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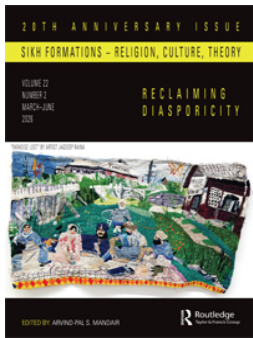
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Sikh scripture, German orientalism, and the predicaments of mistranslation

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on how Sikhism developed a unique historical trajectory in early modernity by coining and cultivating a distinct system of signification, making itself later vulnerable to mistranslation under the weight of Western imperial philology. The potentialities of early Sikhism became manifest through new usages in the Guru Granth of longstanding terms within Indian traditions. Steeped in pluralism, dialogism, musicality, and secularity, the orientations toward newness were undermined by the intervention of Ernst Trumpp's colonially commissioned philology and the ramifications of his mistranslation of Sikh scripture, triggering diverse predicaments premised on the politics of recognition in late colonial India.

KEYWORDS

Guru Granth; scriptural canonization; materialist abstraction; translation; German Orientalism; imperial philology; colonial modernity; politics of recognition; Ernst Trumpp

1. Introduction

It is seldom acknowledged that minor religious traditions present as many intractable and grandiose problems of interpretation as major ones. Even less often recognized is an encumbrance that accrues mostly to minor traditions and rarely, if ever, to major ones: the menace of being dissolved and assimilated into larger, more abstract and fully reified categories of religion such as 'Hinduism.' This is especially the case when it comes to formations such as Sikhism, whose scriptural canonization and later translation may serve as exemplary, which is to say cautionary, instances of how things can go irrevocably awry in highly charged moments of encounter on an uneven field of power. Alongside this contentious problem of being brought under the religious juggernaut of, say, contemporary Hindu nationalism, there are the lingering effects of having come earlier under the hegemony of Western imperial power. The tradition of Sikhism in this equally fraught moment faces an antagonistic field that the historian and anthropologist Bernard Cohn coined as 'colonial forms of knowledge,' that is, research endeavors sponsored by the colonial state meant ultimately to facilitate the project of political control (Cohn 1996). The very act of translation under these unequal conditions becomes a metonym of the wider processes of absorption into a distinct dispensation of modern power in its colonial guise. The effect is to produce

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inequality from the level of language to that of ethnos; to establish boundaries and create thereby demographic units amenable to manipulation; and ultimately to suborn the understanding of one tradition to the terms of another. What must be traced in this process is what happens to all those dimensions considered sacred, singular, or epiphanic in the original texts of the minor religion in the process of modern secular, indeed profane, acts of translation.

The task that these moments of encounter, translation, and assertion produce is three-fold: (1) to trace the formation of Sikhism's most sacred texts, the concepts underlying them, the presuppositions guiding them, the forms they adopted, and the practices with which they were entangled; (2) to understand the formation of Sikh tradition in its early stages as itself a process of translation, marked by acts of filtering, canonization, and innovation extending over a century from the first to the tenth guru, culminating in the transference of guru-status to scripture itself; and (3) to map the encounter with Orientalist philology which results in the reduction of living traditions with wide worldly potentiality into pre-given concepts and categorizations issuing from imperial metropolitan cultures.

Conditions seemed especially conducive for a mistranslation of Sikh tradition when Ernst Trumpp brought his training in German Orientalist philology and Protestant leanings into Punjab under the auspices of crown rule and colonial consolidation in the 1870s. The publication of his translation of the *Adi-Granth* in 1877 set into motion a variety of subtle and not-so-subtle shifts in the way Sikhism would evolve in later decades up to our contemporary moment. Central to this transformation, as we will see, is Trumpp's identification of Nanak, the first of the Sikh gurus, with Martin Luther of the Reformation. In ways that can only be alluded to in this chapter, despite such forced insertions of Sikhism into an emergent world religions model, Sikh congregants and orders would retain remnants of longstanding Indian textual practices and notions of beatitude that would remain impervious to the target languages of modern translational regimes.

2. Heterodox sources, tantric legacies, and mercantile social logics

In order to comprehend the specific textual forms and discursive practices that characterize early Sikhism, one must establish the various conditions of possibility for the rise of this religious formation. Though this is by no means exhaustive, and each topic can only be dealt with cursorily, the list must include: the rise and prevalence of Tantrism in the centuries preceding the emergence of *nirguna* bhakti and Sikhism; the making of distinct regions across the Indian subcontinent, with corresponding social patterns, linguistic evolution, vernacular traditions, and cultural norms; the consolidation of a distinct sociality in Punjab with the predominance of mercantile castes, the stabilization of trade networks, the formation of a monetized economy alongside the evolution of *shrenis*, or integrated guilds and organizations for the production and distribution of goods across urban and rural divides, all of which culminated in the articulation of a new rational civil theology that diverges radically from the caste model inherited from orthodox Hinduism (Sahota 2011); and, finally, the engagement with new models of scripture and the notion of the book brought into India with the rise of Islamic polities from the founding of the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526) to the development of the Mughal empire

(1526–1857) in parallel with the rise of Sikhism. Let us develop each of these in turn to sense how they all coalesced to produce the conditions for early Sikhism and its discursive practices.

The British Indologist Alexis Sanderson has dubbed the *longue durée* extending from the seventh through the thirteenth century the ‘Tantra Age’ (See for instance Flood 2006; Sanderson 2009). What characterized this period, and what were its lasting impacts? Foremost among the tantric orientations that cannot be overemphasized is the burgeoning collective will to depart from, subordinate, and substitute for the strictures and soteriological dimensions of Vedic orthodoxy. This challenge to Vedic orthodoxy was marked initially by a shift away from Vaishnavism, a major exemplar of classical Hinduism, toward more liminal, primitive, and even dangerous theological currents associated with Shaiva theology and the worship of the mother goddess that preceded Vedic civilization. These deities secured for the *tantrika* a new spiritual path beyond that of Vedic theory and practice, an *atimarga* that alighted upon a new cosmology outstripping that of old, as this path was the one that ‘transcended the orthodox system of four stages of life (*asrama*), going even higher than the orthodox stage of renunciation according to the Atimargins’ (Flood 1996, 155). Otherwise, if not in parallel, one could adopt the *kula-marga*, the path of the goddess, which promised spiritual liberation (*mukti*) through acts of transgression and subversion with respect to the everyday norms of Hinduism. The rites that broke with orthodox constraints were often performed in secret, under the veil of dark night, with a guru as an indispensable initiator. The disciple – who could now, under the auspices of the goddess, be female – was led to partake of the five Ms – *madya* (alcohol), *matsya* (fish), *mamsa* (flesh), *mudra* (parched grain), and *maithuna* (coition). As the historian Romila Thapar remarks: ‘In the final state of purification’ – meaning the absolution of all aspects of subjectivity tied to Hindu orthodoxy – ‘everything and everyone was equal’ (Thapar 2002, 486). This situation provided fertile ground for the cross-breeding of various heterodox elements, such as those of classical Buddhism and Jainism. Many of these essential ingredients of Tantra found their elaboration in *nirguna* bhakti, of which Kabir was the most vocal exponent in the fifteenth century, and Nanak and his Sikhs in the succeeding centuries. The notion of social equality was key, concertedly undoing long-inherited caste hierarchies. These kinds of subversions extended to language, with the vernacular esteemed just as effective for spiritual ends as the hieratic Sanskrit; and the world too, in an act of overturning, could be valued for the spiritual life rather than necessitating renunciation for the path to higher spheres. The nature of tantric textuality – replete with esoteric mantras and enigmatic diagrams – meant to facilitate the experience of ephemeral divine-like states in the tantric initiate was kept intact in a variety of ways. All of these heterodox elements bequeathed by the Tantric Age found their way into Sikhism, culminating dramatically in the founding of the Khalsa in 1699, with the newly invested Sikhs no longer hiding in secrecy like the *tantrikas* of yore, but emerging in the light of day as newly formed subjects embodying equal status under the auspices of Guru Gobind Singh.

With the invocation of the vernacular as the humble medium of Sikh scripture, we already broach the theme of regionalization as a crucial condition for the rise of Sikhism. The making of regions and regional languages in the subcontinent is a complex and historically drawn-out process whose richness of color and shading can only be hinted at with reference to the Punjab region. The tendency toward regional

autonomy can be attributed to the fact that there was no overarching imperial polity between the seventh and thirteenth centuries – the same period, coincidentally, that Sanderson calls the ‘Tantric Age’ – that is, from the slow fragmentation of the late Gupta Empire until the rise of the Delhi Sultanate, and later, in the sixteenth century, the expansion of Mughal hegemony. With no imperial center in the subcontinent, different social patterns took hold in different regions. Unlike other parts of northern India, for instance, the Punjab did not move in the direction of a rigid Indian feudalism, characterized by the regional king’s granting of land to local potentates to be worked by locals with no such customary right. The slow evolution of hereditary ownership that grounded Indian feudalism went hand in hand with the transformation of non-sedentary peoples to the status of serfs who now performed *vishti* or forced labor much as their French counterparts provided unremunerated work (*corvée*) to their landed overlords. The traditional caste structure was imposed from above, with the brahman often authorizing the norms meant to govern the social order, even if these norms were surreptitiously negated under the cloak of Tantrism. Yet in Punjab, such land grants were not common, and thus no pattern of bare subsistence production, social involution, and shrinkage of trade took hold. Instead, the course of social development was distinctive: the brahman was demoted and trading castes emerged as the dominant actors of the region. This shift to worldly mercantile power meant that the vernacular languages – those closer to the people and connected with practical affairs – would be fostered. Nanak and his successors all arose from the mercantile caste, and early Sikhism coincided with the fashioning of Punjabi, such as that of the Sufi poet Baba Farid, and old Hindi, such as that of Kabir, into vehicles of spiritual expression. Indeed, the Sikh gurus were themselves responsible for devising the Gurmukhi script for Punjabi, distinguishing this language from those of neighboring regions, and propagating it as the communicative medium for local trade and other purposes.

Looked at from a *longue-durée* perspective, a few distinct social logics can be seen to come together synergistically in the three centuries preceding Nanak, culminating in the emergence of several latent, indeed nocturnal, tendencies of Tantrism into the open and for good. The historical process is one that articulates distinct material, social, and cultural forms into a unifying pattern of change, one in which each sphere’s development reinforces that of the others.

First among the changes that impacts the Punjab region has already been implied: this is the expansion of trade under the widening rule of the Delhi Sultanate. As Richard Eaton notes, the ‘sultanate’s commercial integration with the Middle East greatly augmented international trade, thereby expanding the reach of merchants at every level, from long-distance brokers to local retailers in *qasbahs*’ (Eaton 2019, 58). Under Iltutmish (r. 1211–1236), the sultanate minted and circulated ‘unprecedented levels of silver-based coinage,’ and ‘established a stable currency based on the silver *tanka*, to which the modern rupee can be traced’ (Eaton 2019, 59). As Punjab lay between Delhi and the newly integrated zones beyond the Khyber Pass, it is not surprising that a certain kind of mercantile rationality would define this region’s pattern of development. To this may be combined the inheritance of *shrenis*, or associations that tie together various nodes of the production of raw materials, the guilds that shaped them in accordance with diverse crafts, and the merchants who distributed the resulting commodities along extensive trade networks. *Shrenis* were long recognized as agents for social leveling,

operating according to practical ends that contravened caste codes, increasingly understood to be impediments to any efficient economic process. Regarding this longstanding tension, Thapar writes: ‘The royal and corporate authorities governing urban life were not always in agreement with brahmanical statutes, and this had its roots in the pre-Gupta period,’ which is to say, before the fourth century CE (Thapar 2002, 300). With Brahmanism subordinated to mercantile rationality in the social sphere and generally overturned by tantric experimentalism in ever-widening cultural expression, and with a sovereign power, the Delhi Sultanate, that purposely put in abeyance the religious institutions and codes of the Islamic caliphate, the conditions were increasingly ripe for a new social ethic. What the times demanded was a new rational civil theology that would embody this new social dynamism, a secular code encompassing a theology founded on ideals of equality, secular reason, and the spiritual valorization of this-worldly existence as one possible telos of classical Tantrism. Early Sikhism, with its innovative textuality, arose to this historical challenge and sought to articulate a message that would coalesce with the immanent potentiality of the age.

The Guru Granth cannot be understood apart from these gradually intertwining historical developments. As a textual form, this work embodies and expands the power of open vernacular expression in the contemporary moment against the recondite meanings of the ancient Veda. Furthermore, the choice of local dialects removed scriptural authority from the imperial officialdom signified by Persian. Developed over time, the Guru Granth affirms temporal process, absorbing currents that give its message greater force and scope over the course of ten gurus, before itself assuming the status of a living guru. We may now turn to the historical genesis and formal qualities of this work, emphasizing how it translated longstanding Indian traditions and the fact of Islam as a new presence in Punjab into its medium and message.

3. Text formation as translation

Studies relating how the Guru Granth has been translated into other languages have multiplied over the years (and will be a focus for a later section of this chapter). Yet, it has rarely been noted that the making of the Guru Granth can itself be seen as a process of translation. That is, the spiritual path adopted by the Sikh gurus entailed the task of culling certain past traditions and securing them for the present and future, of curating particular sonic qualities, and of sifting past cosmologies, doctrines, and concepts for ones that conform, enhance, or become the tropes for the underlying precepts of Guru Nanak’s seminal teachings. What were the guiding discursive forms, and their sources? What was the principle of selection, and what were the kinds of figures who were included in the new canon of Sikh thought? Which aspects of the panoply of disparate traditions – Indic or otherwise – were affirmed, which denied? In *What Is Scripture?*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith notes that the making of scripture in the era of Guru Nanak was the manifestation of a world historical process. Similar trends were necessitating and shaping distinct traditions, and these were not due necessarily to the presence of Islam with its notion of the book (*kitab*) and people of the book (*ahl-e kitab*). As Smith writes, there was ‘a shared formalizing transition . . . going on at this time among all three of the Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh communities’ (Smith 1993, 201). A more extensive study of this transitional moment is necessary to determine what commonalities formed across

these different faiths, leading them all in the direction of the promulgation and redaction of canonical sacred writings. In the case of Sikhism, canon formation went hand in hand with the adoption of key techniques that eventually combined to make a work of great reverence, the Guru Granth, partaking thereby in a longer history of the fashioning of books as both sacred and sacralizing objects in Indian traditions. Central among these techniques were writing, music, and poetic innovation. Together they produced a consistency of medium and message for later generations, all the while filtering, sifting, and reorganizing elements of past traditions for the creation of a new practico-spiritual institution (*panth*), an extended notion of custodian (*guru*), and a sense of holiness invested in the book (*granth*).

While a comprehensive picture of Sikhism's complex relationship to past traditions remains a scholarly desideratum, we may glean from extant works a sense of how writing not only stabilized a canon but created the basis for Sikhism's self-definition vis à vis other forms of spiritual expression. In this respect, Pashaura Singh's *The Bhagats of the Guru Granth Sahib* is especially illuminating. This is because Singh takes on the question of the relationship the Guru Granth establishes, explicitly or implicitly, between the teachings of the Sikh gurus, on the one hand, and the poetry of fifteen Sant, Sufi, and Bhakti predecessors included in the newly emerging canon, on the other. This is undoubtedly a complex relation. Yet, Singh distinguishes some guiding threads for understanding the role of the *bhagat bani* – the language of the inspired utterances of the poet-saint predecessors – in Sikh scripture. First among these are the new sociality and its requisite theological underpinnings as exemplified by the poet-saints. Here one finds a constellation of reinforcing principles: a strong orientation to monotheism, a belief in the fundamental equality of human beings, and the rejection of all forms of orthodoxy, as represented especially by the Veda and Vaishnava thought, along with orthopraxy, such as the various prescriptions and rituals that reinforce caste distinctions. Ample room was thus made for the poet-saints of lower caste, such as the six belonging to the Shudra order: Kabir, Namdev, Sain, Sadhana, Dhanna, and Ravidas, who were by profession respectively weaver (*julaha*), cotton printer (*chhimba*), barber (*nai*), butcher (*kasai*), peasant (*jat*), and tanner (*chamar*). Against the grain of ritual ostentation and performance of piety according to prescriptions passed down from above – including worship before images, pilgrimages, fasting, and ritual bathing – the bhagats included in the Sikh scripture exemplified spiritual authenticity via interiority. This rejection of religious display signified an increasingly powerful drive to suborn ancient ritual injunction, no matter the source of religious authority. The needs of a new social ethic represented by genuine autonomy, interiority, and conscientiousness increasingly made obsolete the internally divided and subservient subjectivity normalized by longstanding strata of religious ritualism. Despite many overlaps between the views of the bhagats and the Sikh gurus, it should be noted that the Guru Granth marks important distinctions and differences as well. The discrepancies signify for Singh incorporation of difference in the scripture in keeping with a new ethos of religious pluralism emanating from the Mughal power, especially under Akbar, whose reign (1556-1605) coincided with the earliest moments of Sikh canon formation. This meant not only that room for dialogue with various spiritual seekers in this scripture was encouraged, but that dialogue itself was upheld as a virtue. By incorporating the bhagat bani yet subordinating it to the

teachings of the Sikh gurus, this work made dialogue a catalyst for Sikh self-definition at a crucial early moment of its history.

A similar set of tendencies may be detected in early Sikhism's connection with sound and poetics: incorporation of antique elements balanced by an internal marking of difference in recognition of the dialogical principle and the articulation of self-definition. With respect to music and sound, the picture is no less complex. As with writing (*lipi*), language (*bani*), and canon formation (*sikhi*), the sonic dimensions of the Guru Granth (which can include mystical metaphors, singing in communion, and the making of music) references a long history of the relation between sound and the supernatural in India. The terminology early Sikhism employs on the question of sound references layers of the past that reach down to Vedic chants and broad cosmological notions that connect the sonic to notions of the divine over millennia. The musicologist and religious studies scholar Guy L. Beck uncovers the homologies between divinity and sound in classical Indian traditions: 'As Brahman pervaded the entire universe, including the human soul at its core, the notion of sacred sound as manifested through chant and music provided a veritable thread binding the human realm to the divine' (Beck 2006, 114). This fundamental precept connecting the human capacity for producing sonic patterns, on the one hand, with the fundamental qualities of a universe axiomatically considered to be primordially conditioned by sonic vibrations, on the other, was to remain a common feature across different religious ways of life over the *longue durée*, whether in keeping with Brahmanical orthodoxy, or moving radically away from it. This prevalent notion of a world attuned perennially to musical patterns furnished an expansive understanding of the Sanskrit term *śabda* for both 'sound' and 'word' with wide ramifications in Sikhism, as we will see, but also terms such as *nada* for vibration, including that issuing mystically from an unstruck chord at the heart of the universe (*anahata-nada*). Yet in terms of the organization of the Guru Granth, no term was as decisive as *raga*, referring to musical scales or melody formulas intended to give rise to distinct 'emotional moods' connecting performer with listener. As Singh notes in 'Sikhism and Music,' 'Devotional singing of the *bani* in many *ragas* (musical modes based on specific scales), accompanied by particular rhythmic beats (*talas*), was the medium through which Guru Nanak laid down the foundation of a new religious community' (Singh 2006, 142). Nanak had proclaimed that 'Gurbani embodies all the scriptural knowledge (Veda) and the eternally sounding melodious vibration (*nada*) that permeates all space' (Singh 2006, 144). Nanak's successors would go on to elaborate more *ragas*, amounting to thirty one in total, each in accord with the importance granted to this mode of experience by the first guru. Over the course of these developments, a distinct repertoire of *ragas* emerged, giving rise in turn to the performance culture of *kirtan* (devotional singing), all intended toward cultivating virtue in the audience as well as producing states of peace, tranquility, and equipoise that together reduce spiritual suffering. 'Through such *kirtan*,' writes Singh, 'devout Sikhs attune themselves to vibrate in harmony with the divine word and thereby immerse themselves in the deeper levels of its meaning' (Singh, 2006, 149).

Having come to the notion of levels of meaning in Sikh scripture, we may turn to the last of the main *techne* derived from past traditions and translated into a distinctly Sikh system of signification: poetics. This too is a complex topic, as it references a long and intricately elaborated set of languages, each with distinct forms, genres, and styles,

extending on the transregional stratum from Sanskrit to Persian, and at the vernacular level, from antiquated Hindi to Braj Bhasha to Old Punjabi. Here only a few cursory observations will be offered regarding how a distinctly Sikh style came into being early on; in later sections of this chapter, these points will be further elaborated to allow reflection on the difficulties key themes and features pose for translation into languages, such as contemporary English, formally and cultural distant from those that constitute Sikh scripture in its original milieu. First it should be noted that the strong emphasis on musicality from the beginnings of the Sikh tradition already implies linguistic versification, which is to say a shift toward the poetic function. That is, by making language musical, the Sikh gurus were distinguishing it from the medium of ordinary communication and instead making language's own inherent formal qualities stand forth as intrinsically rich and meaningful. Apart from versification, strong end rhymes, repetition, anaphoras, and rhythmic shifts between short and long stanzas characterize the various compositions of the Guru Granth. Moreover, the deployment of various tropes distinguished the surface or literal sense and deeper, more figurative meanings. Such figuration tended ultimately in the direction of symbolization with respect to key terms (the topic of the next section). As with the other dimensions of Sikh scripture remarked upon above, the emerging tradition affirmed and adopted certain poetic trends while putting others in abeyance. For instance, the intellectual and literary historian Christopher Shackle notes that there was little concern with 'the sort of poetic sophistication associated with the Brahminic class whose authority [*nirguna* poet-saints] so expressly challenged' (Shackle and Mandair 2005, xxi). A different kind of value scheme was asserted in Sikh canon formation than that maintained by a strict adherence to classical Sanskrit or standard Hindi among high-caste Hindus, or Persian and Arabic by Muslim elites: rather than maintaining strict boundaries around a particular dialect and making that the standard, there was an openness to different vernacular languages, poetics, and regional variations. This signified the assertion of a counter-canon comprised of demotic vernaculars, with Old Hindi and Old Punjabi at the center of the new linguistic repertoire of early Sikhism. The language was occasionally roughly hewn, marked by a purposeful violation of the rules of Hindi prosody when needed, putting the emphasis thereby more on the content rather than the form of the message. The scriptural language emphasized immediate intelligibility, thereby obviating the need for an intermediary such as the brahman pandit for grasping the import of the new scripture. Indeed, the scriptural repertoire included the familiar forms of ballad derived from Punjabi heroic narratives (*var*) and terse sayings put in the form of versed or rhymed couplets (*shalok*).

The acts of translation that led to the consolidation of Sikh scripture were manifold and consequential on a number of fronts. The various discursive strands, poetic voices, historical references, musical modes, and generic forms that make up the Guru Granth would in turn pose intractable difficulties and insuperable problems for translation, especially for languages such as contemporary English, whose resources for representing such linguistic variegation can be easily and quickly exhausted. The following section of this chapter will be devoted to examining these difficulties with respect to key terms such as *guru*, *shabad* and *nam* which accrue a thick cluster of significations in the Guru Granth. Here we may sum up some of the main themes that have guided this investigation into scripture as partly the product of translational activity vis-à-vis

past currents of history and thought. That is to say, by bringing well-chosen elements of old into direct contact with the openness of the present, translation allowed for newness to emerge. The inclusion of fifteen poet-saints of previous centuries from a variety of regions and religious persuasions gave emphasis to the dialogical principle in this scripture and thereby established the means for the Sikh gurus to clearly define themselves (See Murphy 2025). The emphasis on musicality and the elaboration of *ragas* in keeping with Guru Nanak's message allowed for a distinct discursive mode to emerge. This mode and the theological, social, and ethical notions it conveyed allowed early Sikhism to diverge significantly from already existing forms of religious expression, institution building, and community organization. Even if concepts such as *karma*, *samsara*, and *mukti* were preserved from past traditions, they were given new shape through the poetics that Sikhism fostered, with their emphasis on this-worldly ethics and practice. And if objects such as the book itself were maintained as fundamental to the community's self-definition, it was a different kind of book, with a distinct organizational structure and language, than any that had preceded it. The Guru Granth conveyed a *vernacular counter-canon* and in doing so, sacralized that which other traditions, whether Indic or Islamic, did not, such as low-caste origins and heterodox spiritual views.

4. Terms now nearly untranslatable: 'Guru,' 'Shabad,' and 'Nam'

A measure of the autonomy early Sikhism had earned through its efforts at self-definition vis-à-vis past traditions, including those of the bhagats, can be detected through the new semantic valences, resonances, and reach acquired by rather classical terms adopted by Guru Nanak and his congregants such as 'guru,' 'shabad,' and 'nam' from the vast panoply of preceding Sanskritic and vernacular formations. A brief analysis of these terms may be illustrative for the wider processes at play in the making of early Sikhism. Underlying the fashioning of new meanings for these longstanding words is the development of mutually reinforcing practices and discourses within a novel constellation of historical possibilities. Key among these practices and discourses are processes of commodity exchange at the heart of a mercantile economy; the forms of intellectual abstraction that such practices of exchange make possible, and the distinct inflections these new forms of abstraction lend to inherited languages of the past. With respect to questions of translation, what these developments signify is the added problem of old words meaning new things on account of a shift in milieu. Through processes of abstraction on material as well as ideational fronts, the terms in question – *guru*, *shabad*, and *nam* – each become relatively distinct from preceding contexts and corresponding semantic fields. In becoming thus, they acquire recondite meanings that do not necessarily correspond to old usages. In other words, they become replete with new semantic potentiality on account of being translated into a Sikh milieu; they thus portend difficulties down the line when the moment arrives for the translation of the Guru Granth by the likes of the German orientalist philologist Ernst Trumpp.

4.1. *Guru*

Deriving from the proto-Indo-European root *g^werə-*, specifically from the zero-grade form **g^wṛə-*, the Sanskrit word 'guru' finds its original meaning, 'heavy' or 'weighty,'

in parallel with its Latin cognate *gravis* ('heavy, grave, weighty, serious') and the Greek *barus* (βαρύς) ('heavy'). In his Sanskrit-English dictionary, Arthur Macdonell gives the extended meanings of 'guru': 'great, large; violent, serious, hard, severe; weary, sad (*days*); important; . . . venerable . . .; venerable or highly respected person: father, mother, or elder relative, esp. teacher' (Macdonell 1996, 85). The latter meaning, which eventually became the primary one passed on through the ages, has as its correlative *shishya* or pupil, from which the Punjabi word *sikh* in turn is derived. This was already the case in the Vedic period, when the *guru-shishya* dyad was established and reproduced generation after generation. But what is most relevant to the meanings that accrue around 'guru' in the wake of Nanak's intervention is the manner in which this term had already attained rich, even innovative, intellectual and ritual functions within Tantrism. In 'The Tantric Guru,' André Padoux highlights the specifically tantric institutions and practices that allowed for key notions of 'guru' to take shape and later get adapted in significant ways in vernacular spheres. Three points that Padoux makes are worth keeping in mind as foundational for early Sikhism: first, the guru is the source of 'the highest wisdom, liberating truth' which 'can issue only from the mouth of the master: *gurumukhad eva*;' second, that *guruparamparas* or *gurupanktis* – that is, the making of a succession of gurus, becomes a major institution, with the idea that there was an original threefold succession going back from the human, to the *siddha* (perfected beings), to the divine, which is to say that the guru's authority is thought to be based on an original teaching that issued directly from the godhead; and third, that the highest guru was, according to the Kashmiri Shaiva polymath Abhinavagupta (tenth to eleventh centuries), one that came into being spontaneously (*svayambhu*), being initiated by the 'goddesses of his own consciousness' (*svasamvittidevibhir diksitah*) (Padoux 2000, 41, 45). The innovations of early Sikhism built on these tantric foundations, yet in certain respects displaced them in significant ways. Nanak cleansed the inherited Tantrism of excessive esoteric ritualism, which in turn made the teachings more accessible to a general public regardless of caste and gender status, thereby further radicalizing the anti-Vedic normativity of Tantrism as a whole. Nanak made the immediacy of *sabda*, the source of spiritual authority and guidance, not another human being, but the experience itself, just as his own guru was not another human being but rather this very immediacy. Likewise, the notion of guru is abstracted from any specific personhood to become something like an inner conscience. To this point, Arvind-pal Mandair writes:

In mainstream Sikh tradition . . . the *satguru* [true guru] does not correspond to the category of 'person' signifying an individual subject as the natural container of thought, or the idea that thought belongs to a single consciousness which exerts sovereign ownership over it. The *satguru* is better described as a transpersonal principle responsible for mediating inner transformation of the psyche. (Mandair 2022, 23)

The process of becoming a *gurmukh* involves internalizing this notion of an abstract impersonal consciousness and conscience.

4.2. *Shabad*

The word 'shabad,' the vernacular derivation of the Sanskrit *sabda*, has an equally long and complex genealogy, ranging eventually across the fields of classical Indian philosophy, linguistics, metaphysics, and esoteric mysticism. The possibilities for this range

can be sensed from even the most concise entries regarding its meaning. In his Sanskrit-English dictionary, Macdonell defines ‘shabda’ as ‘sound; voice, tone, note; noise; word; C.: word-ending, suffix (*gr.*, *rare*); name, appellation, title; verbal authority (*as a pramāna or source of knowledge, phil*)’ (Macdonell 1996, 307). To these basic meanings V.S. Apte, in *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, adds ‘the sound of a musical instrument’ and ‘fame,’ among other less common definitions (Apte 1890, 1032–1033). A process of thinking about this term in abstract ways was already present in the ancient past when the term ‘shabda’ was separated from its most common meaning as merely signifying ‘word’ and became one of the primary *pramanas* or warrants for a truth claim, namely the ‘testimony’ of a reliable source. ‘Shabda’ in this sense connected rational discourses premised on inference (*anumana*) and direct perception (*pratyaksha*) with revelation, and thus religious hermeneutics. Within tantric circles, these rational strains of thinking combined in seminal ways with the mystical dimensions of ‘shabda’ that associated it back to its primary meaning as ‘sound’ but now expanded to include pervasive sonic patterns, a generative musicality, and cosmological schemas premised on primordial vibrations resonating across all space and time. ‘Shabad’ as a form of immediate intelligibility of the sublime, ineffable vitality that permeates all creation had given rise to the notion of an unstruck sound or word, ‘the anhad shabda,’ that symbolized, in the words of Mandair, ‘a pure form of egoless speech/thought that resonates with the underlying sonic-mnemonic theme of creation (*nam*) and, in resonating, unlocks and reveals the creative potentials inherent within human consciousness’ (Mandair 2022, 63). These meanings of ‘shabda’ were widespread and inflected a variety of discourses and disciplines across several religious and non-religious formations by the time Sikhism began to establish its own distinct path across the practical and spiritual landscapes of early modern India. Here, once again, a tendency toward abstraction is noticeable, giving rise to new inflections, however subtle. The word ‘shabad,’ itself in common parlance as the signifier for all other signifiers, began to attain a meaning that stood apart from all other words to mean something like ‘immediacy of mediation’ in general, and thereby to attain a status as itself a possible source for connection with all tangible, ideal, and even quasi-divine truth. Bearing in itself the exoteric and esoteric meanings, the term mediates both workaday phenomenal reality and a more noumenal, even sublime notion of an immaterial force pervading all meaning and existence. This paradoxical nature of the word for ‘word’ is seen in early Sikhism to have several incongruous dimensions. For Mandair, ‘shabad’ embodies various capacities which make it central to Sikh thought: an ‘ability to work within a specific historico-cultural context and at the same time to be free of any particular context,’ an ‘ability to traverse and hold different senses of time and ontology,’ alongside an ‘ability to operate in material and immaterial contexts’ (Mandair 2022, 50). In this manner, ‘shabad’ attains centrality and primacy with respect to all other forms of knowledge and understanding in Sikh thought, and thus a unique meaning.

4.3. Nam

This widely common Indo-European root signifying ‘name’ or ‘appellation’ and its extended senses such as ‘fame,’ took on particularly wide philosophical resonances in Sanskrit and Indian vernaculars over the centuries. Like the other words examined in

this section, especially ‘shabad,’ ‘nam’ too evolved to designate an increasingly abstract entity within the orbit of early Sikh discourses. In antiquity, the Sanskrit *dvandva* or agglomerative compound gave rise to *namarupa* meaning ‘name and form.’ In his classic posthumous work *Philosophies of India*, Heinrich Zimmer elucidates the recondite meanings of this pairing: ‘created as an emanation, or self-splitting, of the non-dual FIRST MAN,’ the world of names and forms is ‘the self-duplication of the one unqualified Reality – its self-manifestation as the multifariously qualified’ (Zimmer 1969, 243). In subsequent philosophical thought, the duality suggested by this pairing of name and form coalesces around that of signifier (*rupa*) and signified (*nama*) – and by extension the separation of phenomenal multifariousness from the noumenal true oneness that is to be overcome by various means. The compound *namarupa* underwent several different readings in accordance with distinct religious doctrines and worldviews, but certain fundamental commonalities persisted, with *nama* referring to intangible properties of an object or being, and *rupa* its physically manifest or tangible dimensions. Within the *nirguna* bhakti tradition that informed early Sikhism, *nama* became separated from its partner in the compound and developed to attain certain abstract meanings on its own that are worth noting. This term became one that marked the overcoming of the dualism of the material and immaterial, marking off a reality beyond the immediate senses and even the capacities of human ratiocination and speculation. As in the compositions of Kabir, *nama* began to signify a quasi-pantheistic force which substituted for the more commonplace names associated with various divinities. Mandair elaborates this point thus:

Eschewing any straightforward representation, *nam* can be comprehended philosophically only from a trans-personal or trans-individual perspective; as such *nam* refers to the primary consciousness that pervades all existence and non-existence, while from a personal perspective *nam* constitutes the beloved object of spiritual search, which has infinite names (god/God, the divine, Madho, Hari, etc) yet remains One in nature. (Mandair 2022, 45)

As it evolved in keeping with the traditions of the old tantras to signify a reality that superseded the various paths associated with orthodox deities, *nam* began to accrue the notion of a primal linguistic force conceptually akin to an originary speech act that made all subsequent ways of doing things with words possible. On this point, Mandair suggests that *nam* emerges as

the singular word that signifies the agency and imperative of creation. In this sense *nam* is closer to what might be understood as the force that impels language to do what it does: *linguaging*, or how words make things happen in the world. (Mandair 2022, 95)

We thus see that with reference to this term as well, a distinctly Sikh spiritual vocabulary had emerged. By simultaneously departing from the meanings of old and fashioning a sensibility in keeping with the precepts of early Sikh thought and practice, old terms took on new meanings and thereby established the conceptual basis for a novel spiritual and practical path.

More extended research will be needed to ascertain the historical processes that gave rise to such rich conceptual abstractions as a major facet of the newly emerging tradition. Yet the mere fact that such abstraction is a noticeably enduring trait across this small sampling of key terms suggests that widespread historical developments relating to

commodity exchange and the thought forms that it makes possible was a major condition of possibility. That is, these seminal social dynamics made feasible, if not exigent, the new kinds of abstractions. These abstractions became animated as ones that had purchase and traction within the flourishing mercantile milieu of early modern northwestern India. They were verbal coinages premised on the forging of an actual coin, one that absorbed in the abstract social value of various labors and made them current in one manifestation. The new meanings could be rather precarious. Such efforts at redefining key terms inherited from a classical past could easily slip from the control of early Sikhism's self-definition. Rather than being part and parcel of a new community's self-fashioning, these meanings could easily dissolve back into the significations of old. That is, they could be easily undone, wittingly or unwittingly, by misinformed translators. To see what challenges the Guru Granth would face in this respect, to glimpse how easily the effort at arriving at a new set of significations could be submerged under more commonplace 'dictionary' meanings, we turn now to Ernst Trumpp and the decisive impact the colonial milieu of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had on the understanding of the Guru Granth and Sikh tradition in general.

5. Mistranslation and its consequences: paradoxes of colonial governance

That which translates worst from one language into another is the tempo of its style, which has its origin in the character of the race, or, expressed more physiologically, in the average tempo of its 'metabolism'. There are honestly meant translations which, as involuntary vulgarizations of the original, are almost falsifications simply because it was not possible to translate also its brave and happy tempo, which leaps over and puts behind it all that is perilous in things and words. The German is virtually incapable of *presto* in his language: thus, it may be fairly concluded, also of many of the most daring and delightful nuances of free, free-spirited thought.

Friedrich Nietzsche.

(Nietzsche 1973, 59)

Rarely does a translation of sacred scripture generate so many cascading effects into the core of a religion, such a multitude of hermeneutical implications, so many ramifications extending into the political domain, and such a thicket of contradiction and paradox for all future efforts in overlapping arenas. Ernst Trumpp's rendering of the Adi Granth into English prose under the employ of the British colonial state of India perhaps could not have produced so many consequences had it tried. Rather, it was the wider domain of governmental processes that assured so many ripples across such a diverse array of social, political, and cultural fronts. Thus, a wide range of historical processes are implicated in any attempt to grasp the seminal import of this translation: a governmental form of a colonial power that seeks to determine the boundaries between objects, peoples, communities, religions, and the words associated with divinity; a kind of philology that serves as a technology for buttressing the claims of colonial power and its lines of division; and local intellectuals who sense the threat of dissolution and absorption of their notion of community into broader demographics in terms of a loss of government patronage and a collapse of all grounds for self-empowerment within familiar terms. Nietzsche's words cited above mark out a double deformation in the context of Trumpp's philological mission: a sense of mastery that is premised on the racial denigration of the object of study, which itself entails the lack of the adequate appreciation to

grasp the internal linguistic tempo and cultural integrity for doing it translational justice. Imperial philology in the hands of a German Orientalist moves clumsily along the surface of texts, unaware of its own deeper impacts issuing from unreflective prejudices. The fallout is the inevitable missing of the forest for the trees, inability to grasp subtleties and uniqueness, a blindness to the singular and particular which cannot be seamlessly folded back into larger conventional meanings and majoritarian categories. The hubristic racism of the imperial philologist comes at the cost of recognizing the minoritarian logics of self-distinction and innovation. As noted, such mistakes did not go unattended with far-reaching risk and consequence.

Who was Ernst Trumpp, and what role did orientalist philology play in the colonial milieu of his times? Though written in an apologetic tone, Annemarie Schimmel's *Ernst Trumpp: A Brief Account of his Life and Work* (1961) provides several essential clues for answering the first part of this question. She writes: 'he was a child of his century, and above all, a missionary' (Schimmel 1961, 21). Trumpp's upbringing bore the stamp of the conservative Lutheran stronghold of Württemberg in which he was raised. Taking pride in his pious family and religious surroundings, Trumpp adhered from early on to his faith and sought to serve it throughout his life. Before his death, his name would be engraved on the memorial tablet at St. Martin's church in nearby Pfullingen. His gifts as a student of languages eventually showed him how he might accomplish this. A curious encounter with gypsies passing through his land piqued his interest in distant cultures and their living languages. Though a mere schoolboy, he attempted to decipher the Romani speech and record what he understood. He passed his theological examination at the University of Tübingen in 1848, where he also studied Arabic and Sanskrit. His participation in the nationalist uprisings in the wake of the Revolution of 1848 forced him to flee to Switzerland, France, Italy and England. The combination of his linguistic and religious proclivities drew him eventually into the orbit of Orientalism and Empire. The move to London led to employment as the assistant librarian of the East India House, the London headquarters of the East India Company, under the good offices of a senior philologist, Sir Edwin Norris. Like his senior colleague, Trumpp took interest in and started to familiarize himself with modern Indian languages, marking a crucial shift in the field of Oriental studies, which up to this point had almost exclusively pre-occupied itself with the languages of Indian antiquity. The East India House served to prepare Trumpp for his first journey to India in 1854, on which occasion he was welcomed by Lord Elphinstone, the Governor of Bombay, and John Harding, the Anglican Bishop of the same city, who consecrated Trumpp as priest of the Anglican Church. On this sojourn he joined the Church Missionary Society and undertook field study in Sindh, where he studied the language. Over the coming decades, Trumpp would set out for India at least three more times in connection with either Protestant Evangelical missionary work or academic research under the sponsorship of the British Empire. In 1870, the colonial government commissioned him to translate the Adi Granth 'because the Sikh religion was a politically important factor in India' (Schimmel 1961, 19). By this time, if not earlier, Trumpp had begun to manifest some general characteristics of Orientalist prejudices and practices in an unusually strident fashion.

Before entering into the details of Trumpp's translation of the Adi Granth and the consequences it unleashed for the Sikh community, a brief survey is in order of the attitudes and presuppositions that Trumpp, backed by over a century of Orientalist

philology and the entire ideological infrastructure of imperial rule, brought to his tasks of knowledge and power. At the core of the scholarly operations of this era is a particular constellation of mutually reinforcing moves aimed at separating the imperial metropolitan society from that of the colonized and establishing as an indisputable given the radical inequality between the two. Colonial forms of knowledge in which Trumpp participated wholeheartedly are generally meant to further the aims of the colonial power and prevent the tables from ever being turned by native forces.

Operative procedures in the command structure enforced in colonial philology begin with unquestionable typologies that negate the individuality of colonized subjects, allowing them to be grouped under separate rubrics and hierarchized along racial and civilizational lines. For instance, when he succeeded in getting hold of three people from Kafiristan for his researches in Nuristani, Trumpp had little doubt that such a small sample would suffice for producing authoritative statements on the entire language and culture in question. His subjects were decidedly representative types. These typologies were in turn premised on the prerogative of the colonial scholar-official to intervene in the sphere of languages, separating them from one another on the basis of different scripts, and canonizing them to mark divisions of culture, religion, and ethnicities in ways that may be at odds with the emic understandings of these very categories. Schimmel remarks on how his Lutheran antipathy regarding mysticism meant that ‘the whole field of mystical literature and poetry was a closed book to him,’ regardless of its source (Schimmel 1961, 32). He consistently denigrated the appreciative modes of his native subjects for ‘the common people enjoy nothing but jingling rhymes and play of words in which logic is often sacrificed’ (Schimmel 1961, 28). For him, the true meanings of the texts he was translating were not in the grasp of their authors and audiences. Trumpp’s intervention into the interpretive realm was itself the result of the scholar-officials’ will to abstract texts and meanings from lived contexts and give such abstractions precedence over the living reading practices that imbue them with specific meanings in any given context. Trumpp did not appreciate ‘the spirit, or the theology, of the religious literature he dealt with’ . . . ‘For him, poetry was a means for extracting grammatical rules and noting down obsolete words; grammar did not constitute a preparatory stage for the study of literature and poetry’ (Schimmel 1961, 45). His approach to Indian religious texts was sharply distinct from his appreciation of Christian discourses. Whereas the former were subjected to an instrumental logic of linguistic extraction, the latter were solely deserving of devotion for its own sake. This unequal treatment, maintained by Trumpp, went hand in hand with his missionary work, where all Indian religions are held to be patently inferior to the faith in Christianity.

Trumpp’s translation of the *Adi Granth* was disconcerting for Sikh community leaders primarily because it dissolved this religious formation’s conceptual distinctiveness and unique modes of self-fashioning, and absorbed it back into an all-encompassing stereotype of Hinduism. This reading was abetted by Trumpp’s collaboration with intellectuals of the *Nirmala* persuasion, a rather eccentric and generally unrepresentative strand of interpreters of the Sikh canon. Working against the grain of central lines of early Sikhism at odds with, if not in opposition to, the philosophical traditions grounded in the *Veda*, *Nirmala* exegetes brought frameworks of traditional Hindu philosophy such as the six-fold *darshana* and non-dualist *Vedanta* to their readings of Sikh thought. Indeed, early figures in the *Nirmala* tradition such as Pandit Gulab Singh (b. 1732)

perfected their skills in Sanskrit in Varanasi, a long-venerated center of Brahmanical learning in India, and grounded their readings of Guru Nanak and the lineage of Sikh gurus in terms borrowed from orthodox Hinduism such as the notion of a *sanatana dharma*, or the eternal all-encompassing normativity stemming from the Veda. Under the guidance of this quasi-Brahmanical variety of Sikhism, Trumpp saw little in Sikhism's articulation of the 'unity of the Supreme Being' to distinguish it from orthodox Hinduism. Accordingly, he translated the 'ik oankar' in the first line of the *Adi Granth* as merely 'om,' the mystical syllable of classical Hindu thought. As Christopher Shackle remarks, this misprision had the effect of routing Sikh thought back into classical Hinduism.

Since philosophers of Vedanta had long expounded the meaning of *om* in terms of the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, for Indologists, *om* symbolized Hindu pantheism, whereas for missionaries it represented the inability of the Hindu mind to transcend multiplicity and achieve a sufficiently monotheistic concept of the divine. Once a lack of theological transcendence was established in this manner, it was but a short step to designate the rest of Sikh scripture as lacking any systematic conceptual unity. (Shackle and Mandair 2005, xxxviii–xxxviii)

Much more than arcane theological matters were at stake in this official account of Sikhism by an authoritative German philologist. The denial of distinct religious recognition meant the denial of the claims of the entire Sikh community for political recognition, patronage, and participation in the institutions of governance on a par with Hindu and Muslim counterparts in Punjab and beyond. The lack of recognition threatened the full disintegration of a community that already bore the tensions of internal diversity and dissension. Sikh identity was effectively set on the course of dissolution within the public sphere and would likely mutate beyond recognition in besieged private realms.

The Sikh response to the challenges posed by Trumpp's translation was manifold, yet over the course of the following decades, a number of predicaments and paradoxes would begin to emerge that fundamentally characterized the hegemonic forms of Sikh thought and practice over the last decades of colonial rule. The religious reform movements that sought to face and overcome Trumpp's ground-raising critique were forced to prove the validity, if not sanctity, of their faith in terms that would be intelligible to Christian theology. In other words, Trumpp's translation had the effect of bringing into the elite Indian milieu and beyond concepts that pertained directly to Christian theology. Just as wars over religion since the Reformation had the effect of fragmenting Christendom into separate denominations and dividing one religion from another in the West, reformist commentaries issuing from the Singh Sabha in particular constructed Sikhism as a distinctive monotheism, separate from Hinduism and Islam, marking a major departure from its own longstanding pluralist traditions stretching back to its earliest moments. Mandair writes:

in a way that might seem counter-intuitive, the rationalizing process within this European philosophical framework was internalized by Sikh elites through their native language via a process of intercultural mimesis, and from there it was seamlessly incorporated not only into exegetical commentaries

but also institutionalized practices such as uniform marriage rites (Mandair 2022, 36). Modern Sikhism, he writes in a related context, 'could only have come into being by repressing what is essentially nonmodern' (Mandair 2023). Meeting the challenge meant conforming to the criteria established by the colonial power and Christian missionaries, both embodied by Trumpp. Nothing made this more obvious than the Singh Sabha

intellectual Bhai Vir Singh's rather casual insertion of the Gospel of John into his commentary on Sikh scripture, fundamentally reconfiguring its notions of creation (See Shackle 2008). The cost of recognition within the colonial order of things was the subtraction of large swathes of Sikh tradition and its inner potentiality, all that which was previously brimming with pluralism, dialogism, and secular rationality (Sahota 2017).

6. Conclusion: orality as antidote

By tracing the evolution of a distinct terminology cultivated and canonized over the first centuries of Sikh history and marking the key events that led to its crisis and impending devolution on account of the hostile and debilitating translational agenda of a colonial apparatus of knowledge production, this chapter has concentrated primarily on the macro-historical level. In doing so, it has avoided the tedium of comparisons between translations, not because those engagements with linguistic minutiae and micrological shifts are not worth pursuing, but because they only really attain their underlying significance and analytical value in reference to the larger historical developments of which they form a part. Furthermore, it is only upon the larger plane of the *longue durée* that one is able to track how trends within the realm of language and scriptural translation map onto the broader hegemonic drive of a force as grand as the British Empire. In other words, it is within these broad frames of reference that one might detect the kinds of regressions – cultural, political, and social – put into effect under the aegis of colonial rule. Far from there being a uniform movement of enlightened progress in the wake of the British conquest, one grasps instead a pattern of repression, manipulation, and self-aggrandizing moves on the part of the colonizers which in their totality distorted the reception and reproduction of cultural formations such as Sikhism. The colonial power imposed regression on a variety of fronts while touting itself as a purveyor of the opposite. For instance, whereas exemplary violence was meted out to anti-colonial insurgencies such as the Namdhari movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, undoing thereby roughly hewn resistances to the weight of modern power (Wagner 2019), the British simultaneously favored propping up and maintaining a conservative, loyalist, and restrictive intellectual elite within the Sikh community as the bearers of legitimate authority. Far from providing an alternative to the Christian theocentrism of a figure such as Trumpp, the intellectual proteges of the British in venues such as the Singh Sabha furnished readings of Sikh texts and concepts that only further entrenched a modern Christian worldview as normative. This is one of the great ironies produced by colonial translation and its underlying modes of governance. Though questions of translation will from this moment forward regularly bear the potential for catachresis, controversy, and crisis, there is nonetheless some possibility of alternative pathways grounded in the permanence of orality in the very notion of Sikh scripture. As the Indologist Frits Staal noted, there is a peculiar Janus-faced nature to the Sikh inheritance of its sacred works (Staal 1979). On the one hand, there is the aspect of scripture in keeping with the etymology of the word itself – *scriptura*: written down, abstracted from speech, and thereby appropriable for translation into other written languages. On the other, there is the aspect of a sacred heritage whose force and meaning can only be maintained through oral guardianship, making the word central in its most original form, and thereby remaining resistant to norms and patterns of a shrinking world.

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