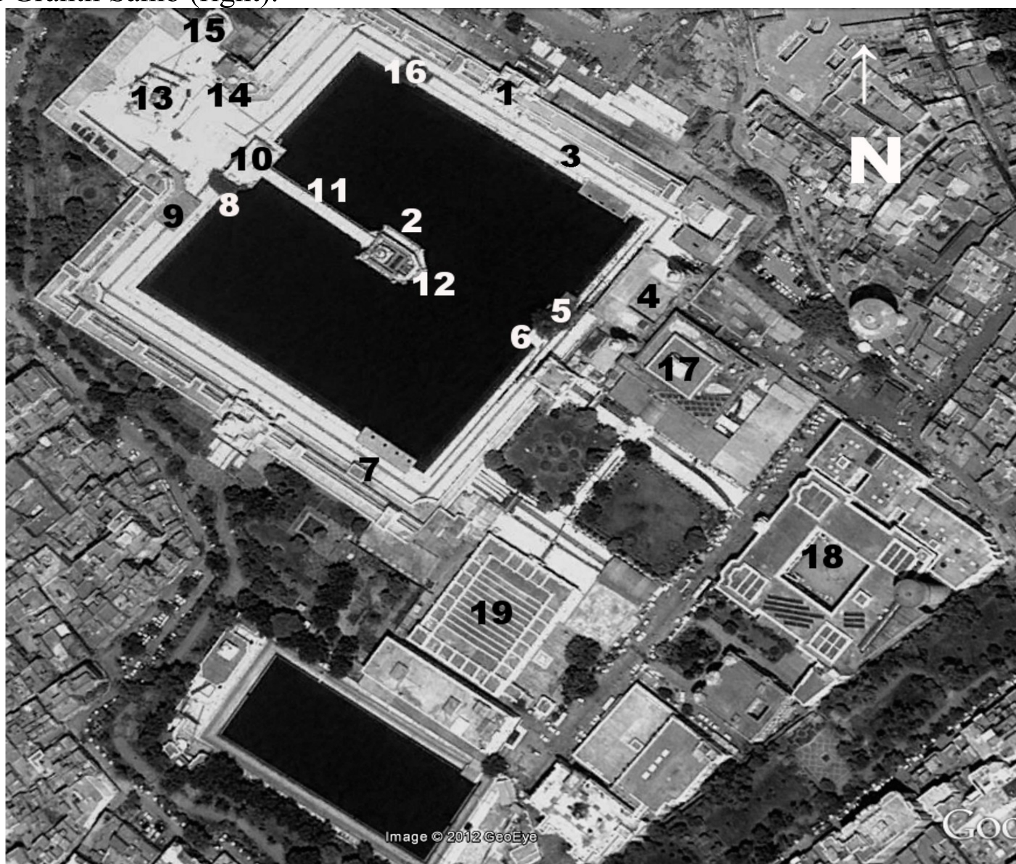

Figure 2.2 Map of the Darbar Sahib (Map data ©2012 GeoEye, legend by the author).

Figure 2.3 First view of Harimandir Sahib and Amrit Sarovar entering the Darbar Sahib complex (photo by the author).

Figure 2.4 Langar Hall and *bungas* of Darbar Sahib (photo by the author).

Figure 2.5 Dukh Banjani Ber and Ath Sath Tirath at the Darbar Sahib (photo by the author).

Figure 2.6 Sikhs wait on the causeway approaching the Harimandir Sahib (photo by the author).

Figure 2.7 The Harimandir Sahib and its causeway to cross the Amrit Sarovar (photo by the author).

Figure 2.8 *Sevadars* prepare the free *langar* meal at the Darbar Sahib (photo by the author).

Figure 2.9 The interior of a northern California gurdwara (photo by the author).

Chapter Three:
Gurbani Kirtan and the Performance of Sikhism in the United States

1.0 Introduction

Amid the continuing growth of Sikh communities around the globe, the field of Sikh Studies still remains in a relatively young though rapidly growing stage. It has only been in the past few decades that Sikhism has begun to come into view as a distinct religious tradition within 'world religions' textbooks and the curricula of departments of religious studies. Much of the scholarly writing of the last several decades that has formed the foundation for Sikh Studies as an academic field has emerged from the fields of History, Religious Studies, and Asian Studies. Accordingly, scholarly literature in Sikh Studies, like that of these broader fields, has often focused on textual-historical approaches, sometimes to the extent of softening focus on—or even overlooking—Sikh practices, performances, and the everyday 'doings' of Sikh lives. This points to the pressing need for scholars of religion and Sikh Studies to explore the dynamics of religious practice in the everyday life of Sikh communities in order to understand Sikhism as a living, global religion. This chapter draws on insights from my ethnographic research within American Sikh communities to examine congregational performances of *Gurbani Kirtan*—the musical performance of the most sacred Sikh Scriptures, the Ādi Granth, or Guru Granth Sahib—as spaces for plural aesthetic experiences of Sikh-ness, and for the formation, performance, and re-interpretation of transnational Sikh identity/ies.

Several years ago, when I first began to conduct the ethnographic research within Sikh communities that formed the beginnings of this dissertation, I initially set out to evaluate how central *Gurbani kirtan* is to the lives and religious practice of everyday Sikhs in the United States. It did not take long in talking to Sikh Americans and spending time in Sikh communities for *Gurbani kirtan*'s centrality in their practice and identity to be made apparent. Rather, it became abundantly clear that as Sikhism has traveled across the globe, one of the primary ways that Sikhs have carried with them Sikh ways of knowing and being is through their religious musical practice of *Gurbani kirtan*. Globally, wherever Sikh communities have settled, *Gurbani kirtan* has remained central to Sikh practice.

A number of scholars of Sikh Studies have affirmed the centrality of *Gurbani kirtan* and the musical and oral/aural dimension within the Sikh tradition and their functional importance to Sikh identity formation, both historically and continuously until today. For example, sociologist Michael Nijhawan writes:

> In Sikhism, the *process of forming the self* in terms of religious piety is linked to the practical efforts of reciting, singing, and listening to the hymns of the Ādi Granth in the form of the meditative *kirtan* ritual. *Kirtan is considered as absolutely central*, as it elucidates the devotee's constant active engagement with and enactment of the sacred text.[1]

Though this was only a passing reference within his larger work on the Sikh *Ḍhāḍi* tradition (discussed in Chapter Two), Nijhawan's assertion that *Gurbani kirtan* is integral in "the process of forming the self" within the Sikh tradition was something that I

[1] Michael Nijhawan, *Dhadi Darbar: Religion, Violence, and the Performance of Sikh History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 44, italics mine.

initially sought to investigate when I first began the research on *Gurbani kirtan* that would eventually grow into this dissertation. My research of the past several years has continued seeking to examine Sikhs' own understandings of their religious and cultural identity/ies in the United States, and how these identities are formed, performed, and (re)interpreted, in relationship with the performance of *Gurbani kirtan*.

This chapter draws insights from my ethnographic fieldwork within American Sikh communities into conversation with theoretical approaches informed by Performance Studies and diaspora theory. In the first part of the chapter, I begin by presenting reasons why theoretical approaches informed by Performance Studies resonate with the study of Sikhism generally, and particularly with my research on *Gurbani kirtan*, offering new modes of analysis in Sikh Studies. After briefly portraying the centrality of *Gurbani kirtan* to Sikhism and within American Sikh communities, I present findings from my interviews and ethnographic research within American Sikh communities, in order to examine how congregational performances of *Gurbani kirtan* serve as spaces for the formation, performance, and re-interpretation of transnational Sikh identity/ies and the re-memory and re-newal of Sikhism in the United States.

2.0 'Performance Studies' Approaches and Sikh Studies

The use of 'performance' terminology and performance theory approaches within the academic study of religion draw attention to the ways in which not just religious rituals, but other behaviors, as well as identity, can be understood as both ‘scripted,’ in the sense of being socially influenced and informed, but also ‘ad-libbed,’ in the sense that

human ‘actors’ are continuously creating and re-creating their identities through their performances of 'self' and 'community.' Beyond theatrical metaphors, 'performance' terminology calls attention to the constructed nature of seemingly 'natural' ways of doing things, and analyzes performances as points of breakdown in mind/body, text/practice dualisms. In this light, Bruce Kapferer has discussed 'performance' as a “unity of text and enactment.”[2]

Performance Studies, as an interdisciplinary field unto itself, began with a set of scholarly collaborations between Victor Turner and Richard Schechner. Other scholars though, including scholars of religion, have utilized this category of 'performance', if only for its utility as a broader interpretive category than 'ritual', one which encompasses such activities as: sport, play, theater, social drama, and (of course) ritual itself, etc. In fact, not knowing what is *not* 'performance' can be a bit of an issue for the usefulness of 'performance' as an interpretive category, but this is no less of an issue with other broad interpretive categories that we seem mostly stuck with, such as: 'ethnicity,' 'culture,' and, of course, 'religion.' To give us an entry into 'performance' as an interpretive category, in a key passage from Victor Turner's writings, he describes the role of performance(s) within culture(s):

> Cultures are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performances. . . . A performance is a dialectic of 'flow,' that is, spontaneous movement in which action and awareness are one, and 'reflexivity,' in which the central meanings, values and goals of a culture are seen 'in action,' as they shape and explain behavior. A performance is declarative of our shared humanity, yet it utters the uniqueness of particular cultures. We will

[2] Bruce Kapferer, "Performance and the Structuring of Meaning and Experience" in *The Anthropology of Experience*, edited by Victor Turner, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

> know one another better by entering one another's performances and learning their grammars and vocabularies.[3]

In a related writing, Turner interprets 'performances' as "...dramatic episodes which vividly manifest the key values of specific cultures."[4] In my reading of Turner's writings from this era of his work, he seems to portray structuralist hopes of 'cracking the code' of religio-cultural performances, and intimates that by understanding a central performance, we might be able to explain an entire religion and/or culture. I do not quite share this hope, and I do not think this was or is true even of small and fairly insular 'pre-modern' societies. However, I do think that Turner's hopes are sound in that I agree that there is *much* that *can* be known about a religion or culture when one particular performative practice is especially central to that religion or culture's lifeworld.

As discussed in Chapter One, James Livingston has written that a central ritual within a religion can serve as a condensed symbol for an entire religious or cultural world.[5] Here, I think Livingston is invoking scholars such as Clifford Geertz, who famously opined in "Notes On a Balinese Cockfight" that the cockfight is just such a condensed symbol for knowing about the Balinese way of life.[6] Taking up again my example from Chapter One, the Eucharist is another example of a ritual and performative practice that is so central to a particular religion, that understanding it reveals much that

---

[3] Quoted in Richard Schechner and Willa Appell, "Introduction" in *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*, edited by Richard Schechner, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 1, italics mine.

[4] Victor Turner and Edith Turner, "Performing Ethnography" in *The Anthropology of Performance*, (New York: PAJ Publications, 1988), p. 139.

[5] James Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion*, Fifth Edition, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2005), p. 81.

[6] Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" in *Readings in Ritual Studies*, edited by Ronald L. Grimes, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996).

is central and significant about Catholic identity, belief, and practice. Robert Orsi also shares the view that such central ritual performances can reveal much about people's religio-cultural worlds as a site in which they 'perform' their identities. In his work on Catholics in Italian Harlem in *The Madonna of 115th Street*, Orsi writes about the annual *festa* of the Madonna, arguing that "...people reveal who they are and the qualities they value in religious celebrations."[7] Later, he continues,

> ...the annual *festa* [of the Madonna of 115th street] allows us to observe how popular religion serves as... *sacred theater*... the streets became a *stage* and the *people revealed themselves to themselves*. The immigrants' deepest values, their understandings of the truly human, their perceptions of the nature of reality were *acted out*; the hidden structures of power and authority were revealed.[8]

Though perhaps it is not appropriate for central rituals and performative practices within *every* religion or culture, I agree with Turner, Livingston, Geertz, and Orsi that much can be learned about particular religious or cultural groups by approaching central religio-cultural rituals as sites for the performance and re/interpretation of identity. As discussed in Chapter One, it is from noticing the seeming gaping hole in scholarship on Sikhism represented by the lack of research on *Gurbani kirtan* that I initially began my ethnographic research on Sikhs' views on musical performances of the Guru Granth Sahib.

My own views on the contributions that a Performance Studies theoretical lens can bring to studying Sikh *kirtan* (and to Religious Studies in general), have been influenced by scholars such as Catherine Bell, who writes:

---

[7] Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. xiv.

[8] Ibid., pp. Xxii-xxiii, italics mine.

> Performance approaches [in Religious Studies] seek to explore how activities *create* culture, authority, transcendence, and whatever forms of holistic ordering are required for people to act in meaningful and effective ways… performance terminology analyzes… rituals as orchestrated events that *construct people's perceptions and interpretations*.[9]

My research has sought to understand the ways that Sikhs in the diaspora create and re-create their religio-cultural identities, and how the performance of *Gurbani kirtan* is connected to the construction of Sikh identities, the 'portability' of Sikhism around the world, and the re-performance, re-interpretation, and remembrance of Sikh ways of being and knowing.

In the next section of this chapter, I will address three inter-related ways that theorizing about 'performance' and using it as an interpretive category informs my research on Sikh *Gurbani kirtan* performances in the United States, also addressing their broader value for the study of Sikhism (and of religions) generally: 1. individual and social/cultural identities as 'performance/s'; 2. performances as providing heightened/shared experiences; and 3. performances as 'doing things with words' (in the Austinian sense), and making sacred presence real for religious practitioners.

2.1 Individual Identity and Social/Cultural Identity as 'Performance'

Erving Goffman wrote: "all the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify."[10] I find this particularly compelling, in that I tend to think of individual '*identity*' as always being made up of multiple performance

---

[9] Catherine Bell, 'Performance', in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, edited by Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 208, italics mine.

[10] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), p. 72.

media, multiple 'characters' or 'roles' that all people 'play' within different socio-cultural contexts. Scholars of performance utilize concepts such as habitus, in Pierre Bourdieu's usage of the term, to point to the ways in which we are often mostly not even aware of the 'performance media' we use, or how we 'get in character' for the 'roles' we play. On the other hand, Richard Schechner has coined the term "restored behavior" (also calling this "twice-behaved behavior") to point to the ways that within some performances, the 'actors' give attention to (or, sometimes, are *very much aware* of) doing things in 'the right way'.[11] As stated above, performance approaches view identities (religious and otherwise) as both '*scripted*,' in the sense that they are socially informed and influenced, and also '*ad-libbed*,' in the sense that human 'actors' are continuously in the process of actively creating and re-creating their identities through their performances. It is through this creativity that the 'scripts' of practitioner's religious performances are themselves constantly evolving. Performances, through their constant re-interpretation, re-living, and active re-creation in religious communities, become a primary locus for the creation and re-creation of religious identities. Thus, performance, in this understanding, is the means by which living religions *live*.

In her work on Laotian American identity, Penny Van Esterik argues that a central Lao ritual and performative practice, known as the *Soukhouan*, is a primary site for the performance of Lao identity, and one that is especially crucial to performing and re-interpreting Lao identity within the American context:

[11] Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), pp. 35-36.

> The Lao face particularly difficult problems resolving the meaning of Lao cultural identity outside of Laos. Rituals such as *Soukhouan*... provide raw materials from which individual Lao can begin to structure a new identity in North America. . . . rituals performed in new lands remain an important part of reconstituting identity.[12]

Although Van Esterik's article is not highly theoretical as a piece on performance studies, I think her reconfiguration of ritual as 'performance' of the self and religio-cultural identity reflects one of the ways that I have found 'performance' terminology to be most useful, especially for understanding central performative practices within transnational communities. In the case of Sikh communities in the U.S., I argue that Sikh *Gurbani kirtan*, as the central performative practice within Sikhism, is a site in which Sikhs 'perform' Sikh identity/ies, and that through such performances—especially in the U.S., and elsewhere in the Sikh diaspora—Sikhs are engaged in interpreting and re-interpreting Sikh identity/ies within new contexts. I have based this, in part, on my many Sikh interviewees who have spoken to me about “feeling Sikh” or “feeling *more* Sikh” when they spend time listening to *kirtan*, or about feeling that it is “the right thing to do as a Sikh” (I will discuss this more below in section 4.0).

2.2 Performances as Providing for 'Heightened'/ Shared Experience/s

To continue by asking the question of why performances are effective in transferring identity, memory, and meaning—Bruce Kapferer, in his chapter titled

[12] Penny Van Esterik, “Ritual and the Performance of Buddhist Identity among Lao Buddhists in North America” in *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*, edited by Duncan Ryūken Williams and Christopher S. Queen. (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999), pp. 65-66.

“Performance and the Structuring of Meaning and Experience,”[13] argues that ritual performances are effective in transferring religious and cultural meaning because of their capacity to draw both 'performers' and 'audiences' into an 'intensive' or 'heightened' experience. Here, Kapferer is invoking one of Stanley Tambiah's usages of the term 'performance' to describe ritual, in the “...sense of a staged performance that uses multiple media by which participants experience the event intensively...”[14] Within a religio-cultural performance, *both* 'performers' and 'audience members' are isolated from the 'ordinary world' as they are caught up in the shared 'experience' of the performance. In this type of performance, people are aware of relating to one another under the parameters of the performance (attention is paid to doing things 'the right way'), and, that as a performance begins, they have stepped into what scholars of performance call a performative 'frame.' Multiple people sharing in a heightened experience or event brings the possibility of intersubjectivity, as an aligning of multiple subjectivities takes place toward the same point of focus: i.e., the heightened elements of the performance. This is similar to Erving Goffman's concept of the 'focused gathering' in which a 'performance' is a group of people gathered together to participate in meaning making, relating with one another in terms of that agreed upon meaning.[15] According to Kapferer, “...the possibility of mutual experience in the sense of experiencing together the one experience”—in other

---

[13] Kapferer, Bruce. “Performance and the Structuring of Meaning and Experience” in *The Anthropology of Experience*. Edited by Victor Turner. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986.

[14] Stanley Jeyarajah Tambiah, "A Performative Approach to Ritual" in *Culture, Thought, and Social Action: An Anthropological Approach*, (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 128.

[15] Erving Goffman, *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*, (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Meryl Company, Inc., 1961) pp. 9-10.

words, that multiple people's individual subjective 'experiences' are drawn into the sharing of 'an experience'—lies in ritual performance:

> Such a possibility is present in many of the cultural performances we and those in other cultures recognize as art and ritual. Art and ritual share potentially one fundamental quality in common: the Particular and the Universal are brought together and are transformed in the process... the process that is actualized and revealed in art and ritual as *performance*, the universalizing of the particular and the particularizing of the universal, is one of the factors accounting for the frequently observed close connection between art and ritual... [as rituals provide opportunities for shared experience] we find the possibility for those organized in relation to them to *commune in* the one experience.[16]

Kapferer's central argument is that it is *because* rituals are 'performances'—involving *both* those 'at center stage' and those in the 'audience' through intensive media (music, dance, drama, etc.)—that they create a *shared* experience; in other words, a 'heightened experience' *shared mutually*, of meaning-making for all participants.

[16] Bruce Kapferer, Bruce. "Performance and the Structuring of Meaning and Experience", p. 191.

Especially through the media of music and dance,[17] members of performative gatherings are further impelled in the direction of the central actors of the performance.[18] Both music and dance catch people in experiences of 'flow,' since music and dance are *temporal*: in the sense of making use of time within their performance, of providing an experience of a temporary 'break' in 'ordinary' time, and in the sense of only allowing for this 'break' for a fleeting period of time (they do not last forever, or they would not be

---

[17] Here, I mention dance only as an example of a performative practice following from Kapferer's inclusion of dance forms in his analysis. It should be noted that dance during performances of *Gurbani kirtan* is not condoned by most Sikhs (some groups among Sikhs, such as the Akhand Kirtani Jatha, utilize percussion instruments and may sway, clap, or be more bodily active than others during *Gurbani kirtan*, but they do not 'dance'; it has also been highly controversial among Punjabi Sikhs that some 3HO Sikhs permit dancing, yoga postures, and other bodily movements during *Gurbani kirtan*, or utilize verses from Guru Granth Sahib within popular music forms to which people perform modern popular dance forms). Devotional dancing being paired with devotional music was common among Sufis and some Hindu groups during the time of the Sikh Gurus, but the hymns of the Gurus in Guru Granth Sahib portray a dim view of dancing, associating it with lust and worldly pursuits. One passage from a hymn of Guru Amar Das will provide an illustrative example of the Sikh Gurus' rejection of dancing as a form of devotional worship:

> ਭਗਤਿ ਕਰਹਿ ਮੂਰਖ ਆਪੁ ਜਣਾਵਹਿ ॥
> ਨਚਿ ਨਚਿ ਟਪਹਿ ਬਹੁਤੁ ਦੁਖੁ ਪਾਵਹਿ ॥
> ਨਚਿਐ ਟਪਿਐ ਭਗਤਿ ਨ ਹੋਇ ॥
> ਸਬਦਿ ਮਰੈ ਭਗਤਿ ਪਾਏ ਜਨੁ ਸੋਇ ॥੩॥
>
> Fools perform devotional worship by showing off;
> [they] dance and dance, and jump up and down, but they obtain [only] great suffering.
> [By] dancing and jumping, devotional worship is not performed.
> They alone who die in the Divine Word [*Shabad*], obtain devotional worship. (M3, *Gauṛi Guārerī*, (4), AG, p. 159. Translation my own.)

This passage is perhaps a direct rejection of the practices of the followers of the Vaishnava saint Sri Caitanya (1486-1534, a contemporary of Guru Nanak), who danced and jumped as part of their ecstatic devotional practice. In keeping with a rejection of dancing and over-excitation within devotional worship, the Sikh Gurus affirmed "...only those [musical] *ragās*... which produce a peaceful effect in the minds of both listeners and performers" (Pg. 158. Singh, Pashaura. "Sikhism and Music" in *Sacred Sound: Experiencing Music in World Religions*. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2006). Modern performers of the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition very frequently affirm that the Sikh Gurus taught that musical form must always be treated as secondary to The Word (*Shabad*), and movements or anything else which could draw the mind away from focus on the *Shabad* are to be rejected.

[18] Ibid.

distinct from 'ordinary' experience). It is these performed aspects that shape the shared experience of all involved.

In my understanding of Sikh performances of *Gurbani kirtan*, both ‘performers’ and ‘audience’ are engaged in enacting a religio-cultural *ethos*, and also in (re)interpreting that *ethos*. There are no ‘passive observers’ in this understanding of 'performance,' since even sitting, watching, and listening do not constitute a ‘passive’ experience, as no ‘audience’ member is a blank slate. Rather, each person brings their own aesthetic evaluations and subjectivity to interpreting the performance. Sikh performances of *Gurbani kirtan* are an observable, outward enactment of internal religio-cultural meaning, and, simultaneously, a means by which religio-cultural meaning is created, (re)interpreted, and ‘internalized’ by ‘insiders’ of the religion. Wherever Sikhs have traveled and settled globally, they have brought their performative practices with them. Through experiencing sacred music socially, Sikhs are drawn into a heightened experience of Sikh-ness, a shared experience of Sikh ethos and of connection with the worldwide *Panth* (the Sikh community; also seen as the physical embodiment of the Sikh Gurus' continued presence). In Sikhs' own articulation, the underlying power of this experience is generated by the *presence* of the Living Eternal Guru wherever the Guru Granth Sahib is performed. This brings me to my final point in this section. Other than the power of music on people's consciousness—especially religious music experienced socially—what is it about Sikh *kirtan* performances (and other central religio-cultural performances) that makes them 'heightened', effective, and central?

2.3 Performances as 'Doing Things With Words' and Making Sacred Presence Real For Religious Practitioners:

Stanley Tambiah has discussed how 'performances' "do things with words" in an Austinian sense of "performative utterances."[19] In J.L. Austin's seminal 1962 work on philosophy of language *How To Do Things With Words*,[20] he employs the classic example of christening a ship as an instance when speaking words is not simply speaking words, but "*doing something with words*". When a ship is christened, something more happens than just the words "I name this ship the Titanic" being spoken—a change has occurred, if only in the consciousness of those present, and those who will encounter or hear of this ship from this day forward. The ship has *become* something *new*: the *name* it has been given. Similarly when a ruler knights someone, saying "I dub thee, Sir Elton Hercules John", a change has been effected, the person is not socially understood to be who they were before. Some religious examples of "doing things with words" could include the bread and wine actually becoming the body and blood of Christ in the Catholic Eucharist, and Hindu rituals of *prāṇa pratiṣṭha* (installing or establishing the breath/life) and *āvāhana* (invocation) actually making the deity present within its image. The example of this in Sikhism that I have already mentioned is the way that performing the Word of the Gurus in the Guru Granth Sahib actually makes the Living Eternal Guru present. Any building in which the Guru Granth Sahib resides is (by definition) a Gurdwara ('door to the Guru'), and when the hymns of Guru Granth Sahib are performed orally and

[19] Tambiah, Stanley Jeyarajah. "A Performative Approach to Ritual"
[20] Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962.

musically by Sikhs, all present are actually in the presence of the Guru—both literally and metaphorically—through the embodied physical presence of Guru Granth Sahib, and through the vibrations of the Eternal Word of the Gurus (*Gurshabad* or *Gurbani*). Revealing Sikhism's sharing of some key pan-Indian concepts about the nature of Scriptural sound, Sikhs have viewed the Guru Granth Sahib as *Naad* (the Divine Word), an embodiment of the eternally sounding vibration which underlies all of existence (this is similar to the way *Shruti*—"that which was heard"—Scriptures, such as the Vedas, are viewed by many Hindus). This concept is elucidated within the Guru Granth Sahib by Guru Nanak: "The Guru's Word is the Sound-current of the *Naad*; the Guru's Word is the Wisdom of the Vedas; the Guru's Word is all-pervading."[21] Thus, the performance of *Gurbani kirtan*, makes the Divine resplendence and consciousness-transforming power of the eternal *Naad present*. Such an understanding of *Gurbani kirtan* as 'tapping into' the eternally sounding vibration which underlies existence (which was made known through the Gurus by the Grace of Akāl Purakh) points to an underlying Sikh understanding of the nature of *Gurbani*: that speaking or singing the hymns of the Guru Granth Sahib is not merely speaking, but "doing things with words". In this Sikh instance, as in the other examples mentioned (and many other examples we could address), performances making sacred presence real is the reason that they are seen as central, authentic, and effective by religious practitioners. I will return to the concept of the performance of *kirtan* and its connection to sacred presence in Sikhism below, but this brings us to discussing the centrality of *Gurbani kirtan* within Sikhism.

[21] M1, *Japu* (4), AG, p. 2.

3.0 The Centrality of *Gurbani Kirtan* in Sikhism, and in American Sikh Communities

Several scholars, including Pashaura Singh and Gurinder Singh Mann[22] have elaborated in detail how the very structuring of the Guru Granth Sahib is musical: with all of the hymns being arranged by *rāga*s (musical modes), and *tāla* (rhythmic signature instructions) being provided throughout. In addition, the verses of Guru Granth Sahib themselves affirm the importance of performing *Gurbani kirtan*. From Guru Granth Sahib we read that singing *kirtan* "is the highest of all actions,"[23] and "the righteous duty incurred by taking birth in this human body."[24] Singing *kirtan* is even assigned soteriological efficacy, since one who sings *kirtan* "has performed all religious rituals,"[25] "the messenger of death cannot even touch [them],"[26] and "the cycle of birth and death is ended… singing *kirtan.*"[27] From such Scriptural references to *kirtan* (along with other reasons) it is not surprising that *Gurbani kirtan* has retained its central status within Sikh practice throughout the history of the tradition and around the world today.

---

[22] See for instance:

Gurinder Singh Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

- and -

Pashaura Singh, *The Guru Granth Sahib: Canon Meaning and Authority* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000); reprint, (New Delhi: Oxford India Paperbacks, 2003).

[23] M5, *Sorāthi* 149 (7), AG, p. 642: 'Singing *Kirtan* in the *Sādh Sangat* [the congregation of the True] is the highest of all actions.'

[24] M5, *Salok Sahaskriti* (26), AG, p. 1356:'To sing *Kirtan* is the righteous duty incurred by taking birth in this human body'.

[25] M9, *Rāmakalī* 75 (1), AG, p. 902: 'Understand, that whoever sings *Kirtan*, has performed all religious rituals'.

[26] M5, *Gond* 19 (2), Ādi Granth, p. 867: 'One who sings *Kirtan*, the Messenger of Death cannot even touch that humble being'.

[27] M5, *Gāthā* (12), AG, p. 1360: 'The cycle of birth and death is ended, O Nanak, singing *Kirtan*'.

Just from initial observations, a first-time visitor to a Sikh gurdwara would see that nearly all of the activities—the things that Sikhs *do*—at American *gurdwaras* revolve around *kirtan* and *seva* (selfless service to the community in various forms). The centrality of *Gurbani kirtan* to Sikh life is supported by comments from my Sikh interviewees. When asked questions such as "what are the most important things about being a Sikh?" and "are there certain things that you *do* that make you a Sikh, or a 'good Sikh'?", most Sikhs' responses include such things as "seva", philosophical/theological points (for example "monotheism", "respect for other religions"), "a strong work ethic", "self-reliance", gender equality, egalitarianism, "defense of the rights of others", etc. Inevitably, however, among the first few items mentioned by any Sikhs who I have spoken to is something about *Gurbani kirtan*. All seem to agree that alongside *seva*, listening to and performing *Gurbani kirtan* is the most important thing that they *do* at gurdwara. For example, a young U.S.-born interviewee from southern California said:

> [What do you do at Gurdwara?]
> The second you walk in, the first thing you do is—after you bow—you try to fully immerse yourself in *kirtan*… *Gurbani* is the Word of God, so you almost take it as, OK, God is kind of singing to you through his messengers and He's trying to tell you something, so you should sit down and listen to that. And then the second part of that is *seva*, those are the two main things that people do do [*sic*], and that people should do.

Gurbani Kirtan is performed for most of the day on Sundays at gurdwaras in the United States,[28] and often also on other days throughout the week (I will open Chapter Four with a 'thick description' of worship activities on a typical day at a gurdwara in the U.S.). In

[28] There is no day comparable to a sabbath or jumu'ah in Sikhism, but, in similarity to other minority religious traditions in the United States, Sikhs have found it amenable to adopt the pattern common among American Christians to set aside Sundays for worship and religious observances.

addition to this continuing cycle of *Gurbani kirtan* performance, there are many other activities in American gurdwara communities which revolve around musical and oral recitation of Guru Granth Sahib. Most gurdwaras that have the resources to do so offer classes for teaching children and adults how to recite the Scripture orally and how to play the musical instruments associated with *Gurbani kirtan* (these efforts to teach *Gurbani kirtan* in the United States are the focus of Chapter Five). American Sikh communities sponsor many special events which bring *rāgis* and *granthis* (the musical 'experts' who lead the performance of kirtan, the focus of Chapter Four) from Punjab and elsewhere in the world to perform *Gurbani kirtan*. Such events draw large crowds to *gurdwaras* and carry an obvious aura of excitement for the community before, during, and after. In addition, individuals, families, and communities sponsor *akhand pāṭh*s (unbroken oral recitations of the entire Guru Granth Sahib, lasting about 48 hours) in commemoration of life events (births, marriages, graduations, new jobs, etc.). I will return to discussing all of these activities in later chapters, but for now let us note that each of these points to the thoroughly musical identity of Sikh communities in the United States. Many of my interviewees have affirmed this musical identity[29]:

> [What is the most important thing that you do at gurdwara?]
> Actually trying to sit down and listen to *kirtan* and trying to find that place [of calm].
>
> [Is hearing or reciting *Gurbani* an important part of being a Sikh?]
> I think that hearing *Gurbani kirtan* is necessary, because for me, music is the only language that speaks to my soul. With reciting, it's no longer a man telling you, it's a man speaking the Word of God—because if a man was to tell you or preach

[29] For the remainder of this chapter, as I reproduce extended quotes from my interviewees, each new quote after a space is from a separate interview.

> to you 'God wants you to do this, God wants you to do that,' Sikhs don't want to be preached to. But if you sing to them—a lot of *Gurbani* is just songs praising God—so if you sing it, it allows the people hearing it just to hear the song, just to hear the praise.
>
> That's the one thing about Sikh music, without the music, Sikhs don't have anything, we live and die by our music. Our music is what keeps us whole.

As I have discussed above, early in my research, affirmations such as these from individual Sikhs about the centrality of music and the oral/aural dimension to their religious practice validated what had already seemed immediately apparent to me as an observer: the central importance of *Gurbani kirtan* within American Sikh communities.

4.0 *Gurbani Kirtan* and the Performance of Sikh Identity

In his work on diaspora theory, Paul Christopher Johnson argues that performances are creative and re-creative of religious identities and religious lifeworlds. He writes:

> In ritual performance, diasporic religious actors 'make history' as they project present events, and their present selves, against the horizon of another territory and time, a horizon that is itself also in motion.[30]

Following from such an understanding, I argue that through their performances of *Gurbani kirtan*, Sikhs in diaspora 'negotiate' their places 'between' multiple religio-cultural territories. To borrow some of Johnson's language, without "collective memories" and remembrances of a shared past, coupled with a "double consciousness"—an awareness of differences with the current "host" culture in the United States—the

[30] Paul Christopher Johnson, *Diaspora Conversions: Black Carib Religion and the Recovery of Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p.2. Here Johnson is partly referencing Hans Gadamer's concept of "horizons".

American Sikh community would cease to be “in diaspora.”[31] A “diaspora,” by Johnson's definition, is a people living in dispersion from their “homeland” who are united by a “sustained collective memory” of this “homeland.”[32] Following from Johnson's definition, without the continuous opportunities for remembering, re-enactment, re-living, and “self-commemoration” provided by central performances like *Gurbani kirtan*—without the Sikh community’s active engagement in remembering—a Sikh “diaspora” would cease to be.[33] I contend that central performances like *Gurbani kirtan* are primary loci which make possible Sikh communities’ “self-commemoration,” sustaining of “collective memories,” and the transmission of religio-cultural meaning, feeling/s, and ways of being and knowing. Thus, in this way, such a central religio-cultural performance makes a religion or culture ‘portable’, as has been the case with Sikhism as it has been carried around the world. Chiefly, performances do this by providing a space where people *perform* themselves, *for* themselves. In this way, performances insure the passing on and continuing re-interpretation and re-living of religio-cultural practices, memory(ies), and *ethos* from generation to generation, from social groups to individuals, etc.

Drawing from this understanding of diaspora theory, I interpret musical and oral/aural performances of *Gurbani kirtan* as taking on multiple roles in diasporic Sikh communities in the United States: as *formative of Sikh identities*; as a *source of pride* and *sense of uniqueness*; as *providing a sense of connection with a history and ‘homeland’*; as

---

[31] Ibid., p. 31.
[32] Ibid., p. 32.
[33] Ibid., p. 37.

a form of *self-commemoration* for these communities; as *protection of identity* forms that may be imperiled (or perhaps are *seen* as being imperiled); and as a potent locus for the *transmission* of religio-cultural identity between members and generations.

4.1 *Gurbani Kirtan* as Formative of Sikh Identities

With *Gurbani kirtan* holding such a central place within Sikh practice, it follows that listening to and performing *kirtan* is an integral part of Sikh identity formation. Families bring children of all ages to U.S. gurdwaras to hear and participate in *Gurbani kirtan*. Often there are special sessions where the children (sometimes aided by adults or older children) will lead the *sangat* in performing *Gurbani kirtan* (I will discuss this further in Chapter Five). In some gurdwaras this occurs every Sunday. In addition to those who started performing *Gurbani kirtan* at a young age, many of my interviewees have also spoken about having formative experiences as children being present in the gurdwara and listening to *Gurbani kirtan*. When I asked one U.S.-born Sikh in his twenties, from California, "Is going to gurdwara an important part of being Sikh?", he replied:

> As a child it is,[34] I think. Because as a child you don't really get that setting of what it is to actually meditate and be a Sikh [without going to gurdwara]. My father made a point to take us to the gurdwara at least twice, maybe three times a month, just to get that feeling of how it feels like [*sic*] to be a Sikh, to pray like a Sikh. And honestly, those were some of the best moments of my life, because listening to kirtan, you get a sense of that bliss, it's a good feeling. It's a good feeling as a child because you get a sense of security, and as a child, you really

[34] This same interviewee told me that he and his family no longer go to gurdwara because of "politics… ruining a lot of things…" in local gurdwara communities.

> take that sense of security for granted, but once you're an adult, it helps you grow up as a man.

The instillment of an appreciation for *Gurbani kirtan* in young Sikhs would obviously seem to be the primary motivation for the training and lessons in Gurbani recitation and the instruments associated with *Gurbani kirtan* that are offered in many American gurdwara communities. In fact there is what I would describe as a mass movement to teach *Gurbani kirtan* to Sikhs in the diaspora that is especially active in the United States. This movement to teach *Gurbani kirtan* is the subject of Chapter Five.

Most young Sikh Americans that I meet have had some level of training in playing the *tabla* or harmonium, having learned at summer camps or at their home gurdwara. Almost all speak of learning to perform *Gurbani kirtan* as enriching to their experience of Sikhism, with some stating that they were now, as young adults, developing a better appreciation for their childhood musical training. For instance, a college student from southern California said:

> I played *tabla* for fun [as a child], but I didn't connect it with Sikhism originally —but after I started playing it I started being able to, you know, [say] 'oh, this is really cool' because in Sikhism, it's a really important part of it, so that appreciation kind of came after, it wasn't my main impetus to learn it.

Several young Sikhs I have spoken to who had not learned to recite *Gurbani* or perform *Gurbani kirtan* and play instruments have expressed regret, and also admiration for their Sikh friends who had. For instance, when I asked a high school aged interviewee from northern California "is learning to play the instruments (associated with *Gurbani kirtan*) important?", he replied:

> Some of my friends who have learned how to do *Shabads*, how to play instruments, they have a pretty good, maybe even a better understanding of that component of Sikhism, better than I do. I think as much comprehension as you can have of every component is definitely better so, yeah, I'd say if I could do things over again, I would have loved to have gone to Punjabi school and gone and learned instruments and *Shabads*.

With the emphasis Sikh parents are placing on learning to perform *Gurbani kirtan* for many young Sikhs, and the emphasis placed on the necessity of listening to *Gurbani kirtan* noted among all of the Sikhs who I have spoken to (even those who do not attend a gurdwara), it is apparent that Sikh parents are seeking for *Gurbani kirtan* to have a formative role in the identities of their children.

4.2 *Gurbani Kirtan* as Providing a Point of Religio-Cultural Pride and Sense of Uniqueness

One could argue that for all religious traditions which have Scriptures, their Scriptures are a source of pride and a point for affirming uniqueness from other traditions. Sikhs are proud of their Scriptures like adherents of other religious traditions. However, their ennoblement of the Ādi Granth as the Guru Granth Sahib, the Eternal Living Guru, along with the performative aspects of their relationship with Guru Granth Sahib, add additional dimensions to this pride. In talking to Sikhs it has been common to hear both young and old Sikhs gush with enthusiasm about the beauty of *Gurbani kirtan* and its positive powers over one's consciousness. For example, two young interviewees said:

> [*Gurbani kirtan*] is some of the most beautiful music you'll ever hear in your life, because it puts you in that blissful state of mind.
>
> For Punjabis, there's a big symbol with your soul, your heart, your *hick* ['chest'], your inside, and the only language, the only communication with your soul is music... the music gets you in a beautiful state of mind. The words themselves are saying their love for God, and if you know those words, you have to say it like you mean it.

In addition to praising the beauty of *Gurbani kirtan*, many Sikhs affirm what they see as the uniqueness of the Sikh tradition's relationship with music. As examples from two interviewees:

> Music is a big part of Sikhism, the Sikh tradition. It's beautiful music too. Music is everywhere, there isn't a culture that doesn't have music, but Sikhs love their music. We love our music, we made it an art-form.
>
> I think that we're really blessed as a community to have gotten something so unique... If you just look at Islam… other than Sufi Islam—you don't have that influence of music, they don't play instruments or anything. They find music [to be] not something that belongs [*sic*]. It's a distraction, not something that belongs in the house of God, you know. Even in [Hindu] *mandirs* you don't really find any sort of real hymns going on in mandirs...[35] I found a video of some *mandir* doing *kirtan* and it was just not the same… it's just that, since I've seen all of these things, I'm just so glad that we got something so unique, so different, that nobody else has…

Such assertions of Sikh uniqueness or exceptionalism when talking about *Gurbani kirtan* are commonly expressed when talking to Sikhs. Many Sikh Americans see the emphasis on *Gurbani kirtan* and the musical and oral/aural dimension within Sikhism as primary among the list of points which differentiate them from other religious groups, other Americans, and other immigrant religious groups in the United States.

[35] Though the idea of a "quiet mandir" seems oxymoronic to the scholar of south Asian religions familiar with the centrality of sacred sound in most Hindu traditions.

4.3 *Gurbani Kirtan* as Providing a Sense of Connection to History and to Punjab

Many Sikhs have declared to me that "the Sikh religion started through music," and have spoken of their understanding that music had been a fundamental part of Punjabi history and culture, and that *Gurbani kirtan* had been a key factor in the attractiveness of Sikhism to early adherents in Punjab:

> It's that Punjabi culture—the only communication that can communicate with you is music. Guru Nanak's first semblance of Sikhism, started with him and his boys [*sic*] going village to village singing the praises of God and other people were like 'Oh, I see where this guy is going, I like it, I'll follow him around.' Therein lies the founding of the Sikh faith. Guru Nanak knew 'the only way I'll get to these [expletive]s is if I sing to them!' [laughs].[36]

> Punjabi culture, traditionally, is a musical culture, so if you look at the Sikh faith, if you look at the way Sikhism was born in Punjab, it only goes hand in hand that there's going to be music in it, because Punjabis are so keen on music, that's how Punjabis got absorbed into the culture, into the faith. So music united the Sikhs, in my belief, because music is the one language of the world.

Such views of the connections between Punjabi culture and Sikh music give young Sikh Americans, such as the interviewees who made these remarks, a feeling of connection to a sacred history and a Punjabi identity.

That *Gurbani kirtan* as it is performed in the United States or elsewhere in the Sikh diaspora is in itself a performed restoration and re-memory of Sikhism in Punjab is apparent. In many ways, the gurdwara communities and the activities which take place in them seem to be attempts at re-approximating similar communities and activities as they exist/ed in (perhaps and imagined) Punjab. As discussed in Chapter two, *Gurbani kirtan* is a performative practice that Sikhs have carried with them for as long as there have been

[36] This was one among several jokes that this interviewee wanted to make to me about what he saw as the 'hard-headedness' of Punjabis—although he himself was Punjabi.

Sikhs in North America. Many young Sikhs have explicitly told me that with *Gurbani kirtan* and other Sikh performative practices, they see doing things "the way they are done in Punjab" as the ideal. A number of younger Sikhs, in talking to me, have lauded (older) Sikhs living in the Punjab for what they perceived as their strong connection with *Gurbani kirtan*. Some have given specific stories from their visits to Punjab, while others who have never been to Punjab still speak of their (perhaps somewhat romanticized) understandings of the centrality of *Gurbani kirtan* to everyday Punjabi life. One Sikh university student described his vision of the centrality of *Gurbani kirtan* to life in Punjab:

> That's what people do in the Punjab, every Punjabi village, people go to *gurdwara* in the morning, all of the old men just wake up, go there, do their thing, and then they come back, and they're completely different people.

Among all of the Sikhs who I speak to, there is a general sense that the performance of *Gurbani kirtan* is a tie to *tradition*: in the sense of "doing things the way that they have been done" throughout Sikh history, and in the sense of referencing the "homeland"; that performing *Gurbani kirtan* is "doing things the way they are done" in Punjab.

4.4 ***Gurbani Kirtan*** **as Special Event for Remembrance and Self-Commemoration**

The performance of *Gurbani kirtan* itself can be viewed as a form of continuous self-commemoration for Sikh communities: it is the continuing collective remembrance and commemoration of the connection and relationship between *Guru Granth* and *Guru Panth*, the Scripture as Living Guru, and the Community blessed as the performers and

interpreters of *Gurbani*. In addition to the 'usual' cycle of performing *Gurbani kirtan*, gurdwara communities organize many special events which center on the musical and oral/aural performance of *Gurbani*. These events serve as a form of self-commemoration for these communities; a time of celebrating the unique features of Sikhism and Sikh identity, perhaps especially as they set Sikhs and Sikh social times apart from their American surroundings. As already mentioned, gurdwara communities sponsor special events bringing *rāgis* and *granthis* from Punjab to perform *Gurbani kirtan*. Such events centering on *kirtan* attract large numbers of Sikhs from the local community who are excited to hear *Gurbani kirtan* performed by different expert performers. As mentioned already, individuals, families, and communities sponsor *akhānd pāṭhs* to commemorate life events. It is significant to note from this that for many Sikhs, the 'proper' commemoration of a life event is sponsoring a religious performance which is itself also a commemoration of the Sikh community and its connection with Guru Granth Sahib, in living recited form. Sikhs speak about what a great honor they feel it is to sponsor an *akhānd pāṭh*. As already stated, without such forms of continual renewal and self-commemoration, without a community's active engagement in performative practices—which act toward achieving remembrance of a 'homeland' and connections to a tradition—a community ceases to be 'in diaspora.' Performative practices such as *Gurbani kirtan* (both as continuing ritual/liturgical practice and as a 'special event'), and *akhānd pāṭhs*, are primary sites which make such remembrance and self-commemoration possible.

4.5 *Gurbani Kirtan* as a Mode of Identity Protection and Transmission

The level of anxiety within American gurdwara communities about young generations of Sikh Americans losing their religious and cultural pride and identity within the American setting is often quite palpable. One example of this was an occasion in which the principle and one of the teachers from the school attached to one of the *gurdwaras* I frequently visit spoke to the *sangat* during a break in *Gurbani kirtan*. She quite ardently argued for the necessity of parents enrolling their children in the gurdwara's school to continue learning *Gurbani kirtan*, Punjabi/*Gurbani*, and Sikh history and culture. She was particularly upset about the California public school system's required unit on the (Catholic) mission system in elementary school 'California History' classes.[37] Many Sikhs have spoken to me about their feelings about the necessity for young Sikhs to continue to learn Punjabi/Gurmukhi, and to be able to play *kirtan* and recite Gurbani, describing the continued ability among young Sikhs to perform *Gurbani kirtan* as integral toward maintaining Sikhism and Sikh identity:

> Hearing *kirtan*, you're glad to hear it, you're glad someone's singing it, because it's keeping the faith alive…. This is how I take it, if I hear a man singing *kirtan* I'm like, 'yeah man, keep the faith alive', simple as that. Because through music, through song is how Sikhs, every one of them have kept their histories alive…
>
> I think for the community as a whole, [*Gurbani kirtan*] is totally necessary to be able to recognize the Sikh faith as a collective group. I think that it's really important for Sikhism to continue - for it to really live as long as it should. I think we really need [*Gurbani kirtan*]. We need people to go to gurdwara regularly.

---

[37] In some school districts in California, Sikh organizations have successfully lobbied to have textbook portrayals of Sikhism seen as offensive removed from school curricula. On the local level, some schools with large Sikh student populations cover the history of Sikh presence in California in 'California history' classes.

> It's very important to listen to *Gurbani kirtan*, and to encourage others to listen to it. It's extremely important for the younger generation of Sikhs to learn the roots of our Sikh identity and to be able to maintain it and eventually pass it on.

With so many of my Sikh American interviewees affirming the centrality of *Gurbani kirtan* in their religious practice, it is perhaps unsurprising that many also see the continuance of this religio-cultural performance as vital to the continued transmission of Sikhism to new generations. If such central practices of a religion and markers of distinction from the 'host culture' are forgotten, the religio-cultural group 'in diaspora' could be 'homogenized' or 'assimilated' and cease to be 'in diaspora.' The desire to resist such 'assimilation' and loss of religio-cultural continuity and uniqueness is often voiced by some of my Sikh interlocutors (especially the volunteer teachers profiled in Chapter Five), who frame it as their 'duty' to make sure that performance of *Gurbani kirtan* continues on to subsequent generations. Others speak of their 'duty' to listen:

> … When a man sings *kirtan*, it goes in my head, it goes in my friends' heads, it's keeping the faith alive and out of respect you sit there and you hear them out, it's almost *your duty as a Sikh*… you stop and listen…

Within the American Sikh communities in which I have conducted my field research, *Gurbani kirtan* is expressly acknowledged as an important locus for identity transmission. This stands to reason if one accepts the centrality of *Gurbani kirtan* and the musical and oral/aural dimension which is apparent within these communities. Without members of the community to continue the performance of *Gurbani kirtan*, the practices and *ethos* of the community could change greatly.

5.0 Differences Between Younger and Older Generations in Their Apprehension of *Gurbani Kirtan*

One of the themes that has emerged throughout my conversations with Sikh Americans is that there are often differences in the ways that *Gurbani kirtan* is apprehended by younger, often 'second' and 'third generation' American Sikhs and older, often 'first generation' American Sikhs. For many among the older generations, it is an integral part of their piety and identity to listen to *Gurbani kirtan* and reflect on the *meanings* of the verses—whereas for many younger Sikhs with less knowledge of Punjabi/Gurmukhi, the meanings of the words may be more obscure or even completely inaccessible:

> For the Sikh youth today, since most of us don't really understand *kirtan*, we can connect with the spiritualness of what's being said, but as far as translation and really understanding, it's pretty [much] beyond all of us.
>
> I can maybe pick up bits and pieces, but not enough to really appreciate the actual meaning of it. For me, I go there [to *gurdwara*], and I recognize that we are reading from the Holy Text, it's something spiritual and a way to recognize our faith and our tradition, but for me to extrapolate individual segments, passages and phrases is pretty difficult.

While older Sikhs speak of the moralizing lessons, or the insight-producing and subliming effects that the meanings of the words of *Gurbani kirtan* have for them, many younger Sikhs talk about 'meditating', or 'being thankful' while listening to *Gurbani kirtan*—or simply finding the experience 'as a whole' of listening to *Gurbani kirtan* especially moving:

> [How do you feel during *Gurbani kirtan*? What do you focus on?]
> I'm not at the spiritual level to understand everything, so I take the opportunity to just sit and listen and think about nothing, or meditate.
>
> When I'm in sort of my meditative phase I try to focus on what I'm thankful for and I try to connect with my understanding of being really fortunate and that I have a lot of things that a lot of people don't have—just kind of recognizing how lucky I am.
>
> [Do you focus on the words or the whole experience?]
> The whole experience is most important for me over the words—just the experience of sitting and listening.
>
> I'm just intent on just hearing it. I don't even understand what they're saying, because the way they sing, I've been away [from Punjab for] too long [(since childhood)]. But honestly just the way they sing, that goes to my heart. It's like instinct, it doesn't skip a beat, I stop. Because that's what kirtan is, literally, you stop and you listen and you're intent on hearing, because honestly, in my soul, I know they're singing something nice. They're singing something beautiful to God. You know it because of the way they sing, they're singing with love. That's the thing, you have to sing with love, and be completely sincere in your voice. And if a man is that sincere in his voice, if a woman is that sincere in her voice, you stop and listen.

Interestingly, for young Sikh Americans who cannot understand (or cannot fully understand) the words of the hymns, *Gurbani kirtan* is seemingly no less a central part of their Sikh practice and identity. I have spoken to a few young Sikhs who feel that it is irrelevant or unnecessary to go to gurdwara regularly. However, even these Sikhs speak of having a Guru Granth Sahib at their (or their parents') home and of their enjoyment of recitation with their family, of sponsoring *akhānd pāṭhs* in their home, and of listening to *Gurbani kirtan* CDs in their personal time. Although their level of understanding of the verses of *Gurbani* is often less than that of their older counterparts,[38] among younger Sikh

[38] Though it should be said that even for native Punjabi speakers, the language of the Guru Granth Sahib is often very difficult to understand, both due to its relative antiquity, and due to the prolific usage of non-Punjabi words, owing to the Gurus speaking different dialects to different audiences.

Americans, the level of enthusiasm and respect for hearing *Gurbani kirtan* recited seems unanimously to be no less than among those who can understand the language of Guru Granth Sahib. All express their feeling that listening to *Gurbani kirtan* is very important to practicing Sikhism, even if one does not understand the meanings of the words:

> [Is there any benefit to hearing or performing *Gurbani kirtan*?]
> For me, I can't connect with individual concepts or individual phrases, so just hearing the music overall in the presence of the rest of the community helps me associate with the bigger idea of why we're there. It's about expressing the connectedness of the community.
>
> Even if you don't know what's going on or what's being said just the act of sitting there and listening to it has some sort of spiritual benefit to it, and I think that is the reason that a lot of parents make their kids sit there. My parents did that to me, they were like 'even if you don't understand, it's still good to listen to it, something might get through to you.' So those words go a long way…

Such discussions with young Sikhs led me to ask questions about their feelings about English translations of Guru Granth Sahib, which for many are their only access to understanding the meanings of the hymns.[39] Many young Sikhs have told me that hearing the hymns of Guru Granth Sahib performed in the form of *Gurbani kirtan* was more important for them than reading it in English translation:

> [If you can't focus on the words during *Gurbani kirtan*, do you read it in English translation?]
> I've only really been at it through music… That's how I get my 'dose' of the faith, if you want to call it that. A lot of people can pray, a lot of people can recite *Gurbani*… but for me, I can't do any of that, so my outlet is through song, through *kirtan*.

[39] Most large gurdwaras in the U.S. seem to recognize the inability of many of those who come to listen to *Gurbani kirtan* to understand the meaning of the verses and they provide English translations of the hymns on projection screens.

Despite having difficulty understanding or being unable to understand the language of the verses of Guru Granth Sahib, almost all young Sikhs I have talked to are against the idea of using translations of the Scripture in English for the purpose of performing *Gurbani kirtan*:

> [What if more people don't understand Punjabi/Gurmukhi in the future? Could the Guru Granth Sahib be translated into English or other languages?] …[In translation] a lot of the essence of the words is lost. Even in Punjabi texts, Punjabi just doesn't have that harmonious feeling to it [in comparison to the hymns of the Guru Granth Sahib] and you've got to remember, you can't translate —like if you translate the hymns into roman text [*sic*, meaning into English], you can't [have the poetic] flow [with] those can you? You can't sing [it] like you can the Punjabi text, because—it's like saying, OK, because Shakespeare's stuff got hard, let's just translate it into simple English. Then you can't perform it. It makes no sense. This is stuff that you need commitment to, that you have to be willing to put your own commitment and time into in order to learn it, and its beauty is in its complications as well… it might be complicated, but it's the Word of God, and maybe God does make stuff complicated sometimes. Not everything is supposed to come easy, as we all know.
>
> The poetry is lost [if you translate it]. The hymns are lost and it takes away from the whole point of kirtan. If it was just going to be plain simple words, then we wouldn't need kirtan, you could just sit up there and say all of the translated stuff you want.

Among the younger generations of American Sikhs, affirmations of the importance of continuing to perform *Gurbani kirtan* as a form of maintaining Sikhism, coupled with hesitancy toward translating Guru Granth Sahib into English, raise questions about how continuing generations of Sikh Americans will continue to interpret their relationship to *Gurbani kirtan* and, perhaps, to Guru Granth Sahib.

When I asked one young interviewee "what are you focusing on during *kirtan*?", his response was "I'm taking it as a lesson for the day—*even when I don't understand*".

Such a statement might seem paradoxical from the understanding of many of his American peers. However, (as discussed above) the history of Sikhism reveals its sharing of key pan-Indian concepts about the nature of Scriptural sound. Sikhs view the Guru Granth Sahib as an embodiment of the *Naad* (the Divine Word), the eternal, unstruck sound vibration underlying all of existence. Thus, the performance of *Gurbani kirtan*, makes the majesty and consciousness-transforming power of the eternal *Naad* present. This understanding of *Gurbani* as the eternally sounding vibration that underlies existence—made known through the Gurus by the Grace of *Akāl Purakh*—points to an underlying Sikh understanding of the nature of *Gurbani* which may be at the heart of young Sikhs Americans' affirmations about the importance and power of listening to *Gurbani kirtan* even when they don't 'understand' it. A Performance Studies approach may also offer some insight into how one 'takes a lesson from' or perhaps deeply experiences a performed text beyond its semantic meanings.

As discussed above, a Performance Studies lens views both 'performers' and 'audience' in religio-cultural performances as engaged in enacting a cultural *ethos*, and also in (re)interpreting that *ethos*. Thus there are no 'passive observers' in a religio-cultural performance. Even to sit and watch, to listen, etc. is not a 'passive' experience, since no 'audience' member is a blank slate, but each person brings their own subjectivity and aesthetic evaluations to interpreting the performance. Following from this understanding, Simon Frith, in his work on popular music, writes:

> …the term 'performance' defines a social—or communicative—process. It requires an audience and is dependent, in this sense, on interpretation; it is about

> meanings. . . . the performance artist depends on an audience which can interpret her work through its own experience of performance…[40]

In this way, an audience does not passively 'absorb' a cultural performance; rather, there is an interplay between 'performance,' 'performer,' and the '*hermeneutic performance*' (i.e. the act of interpretation) of both 'performer' and 'audience.' Further explaining the connected nature of 'performing' and 'interpreting'/'*knowing*,' Lawrence Sullivan writes,

> …all performance is a *specific cultural mode of existence*, *a way of moving the senses in space while evaluating the meaning of existence in time*... performance consists in coming to know the meaning of one's actions. The working out of this understanding creates history.[41]

Following from Frith and Sullivan's understandings of the way performances operate, we can talk about Sikh performances of *Gurbani kirtan* as the observable, outward enactment of internal religio-cultural meaning, and also the means by which religio-cultural meaning is created, (re)interpreted, and remembered and 'internalized' (i.e. 'known') by 'insiders' of the religion. Even Sikhs who do not 'understand' the semantic meaning of the words are not 'passive' observers to such a religio-cultural performance, but are actively engaged with the rest of the community in imbibing and (re)interpreting the meanings of the performance: and with it, the meanings of 'Sikh-ness'.

Jeffrey Alexander focuses on unlocking what it is about social performances that makes them efficacious in creating and sustaining meaning in religio-cultural communities. His answer is that performances must be perceived to be '*authentic*' by participants: both 'performers' and 'audiences'. For Alexander, 'authenticity' is equal to

[40] Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), p.205.
[41] Lawrence E. Sullivan, 'Sound and Senses: Toward a Hermeneutics of Performance', *History of Religions*, 26 (1), (Aug. 1986), p. 28, italics mine.

the “shared understanding of intention and content”; in other words the assent of the participants to the ‘properness’ and significance of the performance.[42] The perception of ‘authenticity’ is dependent on the interpretation and evaluation of all participants present for a performance. Alexander continues:

> …[Performances] stand or fall on their ability to produce psychological identification and cultural extension. The aim is to create, via a skillful and affecting performance, the emotional connection of audience with actor and text and thereby to create the conditions for projecting cultural meaning from performance to audience. To the extent that these two conditions have been achieved, one can say that the elements of performance have become fused.[43]

Here, we could say that Alexander uses the term 'fused' to mean ‘effective,’ because in an ‘effective’ performance, the ‘text’ (in the sense both of words and actions) of the performance is perceived to be ‘right’ by the ‘performers’ and ‘audience’; the ‘audience’ assents to the correctness and efficacy of the way the ‘performers’ are performing the ‘text’; all parties are convinced that, “this is representative of our cultural *ethos*”, “this is who we are”, “this is what is meaningful to us”. This, again, is similar to Erving Goffman’s concept of the ‘focused gathering,’ in which a performance is a group of people gathered together to participate in meaning making, relating with each other in terms of that agreed upon meaning.[44] By re-enacting such performances, cultural meaning and cultural practices are carried over through time. Yet this is not a model of performance which does not allow for the changes in religio-cultural practices which are

---

[42] Jeffrey C. Alexander, 'Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance Between Ritual and Strategy' in *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics and Ritual*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Bernhard Giesen, and Jason L. Mast (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 30.

[43] Ibid., p.54.

[44] Erving Goffman, *Encounters: Two studies in the sociology of interaction* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merril Company, Inc, 1961), pp. 9-10.

inevitable over time. If (over time) a religio-cultural group is no longer ‘persuaded’ by a performance medium, if they no longer find it compelling (or ‘authentic’), 'cultural extension,' the passing on of religio-cultural meaning, memory, and practices through these performances, will cease, or, at minimum, *change*.

Following from this, I would argue that although many among the younger generation of Sikhs in the U.S. may not understand the words of *Gurbani kirtan*, as long as they are convinced of the transformative power of hearing it, as long as they are persuaded by the ‘authenticity’ of the performance overall and the social values which it embodies, there is seemingly little risk of *Gurbani kirtan* losing its relevance for them. This relevance may obviously take a somewhat different shape than for Sikhs who are able to fully understand the words of the hymns, and for the performance of *Gurbani kirtan* to continue, there do need to be some performative ‘experts’ who are able to perform the Scriptures in their original linguistic form. Perhaps Judaism and Hinduism provide strong examples of religious traditions in which performing the Scriptures in their original languages is prized, even when many practitioners do not understand them in this form, yet hold them in high reverence. As time passes and the everyday language used by Sikhs is increasingly removed from the language of Guru Granth Sahib, it will remain to be seen how Sikhs continue to address the translation issue and if there could be an increasing number of Sikhs who place value on experiencing the performance of *Gurbani kirtan* independent of the value of understanding the meanings of its words.

Chapter Four:
'Ritual Experts' in the Sikh Tradition from the Gurus to the United States: Sacred Musicians, Keepers and Performers of the Scripture, Preachers, and Knowledge-bearers

In the *amrit vela*, the “ambrosial hours” before dawn, a *granthī* ('keeper of the Book', an attendant of Guru Granth Sahib) rises and bathes. Dressing and preparing for the day, Bhai Sukhpal Singh[1] recites personal daily prayers and leaves the upstairs apartment where he lives on the grounds of the gurdwara to walk down and open the doors of the Darbar Hall (the “[Divine] Court”, the main worship hall). From many years practicing this daily routine, Bhai Sukhpal Singh may not have needed an alarm clock to rise on this schedule, but today I have set my alarm in a guest room at the gurdwara so that I can rise and bathe much earlier than my usual habit and join the small group of Sikhs waiting outside of the gurdwara for an early morning *darshan*[2] of Guru Granth Sahib. On most weekdays, only a small group of especially devoted Sikhs wait to attend this early Morning Prayer at the gurdwara.[3] Today I stand in the dark, cool morning and exchange quiet greetings with five or six older Sikhs outside of the gurdwara. As Bhai

---

1 A pseudonym, for the reasons explained in Chapter One. I have also employed pseudonyms for all of the *granthīs* and *rāgīs* who I profile later in this chapter, except for Bhai Kultar Singh, who is more of a public figure than the others profiled.

2 Diana Eck has written what is widely regarded as the definitive work on the *darshan* (or *darśan*) experience and concept within the context of Hindu traditions as an “auspicious sight” of the deity within its image, the central moment of iconic Hindu worship of “seeing and being seen” by the Divine (*Darśan: Seeing the Divine in India*, Third Edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). In the Sikh context, however, *darshan* is understood as an auspicious seeing and *hearing* of Guru Granth Sahib—both seeing and being in the presence of the physical 'body' (*saroop*) of the Living Eternal Guru in the form of the Scripture, and also taking an aural *darshan* of Guru Granth Sahib in the form of hearing the hymns within the Scripture performed.

3 Though many devout Sikhs rise in the *amrit vela* to conduct their daily prayers at home, and those who have a *saroop* (physical body) of Guru Granth Sahib at home will likely perform the same *prakash* ceremony described here at home daily.

Sukhpal Singh arrives, I join those gathered in greeting him with the standard Sikh greeting, "*Waheguru-ji ka Khalsa, Waheguru-ji ki fateh*" ('The Khalsa belongs to God, and victory is God's').

After he unlocks the main doors of the Darbar hall, we follow Bhai Sukhpal Singh to a door at the back of the building that immediately opens onto a staircase wrapping upward to a second floor and we walk upstairs together. In the upper floor is a small, air conditioned, and freshly floral scented room, with lush soft carpeting that my bare feet sink into as we step inside. This room is called *Sachkhand* (the 'realm of truth') where Guru Granth Sahib has been at rest, in *sukh āsan* (literally 'pose/position of contentment/rest'), since the previous night. In the center of the room is a small bed with richly embroidered coverings, upon which Guru Granth Sahib rests beneath a bright pink canopy with scriptural verses in fine Gurmukhi script formed by silver embroidery. Entering the room, we perform *maṭṭhā ṭekna*—a deep bow with forehead, hands, knees and elbows to the floor—as a sign of respect upon entering into the presence of the Living Guru. After rising to stand, the gathered Sikhs continue to face Guru Granth Sahib as Bhai Sukhpal Singh begins leading us in *Ardās*, the short Sikh prayer of supplication and remembrance of the Gurus and heroes of Sikhism.

After completing this prayer, Bhai Sukhpal Singh places a clean white cloth on top of his freshly tied turban, and gently and carefully places Guru Granth Sahib on top of his head with the aid of one of the Sikh *sevadars* ('one performing voluntary service') in attendance. Bhai Sukhpal Singh begins to carry Guru Granth Sahib down the stairs,

closely followed by an elderly Sikh man who fans the air above the Guru with a *chaur sahib* (a hair whisk—a symbol of royal status in India since ancient times—used to cool and purify the air around a royal or sacred person, see Figure 4.1). I join the Sikhs present in bringing my palms together in front of my chest and chanting "*Sātinām Waheguru*"[4] as we follow Guru Granth Sahib down the stairs and outside. This is the *prakash*, the "shining forth" of the light of the eternal Living Guru into a new day. As we walk in procession behind Guru Granth Sahib on the cold marble tile outside of the Darbar Hall, a few more Sikhs arrive and quickly remove their shoes, fold their hands, and bow at the arrival of Guru Granth Sahib, and follow us into the Darbar hall.

As we enter the Darbar hall, one *sevadar* has positioned himself at the side of the gurdwara and loudly beats the *nagara* (a large timpani-like drum), signaling the arrival of the 'royal' procession of Guru Granth Sahib. We follow Guru Granth Sahib toward the large *manji sahib* (throne-like platform of honor) at the front of the room. As Bhai Sukhpal Singh and the *sevadar* behind him fanning the scripture reach the *manji sahib*, two of the other Sikhs in attendance move forward to spread out fresh brocaded fabrics and pillows on the raised and cushioned 'throne' on top of the platform. Bhai Sukhpal Singh deftly steps onto the three foot high platform and seats himself while holding Guru Granth Sahib above his head. He carefully places Guru Granth Sahib upon the 'throne' for the day, and we all bow once again, with heads to the floor before the Guru, as the

4 A core Sikh *mantra* used for meditation and prayer. *Waheguru* and *Sātinām* (the "True Name") are standard titles of the Divine in Sikh usage.

granthī begins to remove the *rumalas* ("robes") which Guru Granth Sahib was clothed in the night before, in order to replace them with fresh *rumalas*.

All people present, except for Bhai Sukhpal Singh, seat themselves on the floor of the Darbar hall, facing toward Guru Granth Sahib. The floor throughout the massive ballroom-sized room crunches softly under my feet and then under my hips as I sit, its soft carpet topping multiple layers of padding specifically placed beneath for the comfort of Sikhs, who will always sit on the floor when the scripture is inside of the Darbar hall in order to be at a level lower than Guru Granth Sahib. I look around at the devotees in attendance as they face the Guru. Some continue chanting "*Sātinām Waheguru*" audibly, while others close their eyes in quiet meditation. One of the *sevadars* removes a dazzlingly bright pink embroidered *rumala* from a cabinet at the front of the room that is still wrapped in plastic. These *rumalas* are such a common and frequent donation from community members that many gurdwaras have a large stock of them at the ready for each new day.

After brightly colored, fresh *rumalas* are carefully draped beneath and over the top of Guru Granth Sahib, Bhai Sukhpal Singh adjusts a microphone on the platform to place it in front of his mouth. After an invocation and greeting of "*Waheguru-ji ka Khalsa, Waheguru-ji ki fateh*", he begins to recite the *panj bānia* ("Five Sacred Utterances") of the morning Sikh *Nitnem* ("daily prayers"). These five daily prayers of the morning take roughly an hour to recite. All of the Sikhs in attendance begin by reciting the "*Japji Sahib*" (the group of thirty-eight stanzas of Guru Nanak that form the

opening portion of Guru Granth Sahib) in unison with Bhai Sukhpal Singh. I watch as the *granthī* and some of the Sikhs around me, many of them with eyes closed, chant each of the prayers from memory. As they continue through the cycle of the morning prayers, a slow trickle of Sikhs—perhaps one or two every twenty minutes—enter the Darbar hall and pay respect to Guru Granth Sahib by performing *maṭṭhā tekna*. A few sit and listen in the congregation, or join in with the others reciting prayers; most leave after doing *maṭṭhā tekna*. Many appear to be young or middle-aged professionals who have stopped by the gurdwara to pay respect to Guru Granth Sahib before heading to work for the day. This steady stream of Sikhs coming, paying respect, and making a donation of cash in the small metal lock-box in front of Guru Granth Sahib—or donating food for the langar hall—continues throughout most days of the week as daily liturgical activities ebb and flow.

As Bhai Sukhpal Singh and the gathered Sikhs complete the *Panj Bania Nitnem*, most rise to leave as the *granthī* begins to recite "*Sukhmani Sahib*", the twenty four section set of hymns of the fifth Sikh Guru, Guru Arjan. A few of the Sikhs who have been here since the *prakash* of Guru Granth Sahib before sunrise remain and read "*Sukhmani Sahib*" from *gutkas* (small book-sized compilations of the central Sikh prayers and hymns) along with Bhai Sukhpal Singh. As an observer, I cannot help but marvel at Bhai Sukhpal Singh's powers of memory as he continues through multiple hours of chanting the prayers from memory; the fruits of a lifetime of practice. I begin to fidget, my body tired from several hours of sitting on the floor. I realize I do not have the lifetime of practice at this that some of the older Sikhs around me do, who still sit straight

backed, seemingly in full comfort. I bow respectfully to Guru Granth Sahib and walk outside to stretch and watch the sun continue to rise, still listening to the prayers being amplified from within the gurdwara.

Recitation of "*Sukhmani Sahib*" takes roughly ninety minutes, and as I listen and walk barefoot on the cold marble floor surrounding the Darbar hall, I watch the stream of people coming and going from the gurdwara slowly increase. When I see a visiting *rāgī jatha* (group of sacred musicians) enter through a side door of the Darbar hall carrying their harmoniums and *tabla*, I re-enter the hall, bow toward Guru Granth Sahib, and sit again with the small group of gathered Sikhs. After the *rāgīs* finish setting up their instruments on a platform adjacent to the *manji sahib*, they join the congregation as "*Sukhmani Sahib*" is completed and everyone rises again to recite *Ardās* (the same prayer of supplication recited earlier in the morning).

At the completion of the *Ardās*, everyone present bows before Guru Granth Sahib and the *rāgīs* seat themselves behind their instruments facing the *sangat* ('congregation'). They greet the *sangat*, saying "*Waheguru-ji ka Khalsa, Waheguru-ji ki fateh*!", and, in a clear singing voice, one of the *rāgīs* announces the beginning of *kirtan* of "*Āsa di Var*", Guru Nanak's "Ballad of Hope". Two *rāgīs* play harmonium and sing in loud, full voices in a *raga* meant to evoke the hope of a new sunrise and the beginning of a new day. A *tabla* player accompanies them with a bouncy, lilting rhythm. The first daily sitting of *kirtan* is amplified loudly inside of the Darbar hall and langar hall, where *sevadars* are preparing *langar* and *karah parshad* (blessed food) to serve throughout the day.

It is now about seven in the morning and Bhai Sukhpal Singh gets up from his position behind Guru Granth Sahib where he has now been seated for several hours reciting daily prayers. Another *granthī* takes his place, fanning the *chaur sahib* over Guru Granth Sahib, as Bhai Sukhpal Singh goes to the *langar* hall to stretch and visit the *sevadars* preparing food and *karah parshad*. "*Āsa di Var*" *kirtan* continues for over an hour, and during this time, more people start arriving, performing *maṭṭhā tekna*, and staying to listen to *kirtan*. Some of the older Sikhs who have been here since the early morning have taken up spots leaning against the walls at the sides of the Darbar hall. A few younger Sikhs sit at the front of the Darbar hall, with backs straight, and eyes closed, absorbed in *kirtan*.

Bhai Sukhpal Singh returns to the Darbar hall as the *rāgī jatha* is completing the last hymn of "*Āsa di Var*" *kirtan*. He approaches a microphone and stands facing Guru Granth Sahib as the *rāgīs* pack up their instruments. Everyone stands and faces Guru Granth Sahib as Bhai Sukhpal Singh again leads the *Ardās* prayer. As the *Ardās* is completed, Bhai Sukhpal Singh walks behind the *manji sahib* while the gathered Sikhs bow again and seat themselves. After greeting the *sangat* again with "*Waheguru-ji ka Khalsa, Waheguru-ji ki fateh*", Bhai Sukhpal Singh carefully folds up the top *rumala* covering Guru Granth Sahib and slowly opens the scripture to a random page. With great care, he moves apart the *angs* ("limbs", pages) of Guru Granth Sahib and finds the beginning of the first hymn on the top left *ang*. He has taken the *Hukamnama*, "statement of the Divine Will", a hymn from Guru Granth Sahib chosen randomly for the Sikhs of

this community to hear, ponder, and meditate on for today. The *granthī* recites today's *Hukamnama* in a clear, strong voice, singing the hymn in a simple chant form (of perhaps four musical notes alternating in a cycle). The *Hukamnama* is a hymn of the fifth Guru, Guru Arjan, expressing joy and celebration at the completion of the Darbar Sahib's construction and describing the religious atmosphere of the city of Amritsar, including continuous singing of *kirtan*:

> ਅਬਿਚਲ ਨਗਰੁ ਗੋਬਿੰਦ ਗੁਰੂ ਕਾ ਨਾਮੁ ਜਪਤ ਸੁਖੁ ਪਾਇਆ ਰਾਮ ॥
> ਮਨ ਇਛੇ ਸੇਈ ਫਲ ਪਾਏ ਕਰਤੈ ਆਪਿ ਵਸਾਇਆ ਰਾਮ ॥
> ਕਰਤੈ ਆਪਿ ਵਸਾਇਆ ਸਰਬ ਸੁਖ ਪਾਇਆ ਪੁਤ ਭਾਈ ਸਿਖ ਬਿਗਾਸੇ ॥
> ਗੁਣ ਗਾਵਹਿ ਪੂਰਨ ਪਰਮੇਸੁਰ ਕਾਰਜੁ ਆਇਆ ਰਾਸੇ ॥
> ਪ੍ਰਭੁ ਆਪਿ ਸੁਆਮੀ ਆਪੇ ਰਖਾ ਆਪਿ ਪਿਤਾ ਆਪਿ ਮਾਇਆ ॥
> ਕਹੁ ਨਾਨਕ ਸਤਿਗੁਰ ਬਲਿਹਾਰੀ ਜਿਨਿ ਏਹੁ ਥਾਨੁ ਸੁਹਾਇਆ ॥੧॥
> ਘਰ ਮੰਦਰ ਹਟਨਾਲੇ ਸੋਹੇ ਜਿਸੁ ਵਿਚਿ ਨਾਮੁ ਨਿਵਾਸੀ ਰਾਮ ॥
> ਸੰਤ ਭਗਤ ਹਰਿ ਨਾਮੁ ਅਰਾਧਹਿ ਕਟੀਐ ਜਮ ਕੀ ਫਾਸੀ ਰਾਮ ॥
> ਕਾਟੀ ਜਮ ਫਾਸੀ ਪ੍ਰਭਿ ਅਬਿਨਾਸੀ ਹਰਿ ਹਰਿ ਨਾਮੁ ਧਿਆਏ ॥ […]
> ਦਹ ਦਿਸ ਪੂਰਿ ਰਹਿਆ ਜਸੁ ਸੁਆਮੀ ਕੀਮਤਿ ਕਹਣੁ ਨ ਜਾਈ ॥
> ਕਹੁ ਨਾਨਕ ਸਤਿਗੁਰ ਬਲਿਹਾਰੀ ਜਿਨਿ ਅਬਿਚਲ ਨੀਵ ਰਖਾਈ ॥੩॥
> ਗਿਆਨ ਧਿਆਨ ਪੂਰਨ ਪਰਮੇਸੁਰ ਹਰਿ ਹਰਿ ਕਥਾ ਨਿਤ ਸੁਣੀਐ ਰਾਮ ॥
> ਅਨਹਦ ਚੋਜ ਭਗਤ ਭਵ ਭੰਜਨ ਅਨਹਦ ਵਾਜੇ ਧੁਨੀਐ ਰਾਮ ॥
> ਅਨਹਦ ਝੁਣਕਾਰੇ ਤਤੁ ਬੀਚਾਰੇ ਸੰਤ ਗੋਸਟਿ ਨਿਤ ਹੋਵੈ ॥
> ਹਰਿ ਨਾਮੁ ਅਰਾਧਹਿ ਮੈਲੁ ਸਭ ਕਾਟਹਿ ਕਿਲਵਿਖ ਸਗਲੇ ਖੋਵੈ ॥
> ਤਹ ਜਨਮ ਨ ਮਰਣਾ ਆਵਣ ਜਾਣਾ ਬਹੁੜਿ ਨ ਪਾਈਐ ਜੁਨੀਐ ॥
> ਨਾਨਕ ਗੁਰੁ ਪਰਮੇਸਰੁ ਪਾਇਆ ਜਿਸੁ ਪ੍ਰਸਾਦਿ ਇਛ ਪੁਨੀਐ ॥੪॥੬॥੯॥

> Immovable is the Guru's City of God; chanting God's Name, I have found contentment and peace. I have obtained the fruits of my mind's desires; the Lord, the Creator Himself established it [by His power]. The Creator Himself established it [this place]; total peace and contentment have come; my children, siblings[5], and Sikhs have all blossomed forth with joy. Singing the Glorious

5 Discussing this same passage, Pashaura Singh provides a compelling and illuminating explanation for how Guru Arjan employs the words "my children, siblings, and Sikhs" (as I have translated "*put*[*a*] *bhaī sikh*[*a*]" utilizing gender-neutral pronouns) here: "...all Sikhs enjoyed familial relationships with the Guru as 'his sons and brothers' in faith. By employing the phrase *put bhai sikh bigase* ('sons, brothers, and Sikhs rejoice') Guru Arjan redefined the family relationships. In so doing he was attacking

> Praises of the Perfect, Universal, Infinite Lord [*Paramesur*], the great effort has come to fruition. The Lord Himself is [our] Master. He Himself is [our] Protector, Father, and Mother... Say, O Nanak: "I am a sacrifice to the True Guru, by whom this place has come to fruition". The homes, temples, and marketplaces are beautiful; the Lord's Name abides within [them]. The Saints and devotees worship the Lord's Name in adoration, and Death's noose is cut away. Death's [*Jam/Yāma*] noose is cut away [by] repeatedly meditating on the Lord's Name [*Hari*, *Hari*]. […] The Praises of the Lord and Master fill all of the ten directions; I cannot express [the Lord's] worth. Say, O Nanak: "I am a sacrifice to the True Guru, who has laid this imperishable foundation"... Spiritual wisdom, meditation on the Universal, Infinite Lord [*Paramesur*], and Sermons [*kaṭhā*] on the Lord, *Hari*, *Hari*, are continuously heard [there]. The devotees of the Lord, the Destroyer of attachment, ceaselessly play [music]; the eternal, unstruck sound resounds and vibrates [there]. The unstruck sound tinkles and resonates; the Saints ceaselessly discuss the True knowledge. Adoring and worshiping the Lord's Name, all filth and sins are washed away. There is no birth or death there, no coming or going; no entering again into the womb for rebirth. O Nanak, by the grace of the Universal, Infinite Lord [*Paramesur*], the [True] Guru, all [my] desires have come to fulfillment...[6]

His primary ritual duties done for the morning after taking the *Hukamnama*, Bhai Sukhpal Singh goes to sit at a desk in a building at the front of the gurdwara's campus that serves as an entry point and repository for the shoes of visitors. Throughout the day, Bhai Sukhpal Singh sits and talks to any visitors, collects and records any donations that people make, and is able to spend time eating and chatting in the *langar* hall, attending any necessary meetings, and taking breaks to rest in his apartment at the gurdwara, as other *granthīs* and *sevadars* tend to Guru Granth Sahib, still enthroned in the Darbar hall. During lulls in his duties, I sit and spend time chatting with him. Today, as is typical of weekdays, many people come and go throughout the day, socializing and eating in the

the traditional Punjabi family's axis of power, which set father and mother over son, daughter and daughter-in-law, or which set brother against brother... For [Guru Arjan], all the saintly people become part of a big divine family..." (pg. 119. *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*).

6 M5, *Suhī* (11), AG 783. (Translation my own).

langar hall, which serves snacks and tea throughout the day and into the evening seven days a week.

At about 5:30pm, it is time for Bhai Sukhpal Singh and the *rāgīs* to resume official religious activities. Dozens of Sikhs are already seated in the gurdwara as Bhai Sukhpal Singh and a visiting *rāgī jatha* (different from the one that performed earlier in the day) take their places at the front of the Gurdwara. The *rāgī* leading the *jatha* greets the *sangat* and then sings the opening lines of Guru Nanak's "*So Dār*" hymn:

> ਸੋ ਦਰੁ ਕੇਹਾ ਸੋ ਘਰੁ ਕੇਹਾ ਜਿਤੁ ਬਹਿ ਸਰਬ ਸਮਾਲੇ ॥
> ਵਾਜੇ ਤੇਰੇ ਨਾਦ ਅਨੇਕ ਅਸੰਖਾ ਕੇਤੇ ਵਾਵਣਹਾਰੇ ॥
> ਕੇਤੇ ਰਾਗ ਪਰੀ ਸਿਉ ਕਹੀਅਨਿ ਕੇਤੇ ਗਾਵਣਹਾਰੇ ॥ [...]
>
> Where is that door [*so dār*] of Yours, and where is that home, where You sit and keep watch over all? Your Sound-Current [*Naad*] resounds there, and countless musicians play all sorts of instruments. [There are] so many *rāgas* and so many countless musicians singing [your praises] there...[7]

This is the beginning of the daily evening prayer, the "*Sodār Rehras*," which Sikhs say marks a time of coming together to re-energize after each long workday. After performance of "*Sodār Rehras*," which takes about half an hour, the *rāgī jatha* begins an hour-and-a-half long sitting of *Gurbani kirtan* singing. The sounds of the *kirtan* are amplified outside of the main Darbar hall and also within the *langar* hall. This evening, as on most weekdays, many Sikhs stop by after work, do *maṭṭhā tekna*, maybe listen to *kirtan* for a while, then go and either eat a meal or sit and drink hot spiced chai and socialize in the *langar* hall. Tonight, a group of people have set up a volleyball net on the lawn to the side of the Darbar hall and are enjoying a friendly and spirited all-ages game,

7 M1, *Rāg Āsa* (1), AG, pg. 347 (translations from Guru Granth Sahib throughout this chapter are my own).

as *kirtan* reverberates outside from the speakers within the Darbar and *langar* halls. I see Bhai Sukhpal Singh chatting with a group of Sikhs over chai in the langar hall. As the sun drops behind the horizon, the volleyball game finishes up, and the number of people around the gurdwara is smaller than it was in the early evening, but larger than in the morning. *Kirtan* singing continues until about 8:30pm, when I see Bhai Sukhpal Singh head back inside of the Darbar hall and I follow him in. As the *rāgīs* finish their last hymn of the day, Bhai Sukhpal Singh steps up to the microphone facing Guru Granth Sahib and leads the few dozen Sikhs present in a final *Ardās* prayer for the day.

At the conclusion of the *Ardās*, Bhai Sukhpal Singh approaches Guru Granth Sahib and, with the aid of two *sevadars*, he begins removing the *rumalas* that have covered the scripture throughout the day as he recites "*Kirtan Sohila*", the final evening prayer, in unison with the assembled Sikhs. Bhai Sukhpal Singh and the *sevadars* fold the *rumalas* and fine linens covering the *manji sahib*, setting them aside to be washed, as the *granthī* carefully closes Guru Granth Sahib and wraps the scripture in clean white fabric. At the conclusion of "*Kirtan Sohila*", Bhai Sukhpal Singh covers his turban with a clean cloth, carefully raises Guru Granth Sahib on top of his head, and begins slowly walking around the *manji sahib* toward a side door of the Darbar hall. I join the Sikhs present in bowing to the floor to pay respect as the Guru passes by. A procession of Sikhs follows the Guru and everyone present chants "*Waheguru*! *Waheguru*! *Waheguru*! *Waheguru*!" rapidly in unison as several Sikhs play *chimta* ('tongs', a percussion instrument with tambourine-like jingles on long metal strips that resemble tongs) and one Sikh beats a

loud and vigorous rhythm on a *dholki* (a small two headed drum), announcing the 'royal' procession of the Guru.

The procession follows the Guru outside of the Darbar hall and several Sikhs bow their heads to the marble floor as Guru Granth Sahib passes by. I follow closely behind Bhai Sukhpal Singh and the percussionists, chanting "*Waheguru*!" in unison with the devotees as we arrive at the door and staircase leading upstairs to *Sachkhand*, where Guru Granth Sahib will once again be put to rest in *sukh āsan* for the night. Only about ten Sikhs follow Guru Granth Sahib all the way up the stairs into the small bedroom. I crowd into the small room with Bhai Sukhpal Singh, the *sevadar* fanning the Guru with a *chaur sahib*, and a few families with small children. Bhai Sukhpal Singh places Guru Granth Sahib on the small bed and draws a fresh clean cloth over the top of the Guru. Everyone in the room performs *maṭṭhā tekna* once again. As we stand, Bhai Sukhpal Singh proclaims the *jaikara* (a Sikh cry of exultation) in a loud voice "*Bole so nihal*!" ("Happy are they who say!")—and those present shout back in unison "*Sat Sri Akal*" ("True is the Timeless [One]").

As we slowly begin to file out of the room together, a boy of about four years old turns and asks his mother in a loud, high-pitched voice, "Whose bedroom is this?" His mother responds, shushing him a bit, and replies, "This is Guru-Sahib's room". Bhai Sukhpal Singh and I exchange a smile and chuckle a little at this before we walk down the stairs, the Gurdwara's daily religious activities completed.

1.0 Introduction

This chapter profiles what I am referring to as the 'ritual experts' of the Sikh tradition: people who perform the major religious rituals, practices, duties, and functions in Sikh communities and lead others in these practices, and who have specialized knowledge and training to do this. Currently, in the Sikh diaspora,[8] the two main roles of religious leadership and ritual expertise are that of the *granthī* (in strict literal translation, a “Book person”, a “Book-er”;[9] a person who recites from, tends to, and cares for Guru Granth Sahib), and the *rāgī* ('Sacred musician'; performer of *rāgas*), a person who musically performs the hymns of the Guru Granth Sahib. There are other titles given to Sikh religious leaders and ritual experts that either overlap with or are folded into these first two terms (i.e., *kirtaniya/kirtankar:* 'performer of devotional music', *kathākar*: 'sermon giver'/oral exegete of Sikh scripture), or are honorific terms that are currently used mostly synonymously with them (i.e., *Gīānī*: 'one with sacred knowledge', *Bhai*:

---

8 And these leadership patterns are modeled on the patterns of Sikh religious leadership and ritual expertise that are current in India, where leadership and ritual expertise are similarly centered on these two roles, but where they fit among more complex patterns of authority, including other figures of authority and ritual expertise—such as *Jathedars* ('head priests'; i.e. leaders in control of Sikh religious sites), *Sants* (roughly 'sacred persons'), the heads of various *taksals*, *akharas*, and *deras* (centers of training in Sikh religious knowledge and practice), etc.—all of which have varying levels of influence in the diaspora, but usually less of a direct impact on local affairs within diaspora communities.

9 The Punjabi word *granth* is likely etymologically linked with the Sanskrit *granthī*, meaning 'knot', or 'strung together', and thus *granth* is used primarily in Punjabi to refer to the 'bound together' pages of the Guru Granth Sahib. The term *granth* is used in yogic texts to refer to 'knots' within the body of the yoga practitioner that block the flow of spiritual energy, as in this example (roughly contemporary with the life of Guru Nanak): “When the sleeping *kuṇḍalinī* [spiritual energy] awakens by favour of a guru, then all the lotuses (in the six chakras or centres) and all the knots [*granthayo*] are pierced through.” (*Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, translated by Pancham Singh. Accessed on 05/01/2014 from http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/hyp/hyp05.htm#page_28).

'honored brother'). Later in this chapter, I will discuss in detail the history of these terms and how they now relate to '*granthī*' and '*rāgī*'.

To understand the current structure of leadership, ritual expertise, and conceptualization of authority within contemporary Sikh communities, I will first begin with a discussion of leadership, authority, and ritual expertise throughout the history of Sikhism. Following this, I will present a portrait of how leadership and ritual expertise are currently configured and understood in Sikh communities, especially in the diaspora, and—in keeping with the purposes of this dissertation—specifically in the United States. This necessarily includes a discussion of the complexities around defining leadership roles in an ostensibly 'lay' religious tradition, and a clarification of my own usage of the terms 'ritual' and 'expert' in the context of the Sikh tradition. The core of the later part of the chapter is a set of personal profiles of *granthī*s and *rāgīs* in the United States that I have chosen as being a representative sampling from among my interviewees from American gurdwara communities. Finally, I will discuss issues and questions surrounding the current and future contours of leadership and ritual expertise within American Sikh communities and draw comparisons with the experiences of religious communities among earlier immigrant groups in American history.

2.0 The History of Religious Leadership and Ritual Expertise in the Sikh Tradition

In the early period of the history of Sikh tradition, the Gurus of Sikhism led their community through direct charismatic authority.[10] It is obvious that leadership and

10 I use the concept of "charismatic authority" in the classic Weberian sense (Weber, Maximillian. "The

authority for the early *Sikhs* ('disciples'/'students') ultimately lay within the person of their *Guru* (as the spiritual Teacher and Master), and new patterns of practice and ritual were established and authorized directly by succeeding Gurus. However, even during the period of the ten human Gurus of Sikhism, the Gurus appointed many people to roles of leadership, authority, and ritual expertise from within their community of Sikhs. Probably the earliest example of this is Guru Nanak's relationship with Bhai Mardana, who (as traditional sources narrate) was Guru Nanak's close friend and companion for most of his life starting in childhood, but who was also arguably the first 'court musician' 'employed' in the Guru's court. I use the term 'employed' somewhat loosely, but the traditional Janam Sakhi[11] sources agree in: portraying Bhai Mardana as coming from a hereditary class of people who were musicians and folk historians by profession (*mirasis*, as discussed in chapter two); describing that when Guru Nanak asked Bhai Mardana to accompany him on his travels, Bhai Mardana was unsure about doing so until one of Guru Nanak's Sikhs paid for his daughter's wedding; and presenting (in somewhat comedic form) Bhai Mardana's frequent worries about being provided for materially, worries that are always allayed by God and the Guru providing for them.[12] From these examples in the early traditional sources, it seems clear that we can at least say that Bhai Mardana's livelihood was taken care of during his service to Guru Nanak, even as their relationship obviously ran much deeper than modern connotations of “employee” and “boss”.

Nature of Charismatic Authority and its Routinization” in *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Translated by A.R. Anderson and Talcott Parsons. New York: Free Press, 1947 [1922]).

11 The earliest traditional hagiographic narratives about the life of Guru Nanak.

12 For the content of the *Janam Sakhi* texts, I have consulted Kapoor, Sukhbir Singh and Mohinder Kaur Kapoor. *Janamsaakhi Prampara*. Amritsar: B. Chattar Singh Jiwan Singh Publishers, 2005, as well as McLeod, W.H. *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1968.

As discussed in Chapter Two, Guru Nanak spent much of his life traveling, preaching, and performing his hymns with Bhai Mardana, but after these travels he settled for the rest of his life into farming in the 'intentional community' of Kartarpur ("Creator's Abode"), surrounded by a growing community of Sikhs. It is clear that Guru Nanak established a pattern of communal religious practice centered on the performance of his hymns in the Kartarpur community.[13] As stated, Bhai Mardana was the first 'court musician' in Guru Nanak's employ, and, from the fact that Bhai Mardana's family were professional musicians by hereditary class and that his descendants remained musicians in the courts of Guru Nanak and the later Sikh Gurus (who also employed other court musicians), it seems likely that at least some of the musicians who provided *kirtan* performances in the Kartarpur community were paid 'professional musicians'[14]—at least in the sense that their needs were provided for by the community. Since Guru Nanak encouraged his Sikhs to learn and perform *kirtan* as a form of personal and communal worship, it is also likely that many of the *kirtaniyas* in the Kartarpur community were not 'professional musicians'. Following from this, the mixture of both 'professional' and 'lay' leadership and ritual performance that still exists today in Sikh communities around the

13 Pg. 22. Singh, Pashaura. "An Overview of Sikh History" in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*. Edited by Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

14 Bhai Kultar Singh (who I profile later in this chapter as a performing *rāgī*, and as a *kirtan* teacher in Chapter Five) has narrated the history of 'professionalization' of Sikh musicians to me, saying that according to the oral history that has been passed through his family (who have been Sikh musicians since the time of the Sikh Gurus), it was during the time of Guru Arjan that "... *kirtan* came to 'normal' Sikhs, 'regular' Sikhs started singing *kirtan*. Before Guru Arjan Dev-ji, only the people who belonged to the family of Bhai Mardana-ji were singing: the *Rabābīs*. [Before that] 'Regular' Sikhs used to just listen and enjoy, and sing along, but they were not singing as professional *jathas*, so that's the time when it came... That's the time when *kirtan* came—[when] Guru Arjan Dev-ji started training 'regular' Gursikhs to do *kirtan* ['professionally']". Bhai Kultar Singh partly related this to the episode of Guru Arjan's court musicians Balvand and Satta's display of pride, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

world seems likely to have begun in the first Sikh community at Kartarpur.

During the period of the human Gurus and afterward, religious leadership and ritual expertise diversified, with people beginning to fulfill different roles. Some of these roles have continued as leadership and ritual expertise roles in Sikh communities through to the modern day. In the next section, I will discuss several categories of religious and ritual leadership in the Sikh tradition.

2.1 Ritual Officiants, Caretakers, Preachers, and Knowledge Bearers: *Granthīs*, *Pujārīs*, *Kathākars*, *Bhais*, *Gīānīs*, and Others:

During the time of the second Guru, Guru Angad (Guru from 1539-1552) sent out preachers and "missionaries" to neighboring regions to spread (his and) Guru Nanak's path and message.[15] By the time of the third Guru, Guru Amar Das (Guru from 1552-1574), the communities that had been established by Guru Nanak during his preaching travels, by Guru Angad, and by other preachers spreading the Gurus' teachings, were growing to such an extent that Guru Amar Das sent preachers (*kathākars*) out into communities in the Punjab region, and also appointed *manjis*[16] (local community leaders). Later, the fifth Guru, Guru Arjan (Guru from 1581-1606) also sent *masands*[17] (local community leaders) out as leaders within local Sikh communities. These *manjis* and

15 Pg. 31. Singh, Prithi Pal. *The History of Sikh Gurus*. Pompano Beach, FL: Educa Press, 2007.
16 A '*manji*' (from the Sanskrit *mañcha*) is literally the 'stage', 'platform', the raised seat from which a Guru, or a local leader in their stead, spoke. This word is the same source of *manji sahib*, the throne-like platform on which Guru Granth Sahib is seated within a gurdwara.
17 From the Persian *masnad*, a 'throne or a cushion to recline on'. In Punjabi, this points to the raised platforms that the Gurus, and the preachers who they sent to represent them, sat upon to preach before an audience.

masands preached, collected community funds, and served as local leaders and ritual experts representing the authority of the Gurus within local Sikh communities. Portraying the vision of gender equality of the Sikh Gurus, many of the important early *masands* were women.[18]

As the Sikh community continued to grow under subsequent Gurus, new leadership roles were given to devoted Sikhs. Guru Arjan presided over two centrally important developments in Sikh history and in the character and form of Sikh ritual practice: the completion of the Harimandir Sahib (which was to become the sacred center of Sikhism through to the modern day, as discussed in Chapter Two) and its *sarovar* (sacred pool) in Amritsar in 1604; and the compilation of the Ādi Granth (the 'First/Primary Book', containing the hymns of the first five Sikh Gurus) and its installation in the Harimandir Sahib. With the completion of the Harimandir Sahib and installation of the Ādi Granth, Guru Arjan established a pattern of religious ritual practice that continues today at the Darbar Sahib complex and provides the model for the ritual treatment of the Sikh scripture and performance of the hymns of the Gurus around the world today. To conduct the extremely important ritual and leadership roles necessitated by these developments in Sikh practice, Guru Arjan enlisted the service of the first *granthī*, Baba[19] Buddha.

18 "Masand", *Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, edited by Harbans Singh. Patiala: Panjabi University Press. Accessed from http://www.learnpunjabi.org/eos/MASANDS.html

19 From Persian 'Father' or 'Grandfather', used here in Punjabi as a term of respect for a (typically older) saintly person.

Traditional narratives relate that Baba Buddha (1506-1631)[20] was born Būṛā, who, as a small child, had immediately recognized Guru Nanak as a great religious teacher. Thus, in recognition of his perceptive wisdom beyond his years, Guru Nanak gave him the new name Bhai Buddha (roughly 'Brother Old Man').[21] Baba Buddha was a prominent member of Guru Nanak's Kartarpur community, and was such a well-respected Sikh that, according to traditional narratives, he was asked to apply the ceremonial *tilak*[22] on the forehead of each of Guru Nanak's first five successor Gurus. Bhai Buddha participated in the digging of the *sarovar* (sacred pool) around the Harimandir Sahib in Amritsar under Guru Ram Das and Guru Arjan. A tree, the Baba Buddha *Ber*, still stands today as a shrine within the Darbar Sahib complex to commemorate him. When Guru Arjan installed the Ādi Granth within the Harimandir Sahib on August 16, 1604, he appointed Baba Buddha, by then an old man, as the first *granthī* of the Sikh tradition, entrusting him with the duties of tending to and reciting from the Ādi Granth, and carrying the Ādi Granth in procession inside and outside of the Harimandir Sahib each day—thus setting the pattern of respectful treatment and ritual performance of the scripture that are still carried out today. Baba Buddha was a Sikh of such high reputation that traditional narratives say that the sixth Sikh Guru, Guru Hargobind, himself “gave his shoulder to the bier and performed the last rites” at his funeral.[23]

20 These are traditional dates for his life but seem likely to have been adjusted to accommodate stories about him meeting Guru Nanak as a child and then subsequently serving as a loyal Sikh under all of the first six Sikh Gurus.

21 *Bhai* is another Punjabi honorific, literally meaning 'brother', but here with the meaning of 'honored brother'. In Punjabi, *Buddha* means an 'old man', with the connotation of a 'wise old man'.

22 In south Asian contexts, a ritual mark on the forehead (often of sandalwood or turmeric), in this case, marking the ascendance of a new Guru within the Sikh tradition.

23 “Baba Buddha”, *Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, edited by Harbans Singh. Patiala: Panjabi University Press.

One of the other most famous *granthīs* of early Sikh history is Bhai Mani Singh. In the period between the guruships of Guru Hargobind and Guru Gobind Singh (1606-1708), when the Sikhs were often in conflict with the Mughal authorities, the Darbar Sahib came under the administrative control of the sect called the *Mīnas* ('deceitful'), which was led by Guru Ramdas' disowned son, Prithi Chand. Due to the perceived mismanagement of the Darbar Sahib during this period—which (as discussed in Chapter Two) included the ninth Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur, being barred from entering the Darbar Sahib in 1664—Guru Gobind Singh dispatched Bhai Mani Singh to take control of the Darbar Sahib shortly after the founding of the Khalsa in 1699. In addition to serving for many years as custodian of the Darbar Sahib, according to traditional sources, Bhai Mani Singh also assisted Guru Gobind Singh in preparing the final recension of the Guru Granth Sahib in 1706. He later spent time traveling to the regions surrounding Amritsar on preaching rounds.[24] In 1733, Bhai Mani Singh requested from Zakaria Khan, the governor or Lahore, permission to hold Diwali festivities at the Darbar Sahib. Khan allowed the festivities on the condition that Bhai Mani Singh pay five thousand rupees as a tax. However, by the time of the festivities, Khan dispatched troops around the city, scaring away most of the pilgrims, and Bhai Mani Singh was thus unable to raise the money. Zakaria Khan imprisoned Bhai Mani Singh, giving him the option to convert to Islam, but when Bhai Mani Singh refused, he had him executed by being slowly dismembered limb by limb. Bhai Mani Singh has subsequently been revered as both one

Accessed from http://www.learnpunjabi.org/eos/BABABUDDHA.html

24 "Mani Singh, Bhai", *Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, edited by Harbans Singh. Patiala: Panjabi University Press. Accessed from http://www.learnpunjabi.org/eos/MANISINGHBHAI.html

of the most famous *granthīs* and also martyrs of the Sikh tradition, and his martyrdom is frequently depicted in modern Sikh art.

In the period of history following the end of the line of the human Gurus (with the death of Guru Gobind Singh in 1708), the tradition of *granthīs* as reciters and caretakers of Guru Granth Sahib continued, but major Sikh religious sites, including the Darbar Sahib, were often out of the hands of leaders of the mainline Sikh tradition. In this setting, parallel, and sometimes overlapping, roles of religious and ritual leadership emerged. In addition to *granthīs*, leadership roles at Sikh sacred sites at this time included *pujārīs* ('priests', 'worship performers'), *ardāsīās* (those who performed the *Ardās* prayer on behalf of Sikhs visiting sacred sites), *gīānīs*, and *bhais*, as well as professional musicians, including *rabābīs*, *rāgīs*, and *ḍhaḍīs*. Harjot Oberoi aptly refers to these leadership roles as "... a sort of sacred support staff that performed different functions for the body of Sikh believers". Portraying the 'professional' nature of the work of all of these leaders, Oberoi writes that "in exchange for their services many of them… were granted alienated revenues [*jagirs*]."[25]

It seems that the role of the *granthī*—as the person who recited and tended to Guru Granth Sahib and was often the caretaker of a sacred religious site—usually remained the most central role of leadership and ritual expertise in most Sikh communities. *Granthīs* were also well known as exegetes of the scripture and as preachers. Harjot Oberoi writes, "*Granthīs* were men well known for their ability to read

25 Pg. 131. Oberoi, Harjot. *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

the Sikh scripture and were widely patronized by Sikh aristocrats and religious establishments."[26] Since the role and title of '*granthī*' has continued into the present era, I will further discuss the roles and duties currently assigned to and expected of *granthīs* in greater detail below.

A tradition of Sikh leadership and ritual expertise parallel to the *granthīs* that has not continued into the modern era was that of the *pujārīs*[27] ('priests' who performed rituals at Sikh sacred sites). During the period of time from Guru Hargobind's guruship (beginning in 1606) to Guru Gobind Singh's guruship (ending in 1708), the Sikh community was often occupied with either defending itself against, or evading oppressive Mughal authorities. At this time, when the Gurus and their Sikhs were forced to abandon many Sikh religious sites—including the Darbar Sahib—an ascetic Sikh sect, the Udasis ('mendicant' followers of the ascetic son of Guru Nanak, Sri Chand, who was passed over for the Guruship), were able to take over administrative control of these religious sites, since they were not seen as a threat by the Mughals due to the ascetic nature of their order. The heads of these religious sites came to be called *mahants*, and control of the sites they managed was passed on hereditarily.

It seems that the title *pujārī* emerged during this time to describe a role in Sikh religious leadership quite similar to the connotation this term holds in a Hindu context, i.e. that of a 'temple priest' who is "... responsible for ritual services in shrines,"[28] tends to

---

26 Ibid.

27 Obviously this is the same term that is still linguistically current in the Hindu context where a *pujārī* is one—usually a Brahmin—who conducts a ritual of worship (*puja*), often on behalf of someone visiting a religious site.

28 Pg. 131. Oberoi, Harjot. *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*.

the religious site, and collects offerings from worshipers. An 1859 report written by British administrators and the committee of Sikhs in charge of the Darbar Sahib at that time defined the roles of *pujārīs* as "...look[ing] after the offerings, see[ing] the compilation of accounts, and other minor offices". The report continued, stating: "[the *pujārīs*'] rank is that of before the *rabābīs* and *rāgīs*, for this [*sic*] reason that the latter have no concern with the above important offices."[29]

Another ascetic Sikh sect, the Nirmalas, which had emerged during the time of Guru Gobind Singh, also carried out leadership roles similar to those of the Udasis. Harjot Oberoi writes that the Udasi and Nirmala sects maintained authority as "institutionalized" "traditional intellectuals" who carried out the "upholding, interpreting, and transmitting [of] Sikh tradition ..." all the way up to the early twentieth century. Both of these ascetic sects constructed *bungas* (the buildings, discussed in Chapter Two, that served as schools, guest houses, and even hospitals) surrounding the *sarovar* around the Harimandir Sahib. Oberoi writes,

> Many a pilgrim who visited the Golden Temple would include these [Udasi and Nirmala] *bungas* in his itinerary, and in the process be instructed in the corpus of Sikh myths, theology and meditative practice. In this particular case the doctrine being transmitted must have had a strong element of ascetic thinking incorporated into it.[30]

From other sources, it is apparent that the influence of these ascetic sects, their role as knowledge-bearers and ritual officiants, and their hereditary claims to administrative control of the Darbar Sahib continued, as Oberoi portrays, into the early twentieth

29 Quoted on pg. 131 n.79. Ibid..
30 Pgs. 130-131 Ibid.

century. A 1903 book by Sundar Singh Ramgarhia, titled *Guide to the Darbar Sahib or Golden Temple of Amritsar*, describes the role of the *pujārīs*: “On the left-hand side of the *granthis* sit *pujaris* … hereditary incumbents of the temple, who obtain an income from a portion of the offerings.”[31]

Around the time of Ramgarhia's book, a movement began among many Sikhs protesting what they saw as the corrupt management of Sikh religious sites under the Udasi and Nirmala *mahants*. Of particular offense was what some saw as the falling of the practices of the *mahants* and *pujārīs* into 'brahminism';[32] including the worship of 'idols' within the Darbar Sahib complex,[33] and the refusal to accept or serve *karah parshad* ('blessed food') that was brought by 'low caste' visitors to the Darbar Sahib, or to preform prayers for them.[34] In 1920, a group of Sikhs gathered to protest this refusal to distribute *Karah parshad*, and again the *pujārīs* refused to accept the *parshad* of these 'low caste' Sikhs. They agreed to consult Guru Granth Sahib on the matter, and, taking the *Hukamnama*, they opened the scripture at random to the following verse: ਨਿਗੁਣਿਆ ਨੋ ਆਪੇ ਬਖਸਿ ਲਏ ਭਾਈ ਸਤਿਗੁਰ ਕੀ ਸੇਵਾ ਲਾਇ “[The Lord] Himself bestows bounties on the worthless [*niguṇiā*],[35] O Siblings, and employs them in the service of the True Guru.”[36] This brought

31 Quoted on pg. 120. Singh, Pashaura. “Musical Chaunkis at the Darbar Sahib: History, Aesthetics, and Time” in *Sikhism in Global Context*. Edited by Pashaura Singh. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011.

32 *Brahmans* (or *brahmins*) are the priestly class/caste of Hinduism, traditionally considered at the highest level of religious purity and authority. Since the mainline Sikh tradition rejects the notion of religious purity or authority 'by birth', the charge of '*Brahminism*' is a derogatory comment, implying the practice of 'idolatry' and the hubris of seeing oneself as having value or authority before God exceeding others.

33 Grewal, Arshi, and Oberoi all discuss the presence of these 'idols' at the time.

34 Pg. 72. Madanjit Kaur. *The Golden Temple: Past and Present*. Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University Press, 1983.

35 Literally those 'without qualities', 'without virtues'.

36 M3, *Soraṭhi*, AG, pg. 638. (Translation my own).

a consensus that no one could be excluded from the Darbar Sahib based on 'low caste' status, which formed one of the final blows to the authority of the hereditary *mahants* and *pujārīs*. As discussed in Chapter Two, with the *Sikh Gurdwaras Act* of 1925, management of the Darbar Sahib and other important Sikh religious sites "... passed from the hands of the hereditary *mahants*, *pujārīs* and the *sarbarahs* [administrators appointed by the British colonial authorities] into the hands of the elected representatives of the people, i.e., the S.G.P.C."[37] The widespread view that leadership of Sikh religious sites under the Udasi and Nirmala *mahants* was marked by "corruption", "greed", and "brahminism" is likely a source of the stereotypes held by some modern Sikhs (which I will discuss below), of "greedy" *granthīs*, and the frequent mistrust of the idea that *granthīs* have any "special" authority.

Two more titles for roles of leadership and ritual expertise in Sikhism are important to mention: *bhai* ('honored brother') and *gīānī* ('one with [sacred] knowledge'). As Oberoi points out, "often these honorific titles [*gīānī* and *bhai*], primarily signs of learning, were interchangeable in the nineteenth century."[38] Today, *bhai* and *gīānī* still remain common honorific titles used by modern Sikhs, especially to refer to *granthīs* (it is common to hear Sikhs refer to a *granthī* as *bhai-sahib* ['honored brother'], or *gīānī* ['honored learned person']). However, '*granthī*' and the terms '*bhai*' or '*gīānī*' are not synonymous, since: not all *bhais*/*gīānīs* are *granthīs*; the titles of *bhai*/*gīānī* seem to obviously also have also been applied to Udasi and Nirmala *mahants* and *pujārīs* in an

37 Pg. 82. Madanjit Kaur: *The Golden Temple: Past and Present*.
38 Pg. 131 n.81. Oberoi, Harjot. *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*.

earlier historical period; and *bhai*/*gīānī* are also used to refer respectfully to others, such as *rāgīs* and *kirtaniyas,* as a sign of respect for their perceived knowledge or piety. Oberoi outlines the leadership roles taken on by '*bhais*' within Sikh communities historically:

> Etymologically the word *bhai* means brother, but within early Sikh tradition the word was also used as an honorific for the holy men of the Panth. To qualify for this title a person had to demonstrate a capacity to interpret the Adi Granth, communicate the wisdom of the gurus it enshrined, and be publicly recognized for his piety. If in addition he could work miracles, heal the sick and give succor to the distressed, he was sure to occupy a position of considerable reverence and influence within the community. . . . Since the days of... Bhai Gurdas, the faculty of expounding on gurbani or the teachings of the Sikh gurus has been woven into the definition of a bhai, and bhais have been honoured as embodiments of the holy.[39]

It is apparent, then, that *bhai* and *gīānī* were terms applied to people seen as highly respected within the community for their sacred knowledge and/or their closeness to the Divine or the Guru, and the ability to pass on their knowledge to the community in effective ways.

One of the primary ways such *bhais* and *gīānīs* (and *granthīs*) passed on this knowledge is the tradition of *kathā* ('sermonizing', especially by oral exegesis of Guru Granth Sahib). The Sikh *kathā* tradition had its formal beginnings in the time of Gurū Arjan (Guru from 1581-1606), who, upon compiling the first recension of Sikh Scripture, the Ādi Granth, is said to have entrusted Bhai Gurdas[40] (Guru Arjan's amanuensis, who aided in the compilation of the Ādi Granth) with giving daily sermons to the Sikh

---

39 Pgs. 118-119. Ibid.

40 Based on his extensive first-hand knowledge of the meanings of the Ādi Granth (having literally received this knowledge “from the mouth of the Guru”) Bhai Gurdas went on to write prose exegetical works that have been referred to by Sikhs as the “key to the Guru Granth Sahib”.

community expounding on the scripture's collected hymns. The role of preaching through careful exegesis of the scripture continued to be modeled by the *masands*, the community leaders appointed by the Gurus, who would deliver *kathā* at local gatherings following this pattern. Bhai Mani Singh (discussed above and in Chapter Two), who played a similar role to Bhai Gurdas in the final compilation of the Guru Granth Sahib under Gurū Gobind Singh (guruship from 1675-1708), is said to have been personally instructed by the Guru in exegesis of the Guru Granth Sahib.[41]

In addition to their preaching (*kathā*), *bhai* and *gīānī* were honorific titles applied especially to people who taught by other means and could pass on Sikh sacred knowledge through teaching:

> ...[The] traditional intellectuals, the gianis and bhais, were significant culture bearers of Sikh tradition, a role they largely performed by running educational institutions. In the holy city of Amritsar there resided several prominent families of gianis, who, according to Sikh tradition, had from the time of Gobind Singh acted as exegetes. Each generation of these gianis, at a bunga close to the Golden Temple, instructed students in the mysteries of the sacred scriptures, canons of textual interpretation and doctrines of theology.[42]

Though (as discussed in Chapter Two) the *bungas* are mostly gone from the Darbar Sahib today, *gīānī* and *bhai* continue to be terms of respect for knowledge-bearers of the Sikh tradition. More generally, today, Sikhs around the world use *bhai* and g*īānī* as honorific titles to refer to *kirtaniyas* and especially *granthīs*, particularly those who give sermons expounding upon Guru Granth Sahib and or teach *kirtan*, Sikh history, how to read the Guru Granth Sahib, and so on.

41 "Katha", *Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, edited by Harbans Singh. Patiala: Panjabi University Press. Accessed from http://www.learnpunjabi.org/eos/KATHA.html

42 Pgs. 131-132 Oberoi, Harjot. *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*.

2.2 Sacred Musicians: *Rabābīs*, *Rāgīs*, *Kirtaniyas/Kirtankars*, *Ḍhaḍīs*

As I have discussed in Chapter Two, and above, the initial line of Sikh musicians entrusted with the centrally important task of performing the hymns of the Sikh Gurus (and Bhagats) were the *rabābīs*, a traditional lineage that began with Bhai Mardana and his descendants. It is clear that by a later period in Sikh history, the line of *rabābīs*, as professional musicians performing at Sikh religious sites, was seen as distinct from that of the '*rāgīs*'. *Rabābīs*, as their names makes clear, were players of the *rabāb*—a skin-headed, gut-stringed instrument influenced by Islamic and Afghan music—and, the purveyors of the *rabābī* tradition, were almost entirely Muslim, like their forebear Bhai Mardana. Etymologically, '*rāgī*' simply means one who performs *rāgas*—i.e., the *rāga* compositions of the Sikh Gurus—and these *rāgīs* were almost entirely Sikhs. The exact point when these traditions branched into two distinct musical lineages is not entirely clear, but it seems to have occurred during the period of the early Gurus.[43] The separation of *rabābīs* and *rāgīs* as two groups with expertise in performing Sikh *kirtan* was evident in daily practice at the Darbar Sahib from as early as the time of Guru Arjan[44] and continued into the early twentieth century. Noting this, Pashaura Singh writes: "the pre-modern tradition of eight *chaunkis* ['sittings' of *kirtan* at particular timings throughout the day and evening] of Sikh *rāgīs* and seven *chaunkis* of Muslim *Rabābīs* was still alive at

43 Once again, I would point to the oral history related to me by Bhai Kultar Singh (mentioned in note 12 above). He places the full break of the tradition into two groups of 'professional' musicians—Muslim *rabābīs* and Sikh *rāgīs*—as having occurred during the time of Guru Arjan.

44 Pashaura Singh describes how, during the time of Guru Arjan, the tradition of *rabābīs* and *rāgīs* performing *kirtan* in eight *chaunkis* —different 'sittings' spread throughout each day—was begun. (Pg. 104. Singh, Pashaura. "Musical Chaunkis at the Darbar Sahib: History, Aesthetics, and Time" in *Sikhism in Global Context*. Edited by Pashaura Singh. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011).

the Darbar Sahib at the beginning of the twentieth century."[45] The 1903 book by Sundar Singh Ramgarhia mentioned above (*Guide to the Darbar Sahib or Golden Temple of Amritsar*), which describes the Darbar Sahib for an English speaking audience, further delineates the *kirtan* performance styles and duties of the two traditions:

> ...On [the *granthī*'s] right hand [sit] the musicians... hereditary ministrants, grouped in 15 parties, who relieve each other at stated intervals. They are of two classes—eight parties (known as ragīs) being Sikhs, and seven (known as rababis) being Mahomedans [Muslims]. The former are on duty till noon, and the latter afternoon. The chief instruments employed are: the rabab or rebeck, having four strings of gut only to strike the keynote. The dutara and chautara, with two and four strings respectively: a kind of guitar [sic], somewhat smaller than the rabab. The above are used by the rababis only and are played with plectrum or jawa. The saranda used by rāgīs only: an instrument with strings of iron or brass wire (sometimes of silk gut) and played with a bow. The taus or peacock, similar to above but larger, and with the figure of a peacock carved at the lower end. The sitar, a kind of guitar [sic] with iron or brass wire strings, varying in number from six to forty: it is played with the aid of a peculiar shaped finger-ring known as the 'mizrab' or striker. The tambura or mandolin [sic] with four strings, one of iron and three of brass wire; it is played with the right hand and emits a continuous note. The tabla or small drums for beating time usually placed in pairs, the hands being employed to beat the vellum. A diminutive harmonium; the only wind instrument employed.[46]

From this, it is clear that, into the beginning of the twentieth century, *rabābīs* and *rāgīs* were differentiated not only in their religious and social background, but by the instruments they employed to perform *kirtan*, and that they were differentiated as coming from two distinct traditions to such an extent as to traditionally be given separate times of day to perform their *kirtan*.

Today, the *rāgī* tradition continues in gurdwaras throughout the world, with '*rāgī*' being the standard title of those who perform *Gurbani kirtan*. *Kirtaniya* and *kirtankar* are

45 Quoted on pg. 120 Ibid.
46 Quoted on pg. 120. Ibid.

also standard titles given to those who have expertise in performing *kirtan*—linguistically, they are roughly '*kirtan*-er' and '*kirtan*-doer', respectively. Both of these latter terms point to Sikh musicians of the *rāgī* lineage, as today the distinct *rabābī* tradition has nearly died out. The decline of the four hundred year old *rabābī* tradition in Sikh *kirtan* is attributable to a few historical factors: First, under the reforms of the Singh Sabha[47] movements, the prestige of the *rabābīs* declined, possibly due to their Muslim, and often 'low caste' status, and rumors that the Muslim *rabābīs* washed their mouths out after singing the devotional songs of the '*kafirs*' (pejorative term for 'unbelievers') during their *kirtan* performances.[48] Second, the Partition of India and Pakistan meant that most of the Muslim *rabābīs* ended up moving to Pakistan, making it all but impossible for them to return to Sikh religious sites in India to perform *kirtan*. Third, as Pashaura Singh narrates, "in the 1940s, the S.G.P.C. passed a resolution that only Khalsa Sikhs could perform *kirtan* in the Darbar Sahib. Not surprisingly, the *Rabābīs* who remained in India after Partition had to become Khalsa Sikhs... in order to perform *kirtan* in the Darbar Sahib."[49] Today, there is a desire among many Sikhs around the world to see the Pakistani descendants of the Muslim *rabābī* tradition once again able to perform *Gurbani kirtan* in the Darbar Sahib. Recognizing this as unlikely to occur within the lifetime of those *rabābīs* who had performed in the Darbar Sahib pre-Partition, some gurdwaras in the

47 Sikh 'revivalist' movements beginning in the late 1800s that sought to 'protect' Sikh tradition from Christian missionary activities and 'return' Sikh tradition to the beliefs and practices laid down by the Sikh Gurus. The Singh Sabha movements are widely discussed by Oberoi (and others).

48 This story of *rabābīs* washing their mouths out after performing *Gurbani kirtan* has been retold to me by multiple Sikh musicians—notably, Bhai Kultar Singh. On the other hand, several of my Sikh interviewees (and also, notably, Dr. Kamalroop Singh, who cited Nihang oral traditions in a personal conversation with me) have asserted that this story was a slanderous lie about the *rabābīs*.

49 Pgs. 124-125. Singh, Pashaura. "Musical Chaunkis at the Darbar Sahib: History, Aesthetics, and Time".

diaspora have hosted the aging carriers of the hereditary *rabābī* tradition to perform *kirtan*.[50]

One final category of Sikh musicians is important to mention: the *ḍhaḍīs*. The title of '*ḍhaḍī*' is derived from the small hand drum—the *ḍhaḍ*—that is ubiquitously played by *ḍhaḍī* ensembles as accompaniment to multiple singing voices and usually a *sarangi* (a bowed stringed instrument that can be played standing or sitting). Like *rabābīs*, the *ḍhaḍī* tradition traces its history from the time before the Sikh Gurus to people whose hereditary class occupation was to sing and perform folk histories and narratives, especially pertaining to the heroic deeds of kings and other important persons. During the guruship of Guru Hargobind (1606-1644), the Guru employed *ḍhaḍī* ensembles in his court, where *ḍhaḍīs* functioned in much the same manner that they had in royal courts: as bards, panegyrists, and eulogists, praising the great deeds of Guru Hargobind, his predecessor Gurus, and other Sikh heroes. Harjot Oberoi describes the role of *ḍhaḍīs* in the nineteenth century as that of "...itinerant musicians, perform[ing] mostly in pairs, one playing the tabor [sic][51] and the other a stringed instrument. They sang heroic ballads at festivals and fairs which commemorated the battles and deeds of heroic Sikh figures from the past."[52] Guru Hargobind's practice of having *ḍhaḍī* ensembles perform in front of the Akal Takht

50 For instance, in 2011, a gurdwara in the UK hosted Bhai Ghulam Mohammed Chand, a direct descendant of Bhai Mardana, from Pakistan, to perform *kirtan*. See: http://gt1588.com/last-of-the-rababis/. For further discussion of the current status of the *rabābī* and the remaining living carriers of the tradition in Pakistan, see Navtej Purewal's "Sikh/Muslim Bhai-Bhai? Towards a Social History of the Rabābī Tradition of Shabad Kīrtan" (*Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory*, Vol. 7, No. 3, December 2011, pp.365-382).

51 Here, Oberoi seems to be translating *ḍhaḍ* as "tabor", but the tabor is a quite different western instrument—though both tabor and *ḍhaḍ* are two-headed drums that employ a rope tensioning system to change the drum's pitch.

52 Pg. 131. Oberoi, Harjot. *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

('Throne of the Timeless One', the seat of Sikh temporal authority that faces the Harimandir Sahib in Amritsar) is a practice that has continued into the modern era. It is also relatively common to see visiting *ḍhaḍī* ensembles perform in gurdwaras in the Unites States for special events, as *ḍhaḍī* performances are sanctioned within gurdwaras by the S.G.P.C. However, this seems to be a regular occurrence only in the largest gurdwaras with the most resources for bringing visiting musicians from abroad. Sociologist Michael Nijhawan has written an extensive study on the Sikh *ḍhaḍī* tradition, *Ḍhaḍī Darbar: Religion, Violence, and the Performance of Sikh History*[53], so, for the purposes of this present chapter, I will not focus further on the role of *ḍhaḍīs*.

A final point should be reiterated within this section, and that is, as Oberoi notes, that among the leadership roles so far discussed throughout Sikh history—*granthīs*, *kathākars*, *pujārīs*, *bhais*, *gīānīs*, *rabābīs*, *rāgīs*, *kirtaniyas*/*kirtankars*, and *ḍhaḍīs*, "the functional boundaries between these groups was blurred... [though] we can separate the ascetic orders [i.e., mostly the *pujārīs*] from the rest."[54] Throughout Sikh history and today, many *granthīs* have also been celebrated *rāgīs*, some *kirtaniyas* are also *kathākars*, not all *granthīs* are *kathākars*, most people given the title '*gīānī*' are likely skilled *kathākars*, and so on.

53 New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006.

54 Pg. 123. Oberoi, Harjot. The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

3.0 Applicability of the Terms 'Ritual' and 'Expert' to the Sikh Tradition

I have devoted this chapter to what I am calling the 'ritual experts' of Sikhism. I think that readers with a background in the academic study of religion or culture will probably find the term 'ritual expert' fairly clear and unproblematic. However, I want to be sure that it will be clear to a broader audience the ways in which I am utilizing the terms 'ritual' and 'expert' as scholarly interpretive categories. It is very common in my conversations with Sikhs to hear them say "Sikhism is a non-ritualistic religion,"[55] or, although it happens less frequently, to hear the even stronger assertion that "Sikhism has no rituals". To an outside observer, and especially to a scholar of religions, the assertion that Sikhism "has no rituals" seems highly untenable, even absurd (the reader will recall the detailed description of the standard daily Sikh rituals at a gurdwara that began this chapter!). However, there are several practical reasons why Sikhs might make this assertion, or perhaps might reject the concept of 'ritual' as being 'foreign' to Sikhism. I want to acknowledge and briefly explore these reasons and provide my own clarifications for the ways that I see both 'ritual' and 'expert ' as useful scholarly interpretive categories based on the ways that I am utilizing them.

55 The following excerpt from one of my interviews with a *grānthī* working in a California gurdwara provides an example of a typical Sikh view that the Sikh tradition began partly with Guru Nanak's rejection of the "ritualism" of the religions of his time: "In the Guru Sahib's time, religion was considered as ritual only. If you go to the temple, you do some ritual, you are Hindu. If you go to the mosque, you do some ritual, you are Muslim. But the Guru said 'no, ritual is not the religion of God's message'. God's message is love each other, do good things, and do good for society, then you are a true devotee. And if you say, 'we are superior, and other religions are inferior' it's totally wrong, it's not God's message. That's why Guru Sahib went to Mecca with Bhai Mardana, and he went to all of the Hindu temples, to spread the message, 'God is One, don't fight with each other'. God is One, so all of us are one. This is what *ik ōnkār* means, God is one and only one. And Guru Sahib said, you say Allah, you say Rām, this name is what we provided to God. God is without any name. These names are made by humans. So Guru had a totally different message."

In discussing Sikh objections to the idea of 'ritual' or 'ritualism' in the Sikh tradition, to begin, it is very clear from traditional Sikh sources (such as the *Janam Sakhis*) as well as hymns in the Guru Granth Sahib, that Guru Nanak rejected what he saw as the '*hollow*' ritualism of the religions of his time—or what might be called "ritual for the sake of ritual". There are two particularly well known and frequently retold traditional stories about the life of Guru Nanak that will suffice to illustrate this. In these narratives, when Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana visited the Muslim holy city of Mecca on their preaching journeys (*udasis*), Guru Nanak is said to have fallen asleep with his feet facing toward the *Kaaba* (a highly offensive gesture to the sacred center of the Muslim religion). When a Muslim religious official saw this, he violently woke Guru Nanak to protest at the offense, to which Guru Nanak replied "kindly turn my feet toward some direction where God is not"[56] (according to some narratives, when Guru Nanak's feet were forcibly moved, the Kaaba miraculously followed wherever his feet moved). In another traditional story, when Guru Nanak traveled to the major Hindu pilgrimage site of Haridwar on the Ganges river plain, he observed local Hindus praying in the river and throwing river water to the east in the direction of the rising sun as an offering to their ancestors. During his own prayers in the river, Guru Nanak turned and threw water toward the west. When the other worshipers were swift to tell Guru Nanak he was throwing water in the 'wrong direction', he told them that if they can throw water as far as the sun or their ancestors, he should be able to water his parched crops a few hundred

56 Pg. 152. Fisher, Mary Pat. *Living Religions: Eastern Traditions*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003.

miles away to the west. The hagiographic narratives of the life of Guru Nanak abound with such examples of Guru Nanak flouting convention and rejecting 'hollow', 'meaningless', rote ritual as an efficacious path to God.

Additionally, the inefficacy of 'hollow' 'rituals' or 'ritual for the sake of ritual' is a common recurring theme in the hymns of the Sikh Gurus within the Guru Granth Sahib. A handful of examples should suffice to illustrate this:

Guru Nanak:

> ਤੀਰਥਿ ਨਾਵਾ ਜੇ ਤਿਸੁ ਭਾਵਾ ਵਿਣੁ ਭਾਣੇ ਕਿ ਨਾਇ ਕਰੀ ॥
> [The Lord's] pleasure is my pilgrimage and ritual bath. Without pleasing Him [*Nāi*], what use is ritual bathing?[57]
>
> ਤੀਰਥ ਵਰਤ ਸੁਚਿ ਸੰਜਮੁ ਨਾਹੀ ਕਰਮੁ ਧਰਮੁ ਨਹੀ ਪੂਜਾ ॥
> ਨਾਨਕ ਭਾਇ ਭਗਤਿ ਨਿਸਤਾਰਾ ਦੁਬਿਧਾ ਵਿਆਪੈ ਦੂਜਾ ॥੨॥
> Pilgrimages, fasts, ritual purification, and control of the senses are of no use, nor are [hollow] religious rituals or worship ceremonies. O Nanak, deliverance comes only through loving devotion;[58] through duality, people are engrossed in the world [*dūjā*].[59]
>
> ਜੇ ਲਖ ਕਰਮ ਕਮਾਵਹੀ ਬਿਨੁ ਗੁਰ ਅੰਧਿਆਰਾ ॥
> Even though you may perform hundreds of thousands of rituals, without the Guru, there is [only] darkness.[60]
> ਜਾਲਉ ਐਸੀ ਰੀਤਿ ਜਿਤੁ ਮੈ ਪਿਆਰਾ ਵੀਸਰੈ ॥
> Burn away those rituals which cause me to forget my Beloved [Lord].[61]

Guru Amar Das:

> ਕਾਂਇਆ ਸਾਧੈ ਉਰਧ ਤਪੁ ਕਰੈ ਵਿਚਹੁ ਹਉਮੈ ਨ ਜਾਇ ॥
> ਅਧਿਆਤਮ ਕਰਮ ਜੇ ਕਰੇ ਨਾਮੁ ਨ ਕਬ ਹੀ ਪਾਇ ॥
> You may subject your body to [all kinds of] of self-discipline, intensive meditation, and hang upside-down, [but] your ego will not be eliminated from

57 M1, *Jap Sahib*, AG, pg. 2. (Translations on this and the following page are my own).
58 In the context of the rest of the passage, this is loving devotion to the Name of the Lord.
59 M1, *Sri Rag*, AG, pg. 75. *Dūjā* is 'other', the things of the world that draw one away from The One.
60 M1, *Gauṛī*, AG, pg. 229.
61 M1, *Vaḍhans Vār*, AG, pg. 590.

within. You may perform religious rituals [*adhiātama karama*], and still never obtain the Name [of the Lord].[62]

ਜਗਿ ਹਉਮੈ ਮੈਲੁ ਦੁਖੁ ਪਾਇਆ ਮਲੁ ਲਾਗੀ ਦੂਜੈ ਭਾਇ ॥
ਮਲੁ ਹਧੋਤੀ ਕਿਵੈ ਨ ਉਤਰੈ ਜੇ ਸਉ ਤੀਰਥ ਨਾਇ ॥
ਮਲੁ ਹਉਮੈ ਧੋਤੀ ਕਿਵੈ ਨ ਉਤਰੈ ਜੇ ਸਉ ਤੀਰਥ ਨਾਇ ॥
The filth of egotism pollutes the world, causing suffering. [This] filth attaches itself by the love of duality. The filth of egotism cannot be washed away, even by taking hundreds of ritual baths at sacred shrines. By performing all sorts of rituals, [people are] covered with twice as much filth.[63]

Guru Arjan:

ਪੂਜਾ ਵਰਤ ਤਿਲਕ ਇਸਨਾਨਾ ਪੁੰਨ ਦਾਨ ਬਹੁ ਦੈਨ ॥
ਕਹੂੰ ਨ ਭੀਜੈ ਸੰਜਮ ਸੁਆਮੀ ਬੋਲਹਿ ਮੀਠੇ ਬੈਨ ॥੧॥
ਪ੍ਰਭ ਜੀ ਕੋ ਨਾਮੁ ਜਪਤ ਮਨ ਚੈਨ ॥
Ritual prayer, fasting, ceremonial marks on one's forehead, ritual baths, and giving generous donations to charities; the Lord is not pleased with any of these rituals [*sañjama*],[64] no matter how sweetly one may speak. Those who chant the Name of the Lord, [their] mind is at peace.[65]

ਕਰਮ ਧਰਮ ਪਾਖੰਡ ਜੋ ਦੀਸਹਿ ਤਿਨ ਜਮੁ ਜਾਗਾਤੀ ਲੂਟੈ ॥
ਨਿਰਬਾਣ ਕੀਰਤਨੁ ਗਾਵਹੁ ਕਰਤੇ ਕਾ ਨਿਮਖ ਸਿਮਰਤ ਜਿਤੁ ਛੂਟੈ ॥
Those rituals and hypocrisies which are seen, are taxes plundered by the Angel of Death [*Jamu*].[66] In [the emancipated state of] Nirvana [*nirabāṇa*], sing the *kirtan* of the Creator's Praises; those who meditate [on Him], even for an instant, are delivered.[67]

It should be pointed out that the Gurmukhi terms translated here as 'ritual'—*pūjā*, *karam kamāvahī*,[68] *rīt*, *karam dharam*—can also be translated in other ways. It is clear, however, from the context of each of these verses that the Sikh Gurus affirmed the worthlessness—

62 M3, *Sri Rag*, AG, pg. 33.
63 M3, *Sri Rag*, AG, pg. 39.
64 Can also be rendered "methods", but the previous line describes common south Asian religious rituals.
65 M5, *Dhanasri*, AG, pg. 674.
66 Yama, the south Asian deity who rules the land of the dead.
67 M5, *Sūhī*, AG, pg. 747.
68 Christopher Shackle translates this as "performing religious obligations" in pgs. 73-74. Schackle, C. *A Guru Nanak Glossary.* Vancouver and London: University of British Columbia Press, 1981.

even detriment[69]—of performing 'hollow' actions without devotional focus on God; the highest form of which, Guru Arjan affirms, is singing *kirtan* and chanting God's Name. Significant scholarly work has already been written[70] on the subject of whether the many institutionalized practices that emerged throughout the history of Sikhism (including the adoption of a conspicuous external appearance) represented a 'change' or 'evolution' within Sikhism that signaled a break from the rejection of 'hollow' rituals portrayed in these scriptural examples; therefore, I will not belabor this question here. Rather, the issue at hand is my retention of the term 'ritual' as a scholarly category for understanding Sikhism.

It will probably be quite clear to a reader with a background in the academic study of religion or culture the way that I am using the term 'ritual' and how it obviously applies to many of the Sikh practices that I have discussed in this chapter and throughout this dissertation. However, I want to take a moment to clarify my usage of the term against rejections by Sikhs of the applicability of the term 'ritual' to the Sikh tradition; since, from my perspective as a scholar of religions, Sikhism has rituals at least as well developed as those of any other religious tradition. I would at least like to be clear, again, that I am utilizing 'ritual' as a scholarly interpretive category of human activity rather than meaning to, perhaps, 'impose' a 'western' category of religious activity on Sikhism.[71]

69 As in Guru Amar Das' "...smeared with twice as much filth [*malu*]".

70 See, for example: Chapter 7 of Singh, Pashaura. *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006; and; McLeod, W.H. *The Evolution of the Sikh Community: Five Essays*. Second Edition. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

71 The vast bodies of scholarship on ritual studies and performance studies obviously reject any assumption that "ritual" is a 'western' category, instead exploring (religious and non-religious) ritualized behavior as a universal of human activities. Even the word *rīti* (from the Sanskrit *rīti*, 'custom', 'practice'), such as it is employed in the Punjabi vernacular of Guru Nanak (see example above from

A definition from a textbook commonly used to teach introductory-level courses in Religious Studies will suffice to provide a scholarly definition of 'ritual': “A religious ritual can be defined as an agreed-on and formalized pattern of ceremonial movements and verbal expressions carried out in a sacred context.”[72] Following from this, the description of daily Sikh worship practices from the beginning of this chapter—even taken alone—provides ample examples of the 'ritualized' nature of Sikh religious practices. Daily *nitnem* and the order in which the daily prayers are said within gurdwaras around the world certainly follow a socially “agreed-on and formalized pattern of ceremonial movements and verbal expressions”. It would cause significant discomfort among Sikhs—possibly a row—if the order of prayers, or the order of words in a prayer were suddenly changed (take, as an example, the demotion in 2012 of the head *granthī* of the Harimandir Sahib in Amritsar, for forgetting to recite one part of the nightly prayers).[73] That these formalized patterns of “movements and verbal expressions” are carried out “in a sacred context” is marked by a set of socially agreed upon symbolic practices: the removal of shoes; covering of the head; seating of all people below Guru Granth Sahib; a set of respectful decorum (e.g., being reasonably quiet during *kirtan* and recitation of the Scripture, not conducting business dealings inside of the gurdwara's *Darbar* hall,

M1, *Vaḍhans Vār*, AG, pg. 590) seems clearly linguistically related to the Latin *ritus* ('religious observance', 'ceremony', 'custom') which is the etymological root of the modern English word 'ritual'. Thus there is little reason to see ritual as an imposed 'western' term or concept.

72 Pg. 75. Livingston, James. *Anatomy of the Sacred*. Sixth Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2008.

73 “Giani Jaswinder Singh forgot to read Chopai Sahib during Paath of Rehras Sahib in the sanctum sanctorum of Golden Temple which was noticed by Sikhs around the world through live telecast of Gurbani from Golden Temple” (Rana, Yudhvir. “SGPC Demotes Head Granthi of Golden Temple”. *The Times of India*. November 17, 2012. http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/SGPC-demotes-Head-Granthi-of-Golden-Temple/articleshow/17256320.cms)

avoiding pointing the soles of one's feet at Guru Granth Sahib); and so on.[74] So, I would leave it to Sikhs to ponder whether all of the Sikh activities I am describing amount to “ritualism” that is in any way out of step with the visions of the Sikh Gurus, but it should be clear that the ways in which I am utilizing 'ritual' as a scholarly category for interpreting social, religio-cultural phenomena are indeed applicable to the Sikh tradition.

There are also legitimate reasons why some Sikhs might see use of the term 'experts' as problematic to the Sikh tradition. Sikhs are proud of affirming the essentially 'lay' nature of the Sikh tradition, which has no official religious hierarchy, 'pope', or 'priesthood', in keeping with the egalitarian vision of humanity portrayed by the Sikh Gurus within their hymns. However, as discussed above, from the time of the Sikh Gurus until today, a highly developed nexus of different roles for leadership (i.e., *bhais*, g*īānīs*, *granthīs*, *masands*, *and manjis*) and ritual performance (i.e., *rabābīs*, *rāgīs*, *dhaḍīs*, *pujārīs*, and *ardāsīās*) has existed, all of which require 'expertise': i.e., knowledge, training, and ability. Thus, it should be clear that the Sikh tradition portrays no rejection of 'experts'—people who have the special knowledge, skill, and ability necessary to perform a specific necessary task[75]—but, rather, portrays a rejection of the idea of

74 The controversy in some Sikh communities about whether sitting on chairs inside of the *gurdwara* or *langar* hall is a violation of Sikh principles provides another example. The issue basically hinges on whether sitting in chairs is, or is not, an affront to the “sacred context” of the gurdwara and langar hall (obviously, the underlying issue is whether allowing some people to sit on chairs while others sit below them on the floor is a violation of the Gurus' egalitarian tradition of all visitors eating together 'on the same level' [in *pangat*], but the fact that this is not also a concern *outside* of *gurdwaras* and *langar* halls points to the 'sacredness' of the *gurdwara* and *langar* hall's 'context').

75 I am following from dictionary definitions of the term 'expert'. See, for example: http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/expert

according any 'special' status or authority to those with 'expertise' that would 'set them apart' in any way from any other Sikh. In fact, the primary leadership and ritual roles that are needed within Sikh communities can (ostensibly) be performed by any Sikh who has the expertise (knowledge, ability, skill) to do so.

Specifically discussing the roles of *granthīs*, Eleanor Nesbitt explains: "...the role of the *granthī* in any ritual can in principle be taken by any Sikh. There is no ordination of a *granthī* apart from initiation as a Sikh, and the relationship between a *granthī* and any other Sikh is one of perfect equality of status and religious importance."[76] Perhaps especially since the time of the ousting of the *mahants* and *pujārīs* by the Singh Sabha reform movements, Sikhs have portrayed a mistrust of anything resembling 'Brahminisim'—such as according 'special status' to religious leaders resembling that given to 'high caste' Hindu priests—among Sikh religious leaders and ritual performers. At the same time, *granthīs*, *rāgīs*, *bhais*, and g*īānīs* are often treated as members of Sikh communities deserving of honor and respect for their knowledge and abilities (i.e., their 'expertise'). Thus, this portrays—at least for a scholar of religions—some ambivalence within the Sikh tradition regarding the authority and expertise of religious leaders and ritual officiants.

An episode related in traditional narratives about the time of Guru Arjan (Guru from 1581-1606) provides an example of the Guru (and the later Sikh tradition's) rejection of mistaking 'expertise' for 'special status' above others. Two brothers, Balwand and Satta were *rabābīs* in the court of Guru Arjan who became well regarded for their

76 "Granthi", *Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, edited by Harbans Singh. Patiala: Panjabi University Press. Accessed from http://www.learnpunjabi.org/eos/GRANTHI.html.

beautiful *kirtan* performances. They apparently became so proud of their musical abilities, that, at one time, when Baba Buddha requested their performance of a hymn, they refused until the request came directly from Guru Arjan. Guru Arjan chastised them for this, saying that the Guru is within every Sikh, and thus their refusal was just the same as if they had refused a request directly from the Guru. In a later incident, Balwand and Satta demanded that all of the offerings gathered on a particular day at the Harimandir Sahib be given to them as payment for their talents. Guru Arjan agreed to this arrangement, but when the money collected was not as much as Balwand and Satta had expected, they left the Guru's court. Thinking their talents to be so great that it was they who had actually attracted Sikhs to the Guru's court, they expected that the Guru's followers would dwindle in their absence. Guru Arjan initially sent a messenger asking for them to return. Then, when Guru Arjan personally asked them to return to his court as musicians, Balwand and Satta insulted the previous Gurus, and so the Guru left them alone with their decision. After some time, finding themselves removed from the still flourishing community of Sikhs (and, according to some narratives, struck with leprosy), Balwand and Satta humbled themselves and apologized before the Guru, who was quick to forgive them and let them back into his court after seeing that they had overcome their egoism.[77] From then on, Balwand and Satta remained musicians in the Gurus' court, and

77 I have based this narrative partly on the entry on "Balvand Rai" in the *Encyclopedia of Sikhism* (http://www.learnpunjabi.org/eos/BALVAND_RAI.htm) and others have narrated the story of Balvand and Satta to me orally. For instance, Bhai Kultar Singh narrated the story to me this way: "There was an episode with the *rabābīs* at that time, Bhai Satta and Bhai Balvand-ji, they were getting tough [toward Guru Arjan]... They started making unnecessary demands and stopped going to the gurdwara to make *kirtan*. So *Maharaja* [Guru Arjan] sent messengers to call them back, and they didn't come back. They started using wrong language about Guru [Arjan] Sahib. So one of the senior members [of the *sangat*], they also went to pursue them and bring them back... Then they [Balvand and Satta] criticized the

they were even honored by the inclusion of one of their hymn compositions within the Guru Granth Sahib.[78]

The seeming ambivalence within the Sikh tradition about leadership and ritual expertise appears to have begun, in part, during the colonial encounter. During the British Raj, when Sikhs were often in especially close contact with British Colonial authorities (frequently, through serving in police and military capacities), both Sikhs and Colonial authorities sought to interpret the Sikh tradition in ways that were understandable, even respectable, within the Christian-centric symbolic language of those in power. Thus, for instance, *granthīs* were refigured in English parlance as the 'priests' of the Sikh tradition, and "Sikh [military] regiments... were attended by a *padre-like granthī*..." whose practical roles hewed close to those of Christian military chaplains.[79] As discussed earlier in this chapter, at the time of contact with the British Empire and the beginning of the colonial era, a nexus of diverse roles of Sikh religious leadership existed, none of which carried 'special' Divinely vested authority comparable to that held by the 'called and ordained' priests and ministers of the Anglican and other Christian churches. So, the timing of the collapsing of a multiplicity of ritual and leadership roles into (mostly) just two roles (i.e., *granthīs* and *rāgīs*) was concurrent with the colonial encounter with a hegemon whose primary religious leaders were seen as holding a 'special', Divinely ordained authority,

previous Gurus, and Guru Ram Das-ji. When Guru Arjan Dev-ji came to know about that he said, 'OK, let them do what they're doing and no one should even pursue them to come back, just let them do what they're doing'. That's the time when *kirtan* came—[when] Guru Arjan Dev-ji started training 'regular' Gursikhs to do *kirtan* [professionally, not only *rabābīs*]".

78 *Rāmkalī kī Vār rāe Balvand tathā Saṯai dūm ākhī* , AG 966-8.

79 Pg. 72, italics mine. Nesbitt, Eleanor. *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

'set apart' (at least in vocation) from all other people (the 'laity'). The translation and refiguring of *granthīs* as 'priests' during the colonial era has continued to have an effect on modes of leadership and authority in Sikhism, and perceptions of them, in the current era. Addressing this, Eleanor Nesbitt writes:

> Those who refer to granthīs as priests and to jathedars at that Akal Takhat, Amritsar, as 'high priests' do a disservice to a proudly lay tradition... It is important that Sikhs affirm, and that non-Sikhs come to realize, the Gurus' emphasis on a path of bhakti and seva, unmediated by priests. Neither granthī or jathedar is a priest by virtue of either ordination (as in Christian tradition) or birth (unlike members of the Hindu Brahmin caste).[80]

Moving forward in our analysis, it should suffice to reiterate that, while I am sympathetic to possible Sikh objections to the idea of leaders having any 'special' authority, and how this differentiates the Sikh tradition from other religious traditions (such as Catholic priests or Hindu Brahmins, for whom 'priesthood' is an ordained vocation and a caste distinction, respectively), for the purposes of this chapter and dissertation, I am using the term “expert” according to common uses and dictionary definitions, as someone who has the knowledge and ability to perform a task, not as a special 'class' of humans. Interestingly, (as I discuss in other chapters) one might argue that some Sikh communities today contain more 'experts' than 'non-experts', due to the high number of people learning how to perform *kirtan* and conduct religious activities in gurdwaras. In the long term, it remains to be seen how this commonness of 'experts' within some Sikh communities could further problematize or deconstruct the very idea of 'expertise' (in its common usage) if all, or most, members of local communities are trained 'experts'.

80 Pgs. 139-140. Ibid.

While Sikhs reject any notion that religious 'experts' are in any special relationship with God or hold any Divinely ordained authority greater than any other Sikh, there is a strong expectation among most Sikhs that *granthīs*, *rāgīs*, and *kathākars* should have a high level of 'expertise' in performing their religious functions. Thus a high level of education and training are expected of most *granthīs*, *rāgīs*, and *kathākars*, even though these roles are often (relatively) quite low paying and may even be considered as carrying a low level of prestige or respect. Many members of Sikh communities who I have interviewed portray this as a paradox or even crisis surrounding the current status of leadership in Sikh communities, and I will discuss this issue further below.

4.0 The Current Situation of Sikh Religious and Ritual Leadership in the United States

As discussed above, '*granthī*' could literally be translated as “book person”, or “book-er”, but in the modern Sikh context (and following the use of the term throughout Sikh history) the title of *granthī* specifically points to someone who recites from, and tends to the primary Sikh Scripture, Guru Granth Sahib, as the Living Guru of the Sikhs. In modern usage, '*granthī*' can denote persons who conduct a number of different duties within Sikh communities, and because of this, the duties expected to be conducted by a *granthī* are usually adapted to their skill set. As outlined above, the set of duties assigned to those called '*granthīs*' go back to the time when there were living Sikh Gurus, and thus the core duties of *granthīs* today can be compared to many of the duties of attending to a

living human Guru, since the Guru Granth Sahib is considered and treated as the eternal Living Guru of Sikhs and needs to be properly attended to as such. These duties usually include: caring for Guru Granth Sahib and the building that houses the Guru (the gurdwara, literally the "door to the Guru"); "waking" Guru Granth Sahib to a new day each morning; attending to Guru Granth Sahib throughout the day; putting Guru Granth Sahib "to rest" in *sukh āsan* each night; and, especially, reciting hymns and daily prayers from the Sikh scriptures for the community. All of these duties are, in fact, able to be performed by any 'lay' person from within the community (though current S.G.P.C. guidelines stipulate that the person fulfilling this role in a community should be *amritdhari*—i.e., a fully 'initiated' Sikh bearing the 'Five Ks'—and in current practice at gurdwaras managed by the S.G.P.C. in India these functions are reserved for men only). However, in common practice, most of these ritual duties are usually performed by a professional *granthī* wherever a community has the resources to hire one, rather than by everyday ('lay') Sikhs. Additionally, one role that 'lay' Sikhs almost never perform is that of a *kathākar*. *Kathā* is almost always performed by *granthīs* in the United States, however, as stated above, not all *granthīs* are *kathākars* and not all *kathākars* are *granthīs*. Where a diaspora community's resources allow, it will sponsor visiting *kathākars* from around the world, perhaps in addition to *kathā* being performed by a resident, or semi-permanent *granthī* or *rāgī*.

Currently, religious leadership in Gurdwaras in the United States is constituted of *granthīs* (sometimes delineated into 'head' or 'chief' *granthīs* and their 'assistant' *granthīs*)

and *rāgīs* who are almost entirely drawn from “the old country”. Except for some permanent 'head' *granthīs* and permanent *rāgī jathas*, and a few volunteer *granthīs* who are U.S. citizens who stepped into these roles from within their communities to fulfill the needed position, most *granthīs* and (especially) *rāgīs* in the U.S. are Indian nationals, who are often itinerant and visiting the U.S. on short term Visas. All of the 'permanent' 'head' *granthīs* and *rāgī jathas* who I have interviewed had initially been visitors and then were asked to stay on permanently in their U.S. communities.

Currently, gurdwaras in the U.S.[81] follow one of several patterns in terms of their leadership, and these patterns can also be seen as representing growth stages in gurdwara communities: 1. The smallest, newest communities draw *rāgīs* and impromptu or semi-permanent, usually volunteer, '*granthīs*' from among members of their community. All, or almost all, of this work is done on a completely volunteer basis. 2. A growing community will call a full time 'head' *granthī*, almost universally from India, and the full time *granthī* will serve as caretaker of the gurdwara facilities, and carry out all or most of the religious functions within the community (i.e., daily care of Guru Granth Sahib, conducting services on weekends, preaching, conducting ceremonies such as initiations, marriages, funerals, *akhānd pāṭhs*, etc.) until they are unable to continue renewing their U.S. Visa or they make further arrangements to remain in the United States. Communities in this stage may have the resources to bring occasional visiting *rāgī jathas* to perform for special occasions, or may even employ an in-house *rāgī jatha*, but one that is usually

81 And, although based on less direct evidence than my fieldwork in the U.S., my impression is that the leadership patterns I describe here are much the same throughout the worldwide Sikh diaspora.

subject to change because of U.S. Visa requirements. Some communities at this stage of growth have enough members trained in *kirtan* performance to have all-volunteer *rāgī jathas* who perform *Gurbani kirtan* each weekend. 3. The largest communities with the most resources usually employ one or more full-time *granthīs*, usually with one serving as "head priest" who is assisted by several "assistant" *granthīs*, who are sometimes naturalized citizens of the United States. Gurdwara communities at this level of organization also often employ full-time permanent *rāgī jathas*, or have a continuous inflow of touring *rāgī jathas* who stay for stints as short as a few days, or as long as the full term of a U.S. 'tourist' Visa (usually four months).

5.0 Profiles of *Granthīs* and *Rāgīs* Working in American Sikh Communities

Here, I present profiles of three *granthīs* and three *rāgīs* who I have interviewed during my field research in American Sikh communities. Their stories and perspectives, as drawn from my interviews with them, provide a representative sampling of the people who are currently fulfilling the primary ritual and leadership roles within Sikh communities in the United States. In some instances, I have purposefully chosen to include extended excerpts from my interviews in an effort to allow my interviewees' own voices and their thoughts about their lives, about Sikhism, and about the leadership roles they play in their communities to come across as fully as possible.

5.1 A Permanent *Granthī* Working in a Large Gurdwara

Bhai Sukhpal Singh (whose daily routine we followed in the opening narrative at the beginning of this chapter) is in his sixties and has been a *granthī* at one of the largest gurdwaras in the United States since the early 1990s. He explained to me that before he moved to the United States, he had not worked before as a *granthī*. Rather, he had been the President of a gurdwara committee in India, where he was "in control of all of the gurdwara programs". Initially, he came to the United States planning to just visit, but he was invited to become a *granthī* because his community in California was looking for a *granthī* at the time and "[he] knew something about being a *granthī*, [even though he] was not a professional—[he] knew how to conduct these duties".

As described in the opening of this chapter, I followed Bhai Sukhpal Singh through his daily duties on several days when I had been invited to stay on the grounds of his community's gurdwara for about a month (during summer 2013) in order to conduct my field research. When spending time around him, I asked him many questions about his duties and responsibilities as a *granthī* at the gurdwara. He described how he used to be the only *granthī* at this gurdwara, but that since the gurdwara community has grown much larger, he now has other temporary 'assistant *granthīs*' to help him conduct the necessary religious services. However, Bhai Sukhpal Singh said that his workload has actually increased despite having the help of additional *granthīs*, since the gurdwara community has grown so rapidly in size during his time there:

> Early in the morning I do *prakash*, then prepare the *prashad*, then *ārdas*, after that time, [I do] very small duties, [usually] only one or two people will still be there. I

> distribute *prashad* throughout the day. Earlier [when I first became a *granthī*] I did everything, now I have assistants. When I first came this was a smaller gurdwara, I performed all of the duties from morning until evening, because at that time limited gurdwara funds were there. The gurdwara was not this expanded yet. Now, I have help. [Also, now] Multiple [*ragī*] *jathas* are here at a time, and sometimes they can perform morning prayers and everything. And now some of my duties are delegated to other *granthīs*. Now there are three to five [*ragī*] *jathas* staying here at any time, and that's fifteen people [to aid in these duties].

Bhai Sukhpal Singh explained how certain daily duties require more than one person, and that early in his time in the United States, he had to rely on *sevadars* (volunteers) from within the community to help him with these. Now, however, the other *granthīs* and *ragīs* are there to help him:

> There are two assistant *granthīs* who help for *prakash* and *sukh āsan*, because for *prakash* and *sukh āsan*, one person cannot perform the duties. You have to have at least five, the *panj pyare*. One brings Guru Granth Sahib Ji on his head... [and the others assist]. [However,] Now my duties, my workload has increased in recent years because our gurdwara has expanded so much. Instead of one or two [*ragī*] *jathas*, now there are five [at a time to keep up with the need for *kirtan* performances in the community].

Though Bhai Sukhpal Singh lives with his family at the gurdwara, all of the other *granthīs* and *ragīs* who live at the gurdwara—on short (e.g., a week) as well as long term stays (e.g., a few years on a work Visa)—have families who are not living with them, but at home in India or elsewhere. Bhai Sukhpal Singh explained that one part of his duties is to arrange for the travel of *ragī jathas* who visit the gurdwara to perform *kirtan*: to see that they are comfortably housed at the gurdwara, paid correctly, and so on. He further explained that with the growth of the community, there are now more and larger events that he is responsible for organizing:

> Now we celebrate more *gurpurbs*, like Diwali, Vaisakhi—any *gurpurb*, multiple, many more than that—sometimes with nine [*ragī*] *jathas*, and we have visiting *kathā vachāk* [preachers], multiple *ḍhaḍīs* who sing ballads, [multiple people doing *akhānd pāṭh*] you know? So now my workload has increased. I keep track of how many *jathas* we have, how many times they do *kirtan*, how much time they spent. I have to write each and everything. I manage the times for all these things. We have also a *dharma* committee, a religious committee of about four to five people from the management committee who work with me. They are volunteers. Mostly they are there because the whole community needs to know what will go on [in our community]. So if a *kirtan jatha* plays in some other gurdwara and the *sangat* want them [to perform] in this gurdwara, it's my duty to see if maybe they can come and play *kirtan* one or two or three times in that same week [when they are staying at the other local gurdwara] so I have to arrange all of that.

Bhai Sukhpal Singh showed me his logbooks in which he carefully records the names of all of the *ragī jathas* who performed, when they performed, for how long, and so on. He told me of the importance of keeping good records of when *ragī jathas* performed:

> I have to make sure it's all paid because this is their living. By dedication, by devotion I do this, the *ragīs* and others do this [out of devotion as well], but again, it's their living. So I have to manage everything, like how much I should be paying to this or that *jatha*. [For instance] *Āsa dī Vār* is a long *pāṭh* [recitation], two or three hours, and so [this will be paid at a higher rate than a shorter session of *kirtan*].

Bhai Sukhpal Singh also sits in the front area of the gurdwara when he is not performing religious services in order to collect any donations that people bring. He showed me his meticulous receipt records of the donations, small and large, that people bring to him to give to the gurdwara throughout each day.

At the time that I interviewed Bhai Sukhpal Singh, it was shortly after the shooting death in Elk Grove, California of two elderly Sikh men who maintained the 'Five Ks', Gurmej Atwal and Surinder Singh, whose deaths were being investigated as a

'hate crime'. I asked Bhai Sukhpal Singh about how he felt that he and the broader Sikh community are treated here in the United States and he told me that he feels “very happy” and “treated very well” in the United States. He then related the following story about how he had grown up in a town that, at the time of Partition, ended up being very close to the Indian border with Pakistan:

> When there was India, [and] Pakistan, when there was Partition going on, we could hear firing in our village, the different battles. We were able to hear it because we were very close to that border. Sometimes at that border, people who are shepherds or farmers, they cross the border unknowingly, that's how close it is. One of my friends was a civil engineer who used to be in the army, so... a bunch of things happened [to him]... [One time], a battle finished in the morning, and there were tanks and ammunition and everything. They turned to return to their territory, they said 'we're done for the day, this is our territory'. There was an indication for all of them, you know, 'this is our area now'. So they turned the face of their tanks and everything to go back. But this one day, they accidentally forgot one of their own men. So what happened [was], a few of the Indians from the army went to the Pakistan side [to find him] and people were nice [to them] there. They said, 'we know you are Indian, and you are in Pakistan, and you are not supposed to be here, because if somebody else knows, you will be shot at. You'd better go to your side'... They [the Pakistanis] knew that they are innocent, and if somebody [recognizes] them, they will be killed. That's just one incident from that period.[So, t]here are nice people everywhere. You can't say 'this is your enemy', it's not like that. It's up to the individual to feel who really is kindhearted.

It struck me that Bhai Sukhpal Singh must obviously be aware of the incidents of discriminatory violence against Sikhs in the region surrounding his local community in California, and throughout the U.S. since September 11, 2001—some widely publicized, and some only known to local Sikh communities. However, in telling this story as an answer to my question, he wanted to bring my awareness to the fact that he prefers to focus on the positive: that “there are nice people everywhere”. This is in line with an unwillingness to speak ill of others that I frequently encounter in my interviews with Sikh

Americans, and it also illustrates Bhai Sukhpal Singh's affirmation of the central Sikh principle of *chaṛhdī kalā*, maintaining 'high spirits' at all times, even in the face of adversity.

5.2 A Mobile *Granthī* 'For Hire'

Bhai Jagjeet Singh is in his sixties and had been the head *granthī* of one of the largest gurdwaras in California's Bay Area from the mid-1980s until the late-1990s. He had trained to be a *granthī* at Sikh Missionary College, in Amritsar (Punjab, India), which is one of the schools in India that, under the auspices of the S.G.P.C., trains a large number of *granthīs*.[82] Describing the importance of the Sikh Missionary College in the training of *granthīs*, Bhai Jagjeet Singh explained that, “[t]here are many Missionary Colleges, but this is like the 'Harvard University' of Missionary Colleges. This is where the S.G.P.C wants people to go to be trained as *granthīs*.” After graduating from Sikh Missionary College, Bhai Jagjeet Singh first served as a *granthī*, and eventually a head *granthī*, at a Gurdwara in Chandigarh, the large capital city of Punjab state in India. When I asked him if he had ever pursued or considered pursuing another profession outside of performing *Gurbani kirtan* and being a *granthī*, he replied “No, I am fully devoted to this profession. I never even thought I should go and do something for making money. This [has always been] my life.”

82 It has been fairly common for me to meet *granthīs* working in the U.S. who were trained at Sikh Missionary College.

Between working in Chandigarh and coming to the U.S., Bhai Jagjeet Singh had spent five years serving as a *granthī* in Africa. He then came to visit the U.S. on a tourist's Visa. When I asked him if he had family or other ties that made him want to come the the U.S., he said "No, not anybody. I just came with my family to see the new country. So then I heard they are building beautiful gurdwaras in California, [and] New York [and I wanted to see them]." He was invited to perform *kirtan* and *kathā* at a few gurdwaras during his visit, and said that "[w]hen I came here, the people liked my *kirtan* and my preaching and they requested [for] me to stay here, and [so] I stayed". Bhai Jagjeet Singh arrived in the U.S. in the mid-1980s, shortly after the events of Operation Blue Star and its aftermath in 1984. Because he had left Punjab for Africa in the early 1980s, he was thus not in Punjab during the violence of 1984. He described how the rapid growth of his community in California started around the time he arrived in the U.S., as many people fled the violent environment of Punjab in order to join relatives and friends in the United States.

During his years as a head *granthī*, Bhai Jagjeet Singh was able to live with his family at the gurdwara where he worked, something he said he knows not all *granthīs* in the U.S. are able to do. He described his daily duties during his years at the gurdwara:

> I performed *Vāk* [taking the Word for the day]. We consider our scripture as the Living Guru, so I had to open—we say, doing '*prakash*'—opening the scripture early in the morning at four, then I [would] do the early morning prayer, the five *bānīs*: *Jāpjī Sahib*, *Jāp Sahib*, *Tav-Prasād Svaiye*, *Chaupai* and *Anand Sahib*... Then, in the daytime, people are coming and going, asking questions or doing *ārdas* at the temple. In the evening, again I do the same duty, evening prayer... and preaching, then the closing ceremony of Guru Granth Sahib. Then [at] about 9:00 [at night], Guru Granth Sahib is put in the resting place. These are the routine

> duties. Additionally on the weekends there are many more ceremonies: [I performed] weddings, baptisms, naming ceremonies. For a naming we take a *hukam nāma*. First they do *kirtan* and read verses from Guru Granth Sahib, and after a prayer we take a *hukam nama* for the first name. You can take any name with the first letter on the page, because we think this is Guru's blessing.

After working at this large gurdwara and seeing an explosive growth in the community for fifteen years, Bhai Jagjeet Singh decided to make a change. He formed his own organization to perform the roles of a *granthī* and *rāgī* on the move.

Uniquely among the *granthīs* and *rāgīs* who I have interviewed, Bhai Jagjeet Singh provides a mobile service, bringing the services that Sikhs would usually go to a gurdwara to have performed into their homes and other spaces (e.g., a wedding at a rented space). When I asked Bhai Jagjeet Singh why he had decided to become a 'mobile' *granthī*, he said, "... I decided to start my own kind of practice, because I felt my mission wasn't [being] accomplished, so I started [working] in all of the Bay Area, because in the [large] gurdwara [where I worked] I [could] only serve in a certain area. Now I can provide my services in all of the Bay Area." Bhai Jagjeet Singh further explained:

> This [being a 'mobile' *granthī*] is totally different from [working in] the [large] gurdwara, because there are so many big gurdwaras here [in California]. My model was this... people want [Sikh religious] ceremonies, they go to the gurdwara to listen to *kirtan* and [to have] ceremonies [performed]. Also, we can provide them at home. Some people want them in their home, like doing an *akhānd pāṭh*, [a] forty-eight hour [scripture] reading ceremony—others want *kirtan*. So this was my idea [behind starting this organization]. From [the] gurdwara we [*granthīs*] can't give much time, because we are busy in the gurdwara. Now, I can give them more time and also more organized, [give them] more substance. So I started this in [the late 1990s]. Mostly I am going out to do *kirtan* and *akhānd pāṭh* all the time.

His mobile organization now includes “seven or eight people, some are voluntary, some... compensated.” This includes two additional *granthīs* who also perform *kirtan* with Bhai Jagjeet Singh. He explained that the remaining people who help him are “*rāgīs*, [and] some are *pāṭhīs* [scripture reciters], because we need people who can read the scriptures. So now people call us to request these services and we go there [to them].” I asked Bhai Jagjeet Singh to describe some of the reasons why people might request a performance of *Gurbani kirtan* or an *akhānd pāṭh* in their home, and he explained:

> ... people of the *sangat* want you to bless their house. Most of the time people also have a gurdwara at home,[83] because it is more private for them to have that time [to themselves]. If somebody bought a new house. If they just want a prayer session for whatever reason. Someone has got a new baby in the house, they want to do a *kirtan* ceremony. If someone has a new marriage, they want to do a marriage ceremony and get the blessing of Guru Sahib. Because most people, at least once a year, they want to do *kirtan* or *pāṭhs* for blessings. Actually last week, a Sikh family, their kid was going to college...[84] they want [the] Guru's blessings before going to college, so they call people, the whole family, over to do *kirtan* and chanting, prayers. They might do it after the son or daughter graduates too, to thank God—because in the temple the people are in a large gathering, at home you can invite more close people for this kind of small gathering.

Some Sikhs may live a significant distance, or traffic time, away from their nearest gurdwara, and this is one reason that Bhai Jagjeet Singh's organization now provides a convenient way for people to conduct major Sikh rites of passage and ceremonies away

---

83 It is fairly common, especially among more affluent Sikhs in the U.S. (who have the required spare bedroom in their home), to have a *saroop* ('body'/'embodiment', a complete scripture in one volume) of Guru Granth Sahib in their home. Technically, any place which houses Guru Granth Sahib is a gurdwara ('door to the Guru'). This requires the proper ritual treatment of the scripture as if Guru Granth Sahib was housed in any other gurdwara, including: having a covered *manji sahib* for the Scripture to be placed on during the day, a bed to place the scripture to rest on at night, performing *prakash* each morning and putting the scripture 'to rest' each night, removing one's shoes in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib, keeping Guru Granth Sahib's environment climate controlled, and so on.

84 I actually met Bhai Jagjeet Singh through the family of this student, who I knew from a gurdwara that has been one of my major field-sites. They introduced me to him because they knew about my research and my interest in interviewing *granthīs* and *rāgīs*.

from the gurdwara setting. However, Bhai Jagjeet Singh explained that, for most families who hire him to perform these services, they may simply prefer the privacy, personal atmosphere, and convenience of bringing the ceremonies of the gurdwara into their home.

Following from this discussion about 'convenience', Bhai Jagjeet Singh marveled to me about the ease with which young Sikhs can now study *Gurbani* in the computer and internet age, and speculated about the changes this was bringing among the young generation of Sikhs:

> Just in a second you can find any verse or any page [from Guru Granth Sahib]! Now this new generation, they are very honest because they read *Gurbani* with translation, they read all of Sikh history. Because the older generation, like my generation, they are more ritual [oriented], they practice, but... now [the] new generation, they've started understanding *Gurbani*. They are more devoted now, more honest, more true. So, I think after twenty or thirty years, everything will be totally changed.

For a good portion of the rest of my interview with Bhai Jagjeet Singh, he discussed issues surrounding pay and the level of respect accorded to *granthīs* and *rāgīs* within Sikh communities in the United States. Since these issues came up frequently in my interviews with other Sikhs, I will return to discussing them below, and include quotes from Bhai Jagjeet Singh on these subjects.

5.3 A 'Temporary' *Granthī* Working in a Mid-Sized Gurdwara

Bhai Hardeep Singh is in his late thirties. He is an Indian national and is currently working as a 'head' *granthī* in a mid-sized gurdwara (with a few hundred weekly visitors) in northern California while living in the U.S. on a temporary Visa. Although his position

is that of a *granthī*—and Bhai Hardeep Singh fulfills the usual duties of a *granthī* (tending to Guru Granth Sahib, performing the daily prayers and liturgical cycle, acting as a caretaker of the gurdwara, and so on)—he also performs the duties of a performing *rāgī* in his gurdwara community. He explained to me that he had not initially intended to become a *granthī*, because he had spent extensive time studying and practicing *Gurbani kirtan* and Indian classical music. He described his education in Sikh music to me:

> [I started learning to play music when] I was four. My father taught me. I am from [a small] village... my father is from [a] village... At the time, he had been given a very—you could say —'high' education in Gurmat Sangeet that is not usually given to any village people because there was a Mirasi *sampradaya*,[85] a type of family who are usually trained in these vocals [*kirtan*]. So they gave this tradition and this education to [my father]."

Bhai Hardeep Singh explained that his father was passionate about *Gurbani kirtan* and that in his childhood he had dreamed of being a professional *rāgī*. However, although his father had applied a great amount of effort to learning *Gurbani kirtan*, because he eventually took up a military career, he was not able to pursue performing *Gurbani kirtan* as a profession or to learn as much as he wanted to in the tradition. In fact, because of the traditional teaching methods of his father's *sampradaya*, which demanded 'perfect' knowledge and performative mastery of a given *rāga* before learning another, his father only learned four *rāgas* and hymn compositions within those four *rāgas*. In spite of this relatively limited education in performing *Gurbani kirtan*, Bhai Hardeep Singh described

85 As mentioned in chapter two, *mirasis* are traditionally musicians and folk historians by caste. A *sampradaya* is a lineage tradition or 'school' that passes on knowledge—such as musical knowledge—through a line of master-teachers and their disciples.

the formative role that his father played in his own musical training and his love of *Gurbani kirtan*:

> My father was teaching me *kirtan* when I was a school student... So on Saturday evenings—I would be off from school on Sundays—so on Saturday evening we would do *kirtan*, that was our hobby, to get together with my family and do *kirtan*. Me, my brother, my sister, and my mother and my dad. So sometimes we found a gurdwara [to go to] nearby when my father was in the military, but my harmonium and my tabla [were] always with me! So we used to do *kirtan* in our home. On Saturday and Sunday we would do *kirtan*... I started this way for a long time...

Beyond these *kirtan* performances that made up the core of devotional life in his family's home, Bhai Hardeep Singh continued, describing his later training in *kirtan* to me:

> When my father was an army officer—he was attached to a gurdwara from the beginning [of his life], he was baptized[86] when he was ten, [then] I was baptized when I was thirteen. [Any way, at the time my father was an army officer] I practiced more and more on those four *rāgas* I learned from my father. Then my father's military post was moved to the East coast of India. At that time I got one Muslim *Ustad-ji* who taught me this [*kirtan* tradition] and I learned from him [for] probably ten years... I told him that 'this is my hobby, and this is my pain'. He said, 'what kind of pain are you having?' I said, 'my father wanted to learn but he was not able to learn, that's why I want to be a success and complete that dream that my father had in his childhood. So I started [learning *kirtan*] and my brother started.

Within a few years after starting this intensive training in musical performance, Bhai Hardeep Singh began desiring to perform *Gurbani kirtan* in gurdwaras, but his teacher told him that "[only] after seven years [of practice], you have a right to go on stage, but not before."[87] He continued pursuing his education in music and eventually completed a

86 Initiated into the Khalsa and taking the 'five Ks'.

87 Bhai Hardeep Singh spent parts of our conversations explaining to me that he feels that too many young

degree in music at the University of Allahabad called a "*prabhakar*," meaning "[one has] learned all of the *rāgas*."

When I asked Bhai Hardeep Singh how he had decided to become a *granthī* after training for so long to be a *rāgī*, he explained that after completing his musical training and degrees, he began performing *Gurbani kirtan* in some of the gurdwaras in his region in India. However, he said that his father urged him to devote himself to even more religious education:

> After a while, my father said 'do you believe in God?', and I said 'yes'. He said, 'Ok, then why don't you do [more than] singing? Why don't you serve in His house?". So then I decided to go to religious school, to Sikh Missionary College in Amritsar, for three years, and I learned a lot of things there. I completed my Master's degree...

I asked Bhai Hardeep Singh why he had decided to come to the U.S., and he explained that, at the time that he graduated from Sikh Missionary College, he found very few job openings for *granthīs* in India, so he decided to answer an invitation to work as a *granthī* in a gurdwara in the U.S. "because there were no other options." He said that he had initially only been invited to work at the gurdwara in the U.S. for a short period of time, but that they had "checked [him] out" on a sort of 'test run' to listen to his skills in performing scripture recitation, *kathā*, and, *Gurbani kirtan*, and to see how well he attended to his duties. When his initial visitor's Visa ran out, he had to return to India, but "[a]fter that, I came here. Somebody sponsored me, and I came here... and after that they

---

people today take to the gurdwara stage with too little training and practice to perform *kirtan* well. He also conveyed his worry about the current generation of young Sikh Americans learning *kirtan*, that they have too little patience to learn and too little desire to practice in order to master the tradition before they want to perform *kirtan* in front of others.

hired me. So everything is good." He has now worked in the gurdwara for a few years and is working on gaining permanent residency in the United States. However, the permanency of his position at the gurdwara is in question because he is still having to return to India periodically until the issue of permanent residency is settled.

Bhai Hardeep Singh is acting as the head *granthī* in his California gurdwara community because his education exceeds the level of that of the other temporary *granthīs* there. He described his duties at the gurdwara to me:

> We wake up early in the morning, before four o'clock, and we open Guru Granth Sahib. [This is] called *prakash*. [Then, we are], doing the five *bānīs* in the early morning. Then later [we are] doing *Āsa kī Vār*, and that takes half an hour, [because] there are twenty-four *shaloks* [stanzas] and we are... doing [*shaloks*] one to twelve only. After that we start from ten to twelve [noon] teaching the *sangat* how to read Guru Granth Sahib for free. Then we take some [time to] rest and eat. From four to six [in the evening] we teach *kirtan* classes and *tabla* classes. Then at six thirty we provide a free *Gurmat sikhia* [lessons on the teachings of the Sikh Gurus], the fundamentals of Guru Granth Sahib, [and] how to be a Sikh. That's every day except for weekdays. Then at eight thirty [at night] we do *Sodār Rehras pāṭh* and *kirtan*. After that we do *sukh āsan*, and closing [of] Guru Sahib and putting Guru Sahib away in a room.

Bhai Hardeep Singh explained that he is one of three temporary *granthīs* at this gurdwara and that he was given the role of head *granthī* because not all *granthīs* know how to perform *Gurbani kirtan*, and some of them do not known how to perform *kathā*. When I asked him about the somewhat unusual position of doing the duties of both a *granthī* and a performing *rāgī*, he said:

> Well, you can say I am the only one here who knows [how to do] everything, because I struggled for a long time [to learn *Gurbani kirtan*], and some people

> only know *kirtan*, some people don't know *kathā*, and some people, even if they know these things, they cannot speak English. That's a big problem here.

Bhai Hardeep Singh went on to explain that he felt that he was particularly popular at this gurdwara because he was able to speak enough English in order to connect well with young, second- and third-generation Sikhs born in the U.S. better than *granthīs* who spoke no English. He hopes that this, along with his abilities to perform all of the typical duties of a *granthī*, as well as perform *Gurbani kirtan* and *kathā*, will help him continue to turn his position in the gurdwara into a permanent one.

One of the main reasons that Bhai Hardeep Singh hopes to permanently stay working as a *granthī* in the U.S. is because the income helps him support his wife and one daughter who are still living in India. Bhai Hardeep explained that he was currently "hav[ing] some immigration problem[s but] when that is done, I want to go to India. I want to bring them [back with me]." Bhai Hardeep Singh said that he had visited his wife and seven year old daughter only three times during several years of working in the United States. When I asked him if it was hard for him to be away from his family most of the time, he paused for a moment, and then replied:

> Ummm, not too much, because when we devote everything to God, sometimes there are some points where you have to decide, 'you are a priest, and your lifestyle should be different from the general man or woman'. I mean, you are not for your own self or for your family, you are for all God's work.

I asked Bhai Hardeep Singh if he wanted to stay permanently in the United States and be able to bring his family to live with him here. He said:

> Yes, I want to stay in the U.S. because according to my education, I got a lot of things here, and for my [continuing] education I [want] to read about the rest of the religions here. And the second thing is I [can] get my opportunity and I get my goals here in the U.S.A. I get to meet people like you and other people who are educated and who like taking a deep knowledge about everything. So I'm happy with this... I've gotten a lot of things coming to the U.S.A., I have gotten respect for the path I've taken here—a lot of people, [like] the students [from a local college who had visited his gurdwara and talked to him about Sikhism], everyone likes that. The second thing is that I am teaching to these people [in the *sangat*], the Sikh religion.

In addition to these personal goals, Bhai Hardeep Singh explained that he wanted to move permanently to the United States with his family because he wants his daughter to grow up in the United States so he can "give [his] daughter the best education," because, in his opinion "[e]ducation is fantastic in the U.S. compared to India."

5.4 An Internationally Mobile Travelling *Rāgī*

I met Satinder Singh at the same gurdwara where I interviewed Bhai Sukhpal Singh, a large gurdwara community that graciously hosted me to stay on the grounds of the gurdwara for about a month so that I could conduct field research. During this time, I stayed in the housing at the gurdwara that is usually reserved for *granthīs*, visiting *rāgī jathas*, pilgrims visiting from India or elsewhere in the United States or, occasionally, members of the community who have fallen on hard times. While staying there, I started

to run into Satinder Singh as we were each coming and going from our rooms at the gurdwara. As we began talking to each other, he helped me to practice my Punjabi and told me about his life as an internationally traveling *rāgī*.

Satinder Singh and his *rāgī jatha* travel almost continuously, and at the time that I met him, they had been invited for a one-week engagement of daily *kirtan* performances at this large California gurdwara. Satinder Singh and the members of his *rāgī jatha* are Indian nationals, but in recent years they have been spending most of their time living in different cities in Canada, being hired to perform *Gurbani kirtan* in local gurdwaras there. When I met him, he and his *rāgī jatha* had just come from a similar engagement—performing *kirtan* for two weeks—at a gurdwara in Michigan. Satinder Singh was excited to now be performing *kirtan* in the very large gurdwaras of California for the first time. He told me that, for twenty years, he has frequently traveled throughout Canada and the United States with touring *rāgī jathas*, performing *kirtan* for gurdwara communities. He explained that he and his *rāgī jatha* rarely stay at any one gurdwara in the United States for long engagements, and that how long he stays at any gurdwara depends on how long the gurdwara's management committee decides to have them stay. Since his *rāgī jatha* has recently developed a reputation for performing good *Gurbani kirtan* renditions, they have been invited for longer stays (as long as one month) in some gurdwaras, but they are unable to stay longer than four months at a time in the United States, due to Visa restrictions.

Satinder Singh told me that he had started learning to perform *Gurbani kirtan* at a young age, taught at first by his parents and grandparents as part of his religious upbringing. He stated that “everyone” in his family “knows some *rāgas*”. As a child, Satinder Singh had taken up playing *tabla*, and he told me that after playing *tabla* for twenty years, he had recently started focusing on vocal performance of *Gurbani kirtan* accompanied by harmonium. I told him that the recentness of his switching to primarily vocal performance was impressive considering that I had heard his *rāgī jatha* perform well received *Gurbani kirtan* in front of the large *sangat* of this gurdwara community.

Satinder Singh has a wife and three children in India, but most of the time, he is traveling throughout North America to perform *kirtan* with his *rāgī jatha*. I asked him if it was hard being away from his family so much of the time, and he said “sometimes, but this is something I need to do—this is God's work” and that being a traveling *rāgī* also enables him to provide for his family financially. Apart from missing his family, Satinder Singh said that all of the downtime that he and his *jatha* spend between *kirtan* performances—at this gurdwara, they were only performing one two-hour sitting of *kirtan* each morning—can “make things very boring”. Relatedly, another reason that Satinder Singh was excited to be visiting California was because he has a brother who had recently moved to the area from India. His brother came to meet him at the gurdwara and had taken him to Six Flags, a local theme park, during Satinder Singh's time off between *kirtan* singing sessions.

5.5 A Permanent *Rāgī* Working in a Mid-sized Gurdwara

Bhai Simran Singh is in his mid-thirties and works as a permanent, resident *rāgī* in a mid-Sized gurdwara (of about two-hundred families) in southern California. Such a permanent position is somewhat rare, as most *rāgīs* who I have met in U.S. communities are there on a temporary visa, are continuously traveling *rāgīs* visiting from abroad, or are local volunteers. When I mentioned to Bhai Simran Singh that it seemed more common for *rāgīs* to not be in permanent positions, he explained that: "[p]eople always want a new *rāgī jatha*, something different, something new. They're mostly coming from India because they are men [and it is difficult for women to travel alone].[88] Some come from the U.K., some from Canada, but basically they are mostly all from India." Bhai Simran Singh told me that he first started learning to perform *Gurbani kirtan* as a young boy, and that his father was his first teacher in the tradition. When I asked him if his father had also been a professional *rāgī*, Bhai Simran Singh explained his musical training to me:

> No, my father was very devoted to Guru-ji, but *kirtan* was [only] his hobby, [whereas] you can say that this is my life's work. We say in India, [it is a] *samskar* [an 'impression' left by previous experiences, perhaps in one's past life, that can influence one's future]—my *karma*, my inspiration, [from] past lives. I was more attracted than my father to *kirtan*. When I saw somebody do *kirtan*, I was so attracted to that. So I decided in my childhood, 'when I grow up, I will learn *kirtan*, or I will be a doctor'—those two professions, I would choose one. When I grew up, I chose to be a *rāgī*. From my childhood, I decided I wanted to be a *rāgī*, so my father helped me in my childhood, he taught me *Gurbani*, he

88 Below, I will discuss further the gender imbalance common in the religious leadership of diaspora Sikh communities—which (at least in the U.S.) have no female 'professional' *granthīs* and in which female *rāgīs* are relatively rare. Here, Bhai Simran Singh was speaking to the often cited reasoning behind why there are so few Sikh women in roles of religious leadership, that, due to cultural patterns, women are unable to lead the lifestyle of frequent travel required of most *rāgīs*.

> taught me *kirtan*, *rāgas*, whatever he could. After that, he sent me to Amritsar. I spent three years there in a hostel continuing to learn *kirtan* and *Gurbani*.

Bhai Simran Singh continued his training in performing *Gurbani kirtan* at Sikh Missionary College, in Amritsar (the same S.G.P.C.-funded school for Sikh religious training that Bhai Jagjeet Singh and Bhai Hardeep Singh, profiled above, attended). Bhai Simran Singh described to me how his training and education in the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition since that time has been a continuous process:

> In Sikh Missionary College, they teach you music according to *rāgas*. Most of the *rāgīs* of Harimandir Sahib came from that college. But three years [the length of his program at Sikh Missionary College] is not much time to learn *kirtan*, so after that, after graduation, when you have a little bit more experience, you understand that there is much, much more to learn, so I applied my personal effort to learn more about *Gurbani kirtan*. So I went and learned from many masters. Still, if I find somebody who is good, I will learn from them. [Interviewer: You learn their *rāga* compositions?]. Yes, because in the *rāgas*, in music, there is no completion, you have to practice every day more and more. The further you go, you have to practice more and more.

Bhai Simran Singh and I spent a significant part of our conversations discussing *rāgas*, his extensive knowledge of them, and his ideas about the power of music and *rāgas*. We first discussed the *rāga* organization of Guru Granth Sahib, and the centrality of *rāgas* to experiencing and understanding the Sikh scripture. Many of our discussions then focused on the inherent power of the *rāgas*, including the problematic presented by trying to perform Indian *rāgas* on the harmonium, with its Western chromatic tuning:

> ...[I] mostly play *vājā* [harmonium],[89] [and] that's what I started out playing. [But i]n Amritsar, they [taught] us on *tanpura*,[90] the strings, because *tanpura* is more

89 Even though Bhai Simran Singh still performs *Gurbani kirtan* primarily accompanied by the harmonium, he also spoke of admiring the movement to reintroduce classical stringed instruments into the tradition.

90 The *tanpura* (or *tampura*) is usually understood from a Western musical perspective as a 'drone' instrument because its four strings (which play fixed notes, and are not fretted) are usually tuned:

> pure, the *vājā* has very ready-made, synthetic notes. The original sound [of *kirtan*]—you have to practice with the *tanpura* while you are learning *kirtan* in the classes. The *tanpura* is a very different kind of instrument. It has only four strings, but when you play it you are getting more in tune with the *rāga*, you are going deeper and deeper, you feel more and more the *rāgas*, the notes you cannot find from any other instruments, you can find there. So *Gurbani*, Guru Sahib-ji wrote in the *rāgas*. So when you play in these *rāgas*, it has more power. [Even] today in India, people think that when you sing some *rāga*—let's say *rāga dīpak*, [if] you are very perfect in singing, you did practice, some kind of meditation, when you sing, flames will come, because sound is very powerful. And some kinds of *rāgas*, there are stories that people—like *dīpak* raag, a night time *rāga*, a candle can be lit up, you can create fire. Or if you [were to] sing [right] here—when you are totally in tune... with a note, a glass will be broken immediately, because sound is so powerful.

Bhai Simran Singh's explanation of the great power of *rāgas*, and the powerful effects that they can have—at minimum, on the conscious minds of humans, and perhaps even on the physical world—is in keeping with thousands of years of *rāga* theory in South Asia.[91] Bhai Simran Singh then enthused about the genius of the Sikh Gurus in presenting their teachings through the medium of these powerful *rāgas*:

> [*R*]*āga* has so much power in itself. *Then* when you combine it with *Gurbani*—because in Guru Sahib's time, people sang music in a king's court, people sang music for entertainment, [but] Guru *Sahib-ji* gave us a new direction. So we sing *rāgas* in God's name, combine both, because *rāga* is a kind of pitcher or boat, when you put God's Name inside that boat, it will get more power. So Guru Nanak Dev-ji started this *sadhana* ["means of accomplishing something"].[92] So Guru Arjan Dev-ji—you know at the Golden Temple—this *kirtan* started from Guru Arjan Dev-ji's time, the [continuous] *kirtan*. This is a total meditation to God, totally different vibrations.

Perfect Fifth (sometimes Perfect Fourth), Octave, Octave, Root note. The four notes are played in a continuous cycle to create a 'foundation' (emphasizing the tonic—the root note and its octave—or *Sā* of the *rāga*) over which the notes of a *rāga* move and flourish.

91 See Guy Beck's *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound* for the most in-depth study of multiple Indian religious tradition's varying interpretations of the power of sacred sound, from before the common era until today.

92 From Sanskrit.

Following from this discussion about the Sikh Gurus revealing their message (*Gurbani*) in the form of musical sound (*rāga*), I asked Bhai Simran Singh to describe to me what he thinks about the connections between Sikhism and music from the history of the Sikh tradition. He said:

> Music is a very central part of Sikhism, very crucial. Not any ceremony can be done without music. Even from birth to death, every ceremony is filled with music. Because when Guru Nanak started his mission, he chose only one person [to accompany him]: Bhai Mardana, because he played rebeck, a stringed instrument. When he would play *rabāb*, Guru Nanak *Dev-ji* would sing. Wherever he went, he only gave his message through singing, not just preaching. Even in Baghdad,[93] when Guru Nanak went there, he started singing in the morning time, so when people heard the voice of singing, they became very angry, because in Islam, music is *haram*. *Haram* means forbidden. They said, 'who is this *kafir*?'[94] In the city of Baghdad, the people came and they saw these two people singing and they were totally immersed [in God]. They complained to the chief authority, [and] he said 'this is a great sin that someone is doing this in this city, this is my order: go and stone them!' So they took all the stones—in Islam, this is a punishment for those who go against the religion. When they started singing, Guru Nanak opened his eyes. Just the power of his eyes and his singing—the story goes on—they all became like a kind of statue. But I think they were so rapt, they forgot to kill him. This person looked like an angel, looked like a saint, and they couldn't kill him. They said, 'let's ask him [who he is]'. So the story goes that they became like statues, they forgot their attitude, then the chief of the religion also came to see what was going on. He also was so impressed that when he saw Guru Nanak, he touched his feet. He asked him, 'you look like a holy person, but why are you singing? This is against our religion'. So Guru Nanak *Dev-ji* gave a sermon, [and explained] 'this is the praise of God, this is a service. You can join God and your soul through music, through *kirtan*', and then the people understood.

93 This is a personalized retelling of a traditional Sikh narrative about Guru Nanak's visit to the sacred city of Baghdad. A version of this Baghdad narrative appears in the Vārs of Bhai Gurdas (Vār 1, Paurīs 35-37), which are considered authoritative by Sikhs, at least in that they (per *Rehat Maryada* guidelines) are able to be performed within a gurdwara (For the text of this Baghdad narrative from Bhai Gurdas' Vārs in English translation, see pgs. 18-19. Kapoor, Sukhbir Singh and Mohinder Kaur Kapoor. *Janamsaakhi Prampara*. Amritsar: B. Chattar Singh Jiwan Singh Publishers, 2005).

94 Pejorative term for a non-Muslim, a 'non-believer'.

After relating this traditional narrative about Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana performing *kirtan* in Baghdad, Bhai Simran Singh further explained the centrality of music in the Sikh tradition, how he feels when he performs *kirtan*, and his feeling that every Sikh should learn how to perform *Gurbani kirtan*:

> I respect Guru [Nanak] *Sahib-ji* so much because at the time when Guru Sahib had this inspiration, when these hymns were written, the people who were singing the religious music, people were not saying good things [about] musicians and singers.[95] But the Guru says, if you want to have true enjoyment, if you want to meet with God, you first have to sing something. So that's not just singing, that's the prayer in front of God. So everything which I sing—when I'm sitting there [performing *kirtan*], I'm holding my head in front of Guru *Sahib-ji* and saying 'I'm not doing *kirtan* [it's not me doing *kirtan*], will you please bless me? I just want to have my soul attached to you, that is my prayer. So I use this word 'prayer' [for *kirtan*]. God is blessing me at that time... I [have] now [been] doing teaching [of *kirtan*] and also I am a lecturer [*kathākar*] here [at this gurdwara]. So that's why I can say only this—this thing, this subject [*kirtan*] should be essential to every Sikh. If they want to meet God through Guru Granth Sahib-ji, they have to learn music, and [this is why] we are providing free [*kirtan*] classes here, we are not taking any money from them [for this].

Bhai Simran Singh was one among many of my interviewees in American Sikh communities, and especially among the *rāgīs* who I have interviewed, who have told me that they think that all Sikhs should learn to perform *kirtan*. This is the obvious impetus behind the mass movement within diaspora gurdwara communities to teach young Sikhs (*all* of the children in some communities) how to perform *kirtan* that I will discuss in the next chapter. Bhai Simran Singh is currently teaching multiple *Gurbani kirtan* classes to children and adults in his community.

95 Here Bhai Simran Singh alludes to the stereotype of musicians as being of 'low' class or caste. I will return below to discussing the persistence of this perception in the current era.

Throughout our conversation, Bhai Simran Singh continued to discuss the power of *rāgas* and their importance in the Sikh tradition. He continued, saying:

> Wherever Guru Nanak went, he gave his preaching through singing. That's why everybody liked him. After that, the fifth Guru, Guru Arjan *Dev-ji* made it compulsory in every gurdwara, in prayer session you should [sing *kirtan*]—because it started under Guru Nanak, all of the *Baṇi* he has written, he wrote under the names of *rāgas*. Guru Granth Sahib is organized by *rāga*, starting from Guru Nanak. Because *rāgas*—when they go deep in your heart, deep in your soul—they give you different impressions. Today's science has proved that sound can heal you, sound can give you more peace. The Guru's Divine message was combined with the sound and *rāgas* because it had more power [that way]. It can heal you. You can heal sick people with the sound of *Gurbani*, with the sound of the *rāgas*.

When Bhai Simran Singh began discussing what he sees as the healing power of *Gurbani kirtan*, I asked him if he had ever personally seen someone miraculously healed in the way that he was describing. He replied:

> Yes, yes [and] recently, there is a story. A person in India had cancer, a very rough case, doctors only gave him some days [to live]. He said, 'I didn't know much about Sikhism, but my wife is learning about *Gurbani*, she knows about Sikhism'. She asked him, 'why don't we go to the Golden Temple, the Harimandir Sahib?' So she took him. He said when he went into the Darbar Sahib—before [this] he had [only] heard *kirtan* on the TV—he knew what it was, but when he went and listened personally, he thought this was an amazing thing, and thought, 'I should do *akhānd pāṭh* here, before I finish my [life's] journey'. So I requested that they help him start *akhānd pāṭh* the next day. So the *akhānd pāṭh* started on Sunday evening. When he touched Guru Granth Sahib, he felt as if some light was coming through his fingers and going inside of his body, and slowly he felt more energy and was feeling good. Before starting the *akhānd pāṭh*, they brought him on a stretcher, because his cancer was so advanced that in his bones there was no [marrow], he couldn't even sit straight. Doctors told him, 'if you try to sit straight, you can crack your bones, they can [be] crush[ed] inside, so be careful'. When he listened to Guru Granth Sahib, he sat, he listened, and then he walked to his room afterward, he felt totally different, but he didn't know he was completely healed. So when he went back home, he went to his doctor for his last treatment. His

> doctors told him, 'there is no cancer in your body, what kind of medicine did you take? What happened to you?'. He continued to go to the doctor for three years, because the doctor said it could come back again. But now he is a totally healed person, because of the Guru's blessing, he has health, the cancer has not come back now. There are many stories like this that I personally know. Many people have shared with me what happened to them [like this]. Miracles happen in every religion. In Harimandir Sahib, the vibration is totally different. For centuries, there has only been *kirtan*. Nobody can preach inside the Harimandir Sahib, there is only singing of *Gurbani*. So [the] vibrations are so powerful. If you have devotion and practice meditation a little bit, you can perceive that—the vibrations—immediately.

Following from this story about the healing power of *Gurbani kirtan*, I asked Bhai Simran Singh to describe to me how he "personally feel[s] when [he] does *kirtan*." Bhai Simran Singh replied:

> Well, in my case, I must say, that *I* am not doing *kirtan*, but God is helping me do this thing. For me, *kirtan* is prayer and meditation. I never feel tired if people say 'you have to sing for two hours'. I'm not taking this as a job, because for me—sometimes I will sit and do all night *kirtan*, and someone will have to touch me from the side and say, 'hey, Bhai Sahib, let the next person do *kirtan*'. So I will never say that 'I will only do this one *shabad*' or something like that, I want to keep going. Because I can tell you, you can get tired in your relationships. Sometimes you fight with your mother, saying 'mom you are doing this and this', you want attention. So at [such a] moment, this [*kirtan*] is very big medicine for everything. If you will start doing *kirtan*, you will find peace. I myself started at [a young] age. My mother—with some things, she used to become angry, [like] 'why were you late?', 'why did you not come?'. [I would say] 'I'm sorry Mom, I was playing *kirtan*'. Then my Mom would say, 'keep going'. She was also doing *kirtan*. This is very big for [achieving] focus. This is prayer for me. I love this from my heart. . . . I've done *kirtan* all my life. When I do *kirtan*, I am totally in a different world—always, always. Because *kirtan*, *Gurbani* singing is so powerful. When you do chanting alone, or you do *mantra*, *sadhana*, that will have an impact on your body. But *kirtan* is very powerful, it overwhelms you immediately, you enter into a different frame, a different [world].

After he explained to me how he feels when he performs *Gurbani kirtan*, I asked Bhai Simran Singh to further comment on what he thinks the effects of performing or listening to *Gurbani kirtan* are. He answered with the following:

> *Kirtan's* effects are very simple. In this life we have so many stresses, so many tensions, so many worries. Guru *Sahib-ji* said, '*kirtan* is like rain,[96] when there is no water, everything is getting dry, there is no greenery, after the rain comes, everything sprouts. Guru *Sahib-ji* said, like our mind, our heart—when there is stress, there is worry, so many tensions—this [*kirtan*] is a kind of rain showering for you. It gives you peace, it gives you bliss. It will take you to a different sound. So this is the reason. Guru *Sahib-ji* said '*Kari kīrtanu mana sītala bhae. Janama, janama ke kilavikha gae.*"[97] 'Do *kirtan* with devotion'. What will happen? All of the *karmas* of past lives will be washed away with the power of *kirtan*, the power of the Divine vibrations... If you light the candle, there will be no darkness. If you come to God's name in *kirtan*, the same thing, there will be no darkness of *karma*, no darkness of worry. In Japji Sahib, the morning prayer, Guru *Sahib-ji* says '*Gāvīai suṇīai mani rakhīai bhāu*.'[98] *Gāvīai* is singing, *suṇīai* is listening, *bhāu* means devotion: 'With devotion, sing *kirtan*. With devotion, listen to *kirtan*.' Guru Sahib-ji said, 'what will happen then?' Immediately all of the *dukkha*, suffering will be gone away. In your real home, your inner home, your heart, you will find peace immediately, not tomorrow, not some other day, immediately you will feel bliss and peace. This is the most effective therapy! No medicine can [be] effective like *kirtan*, I think! [So, when people listen to *rāgīs* perform *kirtan*] they sit together, and they listen to *kirtan*. Their vibration is totally changed immediately, they feel bliss, they feel peace, they feel good. In my *kirtan* [performances at this gurdwara], most people listening are professors, doctors, lawyers—high class kind of people from the community—they all come, and they tell us, 'we can't feel peace like this anywhere.' This is a very powerful thing.

In these last few excerpts from our conversations, Bhai Simran Singh's comments about the powerful emotional effects and healing properties of *Gurbani kirtan* are resonant with the reasons that most other Sikhs who I have talked to explain to me that *kirtan* is so

---

96 This is a frequent metaphor in Guru Granth Sahib, particularly of the *amrit* (the Divine nectar) of the Word (*Shabad*) "raining down" to quench the parched earth, or the thirsty mouths of the *gurmukhs* (devotees, those oriented toward God and the Guru).

97 ਕਰਿ ਕੀਰਤਨੁ ਮਨ ਸੀਤਲ ਭਏ ॥ ਜਨਮ ਜਨਮ ਕੇ ਕਿਲਵਿਖ ਗਏ ॥ "Singing *kirtan*, my mind has become peaceful. The Sins of countless births have been washed away." (M5, *Gauṛī Guārerī* (4), AG pg.178).

98 ਗਾਵੀਐ ਸੁਣੀਐ ਮਨਿ ਰਖੀਐ ਭਾਉ ॥ "[With] love within [your] mind, sing, and hear [the Lord's praises]" (M1, *Jāpu*, AG pg.2).

important in their lives. It is relatively common for Sikhs to ascribe miraculous healing effects to *Gurbani kirtan*. However, Bhai Simran Singh's final comment about “high class kind of people” who “can't feel peace like [*kirtan*] anywhere” recalls for me the number of Sikh professionals I have spoken to who talk about listening to *kirtan* for the feeling of calm bliss that it provides them, and trying to fill as many hours as they they can listening to *Gurbani kirtan*.

5.6 A Famous Internationally Mobile *Rāgī*

Bhai Kultar Singh[99] (Figure 4.2) is a twelfth generation Sikh *kirtaniya*. He is a son of the celebrated *Shiromani Rāgī* ('Sikh musician recognized as of the highest order') Bhai Avtar Singh. His father, Bhai Avtar Singh (1925-2006) was the descendant of a long family line of Sikh musicians who spent fifty years of his life performing *Gurbani kirtan*, singing *rītī* ('compositions') on the *rāgas* from Guru Granth Sahib that his family lineage had passed down since the time of the Sikh Gurus. Bhai Kultar Singh thus grew up as the son of a famous and highly respected *rāgī*, the heir to a musical lineage in *kirtan* dating back to the beginnings of the Sikh religion, and his upbringing was steeped in the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition. However, when it came time to choose a career path, Bhai Kultar Singh studied and trained to be an engineer, and he eventually moved to Africa to continue pursuing his engineering career (his three siblings also decided to pursue career paths outside of performing *Gurbani kirtan* professionally). In his thirties, however, he decided to leave a lucrative career as an engineer in order to follow in his father's

99 I will also profile Bhai Kultar Singh as a teacher of *Gurbani kirtan* in Chapter Five.

footsteps as a *kirtaniya*. Bhai Kultar Singh told me that he made this decision because he felt that the Sikh *kirtan* tradition was "dying" and he did not want to see his family's lineage end with him.[100] After spending seven years performing *Gurbani kirtan* as a member of his father's *rāgī jatha*, he became a *Hazoori Rāgī* (roughly, a 'resident Sikh musician') at Gurdwara Bangla Sahib and Gurdwara Sis Ganj Sahib (two very historically important Sikh gurdwaras in New Delhi, both of which I visited in Summer 2011 to conduct research).

I profile Bhai Kultar Singh here because he is one of a few internationally well-known *rāgīs* who are regularly invited to perform *kirtan* in gurdwaras in the United States. As discussed in Chapter Three, it is common for gurdwara communities in the U.S. to pay for touring *rāgīs* to come and perform *Gurbani kirtan* within their communities. Having a *rāgī* such as Bhai Kultar Singh—who is famous both as a carrier of his family's musical traditions and also highly regarded in his own right for his *kirtan* renditions—come and visit to perform *kirtan* is an event that carries a great deal of excitement within a diaspora gurdwara community. Bhai Kultar Singh is also somewhat unique among internationally traveling *rāgīs* in that he connects well with younger second- and third-generation Sikh Americans because he is able to discuss and expound on the *Shabads* he performs both in Punjabi and in eloquent English.

---

100 I will discuss further in Chapter Five that Bhai Avtar Singh spent much of the last period of his life writing down and recording the roughly five-hundred rītī (compositions) on the thirty-one rāgas of Guru Granth Sahib that had been carried in his family's musical lineage since the time of Guru Arjan. He and his brother Bhai Gurcharan Singh, wrote a book in two volumes compiling all of these traditional rītī, titled *Gurbānī Sangīt Prāchin Rīt Ratanāvali* ('Exposition on Jewel-filled Compositions for Musical Performance of the Word of the Sikh Gurus', Punjabi University Press, Patiala, 1995) and also made audio recordings of all of them, which he donated to the University for preservation.

When I asked Bhai Kultar Singh to tell me more about his family lineage, he explained: “Sikhism came to our family [i.e., they became Sikhs] at the time of the third Guru in Goindwal...[101] [and] *kirtan* came to our family at Guru Arjan Dev-ji's time.” As discussed above (note 13), according to the oral history passed down within Bhai Kultar Singh's family, it was during the Guruship of Guru Arjan that 'everyday' Sikhs started to form a tradition of being 'professional' *rāgīs*, in parallel to the older *rabābī* tradition. Bhai Kultar Singh's father, Bhai Avtar Singh traced his family lineage within the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition through eleven generations since that time. Thus, Bhai Kultar Singh represents the twelfth generation of a continuous family lineage of professional *rāgīs* that has existed for as long as there has been a tradition of 'professional' *rāgīs* in Sikhism.

I asked Bhai Kultar Singh about what was behind his decision to make the transition from being a professional engineer to being a professional *rāgī* and he explained:

> I was trained as a mechanical engineer. I practiced engineering for fourteen years. But I always had a desire to pass on the tradition that was within our family, because no one else was doing it. So, I had a desire, and the moment I got an opportunity, I went for it. We moved our business from Kenya to India, and that was the time when I thought I could take a leave, because I was in business with my brother. When we went to India, then we could do that, so we did it. I took five years leave in 1999, and now those 'five years' are still ongoing, ha! I don't want them to finish! I am very happy! I'm not going back into that kind of lifestyle, I'm very happy with this... I believe 100% that it's not we who decide, it's He [God] who decides what we are going to do. Because I never thought that I'd be a *kirtaniya*. I always had an interest and wish that I'd be singing, but I never thought that I'd get an opportunity to sing, because I was so much engrossed in my business, and to take out time was really unimaginable at that time... but I

101 The third Sikh Guru was Guru Amar Das, who was Guru from 1574-1581, and Goindval is a city especially associated with the period of his Guruship, when it became a center of the Sikh community surrounding him.

> decided to take five years leave from my business [and train doing *kirtan*], and within those five years, I decided, 'no, I'm not going back'. There's more satisfaction—it's amazing singing, and making people sing along, and connecting yourself [with God and others] and getting other people connected.

Bhai Kultar Singh has now been a full-time professional *rāgī* for over fifteen years. Though he spends most of his time performing his duties as a *Hazoori Rāgī* in the New Delhi area, he also tours the United States to perform *kirtan* two or more times per year. Recently, due to the interest within U.S. communities, he has also started teaching workshops on the thirty-one *rāgas* of Guru Granth Sahib during his tours of the U.S. (I will further discuss his teaching activities in Chapter Five).

One of the recurring themes of my conversations with Bhai Kultar Singh was the central importance of music to the Sikh tradition. When I initially discussed with him my impression, as a scholar of religions, of the absolute centrality of *Gurbani kirtan* within the Sikh tradition, he stated: "Music is part of our Guru—it's *that* important." Bhai Kultar Singh detailed to me what he sees as the uniqueness of Sikhism, in terms of the fundamental importance that sacred sound has within the tradition:

> It was Guru Nanak who combined the [intellectual power of] the Word with the emotional power [of music]. Before him, this combination was not there [in religions in India]. [Religious figures in India] used to say, 'go to the forest and meditate', or 'don't wear clothes', or 'climb a mountain', or 'stop eating food', or 'stop wearing shoes', so they were more ritualistic,[102] and Guru Nanak *Dev-ji* trashed all of these concepts and said, 'Sing His praises, and you will meet Him, and sing it with love!'. So love is very important. That's the importance of *kirtan* to Sikhism.

---

102 Bhai Kultar Singh's statement here is also in line with the general rejection of 'hollow ritualism' in the Sikh tradition that I have discussed above.

Further discussing the unique importance of music within the Sikh tradition, Bhai Kultar Singh told me that he feels that every Sikh should learn to be a *kirtaniya* as part of their religious practice:

> I think every Sikh should be a *kirtaniya*, because *kirtan* is so important, compared to [music] in other religions. Because at this time, at this moment [during *kirtan*] *Baṇi* is the Guru. *Baṇi* has got the Guru's status. The original form in which the *Baṇi* came on this earth is *kirtan*. So the entire *Baṇi*—when I say 'entire' it's not one-hundred-percent, some *Baṇi* don't have *rāgas*, *shaloks* [verse couplets] are there, whatever—but most of the *Baṇi* came as *kirtan*, it was sung first and written afterward, and to write it down, the purpose was to document it, so there was one place you could find the *Baṇi*. Documentation was very important, we didn't have cameras or MP3 recordings at that time, if we had, we'd be in a different scenario; we'd be singing the *Baṇi* in the original tunes and melodies, but to write it down was the best way to document and *Maharaj* [the Guru] did that. And *Maharaj* took special care to mention the *rāgas*, the musical part of the *Shabad*. Every *Shabad* has got a *rāga* in the title, it came with the *rāga*, so *rāga* was part and parcel of the *Baṇi* when it came. So *kirtan* is that important. Every Sikh should be singing. Every Sikh should be a *kirtaniya*, because if you say *kirtan* is Guru, and *kirtan* is *Baṇi*, there is nothing wrong in it [saying it this way], because if *Baṇi* is Guru, you can say *kirtan* is the original form in which *Baṇi* came. So *kirtan* has a status of Guru when someone is singing the *Shabad*. It's like Guru is transmitted from it. That is the importance of *kirtan* in Sikhism.

Here, Bhai Kultar Singh outlined a key principle of what I have earlier referred to as the 'sonic theology' of the Sikh tradition. To experience performing *Gurbani kirtan*, or hearing *Gurbani kirtan* performed, is to experience the Divine Presence: in the sense of experiencing the sounds as well as the semantic meanings of the Word (*Shabad*, or *Baṇi*), as it was revealed, in musical form, through the Sikh Gurus, who are understood in the Sikh tradition as the 'vessels' of the same Divine Light (*jōt*) and sound vibration that passed through each of them. Bhai Kultar Singh further explained to me this Sikh

understanding of the mystical co-presence of God/Guru/Word within the experience of hearing and performing the sacred sound of *Gurbani kirtan*:

> [Interviewer: I've heard it described that one makes the Guru present when they sing and intone the Word musically.] First of all, let us think, 'who is Guru?'. Guru Nanak? [Yes,] he is our Guru. Is the body of Guru Nanak our Guru? The physical body? So what is Guru? 'Guru' is the teachings of Guru Nanak. And the teachings of Guru Nanak are *Baṇi*. They all came in the musical form of *kirtan*. So from day one, from Nanak's time, *kirtan* was even Guru at that time, because that was the Message, that was the Teaching of Guru Nanak *Dev-ji*. And after Guru Nanak, Guru Angad *Dev-ji*, Guru Amar Das-*ji*, Guru Ram *Das-ji*, Guru Arjan *Dev-ji*, all of the Gurus sang *kirtan*, and new *Baṇi* was added to the collection. So, the physical body of the Guru is not our Guru, the *teaching* of the Guru is our Guru, and that teaching is still there. So our Guru has not changed. Whether Guru Nanak is singing it or it is there in Guru Granth Sahib, it is the same Guru.[103] Isn't it true, if you go to a professor—you are a professor yourself—if you speak a language which your student is not understanding, he will fail if there is no communication between you and your student? So the only communication you have with your student is the word which you speak, and if that word is missing, then will he consider you as his teacher? Because your body is not the teacher. The teachings which you transmit, or they absorb from you, [that] is actually the teacher. This is very clear in *Baṇi*, in Guru Granth Sahib [it] says very clearly that Guru is not the physical body, it is the message, it is the wisdom which is shared, which is transferred, that is Guru. And *Baṇi* has always been the Guru, because even Guru Arjan *Dev-ji* [*sic*][104] says '*Baṇi hai Gurū, Gurū hai Baṇi*. *Vichi Baṇi amritu sāre*'[105] ['The Word (*Baṇi*) is Guru, and the Guru is the Word. All of the Nectar [of immortality] is contained within the *Baṇi*.'][106] So, it's very interesting. *Kirtan* was the original form of *Baṇi*, when it was not even written, it was sung, and it was written afterward. Even now, with Guru Granth Sahib, those papers are not our Guru, the binding is not our Guru, the ink in which it is written is not our Guru. The Word, the Message, *that* is our Guru; *that* is what we bow to. That's where the importance of *kirtan* lies.

This discussion of the Word as Guru, and the very *sound* of the Word as Guru, portrays what Verne A. Dusenbery has aptly referred to as the "non-dualistic ideology of

103 This, of course, is in line with the Sikh understanding that the same Divine Light (*gūrjōt*) passed through each of the ten human Gurus, and now resides within Guru Granth Sahib, and Guru Panth Sahib (the Scripture as Guru, and the living Sikh community as Guru).

104 This line appears in Guru Granth Sahib in a hymn attributed to Guru Ram Das.

105 ਬਾਣੀ ਗੁਰੂ ਗੁਰੂ ਹੈ ਬਾਣੀ ਵਿਚਿ ਬਾਣੀ ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤੁ ਸਾਰੇ M4, *Nat Narāyan Ashtapādian* (3), AG pg. 982.

106 Translation my own.

language" within the Sikh tradition—that Sikh understanding of sacred language (in line with other Indic traditions) "...refuses to privilege semanticoreferential meaning at the expense of other properties that language is thought to possess," especially sound.[107] Bhai Kultar Singh's explanation to me highlights the indivisibility in the Sikh tradition of scriptural Word (semantic-referential meaning) and scriptural sound (the very vibrations of the Word in musical performance), which both make present their common Divine Source. I will return to discussing this understanding of the properties of Sikh scriptural language below in the context of discussing the frequent language barrier between immigrant *rāgīs* and *granthīs* and American-born Sikhs.

My further conversations with Bhai Kultar Singh about the idea of the oneness of Guru/Word/sound in the Sikh *Gurbaṇi* concept recall the discussion in Chapter Three about young Sikhs explaining how they take benefit from hearing *Gurbani kirtan* performed, even when they do not always understand it linguistically. When I asked Bhai Kultar Singh about this, he agreed that simply hearing Guru Granth Sahib performed does have power because of the presence of the Guru within the *Shabad*/Word. However, he further explained that there are multiple layers within *Gurbani kirtan* for the mind to experience:

> *Shabad* is miraculous, even if you don't understand it, it is still affecting your soul. When you say spiritual listening, it is not the physical listening. It is the absorption of the *Baṇi* by your soul. It is beyond intellectual categories. So *Baṇi* has got an intellectual component [i.e., the semantic meaning], but it also has a spiritual component, which is not understandable by the brain, but it still has an

107 Pg. 75. Dusenbery, Verne A. "The Word as Guru: Sikh Scripture and the Translation Controversy" in *Sikhs at Large: Religion, Culture, and Politics in Global Perspective*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008.

> affect on your soul. So many times in the *Baṇi*, it says that *Baṇi* and *simran* [remembrance of God] are 'food for your soul'. So that is the subtle element which is beyond description which is still absorbed by us. There are two kinds of hearing, one is the 'spiritual hearing', which cannot be handicapped—the ears are not part of that. And if you don't understand the Word, or you don't understand the Gurus' message, your soul is still getting a spiritual benefit. But the intellectual benefit will be missing, because you will not be understanding what the Guru is telling you. Sometimes these intellectual and spiritual [facets] complement each other. Sometimes, when you understand everything which is said, and the melody was so suitable to it—melody has a very close relation with your emotions. So if just music is there, it will hit your emotions, and if the Word is there without music, it will have an effect on your intellect. But the combination of the two, when they complement each other, when you are intellectually understanding what the Guru is telling you, and you are also making your emotions part and parcel of this, and the hidden spiritual element—the spiritual food of the *Baṇi* is there—that's a complete experience. Where your emotions are there, you're also having intellectual flights. And then the spiritual flights are there, even if you don't understand the *Baṇi*, even if you are sleeping! If you are asleep and your ears hear *Baṇi*, you will still get some benefit.

Our discussion about the power of the Word being complemented and energized by the 'right' musical sound led me to ask Bhai Kultar Singh questions about the *rāgas* of Guru Granth Sahib.

I would place Bhai Kultar Singh as one of the most well-known figures of a loosely connected but enthusiastic movement among Sikh *kirtaniyas* to retain or reclaim the practice of performing the hymns of Guru Granth Sahib in the original *rāgas* according to which they are organized within the scripture. As discussed above, Bhai Kultar Singh is heir to the hundreds of compositions on the original *rāgas* of Guru Granth Sahib of his family lineage. A significant part of my conversations with Bhai Kultar Singh involved him explaining to me why he is dissatisfied with the direction that many current performers of *Gurbani kirtan* are taking with the tradition—especially the usage

of popular and film ('*filmi*') tunes “polluting” the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition. When I asked him if he had ever played any other 'style' of music other than *Gurbani kirtan*, Bhai Kultar Singh replied: “I have been listening to this 'style' of music since I gained my consciousness—if ever I gained it, ha! [The *kirtan* of my family] is mostly what I have been exposed to... I don't want to have any other influence on this music. This is *my Guru's* 'style'. We want to preserve it and insulate it from the rest of the styles.” Thus, while Bhai Kultar Singh told me that he does not dislike or reject any style of music, or even the use of 'Western' instruments to perform *Gurbani kirtan* (he performs *kirtan* mostly accompanied by the harmonium), he is committed to his role in preserving his family's heritage of musical compositions and performing *Gurbani kirtan* in only the *rāgas* prescribed in Guru Granth Sahib. I asked Bhai Kultar Singh to describe what he saw as the problems or damage that have been introduced into the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition, and he said:

> …[T]hese are [the] wrong practices which have come into [kirtan] ....the present kind of *kirtan* which is popular is not the original kind of *kirtan* which was there. [Interviewer: Can you explain what you mean?] Well, there are so many things. Number one is the *rāga* title which Guru Sahib has written on each *Shabad* is ignored completely. People are not even singing *rāgas*, they're taking a tune from Bollywood, from movies, and they'll fit the *Shabad* on that melody and they'll start singing it, which is a complete mismatch. I believe—and my parents also believed—that every melody has got a soul in it, we don't consider melodies to be non-living, they are living.

Bhai Kultar Singh's explanation for why it is important to preserve the practice of performing *kirtan* only in the original *rāgas* prescribed for each hymn within Guru

Granth Sahib fits, again, with his discussion above about the inherent oneness of Guru/Word/sound. Further discussing this, he said:

> ...[i]f you create a melody today, now, and if someone sings the same melody after one-hundred years, the melody has the power to recreate the environment in which it was born and created. So the kind of mood you have now, the state of mind you have at this time, will reflect through your melody if you create a melody today. So every melody has got a soul, and has got the power to re-create the environment in which it was created. So a movie tune is certainly not spiritual—look at the environment they are created in, most of the directors are under the influence of alcohol, or they smoke, or they have a character which is certainly different from devotion and the spiritual. So if what they create is like whiskey—like alcohol—and you mix it in *amrit* [the nectar of immortality, the Divine essence within the Word], it's entirely opposite, I call it criminal. It's the biggest insult of the *Baṇi* you can do when you fix it on a film song tune. Like, you can't distribute *parshad* [blessed food] on a dirty plate, if you do that people will scold you...

Although Bhai Kultar Singh portrayed strong feelings against performing *Gurbani kirtan* in musical forms other than the prescribed *rāgas*, he was a bit more circumspect about the movement to return to performing *Gurbani kirtan* only on instruments that would have been used during the time of the Sikh Gurus. Though he strongly supports efforts to recover the use of traditional forms of instrumentation in the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition, he stated that he is "not anti-harmonium" as some *kirtaniyas* are (as discussed above, he primarily performs *kirtan* accompanied by harmonium). He explained this stance on instrumentation, stating that the primacy of the Word should take precedent above all else:

> In *kirtan*, *Shabad* is the most important, the Word is the most important. Music and instruments, they're all tools—presentation tools, support tools, they're like decoration. So we should have a limited focus on the instrument. Some of the people are giving too much focus on the instruments. They have ten or twenty students playing on the stage, and then it looks like a display of instruments—it's

> more like an exhibition. But the actual element here is the Word. Anyone, if you have a thousand instruments being played and there's no Word in there, I won't call it *kirtan*. But one person sitting in the wilderness, without even an instrument, just singing, it still qualifies as *kirtan*. So Word is most important. It's like giving too much focus on the person—like his clothes, or other secondary things. So Word is the most important element in *kirtan*.

Finally, at the end of a recorded interview, I asked Bhai Kultar Singh what his highest hope was for the future of the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition, and he replied:

> I wish and I hope that many people should be singing the Gurus' way of *kirtan*, the *kirtan* which the Gurus sang, and recommended. I want that *kirtan* to be popular. But now that *kirtan* is not popular, it is the 'bollywood' *kirtan* which is popular. So I would like the Gurus' *kirtan* to be more popular, and everyone should be able to do that, and listen to that. And our main shrines, the Golden temple and such, they should stick to that. They can be the ones to start it and say 'none of the *filmi* tunes will be sung here'. If they start it, I think it will be a very big change, because many people listen to that kind of *kirtan* now, all *filmi* tunes. So I wish those politicians over there, the Guru gives them some wisdom and they start appreciating the Sikh heritage and Sikh musical values. This is a very rich culture which the Gurus have given to us. So they should think about it. It's a very sorry state, actually, there, it is one-hundred-percent politics, zero-percent spirituality in the people who are controlling it. And it's everywhere, they're not the only people. But I'm very hopeful—I know my Guru will do it when he has to do it. But people do feel the change when ten *jathas* come and they sing something similar, and one *jatha* comes and they sing something entirely different. That one *jatha* gets the credit for singing differently.

When I followed this by asking Bhai Kultar Singh what he hoped his legacy would be within the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition, he was characteristically humble about his own role in the tradition:

> I am fortunate and very grateful to the Guru that he has made me a link within this tradition, but I am not the master, I am not the owner of this, the Guru is the owner, and it must go to the *Panth*... I must say it was my destiny, Guru wanted me to do this, to sing now. . . . I'm just a small soldier trying to fight the big battle.... in whatever small capacity I can serve my Guru and the Gurus' musical heritage, I will. But I know by myself, I cannot do a lot, if Guru wants it done, he will get it done through me...

Bhai Kultar Singh's final comments, reproduced here, about instrumentation and performing *Gurbani kirtan* only in the original *rāgas* point to issues surrounding 'authenticity' and 'authority' in the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition that I will discuss further in the next chapter, Chapter Five. Though, as Bhai Kultar Singh points out, stringed instruments and performing in the assigned *rāgas* of Guru Granth Sahib are currently not 'standard', and in fact somewhat rare in *Gurbani kirtan* performances in gurdwaras around the world, the movement to revive an 'as the Gurus intended' form of *Gurbani kirtan* has massive popular interest and support among Sikhs. I hope to return to discussing this mass 'revival' movement in future writing projects.

6.0 Current Issues in Sikh Religious and Ritual Leadership in the United States

Having profiled six *granthīs* and *rāgīs* who work and perform within U.S. Sikh communities, in the following section I will now discuss four of the important current issues[108] surrounding religious and ritual leadership within Sikh communities in the United States: 1. the tension presented by Sikhism being a 'lay' tradition with high expectations for the 'expertise' of leaders and ritual officiants; 2. a gender imbalance among those in leadership roles within Sikh communities heavily weighted toward male leaders; 3. a 'disconnect' between immigrant *granthīs* and *rāgīs* and American-Born Sikhs in terms of language and culture; 4. the pay, treatment, and respect and authority of *granthīs* and *rāgīs* within American Sikh Communities. Though my focus for the

108 I say that these are important current issues because they have both been expressed as such to me by Sikh Americans talking about their own communities and they have emerged as such from my field research within American Sikh communities.

purposes of this chapter and dissertation is on the United States, most of these issues I discuss below also take on similar contours throughout the worldwide Sikh diaspora.

6.1 A 'Lay' Tradition With High Expectations of Ritual and Leadership 'Expertise'

As discussed earlier in this chapter, Sikhs—pointing to many of the scriptural passages and traditional narratives outlined above—reflect an ambivalence about assigning any 'special' status or expertise to religious leaders and those who conduct Sikh rituals. Sikhs are proud of the fundamentally 'lay' nature of the Sikh tradition, frequently repeating that “there is no pope or priesthood” of Sikhism. A document drafted by the S.G.P.C. (the elected body that has functional control over all of the historical gurdwaras in India and some of the Colleges that educate many *granthīs*)[109] that describes the expected duties and qualifications of *granthīs* affirms the 'lay' nature of the Sikh tradition:

> [A *granthī* is] [l]iterally, 'the keeper and the reader of the Sikh scripture'. In every Sikh Gurdwara there is a granthi nominated or accepted as such by the local Sikh congregation. His duty is to keep and manage the Gurdwara and to run its religious services, but he *is not an ordained priest vested with the exclusive competence of performing or controlling Sikh worship* in a Gurdwara. *There is no priesthood recognised* [*sic*] *in Sikhism* and the granthi is thus *merely a functionary of the Sikh congregation enjoying no special rights or status*.[110]

In spite of this emphasis on Sikhism's lack of a “priesthood”—even within such an authoritative organization's definition of the term *granthī*—expectations among Sikhs for the qualifications and duties expected of *granthīs*, both in India and the worldwide diaspora, are often quite high.

109 Such as the Sikh Missionary College, which three of my interviewees profiled in this chapter attended.
110 Italics mine. http://sgpc.net/glossary/Granthi.asp.

As an example of this in the context of the United States, K.S. Dhillon, a member of a Sikh gurdwara community in Boston, Massachusetts has written a document titled "Functions, Duties and Qualifications of a Granthi."[111] The document appears to have been written for the Boston gurdwara community that Dhillon is a member of, but it is also framed in such a way as to be prescriptive for the broader diasporic Sikh community. Consequently, the document can currently be found circulating widely on the internet, including on the websites of gurdwaras in the United States (e.g., gurunanakdarbar.net), other major websites of Sikh interest (e.g., sikhnet.com), and being discussed in Sikh internet forums (e.g., the user forums of sikhphilosophy.net). The document describes the expected functions of a *granthī* as follows:

> [In addition to performing the hymns of the Guru Granth Sahib vocally] [a] *granthī* is also a *spiritual leader*. He /She leads congregation in prayer, performs the Kirten [*sic*] (musical rendition of the Scriptures), Katha (Discourses), Ardas (Prayers), and inspires and provides spiritual direction and upliftment to the Sangat (congregation). A *granthī* is also *a religious minister*. He/She performs all the Sikh ceremonies from birth, baptism and death. A *granthī* is a *spiritual counselor*. He/She provides spiritual counseling to individuals and families. Finally, a *granthī* is *a teacher* and role model. He/She is expected to spend a good deal of time teaching children, young adults and adults. He/She is to teach Kirten (spiritual music), Tabla (spiritual rhythms) Gurbani (poetry of the scriptures) and Punjabi (the language of the Holy Books).[112]

The next section of Dhillon's document describes the expected "duties" of a *granthī*, which are to include: performing the full range of daily prayer and scriptural recitation duties (as I have described them being conducted throughout a typical day by a *granthī* at the beginning of this chapter); "[being] in attendance to the Granth at all times";

111 K.S. Dhillon. "Functions, Duties, and Qualifications of a Granthi", Online Document, No Date: http://www.gurunanakdarbar.net/files/1DUTIES_FUNCTIONS_AND_QUALIFICATION_OF_A_GRANTHI.pdf

112 Ibid. Italics mine (except for the word "*Granthi*").

performing *Gurbani kirtan* only in the “Original Ragas, Taalas and Musical Scores in which the Scripture is composed”; performing “Katha... a half hour sermon cum discourse” daily; conducting all Sikh rites of passage for the community; teaching classes in Sikh scripture, Gurbani kirtan (both vocal performance and instruments), and Punjabi language; conducting *akhānd pāṭhs* (48 hour unbroken readings of Guru Granth Sahib) for the community; and “provid[ing] spiritual counseling to members of the Sangat of the Gurdwara...”[113] Describing the required “Qualifications of a Granthi”, Dhillon's document proffers that “granthis require multi-disciplinary training... in Classical Music, Punjabi Arts and Literature and Philosophy”, and continues, affirming that *granthīs* must be educated in “classical music” including all of the “31 Ragas and countless taals” of Guru Granth Sahib, as well as “Vocal Training, Raag Training and Tabla training up to a diploma or degree level at a Sangeet (classical /spiritual music) Academy”. Additionally, Dhillon continues, stating that a *granthī* must have “...good literary, oratorical and personal skills” in order to understand Guru Granth Sahib and “...needs good presentation skills to deliver effective discourses” on the scripture. As additional preparation for life as a *granthī*, Dhillon asserts that “[a] granthi must spend a few years as an Assistant to a reputable granthi both to hone his educational skills as well as to learn the ceremonial aspects of his duties... [they should] ideally have worked at least 3 years as an Assistant Priest before becoming a granthi”. Finally, Dhillon describes the basic personal attributes required of a *granthī*, that they be “...married and have a family life... have a high moral life and value attributes such as sharing, service, commitment, empathy and spirituality...

113 Ibid.

an ability to work with and inspire... Sewadars (volunteer service providers)", and "...be an Amritdhari (Baptised) practising Sikh".

I have quoted from Dhillon's document at length in order to highlight the ways that it describes a very large and widely diversified set of skills as 'musts' for Sikh *granthīs* to have. These are diverse skills that most members of the clergy in other religions (Jews, Christians, and Muslims, as examples) do not possess *all* of. For example, even members of clergy in 'western' religions who are highly educated enough to hold Doctor of Divinity degrees are not required—in addition to their usual preaching, community service, and ritual duties—to also be classically trained performing multi-instrumentalist musicians, *and* also teachers skilled in teaching multiple diffuse subjects, *and* also live-in caretakers of sacred buildings and objects, and so on. In short, someone with *all* of the qualifications for a *granthī*, as described in Dhillon's document, would indeed be an "expert" in very many different things (as well as probably quite underslept!).

Dhillon's document describes the duties of *granthīs* with the assumption that they are to also fulfill all of the duties usually fulfilled by performing *rāgīs*. Obviously, even professional *rāgīs* who are not *granthīs* are expected by Sikh communities to have high levels of expertise in their vocation. This includes a high level of knowledge of the musical structure of Guru Granth Sahib, as well as 'perfect' pronunciation and pleasing vocal performance of the Word enshrined within the scripture, the ability to play one or more musical instruments skillfully, and so on. Also, because many of the most popular

rāgīs are also *kathākars* who give sermons between hymns explicating their meanings, *rāgīs* are often expected to have a level of expertise in interpretation of the 'classical' language of the scripture, perhaps for discussing it in Punjabi and, ideally, also in English. All of this points to the reasons that *granthī* and *rāgī* are usually separate roles within a Sikh community (and, as discussed early in the chapter, had been separate roles from the time of the Gurus).

The high levels of training and 'expertise' (i.e., skillful recitation, musicianship, interpretation, and so on) described above are probably typical of the expectations that Sikhs in the diaspora have for *granthīs*, and this portrays a seeming paradox for leadership in Sikh communities: that of a 'lay' tradition that asserts that all leaders should emerge from the laity and not be distinct from it, but which has high expectations for the level of education and expertise that those leaders should possess.[114] Part of this seeming paradox probably arises from changes that took place within the twentieth century and also within the process of migration. Whereas, at an earlier time, the roles of *granthī* and *rāgī* may have been fulfilled by members of particular social classes for whom this was their profession (certainly this is the case for the *rabābī* tradition), or when such professionalization was passed down hereditarily, now such patterns have largely broken down and these leadership roles can be fulfilled by any Sikh—yet expectations of the expertise that come with specialized education, apprenticeship, and 'professionalization'

114 Obviously, a similar 'paradox' is presented in other religious traditions as well. For example, with Protestant Christianity's rejection of much of the 'special', 'set apart' status of the sacramental priesthood for an embracing of the 'priesthood of all believers' comes a spectrum of responses to what levels of 'expertise' are expected for ritual and leadership positions (from 'high church'/'mainline' denominations requiring Master or Doctoral level education to become a minister to 'non-denominational' groups with no set educational requirements).

still persist. Most Sikhs would not want to hear *pāṭh*, *Gurbani kirtan*, or *kathā* done poorly. Modern Sikhs mostly seem to agree that such expertise needs to be supported through education and providing monetary support for those who fulfill these leadership roles as a vocation, however, at the same time, I will discuss below how many reflect ambivalence about *granthīs* and *rāgīs*, seeing them as 'greedy', or minimizing the necessity of their leadership roles.

One response to answering the 'paradox' of leadership that some gurdwaras in the U.S. are pursuing is to try to have all ritual and leadership duties fulfilled by sevadars—members of the 'congregation' who perform voluntary service—and not hire any professional *rāgīs* or *granthīs*, even where community funds would allow it.[115] I will discuss in Chapter Five the mass movement to teach *Gurbani kirtan* to young Sikhs. Some gurdwara communities are expending enormous amounts of time and effort to teach all children in the community how to conduct all religious rituals and services at the gurdwara, perform *Gurbani kirtan*, Scriptural recitation, and so on. The principle of one gurdwara school explained to me that the rationale for doing this was precisely that they hoped that the next generation in their community would be fully capable of conducting all of the ritual functions of the community without the need for any 'professional' *rāgīs* or *granthīs*. As I discuss at other points within this dissertation, it is currently the case

115 One article ("At a Crossroads: Granthis & Gurdwaras" by I.J. Singh, Gurmit Singh, and Ravinder Singh. http://www.sikhchic.com/columnists/at_a_crossroads_granthis_gurdwaras) on the popular website Sikhchic.com questions the necessity of hiring 'professional' *rāgīs* and *granthīs*, while at the same time providing proposed guidelines for hiring them. With some exceptions, most gurdwara communities that I have visited would struggle to have enough volunteers to perform all of these duties. Even in the few gurdwara communities that have most of the usual duties of *rāgīs* and *granthīs* performed by volunteers, they have a *granthī* acting as a full-time caretaker of the scripture and the building.

that some communities could be said to contain more 'experts' than 'non-experts,' due to the very high proportion of (especially young) people now learning how to perform *Gurbani kirtan* and conduct all religious services and rituals within their communities. It will remain to be seen how the very idea of 'professional' or 'expert' (in their common usage) leadership might be changed or deconstructed if virtually all members of some communities have the 'expertise' to conduct these formerly specialized functions.[116]

6.2 Gender Imbalance

In talking to people within American Sikh communities, when the issue of leadership roles comes up in discussion, if I ask about leadership roles for females, I almost universally receive an answer along the following lines: “nothing in the Sikh tradition prohibits a woman from any leadership role, women can be *granthīs* and *rāgīs*”. However, many of my female interviewees (both first-generation and American-born) have spoken to me about how they think modern Sikh practice has broken away from the vision of ultimate gender equality that they see as having been an essential and central tenet of the teachings of the Sikh Gurus. None of my interviewees knew of any gurdwara, either in the United States, or in India, that has female professional *granthīs*[117]. In most American gurdwaras, it is also relatively rare to see women performing *Gurbani kirtan*[118] —and those who do so are not professional *rāgīs*, but volunteers from within local

116 I am currently writing an article-length piece that explores this question more fully.

117 At the time of submitting this dissertation, I have recently learned that there may be one woman serving in the formal position of *granthī* in the United States. I will most certainly seek to interview her (or any other women *granthīs*) as I continue my research.

118 The gender balance of those performing *Gurbani kirtan* is at least heavily leaning toward males.

communities. This seems, in large part, to be due to Punjabi gender norms that may prohibit women from traveling as freely as men do in order to pursue performing *Gurbani kirtan* as a profession.[119] I should stress that it is very common to see women in American Sikh communities fulfilling many of the duties that professional *granthīs* perform—i.e. preparing and distributing *karah parshad*, tending to Guru Granth Sahib, performing *kirtan*, and so on—but not to see them stepping into the role of professional *granthīs*, and not as commonly as one sees men fulfilling these roles. There are other differences in the roles of men and women that are frequently visible within gurdwara communities. For example, although men do sometimes perform *langar seva* (i.e., cleaning and cooking in the kitchen), this role is disproportionately fulfilled by women at most gurdwaras.[120] When people in Sikh communities talk about this, they chalk such gender disparity up to traditional 'cultural' roles that are "not a part of the Sikh tradition."

As I have discussed in Chapter Two, Sikh gurdwaras around the world, in large part, follow in line with the patterns of the core religious practices observed at the Darbar Sahib, as the 'sacred center' of Sikhism. At the writing of this dissertation, women are currently not allowed to be *granthīs* at the Darbar Sahib, or even allowed to perform *Gurbani kirtan* within this most sacred Sikh religious site.[121] As long as this remains the state of affairs at the site which is regarded by most Sikhs as setting the norms for Sikh

119 However, recently in my fieldwork I have begun to see groups of professional female *ḍhaḍī* singers at special events in gurdwaras in the United States. This is a recent phenomenon, and these are only a few groups who are world famous among Sikhs.

120 This is something that was pointed out to me by many of my interviewees—both male and female—as an unnecessary gender disparity in practices at gurdwaras.

121 Pashaura Singh describes this state of affairs: "Thus far Sikh orthodoxy has explicitly said 'no' to Sikh women to perform kirtan inside the Golden Temple" (Pg. 124. "Musical Chaunkis at the Darbar Sahib: History, Aesthetics, and Time").

religious practice, it is likely that female professional *granthīs* at gurdwaras in the diaspora will still be seen as a radical departure, or at least as non-normative. However, questions about why women are not professional *granthīs*, and why more women are not performing *rāgīs* is already being discussed among my interviewees, especially American-born Sikh women. The dearth of female ritual experts and religious leaders is seemingly out of step with the other leadership roles many women play in American gurdwara communities as knowledge-bearers and teachers of the Sikh tradition (I will discuss in the next chapter how the majority of people teaching *kirtan*, as well as classes in gurmukhi, Sikh religion, and history, are women),. Thus, it would be surprising if, within the current or next generation, there are not strong calls for full gender equality within the realm of religious leadership in the Sikh diaspora.

6.3 Linguistic and Cultural 'Disconnect' between Immigrant *Granthīs* and *Rāgīs* and American-Born Sikhs

Due to the current situation of religious leadership I have described above, in which most g*ranthīs* and *rāgīs* are temporary workers or recent immigrants who often serve populations who are increasingly American-born, there is often a 'disconnect' between the g*ranthīs* and *rāgīs* of a community and the second- (and subsequent) generation members of their communities, especially due to a language barrier, and perceived 'old world' views and practices. Eleanor Nesbitt portrays this same scenario

within gurdwaras in the U.K. (the primary site of her ethnographic research) and throughout the worldwide Sikh diaspora:

> ...for Sikhs in the diaspora... the *granthīs* and *Gīānīs* are in many cases recent arrivals from Punjab, with little grasp of their sangat's social context. The greater ease of diaspora-born Sikhs in the vernacular (usually English) that in Punjabi makes discussions of ethical dilemmas even less feasible, and fear of gossip within the community also discourages openness."[122]

As discussed above, it was actually relatively rare for me to meet any *granthīs* or *rāgīs* working in U.S. gurdwara communities who spoke English fluently. Bhai Hardeep Singh was among my few interviewees who is a *granthī* who speaks both fluent English and Punjabi, and he explained to me how much of an asset this was to his ability to connect with the younger generation of people in his gurdwara community:

> [Interviewer: Do they appreciate that you speak English?] Yes... most of the youngsters they love me very much, because most of their *Baba-jis*[123] do not know English, that's why they do not understand. That's the problem, most of our little guys who are born here, they do not know Punjabi, so that's why when they want to speak Punjabi sometimes, they don't have a voice to say it. So I say, 'OK, speak in English, I'm here to help explain'. [Interviewer: Do you ever give *kathā* in English? For kids?] Actually, there was a problem, because parents heard me teaching the kids in English, and at that time some parents came to me and said 'we are coming here so our kids will learn Punjabi, to make our kid attached [to] Gurmukhi, and if you teach them in English, they will never learn Gurmukhi'. But in the discussion classes, [in] learning classes, we all speak English. Now I've changed my style, they ask a question in English and I answer in Punjabi, ha!

Certainly the fear that young American-born Sikhs will become increasingly disconnected from Sikh communities led by people who do not speak their first language is one that I have often heard repeated. As Bhai Hardeep Singh pointed out, this seems to

---

122 Pg. 133. Nesbitt, Eleanor. Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

123 Roughly a respectful term for 'elders', but here used to refer to *granthīs* and *rāgīs*.

be one primary reason that it is so common for gurdwara communities to put resources into having Punjabi schools. I have also talked to many young American-born Sikhs who have discussed how they frequently "have no idea what is going on" at the gurdwara when a *granthī* performs *kathā* or makes announcements only in Punjabi. One President of a gurdwara committee in a large southern California gurdwara highlighted this problem and pointed to his hope that the solution to the language issue will be the establishing of American-born g*ranthīs* and *rāgīs* in the future:

> ...why would you go to an organization where you just, kind of do[n't] know what's going on? ...So, you need the *granthīs* and *kirtaniyas* who are their [second generation Sikhs Americans'] peers... Part of the problem for those folks, younger people, [wanting] to come to the gurdwara is [the need] to see one of them[selves] become the *kirtaniya*, and [to see] one of *them* become the *granthī*.

However, at the same time, this gurdwara president was one of several of my interviewees who acknowledged that among the roadblocks that American Sikh communities face in moving toward 'homegrown' leadership are issues surrounding the pay and treatment (in terms of respect and authority) of *granthīs* in American Sikh communities. This leads well into discussing our next issue.

6.4 Pay, Treatment, and Respect and Authority of *Granthīs* and *Rāgīs* within American Communities

Throughout my interviews with *granthīs* and *rāgīs* working in the U.S., I have often been surprised by how willing many of them have been to be candid in describing some of the problems that they face, including low pay, and feelings that the level of

respect that they receive is sometimes low or that their authority and level of education and training are disregarded by members of their communities. Perhaps even more surprising, presidents and members of gurdwara management committees have also been quite candid with me about what they see as the problems surrounding leadership in gurdwaras, including agreeing that the pay and treatment of *granthīs* and *rāgīs* is often poor. Based on my interviews, the average level of pay for full time *granthīs* in most gurdwaras (both large and small) is about $600 to $800 per month.[124] Though room and board are almost always included with this—usually food from the community's *langar* kitchen and a small studio apartment—this amount of pay is barely half of the United States federal minimum wage for someone working full time.[125] However, most *granthīs* work many more than forty hours per week due to the schedule of their liturgical duties and it is very rare for them to have vacations or medical benefits.

When I asked the president of one southern California gurdwara committee if he thought 'home-grown' *granthīs* and *rāgīs* would emerge from the current or next generation of Sikh Americans, he answered, "[w]ell, you see...there is no compensation

124 In some communities, this base monthly pay is supplemented by donations given directly to a *granthī*, or, especially to a *rāgī jatha*—usually directly during or after a performance of *kathā* or *Gurbani kirtan*. Especially during a particularly well received session of *kirtan*, Sikhs will walk to the front of the gurdwara to place small cash donations in front of the *rāgī jatha*. In most communities, this would provide a source of additional income that could fluctuate greatly in terms of amount. However, in some gurdwaras, I have seen this money picked up and added to the regular donations collected in a collection box in front of Guru Granth Sahib, and I do not know then how it can be directly distributed to the performing *rāgī jatha* except as part of their monthly pay.

125 $1160.00 per month based on forty hour work weeks in a four week month at the current minimum wage rate of $7.20 per hour. In the U.K., there is at least one case of a granthī who had worked for years in a gurdwara community for £50 per week taking his case to court and being awarded by a judge the equivalent to those years wages at the minimum wage rate. See: Doughty, Steve. "Volunteer worker at Sikh temple who received £50 a week in donations wins right to be paid minimum wage", The Daily Mail, February 20, 2012. (http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2103973/Volunteer-worker-Sikh-temple-received-50-week-donations-wins-right-paid-minimum-wage.html)

[for *granthīs* or *rāgīs*]". He continued, explaining that the second generation of American-born Sikhs,

> ...[are] focused on making their millions... [but they] don't want to pay [*granthīs* and *rāgīs*]... Some of these three-member [*kirtan*] *jathas*, they are getting $800.00 for the month [for all three of them], and how can they live? ...[T]he unfortunate part is, all the gurdwaras are doing well... they're raising all the money [for gurdwara projects] from themselves, but the compensation to these guys [*granthīs* and *rāgīs*] is so poor, that the poor guy [can't live]... and their whole logic is 'we are sponsoring him for a green card', or whatever it is... [but] it's not right, you know.

I asked the same question about 'home-grown' leadership in a conversation with a different president of a gurdwara committee from a Sikh community in northern California, and he expressed the opinion that most *granthīs* in the U.S. lacked education, and that this was why gurdwara committees felt justified paying them low wages:

> What can you expect from the *Bhais* [*granthīs*] who gurdwaras hire for so cheap? Communities spend millions of dollars to build a gurdwara, but when they go to hire a *Bhai-ji*, they are looking for someone who will take less pay. Ask all of the gurdwara committees in the U.S. how much they pay to *Bhai-jis*; then you will know [how low it is]. We are in the twenty-first century but our religious preachers are uneducated. Can you find any scholar of the Sikh Religion who is a *Bhai-ji* in any of our gurdwaras?

This interviewee's perception that *granthīs* 'lack education' did not fit well with the education levels of most of the *granthīs* who I have interviewed. However, this committee president corroborated that the monthly pay of most *granthīs* in the U.S. is "between $600.00-$700.00". His comments also portray the pay issue as something of a 'self-fulfilling prophecy', in which gurdwara hiring committees perceive *granthīs* as 'uneducated,' and therefore perhaps not 'worth' much pay, so that the pay level that they

offer may only be attractive to less educated *granthīs* from disadvantaged backgrounds—or those willing to make sacrifices in their lifestyle to pursue a religious calling.

Presenting a seeming contradiction with the current state of low pay as it is described by *granthīs*, *rāgīs*, and gurdwara committee members, it is fairly common to hear my everyday Sikh American interviewees malign *granthīs* and *rāgīs* as 'greedy' or 'only in it for the money' (i.e., impugning their religious reasons for choosing the profession). This stereotype is repeated by some young American-born Sikhs who I have talked to, even though most of them seem to have very little direct knowledge about what *granthīs* lives are like or what their actual duties are. The stereotype of 'the greedy *granthī*' or *rāgī* is exacerbated (and probably informed) by the handful of news stories from India from the past ten years that are recirculated on the internet about cases of financial impropriety involving *granthīs* and gurdwara donations (such a story can draw a large amount of interest and ire, just as similar such stories about people in leadership positions in other religions pilfering funds do). The stereotype of 'the greedy *granthī*' (or *rāgī*) may have deeper roots in perceptions about the earlier *pujārī* and *mahant* traditions, who the Singh Sabha reformists (in particular) accused of being greedy and of having dubious piety as Sikhs. The stereotype may also arise from the fact that many *rāgīs*/*granthīs* were historically from caste backgrounds considered to be 'low' (i.e., *mirasis*, *dums*). A number of my interviewees related their perception that many *rāgīs* and *granthīs* are in fact from 'low' caste or orphan backgrounds, and said that Sikh missionary schools are traditional bodies that house orphans, ultimately educating many of them for

these professions. They also related that people from such disadvantaged backgrounds are often those most likely to be willing to spend years away from their family to travel to the U.S or elsewhere in the diaspora because the pay is comparatively high enough when remitting the money back to India. It is noteworthy that even some of the most well-known *rāgīs* who I have interviewed have also described the situation similarly. Bhai Tajvinder Singh (who I profile in the next chapter) said that he thinks people are often "forced" into this career by lack of other job prospects and a background of poverty, such as having been orphaned, rather than choosing to be a *rāgī* or *granthī* as a vocation. Bhai Kultar Singh (profiled in this chapter and the next), Bhai Baldeep Singh, and Surinder Singh (both of whom I will profile in the next chapter), all spoke extensively during their interviews with me about how they had left lucrative careers and made "sacrifices" to pursue a life performing *Gurbani kirtan*.

Contradicting the perception among some members of Sikh communities that *rāgīs* and *granthīs* may be 'greedy' or perhaps making more money than they are, the *granthīs* I have interviewed described situations of poor pay and sometimes a lack of respect from gurdwara committees who have *de facto* control over their position and the gurdwara. In my interview with Bhai Jagjeet Singh (profiled above), I asked him, "it seems like *granthī* is position of a lot of respect but maybe not very much pay?", and he replied:

> In... the biggest Gurdwara in the U.S., how much do you think they pay their head priest? Maybe $600 or $700 [per month]... Because they don't want to bring a learned person, because if they bring a learned person, they will have to listen to that *granthī*! But they want to control the *granthī*, so they choose a person who is

> not much of a learned person. In [my gurdwara], I had this problem too. I wanted to acquire a[n assistant *granthī*] from Sikh Missionary College. Very few *granthīs* [in the diaspora] are from Sikh missionary College, mostly they acquire people who know a little bit about *Gurbani*, a little bit about Sikhism, and they adopt this profession. So I said to them, in the Sikh religion, the head priest is supposed to be very high, number one after Guru Granth Sahib. The head priest has authority, he has to guide the management committee, they have to listen. But most people on management committees, they want the *granthī* to be under them [in authority].

I asked Bhai Jagjeet Singh if he meant that gurdwara committees want *granthīs* who will do as they say, and he said "[y]es, so this is a negative thing in my community still, but we hope it will change." He continued, explaining to me how he felt that his position was often dictated by a management committee who controls the funds of the gurdwara:

> When I came here, I said very simply, 'I'm not your servant, you are the management committee, yes I will cooperate with you, but I am the head priest. My duty is to teach the Gurus' message, according to the Sikh religion, not just to please you guys. So this was kind of my system, and this was the kind of respect I got. So I did very good there, I gained respect there. But later, I decided I had to leave from there, because political factions are getting much stronger, [and] they want that kind of people, so I decided to go away. [That's when] I gave my resignation and I started my own [mobile] organization" [Interviewer: Because of gurdwara politics you decided to leave?] Yes. Because when they are the management committee, they can give you a hard time, they can put you under pressure. When you are under pressure, you can't enjoy Gurbani, you can't enjoy this religious life. So I decided to go away, and start my own [mobile] organization, and I am very happy now.

Since he had brought it up, I asked Bhai Jagjeet Singh to speak further about the connection between low pay and the perception that *granthīs* are poorly educated. He said:

> From a very young age... From before my schooling I decided, 'I will do *kirtan*', this kind of service. [Interviewer: Is this why some people are willing to do this work for very little money, because they see it as a life of service?] Yes, this is one

> reason, because they think this is... lower class. If they pay less to us, it's okay. But if you give them good wages, good salaries, good, facilities, more educated people can come very easily. That's why people, when they are educated, if they have good education, they decide to choose different paths. Maybe they do *kirtan* as a hobby, but not a profession. This is our problem. But overall, we are happy, because ninety-nine percent of people are so kind, so generous, so lovable, so devoted.

I followed this by asking Bhai Jagjeet Singh if he thought that most American-born Sikhs respected *granthīs*, to which he replied optimistically, "I think so. [The] 'politicians' [in gurdwaras] are different, but [the] normal people of the *sangat*, they are very respectful of *granthīs*. That's why our American future is so bright."

During my interview with Bhai Hardeep Singh, he also spent a significant amount of time discussing issues surrounding pay and a perceived lack of respect for the education that *rāgīs* or *granthīs* may have undergone to pursue their positions. He said: "...when we started learning [*kirtan*], there was a [promise] that if we learn this subject, this vocal classical music, this can give us food, a job, so we were preparing ourselves at that time on that idea." However, Bhai Hardeep Singh related that for many of his friends who had pursued lifelong dreams of becoming *rāgīs* or *granthīs*, they had ended up leaving it behind as a profession when they were unable to support themselves. He connected this with what he perceived to be a shift in the level of respect accorded to *rāgīs* or *granthīs*:

> So if you want someone to learn this, first the[ir] financial problems should be solved by the committees and the people who are learning [from them], and second if you are making [lessons in *kirtan*] available for free, the people don't really care about this—I mean, some people care, but [if they don't], I say 'Ok, fine, someone else will come [and want to learn]... When we were going to our teachers, we called them '*Ustad-ji*', and we bowed our heads in front of them, like

> a god, or massaging his hands and his bones. With these kids [today], when you are giving them a lesson it's like you're holding your neck out for them. The tradition has changed. So, my friend, I can say honestly, today most of the good [Sikh] musicians are [now pursuing other jobs]. They left this Gurdwara Sahib because of this kind of situation. In my case, teaching here, I see as I am teaching them that my expenses, my housing is not fulfilled from this job, so I might have to find another way [to live]. So, these things, we are providing [them for] free to everyone and after all that they are not caring.

I followed this by asking Bhai Hardeep Singh the same question I had asked Bhai Jagjeet Singh: "It seems like *granthīs* and *rāgīs* are very important in the Sikh tradition, but maybe not high paying positions?", to which he replied:

> That's right. In Christianity, you can see that a priest has [a] very big [amount of] right[s] and he can do whatever with his qualifications. This [being a *granthī*] is not a good paying position. The one wrong thing is that—I mean, people should be educated, I have five degrees, so after five degrees, I am still taking the same salary from this job. So the Sikh community should think about this. I'm not blaming them, but they might have to think about this. When they're hiring the *Granthī Singh*, he can't ask anything. But if he says 'what about salary?' [they say] 'OK, give him $600 a month, $700 a month' and they say 'we are providing free food and free lodging'. But they are giving free food and free board to us for leaving everything [behind]. The thing is that you spend a lot of time in college to get your degrees to get these positions. If you are principle of that subject [i.e., have some mastery of Sikh music and *Gurmat*] this type of pay that they provide to you is not good.

Bhai Hardeep Singh further portrayed what he saw as the stark nature of the pay situation by telling me about some of the people he has known who came to the U.S. to be *granthīs* and *rāgīs* and have either ended up returning to India or staying in the U.S. but finding other, especially working class jobs:

> But you know, about the salary and the education—I mean, the [gurdwaras] aren't even looking [at] 'if he has a Bachelor's, give him this, if he has a Master's, give him this,' and so on. Some of my friends who came here with me to do this work, they already left, [or] they are truck drivers, or they are doing their own business... Why? I mean they were not making a living after they completed their degrees.

> They left because of this type of system [of pay]. It's not good. So you cannot see great musicians at [a] Gurdwara Sahib because of this.... I completed four masters degrees. So after taking such an education, I got pain from this. This system [of pay] that they are providing for us is not good. In the coming future they will not be able to get good *granthīs* in their Gurdwara Sahibs [this way].

I asked Bhai Hardeep Singh if he thought that gurdwara community members' lack of understanding of the duties of *granthīs* and *rāgīs* and the education many of them have undergone in order to conduct their duties was a factor in issues surrounding pay and respect. He answered:

> No *granthī* becomes a president [of a gurdwara committee], no *granthī* becomes a cashier, or a secretary. The president and secretary, they don't know—they may be baptised, but they do not know deeply about this tradition, about *kirtan*, about giving speeches [*kathā*], about our Guru Granth Sahib. This upper class system [the leadership of gurdwaras] is totally different, that's why they are not giving respect to that kind of person [*granthīs* and *rāgīs*] who are doing their duty.

The *granthīs* who I have interviewed in my field research are probably in better situations within their communities than many. *Granthīs* are frequently in temporary positions in their communities due to immigration and other issues, living in a culture and environment foreign to them, often living away from their families who are (usually) in India, often isolated from other people by living in the gurdwara with no car, and with little money. Stories have emerged about the toll such an isolated life has taken on some people. In at least one instance, a *granthī* working in a U.S. gurdwara took his own life after falling into despair when two of his children died while he was away from his family working in the United States.[126]

---

126 See: Singh, I.J. "A Very Human Tragedy", *Sikhnet*, May 30, 2012. (http://www.sikhnet.com/news/very-human-tragedy). For further discussion of the issues I discuss here about the pay and treatment of *granthīs*, see another article by this same author (and co-authors): "At a Crossroads: Granthis & Gurdwaras, Sikhchic, June 28, 2012. (http://www.sikhchic.com/columnists/at_a_crossroads_granthis_gurdwaras).

All of the above discussions with my interviewees about the current state of leadership roles in American Sikh communities led me to ask them further questions about what they think will happen within the next generation and beyond in terms of how leadership within their communities might change. I particularly wanted to know their opinion about if and when the community might begin to transfer to 'home-grown' leadership—of when American-born Sikhs might begin stepping into leadership roles. I asked Bhai Hardeep Singh what he thought it would take for young Sikh Americans of this generation to want to become professional *granthīs* and *rāgīs*. He replied:

> To be a professional is very hard, it's not easy. You start [your work] at four [am] and you end at ten [pm], eleven [pm], sometimes twelve [midnight], and all the time you have to be on the line, anyone can come to you, anyone can approach you. So you have to be very devoted to this duty, it's very hard. Kids from the U.S.A., they have a little bit different kind of living [laughs]. It's very tough, but they will adopt it [eventually and become *granthīs* and *rāgīs*].

While Bhai Hardeep Singh framed the issue partly as a question about how well Sikh American youth would take to a life of demanding religious dedication, when I asked the two gurdwara committee presidents (whose interviews I presented excerpts from above) what they thought it would take to attract 'home-grown' leadership in American Sikh communities, their answers focused on the pay issue. The first said, "...compensation attracts talent. So, if a university says 'hey, we are hiring a tenured professor', right, and his compensation is $8,000 a year, who is going to apply there? So... the minute you fix the compensation [issue], the talent will come in...". The second gurdwara committee president replied:

> ...if you put the compensation [at] $100,000 [per year], or, whatever the number is, $60,000 with all the benefits, or whatever, I bet you, there will be kids from North America [who will become *granthīs* and *rāgīs*]... and they will be our good role models to speak out [on behalf of Sikh communities]. [Then,] [w]hen there is a crisis, [and the] press comes, ABC is there, NBC radio is there, NPR... they're [the ones] talking. The guy right now [non-English speaking *granthīs* of the current generation], he can't even say for ten seconds what he stands for. That's where the problem is.

When I asked Bhai Jagjeet Singh if he thought that Sikh communities would soon transition to having 'home-grown' leaders drawn from American-born Sikhs, he said:

> Yes, the time will come. In our community we have so many good things, but we also have some bad things. In every community this is happening. In the Gurdwara Sahib, people want to create political problems. This is not a good thing in my community. That's why a lot of people do not want to take the position of a 'head priest', and financially it's very hard to survive. So this is kind of a problem, but still I hope the new generation will come, yes.

When I asked Bhai Hardeep Singh the same question about whether he thinks 'home-grown' leaders will emerge soon in American Sikh communities, he answered:

> ...Sikhs have been coming here [to my community] for thirty years, [and have been] here [in the U.S.] for one-hundred years, and they have not been able to make any musicians, any *kirtaniyas* who sing and record as a profession, because, the thing is this, they are not very serious about these things, so this is a big tragedy for us and a very big pain for us... [But e]verything is OK, I mean, we pray to God every day, 'God please, just help clean their minds from this, so that they might respect their *granthīs*', and not only the *granthīs*. They are respecting with their words, but not from their hearts. When the kids [of this generation] find that respect from their hearts—every kid who is baptised, maybe then he or she might want to be a *granthī*. She might want to be a *kirtaniya*.

I will discuss further below, and also in the next chapter, how Sikh communities in the United States may already be beginning to address the question of how to form 'home-grown' leadership.

7.0 Comparison of Current Sikh Communities With Earlier Immigrant Groups in American History

In many ways, the current historical moment that Sikh communities in the United States find themselves in bears some striking similarities to the periods of 'growing pains' experienced by earlier immigrant religious groups in American history. Especially during the periods of these immigrant communities' transitions from being predominantly first (immigrant) generation toward being predominantly second- and third- (American-born) generations, Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant immigrant communities of the nineteenth century United States bear many similarities to the Sikh communities of today, including: drawing leaders primarily 'from the old country'; a language and cultural gap between the first and second generations, especially between immigrant leaders and second generation laity; and highly trained leaders describing a lack of respect from their communities evidenced by a perceived drop in their authority from 'the old country', pay issues, and religious leaders' expected deference to lay community members (especially those who had donated financially to the community). Below, I quote at length from the work of some prominent scholars of Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic American history to provide illustrative examples of these similarities.

In the Jewish American context, Hasia Diner describes how, with the rapid growth of ethnically diverse immigrant Jewish communities in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, communities addressed their lack of leadership by bringing Rabbis 'from the old country':

> ... a handful of rabbis and intellectuals... decided to join America's growing Jewish communities, particularly after the 1850s. American congregations, which suffered from an acute lack of religious functionaries, often invited them over. Others responded to numerous advertisements in the Jewish press seeking rabbis, readers, [kosher] slaughterers, teachers, and circumcisers for the burgeoning American Jewish communities... Since the law in much of central Europe required that rabbis speak German and possess a university degree, they brought to America a set of experiences and attitudes that differentiated them dramatically from the masses they were to serve.[127]

Further portraying the language disconnect between first-generation (predominantly) German (and Yiddish) speaking Rabbis and the American-born members of their congregations, Diner writes that "[u]nlike some other immigrants of the mid-nineteenth century, few Jewish community leaders doubted the need for Jewish children to grow up learning the language of their new home."[128] For other immigrant groups, learning English was seen as a clear path to success and assimilation, while Jewish Rabbis were still often only conversant in a sacred/liturgical language (Hebrew) and languages of learning (especially German) that affirmed the 'old world'.

Describing the relationship between 'late arriving' Rabbis and the already established structures of lay authority that they encountered, Diner writes:

> The few rabbis who migrated to America in the years 1820 to 1880 came later than the masses, and rather than shape the communities, they usually, and unhappily, served institutions founded by the laity. Of the rabbis who migrated, those most smitten by the winds of Reform[129] found America most attractive, while the more traditional ones knew that America was a place where congregations were the domain of the laity who accepted or rejected traditions as they wanted. But even the modern rabbis eager to innovate found themselves stymied by ordinary members who in their synagogues acted as Americans,

---

127 Pg. 45. Diner, Hasia R. *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration, 1820-1880*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

128 Pg. 220. Ibid.

129The Reform Tradition or Reform Movement is now a distinct branch of Judaism that was in its beginnings during the period of history that Diner is writing about.

> asserting the right of citizens to determine policy and operating on the principle of 'no taxation without representation.' Their dues built the synagogues and paid the rabbis; therefore, they believed they had as much voice in decisions over ritual practice as did the rabbinate, whether ordained or not. What characterized American Judaism of these years was the widespread belief on the part of the laity that it had the right to change tradition as it saw fit and that American Jewish life derived its power from the 'consent of the governed' as did the machinery of the American political system.[130]

Further describing these frequent conflicts of authority between the Rabbis and Laity, Diner later continues:

> Rabbinic authority, so central to traditional Judaism, could not be maintained in America either. Institutional conflicts between rabbis and their congregations ran rife through the communities. Squabbles over ritual and fights over petty insults and questionable behavior in almost every congregation pitted the previously privileged rabbis against the now empowered American laymen. Since in America the congregations came first, created from the grass roots, dues-paying members treated congregations as their domain. To the congregation, the rabbi was an employee with a contract, serving at the pleasure of the board... the rabbis trained to believe in the principle of *mare d'atra*, that authority rested with the rabbi of the place, engaged in endless arguments, disputes, and even occasionally physical confrontations. Rabbis, many of whom actually did not have formal ordination, went from congregation to congregation, city to city, and disputes between them and the laity erupted everywhere.[131]

Obviously, these descriptions of relations in the nineteenth century between Jewish religious leaders and their lay congregations bear remarkable similarities with comments from my interviews with Sikh *granthīs* above, especially in regards to their relationships with the committees that exercise control in their gurdwara communities. Such parallels can also be seen with Protestant and Catholic American communities during the time period(s) of their rapid migrations to the United States in the nineteenth century.

---

130 Pg. 3. Diner, Hasia R. *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration, 1820-1880*.
131 Pg. 120 Ibid..

Protestant immigrant communities of different ethnic and national backgrounds who arrived in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century provide such points of comparison. For example, among the first wave of Scandinavian immigrants to the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, Jenna Joselit writes that there were,

> ... [a] small number of Lutheran pastors to tend to the immigrants' spiritual needs; only a handful accompanied their parishioners as they made their way from one part of the world to another. In the absence of an established religious presence, settlers had to make do, calling on one another to conduct services, using a roughhewn wooden table for communion and a beer glass for a [communion] chalice.[132]

This description of the early phase in Scandinavian immigration to the United States recalls some of the ways that Sikh communities 'made do' in terms of 'lay' religious leadership and adapting religious practice discussed in Chapter Two. Further describing the relationship of pastors and congregations in early Scandinavian Protestant immigrant communities, Joselit continues:

> Meanwhile, the few Lutheran church leaders who did emigrate along with their flocks often faced considerable discord. Any pastor who comes over to America, wrote one, finds that a 'battle of controversy' awaits him. 'Confused by silly notions of liberty,' Norwegians in the New World 'take it into their hands to reorganize the church community,' challenging religious authority at every turn. Religious leaders from the Church of Sweden fared no better than their Norwegian counterparts. Helplessly, they watched as their people worshiped elsewhere or not at all. It was simply impossible to organize a religious congregation, lamented pastor Lars Paul Esbjorn, his patience worn thin by repeated failure. The Swedes in America, he observed, 'wish to know nothing of piety.' Neither were the pious themselves strangers to conflict. Time and again throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, their ranks were split between those who favored the use of Norwegian or Swedish during church service and those who preferred English; between those who clamored for more ceremony and greater religious authority and those who argued for less. Despite a steady

132 Pg. 21. Joselit, Jenna Weissman. *Parade of Faiths: Immigration and American Religion*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

> succession of quarrels and disappointments, the Lutheran Church took root in America, becoming one of the nation's leading Protestant denominations.[133]

Thus, the perceived points of 'disconnection' between immigrant religious leaders and their American communities—in terms of language, piety, and concepts of authority—within these immigrant Protestant communities again bear similarities with the comments of my Sikh *granthī* and *rāgī* interviewees.

Describing the situation of American Catholic immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century, Jay Dolan writes that "two schools of thought were manifest in the American Catholic community. One desired to fashion an indigenous church, an American Catholicism; the other wanted to transplant to the new nation a continental European version of Roman Catholicism."[134] In spite of the pressure in the United States to learn English in order to assimilate into life in the new country, from the early 1800s to the early 1900s many European Catholic immigrants from different countries of origin continued to conduct religious services in their native languages of German, Italian, Polish, French, and so on.[135] In order to cater to the distinct linguistic and religio-cultural needs and expectations of these different Catholic communities "...many of the immigrant [Catholic] groups arrived accompanied by priests who could conduct services in their native languages. Thus, ethnic national parishes arose alongside, sometimes literally next door to, territorial parishes."[136] Chester Gillis writes that "[i]n order to meet their spiritual needs the [American] bishops permitted [these] ethnic parishes that functioned in the

133 Pgs. 21-22. Ibid.
134 Pg. 167. Jay Dolan. *The American Catholic Experience*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992.
135 Pg. 60. Gillis, Chester. *Roman Catholicism in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
136 Ibid.

languages of the immigrants... [because such] national parish[es] assured them of religious identity, helped them to preserve their language and traditions, and eased them into American society."[137] Thus, for Catholic immigrants of the nineteenth century, the language 'disconnect' between the first- and second- (and later) generations was in some localities mitigated by the existence of these national parishes. However, one imagines similar scenes in these early Catholic immigrant communities as those that are frequently viewed in today's Sikh gurdwaras: an older generation conversing in the mother tongue of 'the old country' and younger generations conversing in the English of their schooling and everyday social environment.

Portraying another point of similarity with the Sikh American communities of today (and also with the Jewish and Protestant communities discussed above) in regard to a perceived conflict between the authority of religious officiants and lay leaders, Gillis writes that "[i]n many cases the laity held the deed to parish property and buildings, giving them more of a say in the governing of the parish."[138] In line with this, Gillis continues:

> The German parishes had powerful lay trustees who sometimes bought land and constructed churches without consultation with the clergy. . . . in any of these [ethnic] parishes there could be tensions between people, priests, and bishop over matters of jurisdiction. Lay trustees generally had control of the purse strings in the parish, which sometimes put them at odds with the pastor or the bishop. The battle over the assignment of priests proved thornier still. In some parishes the people sought control, or at least veto power, over the assignment of priests. The bishop coveted the same control. When they disagreed, sometimes the bishop assigned a different priest who might be more sympathetic to the needs of a particular parish; at other times, when compromise did not work, the bishop

137 Pg. 61. Gillis, Chester. *Roman Catholicism in America*.
138 Pg. 61. Ibid.

> threatened the people with excommunication if they did not accept his appointee[139].

Jay Dolan opines that “[s]uch struggles over power and authority were *typically American* and Catholic.”[140]

Though it would require further qualitative research to fully assess, it seems obvious that it is also the case within American Sikh communities that broadly held American conceptions of 'freedom' and 'individualism' influence Sikh Americans in ways that are affecting patterns of authority and leadership in American Sikh communities. It is, doubtless, one of the contours of 'American Sikhism' as it is currently emerging that, as the considerable wealth of the highly educated and highly successful first generation has largely made possible the rapid building of gurdwaras in the United States, *granthīs* and *ragīs* fulfill leadership roles that are often subordinated to the wills of management committees made up of wealthy donors. As the Sikh community in the United States transitions to a point—as earlier immigrant communities did—at which the majority of community members are American-born, it remains to be seen how Sikh communities will address the question of leadership differently than they are in the current moment, what shape 'homegrown' leadership will take, and if this 'homegrown' leadership will follow patterns similar to those of earlier immigrant communities.

---

139 Ibid.

140 Pg. 167, italics mine. Jay Dolan. *The American Catholic Experience*.

8.0 Conclusion: The Future of Leadership in Diaspora Sikh Communities

Concluding this chapter with a discussion of points of comparison between the current situations of Sikh communities in the United States and earlier immigrant groups of different religions brings into relief open-ended questions about how Sikh communities will address the need for leadership in the future and in what ways these answers might follow patterns similar to earlier immigrant communities. Currently, Sikh communities in the United States find themselves in a phase of 'growing pains' as they transition from being made up primarily of first-generation immigrants, to being primarily made up of second- and continuing generations born in the United States. Most of the issues surrounding leadership roles in Sikh communities discussed above—a 'disconnect' in terms of language and culture between 'first' and subsequent generations, differing interpretations of gender roles, questioning by the 'pioneer' first-generation and subsequent generations of 'old world' modes of leadership and authority—were all issues that earlier immigrant communities to the United States weathered during their first few generations making a life in the new country. It will remain interesting for scholars of Sikh Studies and religion and immigration to follow how American Sikh communities continue to take shape in the next few decades.

One of the issues discussed above, that of the language 'disconnect' between immigrant *granthīs*, *rāgīs* and some first-generation immigrants, and the generations of Sikhs born in the U.S., seems likely to be resolved through a pattern familiar in other American immigrant communities. As discussed above, Verne A. Dusenbery has

skillfully elucidated the reasons why the Sikh tradition on the whole is unlikely to embrace the performance of the hymns of Guru Granth Sahib in anything but their original Gurmukhi (literally, as the Words came from the mouths of the Gurus) language. [141] Many of the excerpts from my interviews with *granthīs* and *rāgīs* also make clear my interviewees' understandings of the Sikh tradition's “non-dualistic ideology of language” in the ways that my interviewees discuss the powerful nature of the *sound* of the original Words of the Gurus, which is not retained in translation. Thus, while it seems fairly inevitable that English will become the vernacular *lingua franca* within gurdwara communities that are predominantly made up of American-born Sikhs (as is already happening in some communities), in terms of religious practice, Sikhs in the United States seem much more likely to follow a pattern similar to Jewish Americans and Muslim Americans in retaining a ritual/liturgical language alongside a common spoken language, rather than shift to conducting services and liturgy in English, as American Protestants and Catholics have. The fundamental importance of Punjabi/Gurmukhi as both a scriptural and heritage language is also unlikely to change, and Sikh communities have already, for almost a generation, been expending a large amount of effort in building 'Punjabi school' programs in their communities to maintain this language among new generations. These schools are very similar in many ways to the Hebrew schools and Arabic schools attached to (or associated with) synagogue and mosque communities in their fulfilling the function of teaching the essential scriptural language and spoken

141 “The Word as Guru: Sikh Scripture and the Translation Controversy” in *Sikhs at Large: Religion, Culture, and Politics in Global Perspective*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008.

heritage language of their respective religio-cultural traditions. With the efforts that Sikh communities are putting into teaching young American-born (and educated) Sikhs how to read and speak Punjabi/Gurmukhi, and toward making the original Gurmukhi of Guru Granth Sahib accessible to those for whom English is their first language (e.g., by providing slide-shows when the scriptures are performed during gurdwara functions with parallel Gurmukhi, transliterated characters, and English translations), it seems clear that Gurmukhi's liturgical status will remain secure, even as English becomes the primary spoken language of most Sikh Americans. I will discuss in the next chapter how American Sikh communities are already creating some of the conditions for the next generation to be ready to be 'homegrown' leaders within their communities by training large numbers of American-born Sikhs how to perform *Gurbani kirtan* in the original Gurmukhi.

In the current historical moment, when the vast majority of Sikh Americans are either of the first-generation (immigrants born in India or outside of the U.S.) or, increasingly, the second generation (the children of the first generation),[142] the Sikh American community is in a rapidly growing and changing stage. The answers that Sikh communities will come to about questions surrounding future leadership roles in the United States are still largely open-ended. It is clear, however, that, within Sikh communities, hopes are almost universally very high that the future of Sikhism in the United States is bright and that the first generation will continue to find ways to pass on

142 Of course some Sikh Americans have family roots going back several generations, and even to the first Sikh 'pioneers' who came at the end of the nineteenth century.

Sikh ways of being and knowing, as well as hand over leadership roles, to the next generation. The following chapter (Chapter Five) will explore how Sikh communities in the United States are expending enormous amounts of effort and resources to teach a second and third generation of American-born Sikhs how to perform *Gurbani kirtan* as a primary means of passing on Sikhism. Within the chapter, I will discuss some of the ways that American Sikh communities are already beginning to address questions surrounding the future of leadership in the United States.

Figure 4.1 A *granthī* performs *chaur seva*, fanning the air around Guru Granth Sahib (photo by the author).

Figure 4.2 Bhai Kultar Singh performs *kirtan* (photo by the author).

Chapter Five: Teaching *Gurbani Kirtan* in the United States

1.0 Introduction

As we have seen in Chapter Two, Sikhs have deep roots in the United States dating back to the 1890s. Due to discriminatory immigration policies and other factors, the Sikh population in the U.S. remained relatively small throughout the early half of the twentieth century. Following U.S. immigration reform, especially the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act,[1] the number of Sikh Americans began to grow. With the very rapid increase in immigration of Sikhs to the U.S. in the post-1965 era, there was an attendant increase in the resources—monetary, human, and otherwise—within American Sikh communities. These increased resources within communities, coupled with an American environment that has continued to become (comparatively) more multi-religious and multi-cultural, have enabled today's communities to flourish and affirm Sikh identity and practice in the United States in ways that their forbears of the 1890s-1950s struggled toward, but could mostly only dream of. In the decades since the 1960s, growing Sikh communities have increasingly devoted vast amounts of time, resources, and effort toward keeping continued generations of Sikh Americans connected with Sikh communities, traditions, history, and ways of being and knowing. As discussed in Chapter Three, I interpret *Gurbani kirtan* (musical performance of the Word of the Gurus) as such an embodied Sikh way of being and knowing, and *kirtan* performances as a site for the

1 See: 89th Congress of the United States. 1965. *H.R. 2580: An Act to amend the Immigration and Nationality Act, and for other purposes* (a.k.a. *1965 Immigration and Nationality Act*; a.k.a. the *Hart-Cellar Act*) Pub.L. 89-236; 79 Stat. 911. October 3, 1965.

performance of Sikh identity and continuously re-newing and re-living the co-presence of *Guru Granth* and *Guru Panth* (the Word as Living Guru and the community blessed as the caretakers and interpreters of the Word). *Gurbani kirtan*—like central religious and cultural practices of other peoples—provides a locus for Sikhs to 'perform themselves for themselves.'[2] In this way, *Gurbani kirtan*, as a central Sikh worship practice, has contributed to making Sikhism 'portable'—open to being re-performed, re-interpreted, re-membered, and re-lived in new contexts. Speaking directly to this, many of the Sikh Americans I have talked to throughout my years of field research in Sikh communities have expressed to me their feeling that *Gurbani kirtan* is 'keeping the faith alive' in the United States and around the world.

In this chapter, I examine efforts within U.S. Sikh communities to teach *Gurbani kirtan* as one of the primary ways that they are teaching younger generations how to be Sikh in the United States. The chapter is intended as less of a theoretical exploration than Chapter Three, and more as an ethnographic 'snapshot' of people currently teaching *Gurbani kirtan* in the U.S. drawn from my fieldwork, observations, and personal interviews from the last several years in Sikh communities (and on a research trip to India in Summer 2011). My intent is to give a concise but relatively full portrait of those teaching *kirtan* in American communities limited to people who I have personally interviewed.[3] I will discuss people teaching *kirtan* in the United States under the

2 As discussed in Chapter Three, further examples of scholarship exploring religion and culture as 'performance' include: Erving Goffman, 1959; Richard Schechner and Willa Appell, 1990; Barbara Myerhoff, 1995; and Robert Orsi, 1985.

3 Many of these interviews have taken place over the course of many meetings and sometimes they encompass many hours of recorded (and unrecorded) conversations. From these long conversations, I

following groupings: organized *kirtan* academies and organizations; well-known *kirtaniyas* (sacred musicians) who hold periodic workshops in the U.S.; professional music teachers; and volunteer (*sevadar*) teachers within gurdwara schools and communities. It is not my intention to propose this as any kind of rigid typology (especially since there is arguably overlap between these different groupings), but typologizing this way allows for further examination of the methods and aims of different *kirtan* teachers.

2.0 Organized *Kirtan* Teaching Academies and Organizations

I include under the grouping 'Organized *kirtan* teaching academies and organizations' relatively organized (relative to individual teachers and volunteers) *kirtan* teaching organizations with a national or international reach.

2.1 The International Institute of Gurmat Studies

The International Institute of Gurmat Studies (IIGS,[4] Figure 5.1) was founded in Lucknow, India in 1955 by Kanwar Harbhajan Singh (later a Captain in the Indian Army). At the time, Harbhajan Singh was nineteen years old and founded the organization as the 'Young Sikh Missionaries.' In its Indian beginnings, the organization hosted camps for young Sikhs in which classes on Sikh history and teachings (*Gurmat*)

have tried, in the space of this chapter, to condense some essential points. When not referenced individually, or otherwise noted, quoted material and biographical elements throughout this chapter are drawn from my personal interviews with the people who I am writing about.

4 www.iigs.com

were taught, workshops encouraged young Sikhs to maintain the 'five Ks', and *kirtan* and study of *Gurbani* (Word of the Sikh Gurus) were taught. In 1972, the organization changed its name to the Institute of Gurmat Studies and hosted its first co-educational camp (including women was considered a pioneering move at the time). In 1979, the Institute of Gurmat Studies added 'International' to its title, after hosting its first camp in Nepal. After the violence and turmoil in India of 1984—including his family's home being threatened by rioters—Harbhajan Singh moved with his family to California (in 1985), which remains the headquarters of IIGS today.

IIGS has, since its Indian beginnings, existed as an all-volunteer (*sevadar*) organization and continues to do so today. Since the death of Harbhajan Singh in 2011, IIGS has been coordinated by his son Kaviraj Singh and daughter-in-law Gurpreet Kaur. Among its activities, IIGS has: organized seventy-seven teaching camps internationally, including thirty-four in the U.S.; organized (since 1986) a major yearly gathering of the broader Sikh community in celebration of the birthday of Guru Gobind Singh called 'Darbar-e-Khalsa'; created a book and CDs for teaching *Gurbani kirtan* that have been used within gurdwara schools throughout the U.S.; and created a CD-Rom for *Gurbani* research. From 1985 until 2011, IIGS also conducted an organized *kirtan* academy that met weekly in the Orange County, California area. Many of my interviewees have pointed to this Orange County *kirtan* academy and to the International Institute of Gurmat Studies as the first organization that they can recall that started teaching *kirtan* to Sikh Americans on an organized, large scale. When I meet young U.S.-born *kirtaniyas*,

and many of their first-generation immigrant parents, it is very common (especially if they are from the West Coast) that they have attended an IIGS camp at least once, and perhaps first learned to perform *kirtan* in such a camp. IIGS' model of hosting week-long (or longer) 'camps'—primarily for school-age children, but also for adults—to teach *kirtan* and Sikh beliefs and practices is now widely followed by Sikh gurdwaras and organizations throughout the United States. Many second and third generation[5] Sikh Americans who I meet have attended such a camp at least once, sometimes every year through their school-age years. Now, some second generation Sikh Americans who attended such camps and started to learn *kirtan* this way are bringing their third generation children to camps to learn *kirtan* and volunteering to teach other students. Having attended such Sikh camps and becoming more committed as a Sikh through them is a common narrative and connecting factor among the most deeply religious young Sikh Americans that I meet. Often, young Sikhs have formed lasting bonds with people from other—even distant—North American Sikh communities, and they continue to work with them within Sikh organizations later in life (such connections have also been one of the ways that interviewees have put me in contact with other interviewees outside of their local communities). The roles of this Sikh 'camping movement'—which some of my interviewees argue was begun by the IIGS—in the forming of Sikhism in the United States is a subject I plan to return to in future research.[6]

5 'First generation' refers to those Sikh Americans born outside of the U.S. who immigrated to the U.S., 'second generation' refers to their children who were born in the U.S., and 'third generation' refers to those born in the U.S. with U.S.-born parents.

6 Jasjit Singh has already written a preliminary, but informative chapter about the Sikh 'camping movement' in the U.K.: (2011). 'Sikh-ing Beliefs: British Sikh Camps in the U.K.' in *Sikhs in Europe:*

2.2 The Gurmat Sangeet Project

The Gurmat Sangeet Project[7] is a charitable trust and volunteer organization based in Boston, Massachusetts dedicated to "...the preservation and propagation of... *Gurmat Sangeet*... [and] to disseminating high quality recordings and teaching materials for free."[8] The founder, Sarbpreet Singh, began teaching *Gurbani kirtan* to Sikh youth in the Boston area in 2001 and the organization's Boston chapter is still dedicated to this purpose. The Gurmat Sangeet Project is now forming chapters throughout the U.S. and uses its donation-based operating budget to host or sponsor *Gurbani kirtan* events throughout the U.S. that bring performers and teachers of *kirtan* from around the world. Often these events centered on *Gurbani kirtan* include free teaching workshops open to anyone interested in learning to perform *kirtan* for themselves or within their communities. The Gurmat Sangeet Project has also produced a written *kirtan* 'study guide' that is used by some of the gurdwara schools throughout the U.S. (for instance, I have seen these materials in use in California gurdwara schools). Additionally, the website of the Gurmat Sangeet Project hosts a large and growing collection of audio and video recordings of *Gurbani kirtan* performances, with an emphasis on traditional vocal and instrumental forms. In addition to the Gurmat Sangeet Project, Sarbpreet Singh maintains an active blog about *Gurbani* kirtan,[9] and he is very involved in broad

Migration, Identities, and Representations. Edited by Knut A. Jacobsen and Kristina Myrvold. Surrey, UK: Ashgate.

7 www.gurmatsangeetproject.com

8 Ibid.

9 www.gurmatsangeet.blogspot.com

interfaith activities in the Boston area. He received an award as a 'Bostonian of the Year'[10] in 2012 for his efforts to educate the broader public about the Sikh tradition in the wake of the Oak Creek gurdwara massacre (which I will discuss in Chapter Six). In the future, Sarbpreet Singh hopes to expand the Gurmat Sangeet Project to include offering community funded web-based teaching of *Gurbani kirtan* to students around the world.

2.3 The Raj Academy Conservatoire

The Raj Academy Conservatoire[11] is an organization based in the United Kingdom founded by Professor[12] Surinder Singh (Figure 5.2) in 1994. Among the groups I am referring to as 'Organized *Kirtan* Academies', the Raj Academy most closely fits this designation. The Raj Academy offers courses in 'Gurmat Sangeet',[13] 'Nád Yoga[14] Studies', and, in partnership with Thames Valley University, is offering Certificates, Bachelors, Masters, and PhD degrees in 'Sikh/Indian Music', and MAs in 'Nád Yoga'.[15] Professor Surinder Singh and the teaching staff of the Raj Academy Conservatoire teach their regular classes in the United Kingdom, but they also teach many students in the United

10 Helman, Scott. "Sikh leader Sarbpreet Singh forged community from tragedy: Following the Wisconsin shootings, this Hopkinton man organized a service that enlightened a region." *The Boston Globe*, December 23, 2012. Accessed from: http://www.bostonglobe.com/magazine/2012/12/23/sikh-leader-sarbpreet-singh-forged-community-from-tragedy/Yz3IUxgO8a8kab1R9g2abO/story.html

11 www.rajacademy.com

12 It may be worth noting that the term 'Professor', as used in relation to Professor Surinder Singh, as well as Professor Dalbir Singh and Professor Ranjit Singh who I discuss below, does not refer to a faculty rank in the way that faculty in the context of American universities are "ladder ranked". Rather, it is a title of respect and refers to their advanced degrees (MA equivalent) and teaching of courses in music within College and University settings.

13 '*Sangeet*' is a Sanskrit-derived word for 'music', and '*Gurmat*' refers to the 'path', 'view', 'teachings', and 'way' of the Sikh Gurus, and thus 'Gurmat Sangeet' can be rendered as 'Music in the Gurus' View'.

14 The 'yoga of sound'.

15 www.rajacademy.com

States their curriculum through books and DVDs, and through personal lessons via internet video conferencing and frequent visits to gurdwara communities U.S. Professor Surinder Singh and his closest teaching staff travel almost continuously; for instance, in one southern California community where I have visited their classes and interviewed their students on multiple occasions, they return to teach three-day and four-day workshops every twelve weeks.

Professor Surinder Singh was prepared to follow in his father's footsteps and become a pilot in the Indian Air Force when he had a debilitating accident. Doctors who treated him said that he might never walk or even speak again. Professor Surinder Singh told me that throughout the long days of his recovery he began to listen to *Gurbani kirtan* recordings, and that he eventually started spending more and more time singing and playing *kirtan*. He credits his ultimate recovery to the healing power of music, and developed his curriculum on 'Nád Yoga', “the healing properties of sound,” partly drawing from his personal experience.

Professor Surinder Singh's teaching and speaking style are very personable, and he often uses English colloquial speech or neologisms to explain Sikh concepts and musical terms to his students. For example, during a class I attended, he explained the Punjabi/Sanskrit term *anhad* (usually translated as 'unstruck [sound]') as “ultrasound” or “sound beyond sound”, and he described the healing effects of *Gurbani kirtan* as producing “superhealth” (i.e., producing effects inclusive of, and beyond the physical). Though this style of explicating Punjabi technical terms in common language seems to

resonate especially well with diaspora-born and non-Punjabi Sikh audiences and students, some of my interviewees who I might call 'traditionalists' (including students of some of the other teachers I discuss below) have maligned this aspect of Professor Surinder Singh's teaching—particularly use of the term 'Nád Yoga' to describe Sikh music (I will discuss this further below).

The Raj Academy's teaching emphasizes performing *kirtan* 'as the Gurus intended'—in Professor Surinder Singh's understanding, this means utilizing only the *raags* (musical 'modes') prescribed in the Guru Granth Sahib for specific *Shabads* (hymns) and utilizing only instruments used during the time of the Sikh Gurus, or conceived by the Gurus themselves (Figure 5.3). Thus, the Raj Academy Conservatoire offers instruction in *Gurbani kirtan* on *rabab*, *taus*, *saranda*, *sarangi*, and *dilruba* (traditional Indian stringed instruments associated with the Sikh Gurus), and *jori*/*pakhawaj* (a set of small hand drums thought to represent an earlier step in the evolution of the Indian wooden-bodied two-headed drum, the *mṛdaṅgaṃ*, to the modern, often metal-bodied *tabla* set). This emphasis of Professor Surinder Singh and Raj Academy Conservatoire on 'reviving' the use of 'classical' or 'traditional' Indian stringed instruments (*taanti saaz*) and *raag* forms from Guru Granth Sahib fits into a larger movement desiring to reclaim an 'original'—and thus more 'authentic'—*Gurbani kirtan* tradition.[16] I will discuss this more below after discussing professional teachers, some of whom are also loosely part of this broader movement.

16 This 'classical' revivalist movement within the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition could itself be the subject of a book-length study. I hope to return to the topic at greater length in some later project.

3.0 Professional Teachers

There are a small number of teachers who make their living (sometimes not solely) from teaching *Gurbani kirtan* (and sometimes other styles of Indian classical music). Of those professional *kirtan* teachers I have interviewed in California, most have degrees in music from Indian universities and have transitioned toward teaching from previous careers. Here, I will profile three such teachers.

3.1 Professor Dalbir Singh

Professor Dalbir Singh (Figure 5.4) has Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Indian Music from Guru Nanak Dev University in Amritsar and Panjab University in Chandigarh and studied *sitar* and other stringed instruments under teachers that included the late Pandit Ravi Shankar. He was a professor of music at the Thai Sikh International School in Bangkok in the 1980s-1990s where his wife, Parminder Kaur, was also a professor of music. Since immigrating to the U.S. with his family in 2001, he has worked in the computer hardware industry in California's 'Silicone Valley' area. He is currently transitioning toward being a full time professional music teacher, and for more than ten years he and Parminder (who sadly passed away on April 27, 2014) have taught *Gurbani kirtan* to large classes (one-hundred or more) of children and young adults in the school of a large Bay Area gurdwara community. He also teaches a few dozen more advanced students in private lessons in his home. In these private lessons, he teaches vocals (*kirtan* singing and *Gurbani* pronunciation), harmonium, and stringed instruments (including

taus, *rabab*, *dilruba*, *sitar*, and violin). He also teaches other styles of Indian classical (Hindustani) music. Recently, he has begun teaching a larger body of students via internet video conferencing. Professor Dalbir Singh's young students frequently participate in *Gurbani kirtan* performance competitions at the California state and national levels. Several of his former students, now adults, are doing regular *kirtan seva*—and a few are themselves teaching *kirtan*—within gurdwara communities.

3.2 Professor Ranjit Singh

Professor Ranjit Singh (Figure 5.5) teaches vocals, harmonium, *tabla*, and stringed instruments in the Orange County, California area. He studied *Gurbani kirtan* with multiple teachers, including Sardar Sohan Singh and Gyani Almast Singh, and was a music professor at Government College, Ludhiana from the 1960s to the 1990s. After his retirement, he immigrated to the U.S. with his family in 1999 and has since been one of the most active *Gurbani kirtan* teachers in southern California. Recently, he has expanded his private lessons into a teaching organization, the Bhai Mardana Institute of Music. The primary activities of the Bhai Mardana Institute of Music include private lessons taught by Professor Ranjit Singh himself, by members of his *jatha* (musical group) and family (trained by himself and others), and also by a *sitar* instructor. Professor Ranjit Singh's students also travel to perform *Gurbani kirtan* at competitions and events in California and throughout the U.S. and the Bhai Mardana Institute of Music has started hosting an annual recital of *Gurbani kirtan* and classical Indian instrumental music. Several of

Professor Ranjit Singh's former students have continued to do regular *kirtan seva* in California gurdwaras. Professor Ranjit Singh's students have enthused to me about the warm and generous traditional *ustad*/*shagird* (master teacher/student) relationship that they enjoy with the Professor (with no fixed pay scale for lessons), and his openness to teach any serious student of *Gurbani kirtan*. For many years, Professor Ranjit Singh has also been active in hosting visiting Indian *ragi jathas* and aiding in facilitating their tours of American gurdwaras in the U.S.

3.3 Bhai Manmohan Singh

Bhai[17] Manmohan Singh is a *Gurbani kirtan* teacher based in the Bay Area of California. He developed a passion for *Gurbani kirtan* at a young age, learning *Shabads* from friends and family members and eventually became a *kirtan* teacher in New Delhi for many years. He was invited to be a *Granthi* ('priest', keeper of the Scripture) at a large Bay Area gurdwara and immigrated to the United States with his family in 1987. After long serving in that role, he has turned his focus in recent years to teaching *Gurbani kirtan* professionally. He teaches large classes of children in one of the largest gurdwaras in the Bay Area, and also gives private lessons in *Gurbani kirtan* to children and adults. He told me that his main impetus in devoting himself to teaching is his feeling that every

17 'Bhai', as discussed in Chapter Four, is an honorific title used by Sikhs to refer to someone respected for their sacred knowledge, especially in explication of *Gurbani* or performance of *kirtan*. It is sometimes a contentious issue among Sikhs if people are referred to as 'Bhai', since, in one understanding of the term, 'Bhai' is a formal honorific title that must be bestowed by the Akal Takht, yet in common parlance (especially at gurdwaras), 'Bhai' is freely used as a title of respect for *granthis*, *kirtaniyas*, and others. Within this dissertation, I refer to several people as 'Bhai' because they are commonly referred to this way within their communities, without claiming knowledge about whether these are 'officially' given titles.

Sikh can and should learn to perform *Gurbani kirtan*. To this end, he has created DVDs and books for teaching *kirtan* and a website[18] called 'Learn *Gurbani Kirtan*'. Bhai Manmohan Singh's books, DVDs, and website all emphasize beginning with simple melodic forms in order to 'teach anyone' how to perform *Gurbani kirtan*. His books are used within the *Gurbani kirtan* teaching curriculum of some of the gurdwara schools I have visited in California.

Bhai Manmohan Singh's emphasis on (at least beginning with) relatively 'simple' musical forms so that anyone can learn to perform *Gurbani kirtan* is in line with what could be called the 'style' of *Gurbani kirtan* of the Akhand Kirtani Jatha[19] (AKJ, 'Continuous Kirtan Singing Group'), with which he is affiliated. In distinction from the focus on recovering 'classical' *rāgas* and instrumentation in the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition exemplified by the teachers I will discuss in the next section of this chapter, the AKJ instead emphasize keeping *Gurbani kirtan* performances simple in order to encourage mass congregational singing and focus on 'the Word'. Some of their distinct forms of *Gurbani kirtan* performance—including energetic vocal performance, repetitive chanting of "*Waheguru*", and holding extended or *rain sabai* ('all night') *kirtan* singing sessions—are growing extremely popular in Sikh communities in California and elsewhere throughout the Sikh diaspora.

18 www.learnkirtan.com

19 The AKJ is referred to by some Sikhs as a Sikh 'sect' due to their distinctive dress style, strict vegetarianism, and rejection of the legitimacy of the *rāgamāla* (the 'garland of *rāgas*' that appears at the end of modern printings of Guru Granth Sahib), as well as some other points of differentiation. However, members of the AKJ usually refer to the AKJ as simply an "organization", or "group" of Sikhs that is especially focused on communal *kirtan* singing within their activities.

4.0 Well-known *Kirtaniyas* Who Teach Occasional Workshops in the U.S.

As discussed in Chapter Four, it is very common for gurdwara communities in the U.S. to sponsor the travel of *ragis*/*kirtaniyas* from India (and elsewhere) to come and perform *Gurbani kirtan*. Sometimes this is for a limited set of performances; perhaps one night or day, up to a few weeks. In some gurdwaras, *kirtan* is performed almost entirely by *ragi jathas* from India who are employed for a period of time (perhaps a few weeks to a few months) before returning to India or moving on to another such engagement in North America or elsewhere in the Sikh diaspora. Especially among particularly well-known or well-regarded *kirtaniyas* who travel frequently to perform *kirtan*, it is becoming increasingly common for those who regularly visit U.S. communities to offer periodic classes or workshops on *kirtan* performance for the *sangat* (community members). Here, I will briefly profile three such well known *kirtaniyas* who teach occasional *kirtan* classes or workshops.

4.1 Bhai Baldeep Singh

Bhai Baldeep Singh (Figure 5.6) is a thirteenth generation *kirtaniya* who traces his musical lineage back to the time of the Sikh Gurus.[20] He turned away from a career as a pilot and aeronautical engineer because he felt that "the Sikh *kirtan* tradition was

20 Bhai Baldeep Singh's musical lineage is contested by his detractors. Bhai Kultar Singh (discussed below in section 4.2) affirms that Bhai Baldeep Singh is a member of his family, being his cousin (thus, Bhai Baldeep Singh has at least familial ties to Bhai Kultar Singh's family's musical lineage). As I discuss later in this chapter, such lineage claims are a hotly contested issue among some of the most revered Sikh *kirtaniyas* who have been some of my interviewees. For the purposes of these short ethnographic profiles, I am content to leave any sleuthing of the veracity of claims to lineages and titles to the work of others and take my interviewees' words at face value.

dying."[21] In addition to years of dedicated study and performance of *kirtan*, Bhai Baldeep Singh is one of the major figures in the movement to revive the use of traditional Indian stringed instruments (*taanti saaz*) used during the time of the Sikh Gurus. Toward this end, he has studied luthiery (stringed instrument craft) in India, the U.S., and Italy. From carefully examining stringed instruments thought to be from the Gurus period (held in museums in India and Europe) he has personally hand crafted *rabab, taus* and other stringed instruments. Bhai Baldeep Singh is considered by many to be a rejuvenator of 'classical *kirtan*,' performing *Shabads* in the *raags* prescribed in Guru Granth Sahib, and he has made dedicated efforts toward studying *raag* compositions and styles handed down from the oldest existing lineages of *kirtaniyas*. Since 1996 he has given intensive one and two week long *kirtan* teaching workshops each year within the (primarily non-Punjabi) Sikh community in Española, New Mexico. He has also given lectures, performances, and workshops at UC Berkeley and Hofstra University, and regular performances and periodic teaching workshops within U.S. gurdwaras. Currently he is overseeing the building of the Anad Conservatory,[22] which is planned to be a premiere "Institute of Arts, Aesthetics, Cultural Traditions, and Development Studies," in Sultanpur Lodhi, Punjab, a site considered to be the birthplace of the Sikh religion.[23] Bhai Baldeep Singh is also a contributor to the academic theorizing of Sikh *kirtan*, including within the

21 I personally interviewed Bhai Baldeep Singh in June of 2011 at Sultanpur Lodhi, India. Most of the quotes in this section are taken from that interview.

22 www.anadfoundation.org

23 Ibid. Sultanpur Lodhi is traditionally regarded as the site at which Guru Nanak disappeared for three days while praying in the Kali Bein (rivulet) as described at the beginning of Chapter Two. I visited this site in Summer 2011 and some of the sites traditionally associated with the beginnings of Guru Nanak's religious 'mission', including the Kali Bein.

premier academic journal in Sikh Studies, *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory*.[24] Recently, he has entered the field of politics, running (unsuccessfully) as a candidate for the Aam Aadmi Party ('Common Man's Party') for Punjab's district of Khadoor Sahib's seat of India's Lok Sabha ('House of the People'/lower house of Parliament).[25]

4.2 Dr. Gurnam Singh

Dr. Gurnam Singh also comes from a musical lineage, being the son of *Shiromani Ragi* ('Sikh musician recognized as of the highest order') Bhai Uttam Singh. He is currently the Chair of the Department of Gurmat Sangeet at Punjabi University in Patiala, a position established there in 2003. The Department of Gurmat Sangeet (which I visited in summer 2011) is called the "first academic institution at the global level... dedicated to the research, revival, and preservation of Gurmat Sangeet," and offers Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral degrees in 'Gurmat Sangeet'.[26] The Department of Gurmat Sangeet is also considered by many to be at the forefront of reviving 'classical *kirtan*' instruments and forms, with its teaching programs emphasizing *tanti saaz* (stringed instruments), and the thirty-one original *raags* (and additional subsidiary *raag* forms) of the Guru Granth Sahib. Dr. Gurnam Singh has published extensively in both Punjabi and English about Sikh *kirtan*, and has recorded a number of CDs, including recordings of all "thirty-one raags and thirty-one raag forms" of Guru Granth Sahib. Dr. Gurnam Singh has toured the

24 "What is Kīrtan?" *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory*. Routledge Periodicals, Taylor and Francis Group, Vol. 7, No. 3, Dec. 2011.
25 http://candidates.aamaadmiparty.org/bhai-baldeep-singh.html
26 www.punjabiuniversity.ac.in/pbiuniweb/pages/teaching/GurmatSangeetProject.doc

United States. giving *kirtan* performances, as well as hosting some periodic *kirtan* teaching workshops in gurdwara communities, including a three week camp teaching the "thirty-one Raags of Guru Granth Sahib." He has also performed and lectured on the topic of Sikh *kirtan* at Hofstra University. The Department of Gurmat Sangeet at Punjabi University, Patiala has recently begun offering "online teaching and certificate programs to NRIs [non-resident Indians] throughout the world," including Bachelor's degrees in "Gurmat Sangeet."[27] Dr. Gurnam Singh told me that one of his personal goals is to see some of his students placed throughout the world as *ragis*, *granthis*, or teachers in order to continue to pass on the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition, in original *raags*, to future generations inside and outside of India.[28]

4.3 Bhai Kultar Singh

Bhai Kultar Singh (Figure 5.7) who I also profiled in Chapter Four) is a twelfth generation Sikh *kirtaniya*, a son of the much lauded *Shiromani Ragi* Bhai Avtar Singh. His father, Bhai Avtar Singh (1925-2006) was descended from a long familial line of Sikh musicians, and spent fifty years of his life performing *kirtan*, singing 'compositions' (*rītī*) on the *rāga* based hymns of Guru Granth Sahib that had been passed down within his family lineage since the time of the Sikh Gurus, primarily accompanied by the *taus* (a 'peacock' shaped stringed-instrument said to be invented by the sixth Sikh Guru, Guru Hargobind). Bhai Avtar Singh and his brother (and *kirtan jatha* member), Bhai Gurcharan

27 Ibid.
28 Personal interview with Dr. Gurnam Singh at Punjabi University in Patiala, India, June 2011.

Singh, wrote a book in two volumes compiling all of these traditional *rītī*, titled *Gurbānī Saṅgīt Prāchin Rīt Ratanāvali*[29] ('Exposition on Jewel-filled Compositions for Musical Performance of the Word of the Sikh Gurus'), so that they would be preserved for future generations of Sikhs. At the time of Bhai Avtar Singh's death, he had recently completed audio recordings of all of these *rītī*, performing many of them accompanied by his son Bhai Kultar Singh.

Bhai Kultar Singh had studied and trained to be an engineer, but decided to leave a promising career to follow in his father's footsteps because he felt that the Sikh *kirtan* tradition was 'dying' and wanted to see his family's lineage continue. He has been a *Hazoori Ragi* (roughly, a 'resident Sikh musician') of Gurdwara Bangla Sahib and Gurdwara Sis Ganj Sahib (two very important historical Sikh gurdwaras in Delhi, both of which I visited in my Summer 2011 research trip). Bhai Kultar Singh regularly tours gurdwaras in the United States and he is particularly popular both because of his *Gurbani kirtan* renditions, and because he frequently explains and discusses *Shabads* in both Punjabi and in eloquent English, thus connecting well with younger second and third generation Sikh Americans. Recently, Bhai Kultar Singh has begun hosting periodic workshops on "the thirty-one traditional *raags* of Guru Granth Sahib" for U.S.-based *kirtan* performers and teachers. In the future, Bhai Kultar Singh is planning to start his own *kirtan* academy which will offer both in-person and on-line instruction in *Gurbani kirtan*.[30]

---

29 Patiala: Punjabi University Press, 1995.
30 see: http://www.bhaikultarsingh.com/?page_id=23

5.0 Issues of 'Authority' and 'Authenticity'

Like other dynamic, living, religious and performative traditions, Sikh *kirtan* and its teaching are constituted in interpretation, contestation, and negotiation. Questions of 'authority' and 'authenticity' are debated—even sometimes acrimoniously—and this is visible among some of the *Gurbani kirtan* teachers I have discussed above. Bhai Baldeep Singh, Professor Surinder Singh, and (to a lesser extent) Dr. Gurnam Singh have questioned each other's specific claims to 'authenticity' and 'authority' to varying degrees, both publicly and in their interviews with me. Points of debate include: lineage claims; *raag* forms and who 'originated' the move toward the most early (and therefore 'authentic') *raag* compositions and forms; who 'originated' the resuscitation of traditional Indian stringed instruments in *Gurbani kirtan*; which instruments and instrument forms are 'authentically' Gurus-period correct; and whether the concept of '*Nád Yoga*' (the 'Yoga of sound') is 'authentically' or acceptably 'Sikh'.[31] Bhai Baldeep Singh points to the term

31 Many Sikhs are ambivalent (or outwardly negative) about associations between Sikhism and '*yoga*' (a term which encompasses various traditional Indic paths to achieve 'union' with the Divine). This attitude is largely drawn from passages in Guru Granth Sahib which seem to take a dim view toward the efficacy of (especially) physical yoga practices for attaining union with The One. As examples, see a verse from Guru Arjan, and a longer hymn of Guru Nanak discussing the futility of 'outward' forms of *yoga* without 'inward' cleansing of the consciousness:

ਪਾਠੁ ਪੜਿਓ ਅਰੁ ਬੇਦੁ ਬੀਚਾਰਿਓ ਨਿਵਲਿ ਭੁਅੰਗਮ ਸਾਧੇ ॥
ਪੰਚ ਜਨਾ ਸਿਉ ਸੰਗੁ ਨ ਛੁਟਕਿਓ ਅਧਿਕ ਅਹੰਬੁਧਿ ਬਾਧੇ ॥੧॥
"They read scriptures, and contemplate the Vedas; they practice the inner cleansing techniques of *Yoga*, and control of the breath. But they cannot escape from the company of the five passions; they are increasingly bound to egotism." (M5, *Soraṭhi*, [*Gharu* 2, *Asṭapadīā*], AG pg. 641).

ਜੋਗੁ ਨ ਖਿੰਥਾ ਜੋਗੁ ਨ ਡੰਡੈ ਜੋਗੁ ਨ ਭਸਮ ਚੜਾਈਐ ॥
ਜੋਗੁ ਨ ਮੁੰਦੀ ਮੂੰਡਿ ਮੁਡਾਇਐ ਜੋਗੁ ਨ ਸਿੰਙੀ ਵਾਈਐ ॥
ਅੰਜਨ ਮਾਹਿ ਨਿਰੰਜਨਿ ਰਹੀਐ ਜੋਗ ਜੁਗਤਿ ਇਵ ਪਾਈਐ ॥੧॥
ਗਲੀ ਜੋਗੁ ਨ ਹੋਈ ॥
ਏਕ ਦ੍ਰਿਸਟਿ ਕਰਿ ਸਮਸਰਿ ਜਾਣੈ ਜੋਗੀ ਕਹੀਐ ਸੋਈ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥
ਜੋਗੁ ਨ ਬਾਹਰਿ ਮੜੀ ਮਸਾਣੀ ਜੋਗੁ ਨ ਤਾੜੀ ਲਾਈਐ ॥
ਜੋਗੁ ਨ ਦੇਸਿ ਦਿਸੰਤਰਿ ਭਵਿਐ ਜੋਗੁ ਨ ਤੀਰਥਿ ਨਾਈਐ ॥

'*Gurmat Sangeet*' itself as a neologism, preferring the term '*Gurbani kirtan*' alone.[32] My own impression as a scholar of religions viewing such debate from relative 'distance' is that (especially) these three *kirtaniyas* and teachers occupy a particularly high level of respect among Sikhs for their contributions to Sikh *kirtan*, and among such a relatively small movement of people dedicated to rejuvenating an 'original', or more 'authentic' tradition, perhaps some debate is inevitable.

Bhai Kultar Singh—himself lauded by others as a carrier of a long-standing lineage and of traditional *kirtan* forms—discussed with me the inherent difficulty of recovering the 'original' forms of traditional instruments and discerning what an 'original' *kirtan* sounds like when so many carriers of the tradition have passed away, musical lineages (such as the Muslim *Rababi* tradition discussed in Chapters Two and Four) were fractured by Partition and other factors, and older forms and performance styles were supplanted by other forms and styles beginning even early in the post-Gurus period. He, and others among my interviewees, applaud the efforts to reclaim and rediscover *kirtan* forms more close to the instrumentation and style of the Gurus period, while affirming

---

ਅੰਜਨ ਮਾਹਿ ਨਿਰੰਜਨਿ ਰਹੀਐ ਜੋਗ ਜੁਗਤਿ ਇਵ ਪਾਈਐ ॥੨॥
"*Yoga* is not the patched coat, *Yoga* is not the walking stick. *Yoga* is not smearing the body with ashes.
Yoga is not the ear-rings, and not the shaven head. *Yoga* is not the blowing of the horn.
Remaining unblemished in the midst of the filth of the world—this is the way to attain *Yoga*. ||1||
By mere words, *Yoga* is not attained.
One who looks upon all with a single eye, and knows them to be one and the same—he alone is known as a *Yogi*. ||1||Pause||
Yoga is not wandering to the tombs of the dead; *Yoga* is not sitting in trances.
Yoga is not wandering through foreign lands; *Yoga* is not bathing at sacred shrines of pilgrimage.
Remaining unblemished in the midst of the filth of the world—this is the way to attain *Yoga*. ||2||" (M1, *Sūhī* (6), AG pg. 730).

32 Personal interview in June 2011. This was also echoed by Bhai Kultar Singh and some of my other interviewees.

that, above all, the primacy of the Word—*Guru Shabad*—must be maintained in any form of *kirtan*.[33]

Although enthusiasm for reviving and reclaiming stringed instruments and 'original' *raag* forms is generally very high among Sikh Americans, some of my interviewees have been circumspect about authoritative claims to an 'authentic', "as the Gurus intended" *kirtan*. For example, in one discussion that I had with a group of very pious and talented college-aged Sikh American *kirtaniyas*, I asked "What do you think about the movement to revive 'classical' *kirtan* and stringed instruments?" They brought up Bhai Baldeep Singh and Professor Surinder Singh specifically, asserting that "People don't like their voices as well."[34] Asked the same question, one volunteer *kirtan* teacher from a southern California gurdwara community brought up Bhai Baldeep Singh specifically, and opined: 'I don't think the Gurus intended for *kirtan* to be done in such an 'ornamented' style... with *sargams* [singing through the note forms of the *raag* without the words of the *Shabad*]... it takes away focus from the Word."[35] Another young Sikh *kirtaniya* said of Bhai Baldeep Singh, "The congregation can't sing along with the *Shabad* when people sing like that."[36] Many of my interviewees have asserted their opinion that *Gurbani kirtan* should be done in 'simple' forms that affirm the *Shabad* and

33 Personal interview with Bhai Kultar Singh in March, 2012. Bhai Kultar Singh partly explained this within a conversation about why he employs the *baja* (harmonium) within his *kirtan* performances and sees instrumentation as always distantly secondary "support" to vocal performance of Gurbani/the Word. He also defended use of the harmonium in Gurbani kirtan on practical grounds: that modern, often air-conditioned, performance environments wreak havoc on the delicate tuning of traditional Indian stringed instruments crafted of wood and animal skin and gut.

34 From a group interview conducted in California in August 2012.

35 From a personal interview in California in July 2013.

36 From a personal interview in California in July 2013.

allow for the participation of the *sangat*.[37] I point to these examples from my interviews with the intention of illustrating that Sikh *kirtan* and the teaching of it—like Sikhism itself—seems to thrive in the form of a living dialogue, resistant to any singular claims of 'authenticity' or 'authority'. I would compare this to the ancient and modern *midrash* (ongoing exegesis) tradition of Judaism and agree with scholars of 'lived religion' that this kind of dialogue and openness to interpretation is similarly present in every living religion.[38]

6.0 Volunteer Teachers

Having discussed the contributions toward teaching *Gurbani kirtan* in the U.S. of organized academies and professional *kirtaniyas* and teachers, it is still currently the case that, by far, most Sikh Americans learn how to perform *Gurbani kirtan* either from family members and friends, or from volunteer (*sevadar*) teachers within gurdwara communities and schools. As I asserted at the beginning of this chapter, American Sikh communities are currently expending vast amounts of effort to keep a second and third generation of young Sikh Americans engaged. *Gurbani kirtan* teachers in gurdwara communities represent a forefront in these efforts, both in terms of their personal dedication to their teaching as a service (*seva*) to their communities, and in terms of their successes in their

37 This probably partly reflects the strong presence of—if not preference for—what some of my interviewees call an Akhand Kirtani Jatha-influenced 'style' of *kirtan* in some northern and southern California gurdwaras, which (as described above) emphasizes a simple musical structure that allows for congregational singing and *Naam Simran* in the form of chanting '*Waheguru*'. The influence of the AKJ —particularly in terms of broadly promoting congregational singing of *Gurbani kirtan* around the world —is growing quite apparently in the United States and could be the subject of another larger study.

38 As I have more fully explored in Chapter Three.

efforts. I have interviewed the volunteer *kirtan* teachers in most of the largest and most active gurdwara communities in California, and have visited their classes on multiple occasions. Most of these volunteer teachers teach *kirtan* within gurdwara schools where *Gurbani kirtan* is usually taught every Sunday (and sometimes on Saturdays or other days) as a subject alongside Punjabi/Gurmukhi language, and Sikh history (Figure 5.8). Most of these volunteer teachers are women, and most of them are mothers of children who attend the gurdwara schools where they teach (several have lessened their role teaching at the gurdwara after their own children were grown). Most of them are first generation immigrants born in India. Many have degrees in music from Indian universities, and they (as well as those without degrees) learned *kirtan* from childhood within families that practiced *kirtan* at home together as a primary form of worship and religious practice. Most of them continue to have, or have had, careers outside of teaching *Gurbani kirtan* and consider their teaching a form of *seva* (selfless service) to their communities.

In many of the *kirtan* classes I have attended within the gurdwara schools (Figures 5.9 and 5.10), the teachers have twenty, or even more (as many as one hundred!) students in one class at one time (this is especially the case in gurdwara schools where *Gurbani kirtan* is a required class). Students learn vocals and *Gurbani* pronunciation, and usually harmonium and *tabla* (which tend to be gendered, with female *tabla* students being quite rare). Not every student has innate musical ability or the same interest level, but many students continue to study *Gurbani kirtan* at more advanced levels and, from my

observation, almost all students are able to perform at least some *Shabads* ('hymns'). Most of the teachers have told me that their hope is that whatever else students gain from studying *Gurbani kirtan*, that they will have built a 'foundation' of religious practice and knowledge that they can come back to later in life. For example, one teacher told me how performing *Gurbani kirtan* had provided for her throughout her life a means for meditative calm and a feeling of Divine “support,” and she hoped to pass this on to her students, “...so they can carry that comfort and support with them and maybe come back to it later in life.”[39] Another teacher said 'Our first Guru sang God's Word accompanied by Bhai Mardana and he taught [people to worship] that way. When you play [*Gurbani kirtan*], you can actually meet God... and that is how our Gurus taught us to do *kirtan* to have God's blessings.” She stated that this way of “experiencing God through music” is what she hopes to pass on to her students.[40]

Less occupied with questions of 'authority' and 'authenticity', the 'professional teachers' (discussed above) who I have interviewed seem mostly to be overjoyed to be teaching *Gurbani kirtan* to young Sikhs during their life stage of semi-retirement, and the volunteer teachers within California gurdwara schools are primarily occupied with the business of—and sometimes anxiety about—preserving Sikhism and the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition among their children and the children they teach in the United States. Some of the volunteer teachers expressed to me their worry that even their own children, who they have been teaching *Gurbani kirtan* from childhood (at home and in the gurdwara

39 Personal interview, February 2013.
40 Personal interview, December 2013.

schools), may someday fall away from their gurdwara community and stop performing *Gurbani kirtan* when they are young adults. They hope that the "foundation" that they are building will at least draw them back to *Gurbani kirtan* and to the Sikh community later in life when they begin to start their own families.

7.0 *Gurbani kirtan* In the Emergence of an 'American Sikhism'

Many of my interviewees—including people who have, or had, been on the committees or advisory boards of gurdwara communities since before 1984—have asserted that the teaching of *Gurbani kirtan* to large numbers of students in the United States did not start until after 1984. For instance, when I asked one committee member of one of the oldest gurdwaras in northern California if their gurdwara had started teaching *Gurbani kirtan* early in the community's history, he answered: "forget about it, no one in California communities was learning *kirtan* before 1984 [except in private homes]." He continued by stating that when he arrived in his northern California community in the early 1980s, "most people were clean-shaven... [and] the gurdwara president served hot dogs and beer at picnics at the gurdwara."[41] He pointed, like many of my other interviewees, to a perceived shift that had taken place in American Sikh communities after the violent and tumultuous events in India of 1984 ('Operation Blue Star' and its aftermath over the ensuing months and years).

41 Personal interview, August 2012. Obviously, being clean-shaven is breaking from the first 'K' of the 'Five K's, keeping *kesh*, or uncut hair. Serving meat in a gurdwara is considered an affront to the *langar* kitchen's purpose of always serving food that avoids offending anyone's religious sensibilities (and many Sikhs maintain that a vegetarian diet is part of their Sikh practice). Alcohol consumption is broadly considered to be strongly prohibited for Sikhs.

It is apparent that the post-1984 era brought about several factors that affected U.S. Sikh communities: an influx of community members as many Sikhs applied for and received visas (often as refugees) in order to leave the turmoil in India (it is noteworthy that all of the 'volunteer' and 'professional' *kirtan* teachers among my interviewees immigrated to the U.S. in this post-1984 era); increased resources (human and monetary) that came with the growth of these communities combined with the strong resources of the earlier post-1965 'Brain Drain' generation; and, many of the new post-1984 immigrants had seen firsthand what they considered to be a direct attack on Sikhism in India, and anxiety about 'losing' Sikhism, or Sikhism being 'in danger,' became more marked within the American Sikh communities that they joined. This post-1984 anxiety about Sikhism being 'in danger' appears to have combined with U.S. Sikh communities' already existing awareness of the hardships faced by earlier generations of Sikh Americans in the face of American xenophobia and assimilationism (which still continues today, by some unfortunate measures). It is apparent in U.S. Sikh communities that there is often palpable anxiety about continued generations of Sikh Americans becoming disconnected with Sikhism and that the emergence of gurdwara schools was at least partly meant as a major protective measure against this by organizing the teaching of Sikh ways of being and knowing and sharing this responsibility at the community level.

There are many markers that American Sikh communities are achieving remarkable successes in teaching *Gurbani kirtan* and other central Sikh practices to young generations of Sikh Americans. There is also every indication that *Gurbani kirtan*

is one of the central ways that young people are learning how to be Sikh in the United States. Many of my interviewees have expressed their impression that a much higher ratio of Sikh Americans are learning *Gurbani kirtan* than their contemporaries of this generation in India and throughout the Sikh diaspora. This assertion is probably difficult to evaluate quantitatively, but it is apparent that a very large percentage of young Sikh Americans—*all* of the children attending the gurdwara schools of some communities—are learning *Gurbani kirtan* as a primary way of Sikh being and knowing.

Today, schools within U.S. gurdwaras continue to be founded and to grow in enrollment. In several of the gurdwaras with schools in California, the communities now set aside one whole 'sitting' or cycle of Sunday prayers (a whole 'service') to be led entirely by children enrolled in the gurdwara school. Children (as young as four years old) participate in and lead every major part of the religious activities and services, including: reciting *nitnem* (daily prayers), doing *paath* and *vak lao* (recitation of Guru Granth Sahib and taking the daily 'Command'), performing *Gurbani kirtan*, *Karah Parshad seva* (distributing blessed food), *chauri seva* (tending the scripture) and other forms of respectful treatment of Guru Granth Sahib, etc. Thus, today a large percentage of the young U.S.-born Sikhs within these communities are growing up fully equipped to lead the religious activities of their communities.

With so many young Sikh Americans now learning *kirtan*, *Gurbani* recitation and study, etc., the question has arisen within my interviews whether some of the many enthusiastic young American *kirtaniyas* will follow a path toward being 'professional'

Sikh religious leaders (*granthis*, *ragis*, and/or *kathakars*). As discussed in Chapter Four, the current arrangement for religious leadership in gurdwaras in the United States is usually to bring in *ragis* and *granthis* from India. Often these are temporary and/or relatively low paying (by American standards) positions. As I have further explored in Chapter Four, this pattern of religious leadership in many ways mirrors how earlier immigrant religious communities (including Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant Christian communities of different ethnicities) in American history sustained their need for leadership by bringing religious officiants from 'the old country,' especially during their early generations in the U.S. Most Sikh communities today have comparably greater resources than these earlier immigrant communities—or earlier Sikh communities in the United States—and this could help ease the transition to second-generation, 'homegrown' leadership. Several of my interviewees expressed optimism that Sikh communities in the United States might now begin to discuss how to offer compensation comparable to religious leaders and officiants in other American religious communities in order to attract a young generation of U.S.-born leaders. As more generations of Sikh Americans grow up from birth in the United States, it may be an inevitable future step to have leaders who are both trained in performing and interpreting Guru Granth Sahib in the original Gurmukhi, and also able to teach, explicate, and preach on *Gurbani*, and interact with other U.S.-born Sikhs in English.[42]

42 There are other factors to complicate this, like Sikhism's 'de-jure' stance of having 'no religious hierarchy' or 'organized' religious leadership, despite 'de-facto' realities. Much of the religious leadership of U.S. gurdwaras is currently carried out by large numbers of volunteers (*sevadars*), and, undoubtedly, this will continue. Yet not all of these *sevadars* desire, or have the knowledge, to lead worship activities. So it remains to be seen how continued generations of Sikh Americans will shape

As one emblem of the successes of U.S. Sikhs' efforts to teach the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition to continuing generations of Sikh Americans, I would point to the story of Bhai Tajvinder Singh (Figure 5.11). Bhai Tajvinder Singh was born, raised, and trained to perform *Gurbani kirtan* by teachers in the United States (including attending camps conducted by the International Institute of Gurmat Studies). From a young age he told his family and *kirtan* teachers that one day he wanted to be a *ragi* at the Harimandir Sahib.[43] Today, he has recently returned to performing *Gurbani kirtan* in the U.S. after spending six years as a *Hazoori Ragi* at Harimandir Sahib (with his *jatha* on the regular calendar of *kirtan* duties). He is both the youngest *kirtaniya* (22 years old when first appointed), and the first U.S.-born Sikh to achieve this accomplishment and honor.

Travis Van de Berg and Fred Kniss point out that in most studies of religion and transnationalism, "...the experiences and religious practices of immigrants and of congregations are studied as *products* of transnationalism. However... it is important to look at these experiences and practices themselves as *forms* of transnationalism, rather than its effects."[44] Bhai Tajvinder Singh's story points to Sikhism's transnational 'circle' completing itself. In the current historical moment, when performing *ragis* and *kirtaniyas* regularly travel to and from the United States and around the world; when American children frequently attend camps and schools to learn *Gurbani kirtan* and other Sikh ways of being and knowing in India, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere; when Sikh

---

gurdwara leadership in the future.

43 I personally interviewed Bhai Tajvinder Singh in northern California in July 2013.

44 Pgs. 80-82. Van de Berg, Travis, and Fred Kniss. 2008. 'ISKCON and Immigrants: The Rise, Decline, and Rise Again of a New Religious Movement.' *The Sociological Quarterly* 49: 79-104.

Americans can fill their days with the sounds of *Gurbani kirtan* from the Harimandir Sahib and other gurdwaras in India via satellite TV, internet, and cellphone applications; when *Gurbani kirtan* students communicate via internet video chat with their *Ustad-jis* in India, the U.K., and elsewhere; and when the United States exports its first *Hazoori Ragi* to the Harimandir Sahib; Sikh *kirtan*—and Sikhism itself—exists as a fully and richly global, transnational movement. Seen from this perspective, much of what is emerging as a uniquely 'American Sikhism,' exists within these transnational human networks that, to date, a second and third generation (since 1965) of American Sikhs are deeply enmeshed in, and continuing to bolster.

Figure 5.1 IIGS teachers and students perform *kirtan* (photo by the author).

Figure 5.2 The author with Professor Surinder Singh of the Raj Academy Conservatoire (photo courtesy of Suzanne Townsend).

Figure 5.3 Professor Surinder Singh and students of the Raj Academy Conservatoire perform *kirtan* on traditional instruments associated with Sikh history—left to right: *dilruba*, *sarangi*, *rabāb* (back row), two *sarandas*, *tabla* (drums), *saranda* (back row), and *dilruba* (photo by the author).

Figure 5.4 Professor Dalbir Singh stands with his students as they win an award at a *kirtan* competition (photo by the author).

Figure 5.5 Professor Ranjit Singh and his family *jatha* perform *kirtan* (photo by the author).

Figure 5.6 The author with Bhai Baldeep Singh in Sultanpur Lodhi, India (photo courtesy of Suzanne Townsend).

Figure 5.7 Bhai Kultar Singh (center) performing *kirtan* with his *jatha* (photo by the author).

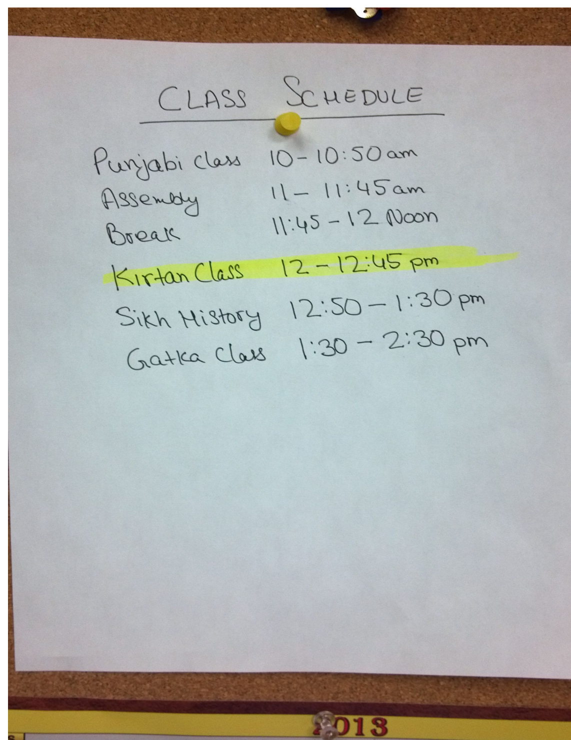

Figure 5.8 Class schedule hanging at a gurdwara school (photo by the author).

Figure 5.9 Children learning *kirtan* in a class at a gurdwara school (photo by the author).

Figure 5.10 Adolescents learning *kirtan* in a class at a gurdwara school (photo by the author).

Figure 5.11 Bhai Tajvinder Singh performs *kirtan* in a large gurdwara (photo by the author).

Chapter Six:
Conclusion

As we have seen, musical performance of the hymns of the Sikh Gurus has been central to Sikh practice and identity since the beginning of Sikhism as a distinct religious tradition in south Asia in the fifteenth century and it has remained the centerpiece of Sikh religious life that Sikhs have carried with them as they have traveled and settled all across the globe. This dissertation has taken this living *Gurbani kirtan* tradition as a lens through which to view and interpret the ongoing transnational flow of the Sikh tradition from the time of the Sikh Gurus in south Asia to the contemporary United States. As an embodied Sikh way of being and knowing, the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition has provided a site for the ongoing performance of the Sikh tradition and of Sikh identity, and for the continuous re-living and re-newal of the co-presence of Guru Granth and Guru Panth—the Divine Word/Sound as Living Guru and the Sikh community as the caretakers and interpreters of the Divine Word/Sound—in new contexts. In similarity to the fundamentally central religio-cultural performative practices of other peoples, *Gurbani kirtan* provides a locus for Sikhs to 'perform themselves for themselves,' which has contributed to the Sikh tradition's 'portability': its ability to be re-performed, re-interpreted, and re-lived in changing settings across time and geography.[1] As they have

1 Though I began thinking about the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition in terms of its contributions to the 'portability' of Sikhism under the influence of Thomas Tweed's *Crossing and Dwelling* (2006) and Paul Christopher Johnson's work in the area of Diaspora Studies (2007), at the time of this writing, I have more recently discovered Thomas Csordas' work on transnational religion. In a similar line of thought about 'portability', Csordas refers to the "portable practice[s]" of religions, which are as those "...rites that can be easily learned, require relatively little esoteric knowledge or paraphernalia, are not held as proprietary or necessarily linked to a specific cultural context, and can be performed without commitment to an elaborate ideological or institutional apparatus" (Pg. 4. Csordas, Thomas.

migrated to places throughout the world, Sikhs have shown remarkable abilities to sustain and continuously re-interpret what it means to live as Sikhs of the Gurus while adapting to, and thriving within, diverse global settings—often through great adversity. I have maintained throughout this dissertation that the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition is one of the primary ways that Sikhs have carried Sikh ways of being and knowing with them on these global journeys, and especially into Sikh communities in the current American context. The major findings presented in each of the chapters of this dissertation have evidenced and affirmed this core assertion that the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition has been one of the central threads—perhaps *the* central thread—running through Sikh history that has made the Sikh tradition 'portable' to new and changing contexts throughout the world, and that is sustaining and influencing the current growth and shaping of Sikh communities in the United States.

The second chapter followed the history of the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition "from Sultanpur Lodhi to San Jose, California"—from the traditional place of Guru Nanak's initial direct experience of the Divine Sound/Word, through to the construction of the largest gurdwara in the world on the other side of the planet from the birthplace of the Sikh tradition. The first part of the chapter traced the history of the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition through its major developments under the Sikh Gurus and elucidated the 'sonic theology' of the Sikh Gurus as it is displayed in their teachings in the Guru Granth Sahib. The second part of the chapter narrated the history of the Darbar Sahib and discussed the

"Introduction: Modalities of Transnational Transcendence" in *Transnational Transcendence: Essays on Religion and Globalization*. Edited by Thomas Csordas. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009).

sacred site's role as the central, musical 'beating heart' of the Sikh tradition that influences patterns for Sikh religious practice and performance around the world today. In particular, the twenty-four hour continuous musical performance of the hymns of Guru Granth Sahib at the Darbar Sahib sets a pattern of devotional worship that Sikh gurdwaras around the world seek to approximate as much as their local resources allow. Finally, the last section of the chapter narrated the history of Sikhs in the United States, from the first documented Sikh 'visitor' around the turn of the nineteenth century, to the small 'first wave' of Sikh immigrants arriving in the United States from the 1890s to 1960s, to the large influx of Sikh Americans during the 'second wave' (1965-1984) and 'third wave' (1984-present) eras. Through all three of these parts of the chapter, we have seen how the performance of the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition has run through all of the periods of Sikh history and across the world as a primary mode for the transmission and continuance of Sikh ways of being and knowing.

The third chapter drew my extensive ethnographic field research within Sikh communities in the United States into conversation with theoretical insights from Performance Studies and diaspora theory in order to further analyze the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition as one of the primary ways that Sikhs are teaching and transmitting Sikh ways of being and knowing to new generations of Sikh Americans. I explored how approaches informed by Performance Studies resonate with the study of the Sikh tradition generally, but especially with my particular research focus on the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition, and thus offer new modes of analysis for the field of Sikh Studies. The findings presented in this

chapter from my ethnographic research within American Sikh communities—particularly among young, predominantly American-born (or raised) Sikhs—portrayed how congregational performances of *Gurbani kirtan* are serving as spaces for the formation, performance, and re-interpretation of transnational Sikh identity/ies and the re-memory and re-newal of the Sikh tradition in the United States.

The fourth chapter provided an extended discussion of leaders and 'ritual experts' in the Sikh tradition—sacred musicians, keepers and performers of the scripture, preachers, and knowledge bearers—from early Sikh history through to roles of leadership and 'expertise' within Sikh communities in the modern United States. By tracing changes in the patterns and divisions of ritual and leadership roles since the early history of the Sikh tradition, some of the questions surrounding the future of leadership in American Sikhs communities were illuminated. In the current historical moment, these questions that surround the defining of leadership roles in American Sikh communities remain open ended, as the current generation forms varying responses that leave the very meanings of 'leadership' and 'expertise' open to future interpretations. Through in-depth ethnographic profiles of *rāgīs* and *granthīs* currently performing and working in the United States, we have seen a portrait of the current state of leadership in American Sikh communities and the centrality of Sacred Sound and Word to these leadership roles. We have also seen salient points for comparing ritual 'expertise' and leadership within current Sikh communities to modes of leadership and 'expertise' within other religious and ethnic communities that immigrated to the United States in earlier eras—comparisons that may

reveal insights about the future trajectories of leadership in Sikh American communities as they begin to contemplate the move to 'home-grown' American leadership.

Finally, the fifth chapter explored how Sikhs have continued to plant roots in the United States, and how, since the large influx of Sikhs that began with United States immigration reform in the 1960s, Sikhism has begun to come into view as an 'American religion'. Fundamentally, this is being brought about through the efforts of the post-1965 generation to educate their American-born and raised children in Sikh ways of knowing and being—among which the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition has taken prominence. Drawing from my extensive ethnographic field research and interviews with people who are teaching the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition in the United States and their students, I discussed how those currently teaching *Gurbani kirtan* in the United States can be understood within a typology of several groupings. This final chapter analyzed how American Sikh communities are expending vast amounts of time, resources, and effort, to teach new generations of Sikh Americans to perform *Gurbani kirtan*, and the integral role that this is playing in the forming of the 'home-grown' 'American Sikhism' of the current generation of Sikhs born and raised in the United States.

In the opening chapter, I discussed the dearth of scholarly writing on the subject of *Gurbani kirtan* that existed when I began to do research on this topic, comparing this to if there were almost no scholarly research on the central Catholic religious practice of the Eucharist. Beyond the fact that this dissertation has broken ground as an extended exploration of the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition—a subject that has received surprisingly little

scholarly attention from scholars of Sikh Studies[2]—my research overall, and my writing of this dissertation, both seek to bring Sikh Studies into closer conversation with the field of Religious Studies and the broad, interdisciplinary array of methodological and theoretical perspectives that the field of Religious Studies engages. The field of Sikh studies is still in a relatively young and small, though rapidly growing stage—it has only been in the past few decades has Sikhism begun to appear within 'world religions' textbooks and the curricula of departments of religious studies as a distinct religious tradition. Due to the field of Sikh studies emerging predominantly from the work of historians, textualists, and south asianists, to date, most of the foundational scholarly literature of the field has focused on Sikh history, texts, and doctrines, and relatively much less scholarship is available which focuses on living Sikh practices. Through this dissertation, I have also sought to bring a focused awareness to Sikh lives and embodied Sikh practice, especially through my ethnographic methodology of extended and intimate field research in living Sikh communities, and also through engaging the scholarly study of the Sikh tradition with theoretical insights from Lived Religion approaches and Performance Theory.

Other scholars of Sikh Studies[3] have pointed to the dearth of ethnographic and interview-based studies of Sikhs and have suggested that this is an important next step in advancing the field. I have sought throughout this dissertation to create an ethnographically rich depiction of Sikh lives that Sikhs can 'recognize themselves' in—as

2 This was especially the case until recently, as I have discussed in Chapter One.
3 Including Verne A. Dusenbery (2008) and Tony Ballantyne (2006).

examples: by capturing ethnographic 'snapshots' of historic moments of the Sikh American community's growth (like the grand opening of the largest gurdwara in the world); by providing a detailed ethnographic description of daily Sikh worship following the daily religious duties of a *granthī*;[4] and by reproducing (sometimes extended) excerpts from my interviews with Sikhs, including prominent *rāgīs* and *granthīs*, as well as with 'everyday' Sikhs who are performers and teachers of the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition, and also Sikhs who do not perform *kirtan*. This dissertation represents one of the first book-length pieces of scholarly research on Sikh Americans,[5] and represents some of the first extended ethnographic research on Sikhs in the United States since the pioneering work of Bruce LaBrack (1988), Karen Leonard (1994),[6] and Van Dusenbery (1989), which was conducted two-to-three decades ago. Much of the work of these three anthropologists was distinctly focused on describing Sikhs as an ethnic minority in the United States. While being duly influenced by their work, in my own research, I have sought to pick up with Sikh Americans a generation later and to take Sikh religious identity and practice as my central focus.

The latter chapters of this dissertation have all explored, from different perspectives, the roles that the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition has played in the history of Sikhs and the Sikh religion in the United States, and the roles that it is continuing to play in the

4 To my own surprise, I have not seen another such extended 'thick description' of daily Sikh worship practices in other scholarly literature.

5 Jaideep Singh's 2009 Doctoral dissertation *Diasporic Community-Building Enterprises: Race, Religious Identity, and Sikh American Grassroots Political Organizing Before 9/11* (University of California, Berkeley) is one of the only other recent book-length studies of Sikh Americans. However, coming from the perspective of Ethnic Studies, and focusing on political organizing, his work is less focused than my own on Sikh religion and religious practice in the United States.

6 Both of whose work I have cited extensively in Chapter Two.

ongoing emergence of an 'American Sikhism'. In the second chapter, I discussed the efforts of the earliest Sikh communities in the United States to maintain the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition even during times of great difficulty due to discrimination and dwindling numbers. In the third chapter, I examined attitudes among today's second- and third-generation Sikh Americans toward the centrality of the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition in maintaining Sikhism in the United States. The fourth chapter discussed the large amount of resources that Sikh communities in the United States are devoting to bringing expert performers of *Gurbani kirtan* from around the world in order to perform in American Sikh communities. In the fifth chapter, I described the vast amounts of effort that American Sikh communities are putting into teaching continued generations of Sikh Americans how to perform the *Gurbani kirtan* tradition. I ended the dissertation with this chapter in order to portray the current generation of Sikh Americans as a '*kirtan* generation'—a generation of Sikhs who are learning to perform *Gurbani kirtan* at a rate that may be unprecedented since the time of the Gurus of the Sikh tradition.[7]

The period of the rapid growth of American gurdwara communities since the beginning of the 'second wave', and especially the 'third wave', has ushered in an era in which Sikh communities in the United States now have enough human and monetary resources to continue growing and affirming Sikh practices, identity, and ways of being and knowing in the United States in ways that the 'pioneers' of the 'first wave' struggled toward, but could barely have imagined. The current generation of Sikh Americans are

7 I am currently writing a chapter-length piece titled "The '*Kirtan* Generation' in the Making of an 'American Sikhism'", taking up this very idea.

engrossed in thinking about how to best live out their lives as both Sikhs and Americans. As American-born and raised Sikhs begin to become demographically dominant in their communities, the current generation of Sikh Americans are beginning to look to what modes of 'homegrown' leadership might emerge. The 'Punjabi schools' built up by the 'second wave' generation have achieved such success in teaching new generations that in some communities children are able to perform all religious services (including *Gurbani kirtan* and recitation of Guru Granth Sahib), and the United States has exported its first American-born and trained '*hazoori rāgī*' to the Darbar Sahib. For all of the questions that the future holds for Sikhs in the United States, it is abundantly clear that Sikh Americans will be continuing to perform “music in the Gurus' view” as a centerpiece of their lived religious practice and as a site for the continuing re-newal of the Sikh religion in the United States.

Early on a warm Sunday morning in Oak Creek Wisconsin, the community at the local Sikh gurdwara had begun its day with morning prayers and a group of *rāgīs* singing *Gurbani kirtan*. In the mid morning, Sita Singh and Ranjit Singh, two brothers who were *granthīs* at the gurdwara, were inside of the main Diwan hall. Having recited the early morning prayers, they were distributing *kara parshad* and attending to Guru Granth Sahib with another *granthī*, Prakash Singh, who lived at the gurdwara, as the morning

kirtan singing session continued.[8] Many members of the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin community were busy with the *seva* activities that they performed every Sunday: cleaning, preparing *kara parshad* and the large *langar* meal to serve to the hundreds of community members who would be arriving for the mid-day prayer service, and preparing the classrooms and materials within the gurdwara's school for the day. Community members were beginning to arrive in larger numbers for worship and a time of shared food and community. Children were arriving with their parents to worship and to learn the Punjabi language, Sikh history, and *Gurbani kirtan* in the gurdwara's school.

At about 10:30am, a stranger to the community, Wade Michael Page walked onto the property of the gurdwara carrying a 9mm semi-automatic handgun. He raised his gun and opened fire on people who were standing outside of the gurdwara and then made his way inside. Paramjit Kaur, a wife and mother of two sons who worked long hours in a medical devices company, was praying inside of the gurdwara when shots rang out outside. Rather than leaving immediately, she told her son that she wanted to finish her prayers by bowing down to pay respect to Guru Granth Sahib. As she was standing up from bowing, Wade Michael Page entered the gurdwara and fatally shot her in the back. Page then opened fire on other people inside of the gurdwara, killing the *granthīs* Sita Singh, Ranjit Singh, and Prakash Singh, and wounding others. Suveg Singh Khattra, an

8 Some of the biographical elements about the members of the Oak Creek Sikh community were revealed to me through my discussions with Sikhs in California who know members of the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin community personally and were later corroborated through meeting and hearing a public discussion about the massacre by the son of Satwant Singh Kaleka, Pardeep, in November 2014. Many of the facts about the incident that I narrate here were widely reported by multiple news sources. Some biographical elements are drawn from http://sikhtempleofwisconsin.com/memorial.

84 year old man whose son dropped him off every day at the gurdwara early in the morning to pray and do *seva* until late into the evening, was also shot and killed. Many panicked women, men, and children ran from the Diwan hall, some of them cramming together to hide inside of kitchen pantries, restrooms, and other places that had doors they could close behind them. They waited, terrified for their lives, using their cell phones to call police and emergency services as they continued to hear shots being fired. Wade Michael Page made his way through the other rooms and buildings around the gurdwara, looking for more people to fire on.

Satwant Singh Kaleka came to the United States in 1982, sponsored by his brother, a veterinarian. He worked at a gas station for many years until he had saved the money to purchase several gas stations. In 1997, he and other Sikhs living in Wisconsin raised the money to finish building the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin. Since that time, Kaleka had served as the President of the gurdwara's management committee and spent many hours at the gurdwara doing different types of *seva*. When Page began firing his gun on the grounds of the gurdwara, Kaleka was inside of the gurdwara's *langar* hall, helping to prepare the community's free meal for the day. Hearing the shots, Kaleka grabbed the nearest knife, a butter knife,[9] and went running toward the sound of the shots. Encountering Page, Kaleka lunged toward him to try to tackle him, managing to wound

9 It was widely reported in news media that Kaleka had a 'butter knife' in his hand when he confronted Page. It seems likely that Kaleka, who maintained the 'Five Ks', would have had a *kirpan* with him (some of my Sikh friends in California affirmed that it was a *kirpan* from talking to members of the Oak Creek Sikh community)—though many *kirpans*, especially those carried by Sikh Americans are often very short (perhaps a few inches long) and as dull as a 'butter knife'. Regardless, this point is immaterial to Kaleka's obvious heroism in trying to defend his community and friends against a man armed with a gun, even at the cost of his own life.

Page with the butter knife before Page shot him twice in the hip. Kaleka was able to drag himself away from the gunfire. As Page left the gurdwara to head outside again, Kaleka sat and continuously chanted "*Waheguru*. *Waheguru*. *Waheguru*..." He died from loss of blood before emergency workers could reach him. Many members of the Wisconsin Sikh temple community would later credit Kaleka with saving the lives of dozens of others by slowing down Page and setting him on a course back toward the outside of the front of the gurdwara.

By the time Page moved outside of the gurdwara, Lieutenant Brian Murphy of the Oak Creek Police had pulled up to the scene in his squad car. Murphy had been scheduled to be off that day, but traded shifts with another officer so that he could attend his son's graduation. Murphy was rushing to aid wounded people who he had spotted lying in the parking lot when he saw Page running out of the gurdwara. When Page and Murphy saw each other, they both raised their guns and fired at each other.[10] Murphy missed, but Page's first bullet entered Murphy's chin and tore through his larynx, lodging in his back. As Murphy laid on the ground behind (and eventually beneath) his squad car, Page continued shooting at him, striking him with a total of fifteen bullets out of twenty-five shots. By this point, another police officer had arrived on the scene who fired a shot that hit Page in the abdomen. Page sat down, put his own gun to his head, and pulled the trigger, killing himself instantly. As more police officers arrived and ran to aid Lieutenant

---

10 Singh, Simran Jeet. "15 Rounds and Still Talking: Lt. Brian Murphy's Story of the Oak Creek Massacre", *The Daily Beast*, August 5, 2013. (Accessed from http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/08/05/15-rounds-and-still-talking-lt-brian-murphy-s-story-of-the-oak-creek-massacre.html).

Murphy, he waved them off, urging them to go inside the gurdwara to assist the other victims of Page's rampage.[11] Lieutenant Murphy survived his wounds and has been broadly hailed by the Sikh community as a hero who saved many lives by confronting Page.[12]

Even after extensive investigation by the FBI and local law enforcement, little is known about what motivated Wade Michael Page to inflict the murderous violence that he did at the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin. Page had received an "other than honorable" discharge from the U.S. Army after having been demoted from sergeant to specialist for problems with alcohol abuse and being absent without leave.[13] News reports and images relate that Page was heavily covered in tattoos conveying racist messages, that he had been a member of a white supremacist group known as the 'Hammerskins', that he had frequently posted racist comments on white supremacist websites, and that for decades he had been involved in white supremacist music groups. One of these music groups, called the Blue Eyed Devils, had written a song titled "White Victory," that included the lyrics: "now I'll fight for my race and nation/*sieg heil*!" Another one of Page's musical groups, called Definite Hate, performed a song called "Welcome to the South," which included

11 Delong, Katie. "Oak Creek Police Chief outlines Sikh Temple shooting timeline". *Fox6now.com*, August 6, 2012. (Accessed from: http://fox6now.com/2012/08/06/oak-creek-police-chief-outlines-sikh-temple-shooting-timeline).

12 Several Sikhs have donated money toward Lieutentant Murphy's medical bills, including two Sikhs from Yuba City who donated $100,000 toward his medical bills and as a reward for his heroism. (Parsons, Rob. "Sikhs donate to Wisconsin officer shot at temple," *Appeal Democrat*, September 12, 2012. Accessed from http://www.appeal-democrat.com/sikhs-donate-to-wisconsin-officer-shot-at-temple/article_277ee120-43e6-517e-8987-b7de6c00cced.html).

13 Kovaleski, Serge F. "Wisconsin Killer Fed and Was Fueled by Hate-Driven Music". *The New York Times*, August 6, 2012. (Accessed from: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/07/us/army-veteran-identified-as-suspect-in-wisconsin-shooting.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

lyrics referring to “our race war” and asking, “what has happened to America/that was once so white and free?”[14] It is unclear whether Page knew anything about Sikhs or Sikhism, whether he thought that the people who he targeted were 'Muslims', or whether race, immigrant status, or other factors were also part of his motivation. It is readily apparent, however, that the FBI designations of the massacre at Oak Creek as a “hate crime” and an “act of domestic terror” are clearly fitting, and that Page was a person whose life was consumed by hatred, anger, and xenophobia.

When I first read news about the massacre of Sikhs at the gurdwara in Oak Creek, I was obviously horrified and deeply saddened, but, unfortunately, I was also not surprised that something like this had happened. Sadly, the horrific events at Oak Creek fit too well within the pattern of discrimination and violence that I knew Sikhs have all too often faced by being religiously, culturally, and ethnically different in the United States. The second chapter of this dissertation has provided the reader with enough examples of this from the history of Sikhs in the United States to illustrate that the massacre at Oak Creek is not simply a case of one 'crazed gunman' in an isolated encounter, but reflects problematics surrounding much broader institutional and cultural responses to Sikh presence in the United States. In spite of the changes in U.S. demographics in the last several decades and the often perceived embracing of 'multiculturalism' in a 'nation of immigrants' that has attended this, it is likely that the United States is today an even more potentially violent place to be a Sikh than the the United States of the early twentieth century's 'anti-Hindoo' and 'anti-Oriental' riots. The

14 Ibid.

once institutionalized and open racism and xenophobia of 'alien' land laws and sensationalized newspaper reports about a 'turban tide' or 'hindu invasion' of the early period of Sikh (and broader Asian) migration to the United States have given way to more insidious forms of racism and xenophobia. Wade Clark Page exemplifies an extreme case, but one which nonetheless reveals these larger, more pervading attitudes and cultural processes.

Especially since the aftermath following September 11, 2001 and the wave of xenophobia and 'Islamophobia' that had exploded across the United States in the ensuing years, Sikhs have frequently been the target of slurs, taunts, physical attacks, and even deadly violence. Balbir Singh Sodhi, a gas station owner in Arizona who maintained the untrimmed beard and turban of the 'Five Ks', was shot to death just four days after the attacks of September 11, 2001. His killer, a man named Frank Roque, referred to himself as a “patriot” who desired to kill “towelheads” in “revenge” for the September 11, 2001 attacks. In the years since then, there have been multiple murders, and hundreds of documented violent hate crimes against Sikhs (with many hundreds probably going unreported). Sikh men who keep the untrimmed beard and turban that are a religious requirement for Sikhs who have vowed to maintain the 'Five Ks' are particularly vulnerable to being targeted for such hate crimes. Though this dissertation has concentrated on exploring Sikh religious music as a focal lens through which to view the movement of the Sikh tradition transnationally and especially to the United States, I do

not find it possible to conclude without addressing the pervasive discrimination and even violence that Sikh Americans still face today.

As someone who has spent extensive time in the past decade within American Sikh communities and getting to know individual Sikhs, I was struck by a few tragic ironies of the massacre at Oak Creek that were probably not understood by the broader public reading about this incident in the news. Having personally benefited—quite continuously for a number of years—from the hospitality and welcoming nature of Sikhs and Sikh communities, I know with absolute certainty that if Wade Michael Page had walked into the Oak Creek gurdwara on Sunday, August 5, 2012 with a curiosity to see what the gurdwara community was about, he would have been greeted by many people who would have been happy to show him around, tell him about Sikhism in a non-proselytizing way, talk to him about the basic etiquette of visiting the main Diwan hall ("remove your shoes and cover your head" with a provided bandana), and encourage him to step inside and listen to *Gurbani kirtan* if he wanted to.[15] They would likely have not wanted him to leave without eating a free meal prepared in the *langar* hall—or at least a snack and some fresh, hot, spiced tea. Another tragic irony that immediately struck me when information came out in the news about Page's ties to 'white power' music groups was that Page was a man who had dedicated years of his life to creating and performing

---

15 Pardeep Singh Kaleka has described his father Satwant Singh Kaleka as being the kind of leader in his community who would welcome anyone who came into the gurdwara in such a way: "He was the first person to walk people through if they showed up and they were of a foreign descent, and talk to them about our traditions and make sure that he was [reaching out]." (Nessen, Stephen. "A Victim's Son Reflects on the Sikh Temple Shooting," *Thetakeaway.org*, August 9, 2012. (Accessed from: http://www.thetakeaway.org/story/228845-continued-reflection-sikh-temple-shooting).

'hate music'. On a sunny August day, he unleashed his hate with deadly accuracy in a place of worship in which the primary worship activity is performing and listening to 'love music'—music that ultimately is intended by Sikhs, and the Gurus and *Bhagats* who composed the hymns performed in Sikh gurdwaras, to raise the human consciousness to love of the Divine and love of all of humanity.

On October 13-14, 2012, barely a few months after the massacre of Sikhs at Oak Creek, Wisconsin, the Sikh community in Stockton California held the culminating events of their months-long commemoration of the one-hundred year anniversary since the Stockton Gurdwara—the oldest Sikh gurdwara in the U.S.—was built. The two-day long celebrations marked the culmination of other events held throughout the previous months to commemorate the "Sikh Century" in the United States, which included two academic conferences (one in English that included non-Sikh University scholars and one in Punjabi that focused on Indian perspectives on the contributions of the *Ghadar* party to Indian independence) and the opening of a museum exhibit commemorating the history of Sikhs in the United States built inside of the original (1912) structure of the Stockton gurdwara.

During the weekend of the culminating centennial event, members of the Stockton Sikh community memorialized the victims of the massacre at Oak creek, along with Balbir Singh Sodhi, and other Sikh victims of hate crimes in the United States. Though the connection was not explicitly made in public speeches, the memorialization of these recent victims of violence in the United States portrayed them in ways that obviously

linked them with the history of persecution and martyrdom in Sikhism that goes back to the Sikh Gurus (two of whom were killed by oppressive rulers) and many of their followers in early Sikh history, and, in the eyes of many Sikhs, the 'genocidal' bloodshed of 1984's 'Operation Blue Star' and its aftermath. Discussing and memorializing the history of the hardships faced by Sikhs in North America (including the Komagata Maru incident,[16] the Bellingham Riots,[17] etc.) was a key component of the academic conferences held by the community in the months-long leadup to the October Centennial events. One of the organizers of the 'Sikh Century' events told me that the pattern of unearned suffering remembered during the events and made newly raw at the time of the Centennial celebration by the massacre at Oak Creek, “is the way it's always been for Sikhs.” He continued, explaining that Sikhs have always been a minority—both in India and around the world—who have often faced persecution, but have always persevered. He further explained that the Sikh tradition has so many martyrs because “martyrs” are “the people who maintained defiance and fearlessness in the face of oppression and hopelessness”.

For the final culmination of the Sikh centennial event in Stockton, the community performed a grand *nagar kirtan*. As in other *nagar kirtans* that Sikh communities organize throughout the United States, the community carried Guru Granth Sahib through

16 The Komagata Maru was a Japanese steamship that sailed from Punjab to Vancouver, Canada in 1914. The ship carried 376 passengers, most of them Sikhs, who were British subjects, but who were not allowed to land in Canada. After being held off the coast of Vancouver for three months, with diminishing supplies and sanitation, the ship was forced to return to India. The incident raised a mass outcry against the anti-immigration policies of Canada toward citizens of British India.

17 Discussed in Chapter Two.

the streets of the city on a vehicle set up as a rolling 'throne' for the scripture. They amplified performances of *Gurbani kirtan* through the city streets, performed *gatka* demonstrations, and provided large amounts of free food to visitors. It was fitting that the community would celebrate and commemorate one-hundred (plus) years of Sikh presence in the United States by publicly performing Sikhism, Sikh music, and Sikh identity in the streets of the city. In doing so, the community proudly and boldly announced their continued presence and successes in American life, and, that in the face of recent tragedies and the memory of other tragedies of the past, Sikh Americans have maintained *chaṛhdī kalā*. The *nagar kirtan* itself thus became a performative enactment of this cardinal Sikh principle: to maintain 'high spirits'—grounded in faith in the Divine Will (*hukam*)—that the moral arc of the universe bends toward the good and to ceaselessly remember history and the martyred and the fallen while moving forward hopefully. This spirit of *chaṛhdī kalā* is palpable in meeting American Sikhs (Figure 6.1). It has carried them through the difficult 'growing pains' of their first century (and longer) in the United States and will no doubt carry them forward into future centuries in the United States and around the world.

Figure 6.1 Sikh Americans at the head of a *nagar kirtan* parade (photo by the author).

Bibliography:

89th Congress of the United States. 1965. *H.R. 2580: An Act to amend the Immigration and Nationality Act*, and for other purposes (a.k.a. *1965 Immigration and Nationality Act*; a.k.a. the *Hart-Cellar Act*) Pub.L. 89-236; 79 Stat. 911. October 3, 1965.

Aam Aadmi Party. "Bhai Baldeep Singh Profile," 2014. http://candidates.aamaadmiparty.org/bhai-baldeep-singh.html

Abrahams, Roger D. "Ordinary and Extraordinary Experience" in *The Anthropology of Experience*, edited by Victor Turner. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986.

Ahluwalia, M.L. "The Harimandir Sahib–in Historical Perspective." *Golden Temple*. Edited by Parm Bakhshish Singh, Devinder Kumar Verma, R.K. Ghai, and Gursharn Singh. Patiala: Punjabi University, 1999

Albanese, Catherine. *America: Religions and Religion*. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 1999. Third Edition.

_____. "Exchanging Selves, Exchanging Souls: Contact, Combination and American Religious History" in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*. Edited by Thomas A. Tweed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

Alexander, Jeffrey C. "Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance Between Ritual and Strategy" in *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics and Ritual*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Bernhard Giesen, and Jason L. Mast. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Alper, Harvey. "Introduction" in *Mantra*. Edited by Harvey P. Alper. New York: State University of New York Press, 1989.

American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship. Edited by Duncan Ryūken Williams and Christopher S. Queen. Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999.

Anadfoundation.org

Arshi, P.S. *The Golden Temple: History, Art and Architecture*. New Delhi: Harman Publishing House, 1989.

Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries. Edited by Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang. New York: New York University Press, 2004.

Asian Religions in America: A Documentary History. Edited by Thomas Tweed and Stephen Prothero. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962.

Bagga, Niraj, "Solar cooking system at Golden Temple soon." *The Tribune of India*. Sunday, April 15, 2012. (Accessed from http://www.tribuneindia.com/2012/20120416/punjab.htm#8).

Ballantyne, Tony. *Between Colonialism and Diaspora: Sikh Cultural Formations in an Imperial World*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

Beck, Guy L. "Hinduism and Music" in *Sacred Sound: Experiencing Music in World Religions*. Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006.

_____. *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1995.

Bell, Catherine. "Performance", in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. Edited by Mark C. Taylor. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

_____. "Constructing Ritual" in *Readings in Ritual Studies*. Edited by Ronald L. Grimes. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996.

http://www.bhaikultarsingh.com/

Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action. Edited by David N. Lorenzen. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.

Blau, Herbert. "Universals of Performance; Or Amortizing Play" in *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*. Edited by Richard Schechner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Bourdieu, Pierre and Loïc J. D. Wacquant. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

Brown, Karen McCarthy. *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

Bruner, Edward M. “Experience and its Expressions” and “Ethnography as Narrative” in *The Anthropology of Experience*, edited by Victor Turner. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986.

California Legislature. *Alien Land Act* (1913). (Accessed from: http://www.intimeandplace.org/Japanese %20Internment/reading/constitution/alienlandlaw.html).

Carnes, Tony and Fenggang Yang. “Introduction” in *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries*. Edited by Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang. New York: New York University Press, 2004.

Chakravorty, Robindra. *The Sikhs of El Centro: A Study in Social Integration*. Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Minnesota, 1968.

Chandler, Stuart. “Placing Palms Together: Religious and Cultural Dimensions of the Hsi Lai Temple Political Donations Controversy” in *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*. Edited by Duncan Ryūken Williams and Christopher S. Queen. Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999.

_____. “Chinese Buddhism in America: Identity and Practice” in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*. Edited by Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Chen, Carolyn. “Cultivating Acceptance by Cultivating Merit: The Public Engagement of a Chinese Buddhist Temple in American Society” in *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America*. Edited by Jane Iwamura. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Clifford, James. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Coburn, Thomas B. “'Scripture' in India: Towards a Typology of the Word in Hindu Life” in *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective*. Miriam Levering Ed. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989.

Cole, W. Owen, *Understanding Sikhism*. Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2004.

Covert, Martin, V. “Stockton Sikh Temple,” *The Stockton Record* , November 22, 1915.

Coward, Harold. *Sacred Word and Sacred Text: Scripture in World Religions*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988.

Coward, Harold and David J. Goa. *Mantra:Hearing the Divine in India and America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. Second Edition.

_____. "The Meaning and Power of Mantras in Bhartrhari's Vakyapadiya" in *Mantra*. Edited by Harvey P. Alper. New York: State University of New York Press, 1989.

Csordas, Thomas. "Introduction: Modalities of Transnational Transcendence" in *Transnational Transcendence: Essays on Religion and Globalization*. Edited by Thomas Csordas. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009

De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven F. Rendall. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1984.

Delong, Katie. "Oak Creek Police Chief outlines Sikh Temple shooting timeline". *Fox6now.com*, August 6, 2012. (Accessed from: http://fox6now.com/2012/08/06/oak-creek-police-chief-outlines-sikh-temple-shooting-timeline).

Dhillon, K.S. "Functions, Duties, and Qualifications of a Granthi", (Accessed from: http://www.gurunanakdarbar.net/files/1DUTIES_FUNCTIONS_AND_QUALIFICATION_OF_A_GRANTHI.pdf

Dictionary.reference.com (online English dictionary).

Diner, Hasia R. *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration, 1820-1880*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

Dolan, Jay. *The American Catholic Experience*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992.

Doughty, Steve. "Volunteer worker at Sikh temple who received £50 a week in donations wins right to be paid minimum wage", *The Daily Mail*, February 20, 2012. (http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2103973/Volunteer-worker-Sikh-temple-received-50-week-donations-wins-right-paid-minimum-wage.html).

Dusenbery, Verne A. *Sikhs at Large: Religion, Culture, and Politics in Global Perspective*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Eck, Diana. “Negotiating Hindu Identities in America” in *The South Asian religious diaspora in Britain, Canada, and the United States*. Edited by Harold Coward, John R. Hinnells, and Raymond Brady Williams. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2000.

_____. *Darśan: Seeing the Divine in India*, Third Edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

Encyclopedia of Sikhism. Edited by Harbans Singh. Patiala: Panjabi University Press. Accessed from http://www.learnpunjabi.org/eos/

Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives. Edited by Nancy T. Ammerman. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2006.

The Faces of Buddhism in America. Edited by Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Fenton, John Y. *Transplanting Religious Traditions: Asian Indians in America*. New York: Praeger, 1988.

Fisher, Mary Pat. *Living Religions: Eastern Traditions*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003.

Frith, Simon. *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*. Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996.

Geertz, Clifford. *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.

_____. “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight” in *Readings in Ritual Studies*. Edited by Ronald L. Grimes. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996.

_____. “Making Experience, Authoring Selves” in *The Anthropology of Experience*, edited by Victor Turner. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986.

George, Sheba. “Why Can't They Just Get Along? An Analysis of Schisms in an Indian Immigrant Church” in *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America*. Edited by Jane Iwamura. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Gibson, Margaret A. *Accommodation without Assimilation: Sikhs in an American High School*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988.

Gillis, Chester. *Roman Catholicism in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape. Edited by Robert Orsi. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

Goffman, Erving. *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Meryl Company, Inc., 1961.

_____. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 1959.

Gopal, Navjeevan, "Come rain or shine, awning to shield golden temple devotees Amritsar." *The Indian Express*. Saturday, February 25, 2012. http://www.indianexpress.com/news/come-rain-or-shine-awning-to-shield-golden/916349/

The Graceful Guru : Hindu Female Gurus in India and the United States. Edited by Karen Pechilis. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Graham, William. "Scripture as Spoken Word". *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective. Miriam Levering Ed. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989.*

Grewal, J.S. *The Sikhs: Ideology, Institutions, and Identity*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

_____. *Contesting Interpretations of the Sikh Tradition*. New Delhi: Manohar, 1998.

GT1588 Editors. "The Last of the Rababis," *Gt1588.org*, August 14, 2011. (Accessed from: http://gt1588.com/last-of-the-rababis).

Gupta, Himanee. "Staking a Claim on American-ness: Hindu Temples in the United States" in *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America*. Edited by Jane Iwamura. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Gurmat Sangeet Project, "Gurmat Sangeet Project," 2014. (Accessed from: http://www.gurmatsangeetproject.com/Pages/GurmatSangeetProject.asp).

Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck. "At Home in the Hijra: South Asian Muslims in the United States" in *The South Asian religious diaspora in Britain, Canada, and the United States*. Edited by Harold Coward, John R. Hinnells, and Raymond Brady Williams. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2000.

Hall, David. “Lived Religion”, *The Spirit of Things with Rachel Kohn*, Radio Broadcast, February 7th, 2000. (Transcript accessed from: http://www.abc.net.au/rn/relig/spirit/stories/s103914.htm).

_____. “Introduction” in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*. Edited by David Hall. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Harley, Gail M. *Hindu and Sikh Faiths in America*. New York: Facts on File, 2003.

Hawley, John Stratton. “Global Hinduism in Gotham” in *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries*. Edited by Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang. New York: New York University Press, 2004.

Helman, Scott. “Sikh leader Sarbpreet Singh forged community from tragedy: Following the Wisconsin shootings, this Hopkinton man organized a service that enlightened a region.” *The Boston Globe*, December 23, 2012.(Accessed from: http://www.bostonglobe.com/magazine/2012/12/23/sikh-leadersarbpreet-singh-forged-community-from-tragedy/Yz3IUxgO8a8kab1R9g2abO/story.html).

Hess, Linda. “Three Kabir Collections: A Comparative Study” in *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*. Edited by Karine Schomer and W.H. McLeod. Berkeley: Religious Studies Series and Motilal Banarsidass, 1987

Iigs.com (website of the International Institute of Gurmat Studies).

Immigrant Faiths: Transforming Religious Life in America. Karen Leonard, et al, editors. Lanham, MD: Alta Mira Press, 2006. Second Edition.

Jacoby, Harold S. *History of East Indians in America: the First Half-Century Experience of Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims*. Amritsar, India: B. Chattar Singh Jiwan Singh, 2007.

Jensen, Joan M. *Passage from India: Asian Indian Immigrants in North America*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988

Johnson, Paul Christopher. *Diaspora Conversions: Black Carib Religion and the Recovery of Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

Jolly, Asit, “Sikh 'nectar' gets hi-tech clean-up.” *BBC News, World Edition*. Friday, 13 December, 2002. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/2574025.stm

Joselit, Jenna Weissman. *Parade of Faiths: Immigration and American Religion*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Joshi, Khyati Y. *New Roots in America's Sacred Ground: Religion, Race, and Ethnicity in Indian America*. Piscataway, NJ:Rutgers University Press, 2006.

Kapferer, Bruce. “Performance and the Structuring of Meaning and Experience” in *The Anthropology of Experience*. Edited by Victor Turner. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986.

Kapoor, Sukhbir Singh and Mohinder Kaur Kapoor. *Janamsaakhi Prampara*. Amritsar: B. Chattar Singh Jiwan Singh Publishers, 2005.

Kaur, Madanjit. *The Golden Temple: Past and Present*. Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University Press, 1983.

Kerr, Ian J. , “Handle with great care: 'British Actions Towards the Sikhs and the Golden Temple in the Last Half of the 19th Century.” *Golden Temple*. Edited by Parm Bakhshish Singh, Devinder Kumar Verma, R.K. Ghai, and Gursharn Singh. Patiala: Punjabi University, 1999.

Kim, David Kayuman. “Enchanting Diasporas, Asian Americans, and the Passionate Attachment of Race” in *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America*. Edited by Jane Iwamura. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Kovaleski, Serge F. “Wisconsin Killer Fed and Was Fueled by Hate-Driven Music”. *The New York Times*, August 6, 2012. (Accessed from: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/07/us/army-veteran-identified-as-suspect-in-wisconsin-shooting.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

Kurien, Prema A. “Who Speaks for Indian Americans? Religion, Ethnicity, and Political Formation.” *American Quarterly*, Volume 59, Number 3, September 2007, pp. 759-783.

_____. *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007.

LaBrack, Bruce. *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975*. New York: AMS Press, 1988.

Lal, Vinay. “Sikh Kirpans in California Schools: The Social Construction of Symbols, the Cultural Politics of Identity, and the Limits of Multiculturalism” in *New Spiritual Homes: Religion and Asian Americans*. Edited by David K. Yoo. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press in Association with UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1999.

Learnkirtan.com (website of Bhai Manmohan Singh).

Leonard, Karen. “Second Generation Sikhs in the U.S.: Consensus and Differences.” *Sikh Identity: Continutity and Change*. Edited by Pashaura Singh and N.G. Barrier. New Delhi: Manohar, 1999.

_____. *The South Asian Americans*. Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 1997.

_____. “Pioneer Voices from California: Reflections on Race, Religion and Ethnicity” in *The Transmission of Sikh Heritage in the Diaspora*. Edited by Pashaura Singh and N. Gerald Barrier. New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1996.

_____. *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994.

Levi Strauss, Claude. *La Pensée Sauvage*. Paris: Librairie Plon, 1962.

Lien, Pei-te and Tony Carnes. “The Religious Demography of Asian American Boundary Crossing” in *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries*. Edited by Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang. New York: New York University Press, 2004.

Lin, Irene. “Journey to the Far West: Chinese Buddhism in America” in *New Spiritual Homes: Religion and Asian Americans*. Edited by David K. Yoo. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press in Association with UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1999.

Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice. Edited by David Hall. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Livingston, James. *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion*. Fifth Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2005.

Lucia, Amanda. *Reflections of Amma: Devotees in a Global Embrace*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.

Mandair, A.S. *Religion and the Spectre of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality and the Politics of Translation*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2009

Mann, Gurinder Singh. *The Making of Sikh Scripture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

_____. “Sikhism in the United States of America”. *The South Asian Religious \Diaspora in Britain, Canada, and the United States*. Edited by Harold Coward, John R. Hinells, and Raymond Brady Williams. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000.

_____. *Sikhism*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004.

Mann, Gurinder Singh, Paul Numrich and Raymond Brady Williams. *Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs in America.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Mansukhani, G.S. *Indian Classical Music and Sikh Kirtan*. New Delhi: Oxford and IBH Publishing Co., 1982.

Mantra. Edited by Harvey P. Alper. New York: State University of New York Press, 1989.

Marcus, George E. “Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography”. *Annual Review of Anthropology,* Vol. 24 (1995), 95-117.

Mahmood, Cynthia Keppley. *Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogues with Sikh Militants*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996.

Mazumdar, Shampa and Sanjay Mazumdar. “Creating the Sacred: Altars in Hindu American Homes” in *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America*. Edited by Jane Iwamura. New York: Routledge, 2003.

McGuire, Meredith. *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

McLeod, W.H. “Sikhs of the Diaspora” in *Sikhism*. New York: Penguin, 1997.

_____. *The Evolution of the Sikh Community: Five Essays*. Second Edition. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

_____. *The Sikhs: History, Religion, and Society*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.

_____. *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janam Sakhis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980

_____. *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1968.

Min, Pyong Gap. “Religion and the Maintenance of Ethnicity Among Immigrants:in Ethnicity?: A Comparison of Korean Christian and Indian Hindu Immigrants” in *Immigrant Faiths: Transforming Religious Life in America*. Karen Leonard, et al, editors. Lanham, MD: Alta Mira Press, 2006. Second Edition.

_____. “Immigrants' Religion and Ethnicity: A Comparison of Korean Christian and Indian Hindu Immigrants” in *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America*. Edited by Jane Iwamura. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Muthanna, I.M. *People of India in North America*. Enlarged Edition. Bangalore: Lotus Printers, 1982.

Myerhoff, Barbara. 1995. 'Death in Due Time: Construction of Self and Culture in Ritual Drama.' In *Readings in Ritual Studies*, edited by Ronald L. Grimes. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Higher Education.

_____. “The Transformation of Consciousness in Ritual Performances: Some Thoughts and Questions” in *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*. Edited by Richard Schechner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Narayan, Anjana and Bandana Purkayastha. Living Our Religions: Hindu and Muslim South Asian American Women Narrate their Experiences. Danvers, MA: Kumarian Press, 2009.

_____. “Hinduism in Pittsburgh: Creating the South Indian 'Hindu' Experience in the United States” in *The Life of Hinduism*. Edited by John Stratton Hawley and Vasudha Narayanan. Berkeley and Los Angeles:University of California Press, 2006.

Nattier, Jan. “Who is a Buddhist? Charting the Landscape of Buddhist America” in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*. Edited by Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Nesbitt, Eleanor. *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Nessen, Stephen. “A Victim's Son Reflects on the Sikh Temple Shooting,” *Thetakeaway.org*, August 9, 2012. (Accessed from: http://www.thetakeaway.org/story/228845-continued-reflection-sikh-temple-shooting)

New Spiritual Homes: Religion and Asian Americans. Edited by David K. Yoo. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press in Association with UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1999.

Nijhawan, Michael. *Dhadi Darbar: Religion, Violence, and the Performance of Sikh History*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Nimbark, Ashakant. “Paradoxes of Media-Reflected Religiosity among Hindu Indians” in *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries*. Edited by Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang. New York: New York University Press, 2004.

Oberoi, Harjot. *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Orsi, Robert. *Between Heaven and Earth: the Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005.

_____. “Everyday Miracles: the Study of Lived Religion” in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*. Edited by David Hall. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

_____. *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

Padoux, André. “Mantra” in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*. Edited by Gavin Flood. Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Synergy, 2005.

_____. “Conclusion: Mantras—What Are They?” in *Mantra*. Edited by Harvey P. Alper. New York: State University of New York Press, 1989.

Parsons, Rob. “Sikhs donate to Wisconsin officer shot at temple”, *Appeal Democrat*, September 12, 2012. (Accessed from: http://www.appeal-democrat.com/sikhs-donate-to-wisconsin-officer-shot-at-temple/article_277ee120-43e6-517e-8987-b7de6c00cced.html).

The Performance Studies Reader. Second Edition. Edited by Henry Bial. London and New York: Routledge, 2004.

Phillips, James Duncan. “Captain Stephen Phillips, 1764-1838” in *Essex Institute: Historical Collections*. Vol. LXXVI, No. 2, April, 1940.

Pluralism.org/religion/sikhism (statistical data on Sikh Americans).

Punjabi University. “Gurmat Sangeet Project”. Word document. 2014. (Accessed from: www.punjabiuniversity.ac.in/pbiuniweb/pages/teaching/GurmatSangeetProject.doc).

Punzo Waghorne, Joanne. *Diaspora of the Gods: Modern Hindu Temples in an Urban Middle-Class World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Purewal, Navtej K. "Sikh/Muslim *Bhai-Bhai*? Towards a Social History of the *Rabābī* Tradition of *Shabad Kīrtan*" in *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory*, Vol. 7, No. 3. (pgs. 365-382). Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group: 2011.

Qureshi, Regula. "Islam and Music" in *Sacred Sound: Experiencing Music in World Religions*. Edited by Guy L. Beck. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2006.

Rai, Gurmeet and Kavita Singh, "Brick by Sacred Brick: Architectural Projects of Guru Arjan and Guru Hargobind." *Insights Into Sikh Art*. Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2003.

Rajacademy.com.

Rana, Yudhvir. "SGPC Demotes Head Granthi of Golden Temple". *The Times of India*. November 17, 2012. (Accessed from: http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/SGPC-demotes-Head-Granthi-of-Golden-Temple/articleshow/17256320.cms).

Reinhart, Robin. "Dasam Granth" in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*. Edited by Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Religions of India in Practice. Edited by Donald S. Lopez Jr. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Retelling U.S. religious history. Edited by Thomas A. Tweed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America. Edited by Jane Iwamura. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Riesebrodt, Martin and Mary Ellen Konieczny. "Sociology of Religion" in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*. Edited by John R. Hinnells. London and New York: Routledge, 2005.

Schechner, Richard. 2002. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge.

_____. "Restoration of Behavior". *Readings in Ritual Studies*. Edited by Ronald L. Grimes. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996.

_____. “Magnitudes of Performance” in *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*. Edited by Richard Schechner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

_____. *Performance Theory*. New York: Routledge, 1988. First published as *Essays on Performance Theory* in 1977.

_____. *Between Theater and Anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985.

Schechner, Richard and Willa Appell. “Introduction” in *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*. Edited by Richard Schechner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Seager, Richard Hughes. *Buddhism in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

Searchgurbani.com/bhai_gurdas_vaaran (online text of the *vār* compositions of Bhai Gurdas)

Shackle, C. *A Guru Nanak Glossary*. Vancouver and London: University of British Columbia Press, 1981.

Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology. Edited by Gregory Barz and Timothy J. Cooley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Second Edition.

Shankar, Vijay N. and Ranvir Bhatnagar, *The Golden Temple: A gift to humanity*. New Delhi: Ranvir Bhatnagar Publications, 2004.

Shapiro, Michael C. “The Theology of the Locative Case in Sacred Sikh Scripture” in *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action*. Edited by David N. Lorenzen. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.

Sharf, Robert H. “Experience” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. Edited by Mark C. Taylor. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee. “Granthi”. sgpc.net. No Date. (Accessed from: http://sgpc.net/glossary/Granthi.asp).

Sikh Bulletin Editors, “Langar: The Power of Devotion, Some Eye Opening Facts.” *The Sikh Bulletin* 3:1&2, 2011: 4-6.

Sikhpioneers.org.

Sikh Temple of Wisconsin. “Memorial”. No Date. (Accessed from: http://sikhtempleofwisconsin.com/memorial).

Singh, Bhai Avtar and Bhai Gurcharan Singh. *Gurbānī Saṇgīt Prāchin Rīt Ratanāvali*. Two Volumes. Patiala: Punjabi University Press, 1995.

Singh, Gurnam. “Sikh Music” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*. Edited by Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

_____. *Sikh Musicology: Sri Guru Granth Sahib and Hymns of the Human Spirit*. New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers, 2001.

Singh, I.J. “A Very Human Tragedy”, *Sikhnet*, May 30, 2012. (Accessed from: http://www.sikhnet.com/news/very-human-tragedy).

Singh, I.J., Gurmit Singh, and Ravinder Singh.“At a Crossroads: Granthis & Gurdwaras”, *Sikh Chic*, June 28, 2012 (Accessed from: http://www.sikhchic.com/columnists/at_a_crossroads_granthis_gurdwaras).

Singh, Jaideep. *Diasporic Community-Building Enterprises: Race, Religious Identity, and Sikh American Ggrassroots Political Organizing Before 9/11*. Dissertation. University of California, Berkeley, 2009.

Singh, Jasjit. 'Sikh-ing Beliefs: British Sikh Camps in the U.K.' in *Sikhs in Europe: Migration, Identities, and Representations*. Edited by Knut A. Jacobsen and Kristina Myrvold. Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2012

Singh, Kamalroop. “Sikh Martial Art (*Gatkā*)”. *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*. Edited by Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014

Singh, Kirpal, “Darbar Sahib Amritsar and Maharaja Ranjit Singh.” *Golden Temple*. Edited by Parm Bakhshish Singh, Devinder Kumar Verma, R.K. Ghai, and Gursharn Singh. Patiala: Punjabi University, 1999.

Singh, Pashaura. “An Overview of Sikh History” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*. Edited by Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

_____. “Musical Chaunkis at the Darbar Sahib: History, Aesthetics, and Time” in *Sikhism in Global Context*. Edited by Pashaura Singh. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011.

_____. *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006.

_____. *The Bhagats of the Guru Granth Sahib: Sikh-Self-Definition and the Bhagat Bani*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

_____. *The Guru Granth Sahib: Canon Meaning and Authority*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000. (Reprint, New Delhi: Oxford India Paperbacks, 2003).

_____. “Recent Trends and Prospects in Sikh Studies”. *Studies in Religion*, Volume 27, No. 4 (1998) pp. 407-425.

Singh, Patwant, *The Golden Temple*. New Delhi: Time Books International and Manohar, 1988.

Singh, Prithi Pal. *The History of Sikh Gurus*. Pompano Beach, FL: Educa Press, 2007.

Singh, Sheena. “15 Years in the Making—San Jose Gurdwara Celebrates a Very Grand Opening” *The Sikh Foundation*, May 8, 2011. (Accessed from http://www.sikhfoundation.org/people-events/15-years-in-the-making-san-jose-gurudwara-celebrates-a-very-grand-opening).

Singh, Simran Jeet. “15 Rounds and Still Talking: Lt. Brian Murphy's Story of the Oak Creek Massacre”, The Daily Beast, August 5, 2013. (Accessed from http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/08/05/15-rounds-and-still-talking-lt-brian-murphy-s-story-of-the-oak-creek-massacre.html).

Sircar, Nabanita. “Biggest Gurdwara Outside India Opens”. *Hindustan Times*, December 27, 2003. (Accessed from: http://www.hindustantimes.com/news-feed/nm2/biggest-gurudwara-outside-india-opens/article1-7400.aspx).

Smith, Elta and Courtney Bender. “The Creation of Urban Niche Religion: South Asian Taxi Drivers in New York City” in *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders andBoundaries*. Edited by Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang. New York: New York University Press, 2004.

Smith, Jane I. *Islam in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

Smith, Jonathan Z. “The Bare Facts of Ritual” in *Readings in Ritual Studies*. Edited by Ronald L. Grimes. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996.

The South Asian religious diaspora in Britain, Canada, and the United States. Edited by Harold Coward, John R. Hinnells, and Raymond Brady Williams. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2000.

Spokensanskrit.de (online Sanskrit dictionary).

Srigranth.org (online text of Guru Granth Sahib).

Sullivan, Lawrence E. "Sound and Senses: Toward a Hermeneutics of Performance", *History of Religions*, 26 (1), August 1986, pgs. 1-33.

Takaki, Ronald. *India in the West: South Asians in America*. New York and Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1989.

Tambiah, Stanley Jeyarajah. "A Performative Approach to Ritual" in *Culture, Thought, and Social Action: An Anthropological Approach*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1985.

Tanaka, Kenneth. "Issues of Ethnicity in the Buddhist Churches of America" in *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*. Edited by Duncan Ryūken Williams and Christopher S. Queen. Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999.

Tatla, Darshan Singh. "Guru Granth Sahib Among the Sikh Diaspora." *Guru Granth Sahib Among the Scriptures of the World*. Patiala, India: Publications Bureau, Punjabi University, 2004.

_____. *The Sikh Diaspora: The Search for Statehood*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999.

Townsend, Charles M. "'Keeping the Faith Alive': Teaching Sikh *Kirtan* in America" in *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory*. Routledge Periodicals, Taylor and Francis Group, Vol. 10, No. 3, November 2014.

_____. "Introduction: Engaging Sikh Texts, Practices, and Performances" in *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (December), 285-298. Routledge Periodicals, Taylor and Francis Group, 2014.

_____. "The Darbar Sahib" in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*. Singh and Fenech, eds. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

_____. "'Performance' and 'Lived Religion' Approaches as New Ways of 'Re-Imagining' Sikh Studies." In *Re-Imagining South Asian Religions: Essays in Honour of Professors Harold G. Coward and Ronald W. Neufeldt*. Singh and Hawley, eds. Numen Book Series: Studies in the History of Religions. Boston, MA and Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Publications, 2012.

_____. "*Gurbani Kirtan* and the Performance of Sikh Identity in California." In *Sikhism in Global Context*. Edited by Pashaura Singh. New York, Oxford, and New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011.

_____. "Sikhism," in *The Encyclopedia of Asian American Folklore and Folklife*. Lee and Nadeau, eds. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011.

_____. "Sikh Gurus" in *The Encyclopedia of Asian American Folklore and Folklife*. Lee and Nadeau, eds. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011.

_____. "Gurbānī Kīrtan" in *The Encyclopedia of Asian American Folklore and Folklife*. Lee and Nadeau, eds. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011.

Turino, Thomas. *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Turner, Victor. "Liminality and Communitas" in *Readings in Ritual Studies*. Edited by Ronald L. Grimes. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996.

_____. "Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and Drama?" in *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*. Edited by Richard Schechner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

_____. "Images and Reflections: Ritual, Drama, Carnival, Film and Spectacle in Cultural Performance" in *The Anthropology of Performance*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1988.

_____. "The Anthropology of Performance" in *The Anthropology of Performance*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1988.

_____. "Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama: An Essay in the Anthropology of Experience" in *The Anthropology of Experience*, edited by Victor Turner. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986.

Turner, Victor and Edith Turner. "Performing Ethnography" in *The Anthropology of Performance*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1988.

Tweed, Thomas. *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2006.

U.S. Supreme Court. *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, 261 U.S. 204 (1923). (Accessed from: https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/261/204/case.html#214).

Van de Berg, Travis, and Fred Kniss. "ISKCON and Immigrants: The Rise, Decline, and Rise Again of a New Religious Movement". *The Sociological Quarterly* 49 (2008): 79-104.

Van Esterik, Penny. "Ritual and the Performance of Buddhist Identity among Lao Buddhists in North America" in *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*. Edited by Duncan Ryūken Williams and Christopher S. Queen. Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999.

Vásquez, Manuel A. and Marie Friedmann Marquardt. *Globalizing the Sacred: Religion Across the America*s. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003.

Verma, Rita. *Backlash: South Asian Immigrant Voices on the Margins*. Rotterdam and Taipei: Sense Publishers, 2008.

Vertovec, Steven. *The Hindu Diaspora: Comparative Patterns*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000.

Wade, Bonnie C. *Imaging Sound: An Ethnomusicological Study of Music, Art, and Culture in Mughal India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Weber, Maximillian. "The Nature of Charismatic Authority and its Routinization" in *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Translated by A.R. Anderson and Talcott Parsons. New York: Free Press, 1947 (1922)

Williams, Raymond Brady. "South Asians in the United States" in *The South Asian Religious diaspora in Britain, Canada, and the United States*. Edited by Harold Coward, John R. Hinnells, and Raymond Brady Williams. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2000.

_____. "Conclusion: Trajectories for Future Studies" in *The South Asian Religious diaspora in Britain, Canada, and the United States*. Edited by Harold Coward, John R. Hinnells, and Raymond Brady Williams. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2000.

Wulff, Donna Marie. “On Practicing Religiously: Music as Sacred in India” in *Sacred Sound: Music in Religious Thought and Practice*. Edited by Joyce Irwin. Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983.

Zarilli, Phillip. “What Does it Mean to 'Become the Character': Power, Presence, and Transcendence in Asian In-Body Disciplines of Practice” in *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*. Edited by Richard Schechner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.