

# Religions and Development Research Programme

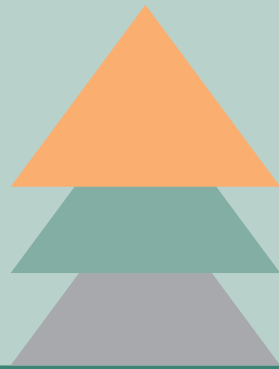
## **Sikhism and Development: A Review**

**Darshan S. Tatla**

Director, Punjab Centre for Migration Studies

Lyallpur Khalsa College

Jalandhar, Punjab



Working Paper 21 - 2008

**Rad**

# Religions and Development

## Research Programme

The Religions and Development Research Programme Consortium is an international research partnership that is exploring the relationships between several major world religions, development in low-income countries and poverty reduction. The programme is comprised of a series of comparative research projects that are addressing the following questions:

- How do religious values and beliefs drive the actions and interactions of individuals and faith-based organisations?
- How do religious values and beliefs and religious organisations influence the relationships between states and societies?
- In what ways do faith communities interact with development actors and what are the outcomes with respect to the achievement of development goals?

The research aims to provide knowledge and tools to enable dialogue between development partners and contribute to the achievement of development goals. We believe that our role as researchers is not to make judgements about the truth or desirability of particular values or beliefs, nor is it to urge a greater or lesser role for religion in achieving development objectives. Instead, our aim is to produce systematic and reliable knowledge and better understanding of the social world.

The research focuses on four countries (India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Tanzania), enabling the research team to study most of the major world religions: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and African traditional belief systems. The research projects will compare two or more of the focus countries, regions within the countries, different religious traditions and selected development activities and policies.

The consortium consists of six research partner organisations, each of which is working with other researchers in the four focus countries:

- University of Birmingham, UK: International Development Department, Department of Theology and Religion, Centre for West African Studies, Centre for the Study of Global Ethics.
- University of Bath, UK: Centre for Development Studies.
- Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, New Delhi.
- Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research, Ibadan.
- University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.
- Lahore University of Management Sciences, Pakistan.

In addition to the research partners, links have been forged with non-academic and non-government bodies, including Islamic Relief.

# Religions and Development Working Paper 21

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# Glossary

5Ks	outward marks of a Khalsa Sikh: <i>Kes</i> (uncut hair), <i>Kara</i> (steel bangle) <i>Kacch</i> (underwear), <i>Kangha</i> (comb), <i>Kirpan</i> (sword)
Adi Granth	the Sikh scripture: its more common name is Guru Granth Sahib
Akal Takhat	literally, Throne of the timeless one: name of a building facing the Golden Temple in Amritsar, where decisions affecting the community as a whole are taken; its Jathedar issues <i>hukamnamas</i> or injunctions which carry wide authority within the Sikh Panth.
Ahankar/ hankar	ego
Akali Dal	main political party of the Sikhs
Amrit	ambrosia: the sanctified sweetened water used in the initiation ( <i>amrit</i> ) ceremony, a near English word is baptism.
Anand Karj	ceremony of bliss: the name of the Sikh wedding ceremony
Ardas	formal prayer offered in <i>gurdwara</i> or other acts of worship
Bani	utterance or the words (of the gurus), hence <i>gurbani</i> or <i>Bhakat-bani</i>
Begampura	Term for an ideal state enunciated by Bhakat Ravidas
Bhakat (pl. Bhakats)	devotee, follower, sometimes spelled as Bhagat
Bhakti/ Bhagti	devotion, also name of a religious movement in mediaeval India
Bhikhu	Buddhist devotee
Chapatti	Punjabi style bread cooked on an oven
Chardhi Kala	cheerful optimism or disposition, an exclusive Sikh concept
Chief Khalsa Diwan	educational and religious reformist organisation established in 1902
Dal Khalsa	an eighteenth century form of organization among the Sikhs
Dasam Granth	anthology of the tenth guru's poetry, believed to contain other poets' writings
Daswandh	a tenth part of Sikhs' earnings, meant for a charitable cause
Dervish	mendicant ascetic practitioner of Sufism, who has taken a vow of poverty
Dharam Yudh	the righteous war
Dharam	a range of meanings: religion, rightful duty, commitment
Giani	an interpreter of sacred literature
Gost/l	rational discourse
Granthi	a professional reader of Guru Granth, and in charge of a Gurdwara
Grisat	householder, married person, an ideal expected of a Sikh
Gurdwara	place of worship with the Guru Granth at its centre

Gurmata	A binding order related to the fundamental principles of the Sikh religion that is passed by the Sarbat Khalsa in the presence of the Guru Granth
Gurmukh	a disciple devoted to a guru
Gurmukhi	the script in which the Sikh scriptures are written and the Punjabi language written in the Indian Punjab
Gursobha	hagiographic accounts of the Sikh gurus, especially the 6 <sup>th</sup> and 10 <sup>th</sup> gurus
Guru	a word for teacher, spiritual guide, God, the ten gurus
Guru Granth Sahib	the most sacred Sikh scripture, containing hymns of six of the gurus and several <i>Bhakats</i> , published with standard pagination of 1430 pages.
Halal	meat of animals killed in the Muslim manner
Harmandir	lit. the throne of God; the Golden Temple, Amritsar
Hankar	pride/ego
Haumai	egoism
Hukamnama	a written order, earlier term for Guru's letters to his followers, currently an injunction issued by the Jathedar of Akal Takhat for the Sikhs
Izzat	honour, reputation
Janamsakhi	hagiographic account of Guru Nanak's life; several exist
Jap Sahib	opening stanza of the Guru Granth Sahib, Jap-recite
Jat	the dominant social group among Punjab's Sikhs
Jathedar	leader of a religious group; head of the Akal Takhat or one of the other four historical shrines at Anandpur, Talwandi Sabo, Patna and Hazur Sahib
Jhatka	meat recommended for the Sikhs because the animal is killed instantly Jogi a person belonging to any of the twelve orders of the followers of Gorakhnath, in Northern India, who renunciated life and claimed spiritual authority through body discipline
Kam	lust
Kar seva	voluntary work
Karma	action, predestined; the actions and effects of the actions of each person as reflected in their subsequent lives
Kaur	princess, title of all female Sikhs
Khalsa	pure; from Persian language, another name for the Sikh community
Khalsa Panth	collective name for the Sikh community
Khande ki pahul	traditional name for <i>amrit</i>



Kirtan	congregational singing of the hymns
Krodh	anger
Langar	free meal or community kitchen attached to every <i>gurdwara</i>
Lobh	greed
Man	mind, whim
Manji	a designated preaching centre with a nominee appointed by Guru Amar Das
Manmukh	self-centred life
Miri	temporal power
Misl	name of twelve suzerainties established by Sikh chiefs in the eighteenth century
Moh	materialism
Moksa	liberation
Nam	name of God
Namdhari	followers of Baba Ram Singh, a Sikh sect
Nirguna Sampradya	tradition or disciple lineage focused on the ultimate reality
Nirmala	a Sikh sect dating from the tenth guru, who sent some Sikhs to Benares to learn Sanskrit and religious discourse
Pandit	scholar, teacher, particularly one skilled in Sanskrit and Hindureligion and philosophy
Panth	collective name for the Sikh community
Pathshala	traditional Sikh school for instruction in scriptures
Piri	spiritual authority
Pooris	chapatti-like fried bread
Qazi	the judicial officer who administered Islamic law in Punjab
Rahit Maryada	Sikh code of discipline
Rahitnama	written code of discipline issued from the eighteenth century
Rakhi	literally 'protection' a Sikh chief's claim on the produce from land in return for protection
Ramgarhia	title adopted by certain artisan castes, for example woodworkers and masons
Sacha Patshah	true emperor, a title accorded to the Guru and God
Sangat	congregation

Sahaj	a just balance between spiritual and material life
Sahib	a title of respect for historic shrines or persons
Sant	an acclaimed spiritual leader exerting considerable influence in the social and sometimes political affairs of the Sikhs
Sant Nirankari	Sikh sect formed in the late nineteenth century
Sant-Sipahi	Saint-soldier – the Sikh ideal of spirituality with disciplined courage
Sati	a devoted wife who chooses to die on her husband's funeral pyre
Seva	service devoted to others
SGPC	Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee
Shahid	martyr
Sheikh/shaikh	elder, learned person among Muslims
Shudhi	a prescribed method of conversion of lower caste Hindus as practised by Arya Samaj in the Punjab
Sikh	a learner; a believer in the ten gurus and the Guru Granth Sahib
Sikh Rahit Maryada	a booklet published by the SGPC in 1950 as the Sikh code for religious life
Singh	literally lion, name of Sikh men
Singh Sabha	late nineteenth century religious revival movement
Sudra	untouchable
Sufism	mystical tradition within Islam; belief that it is possible to have a personal experience of God
Takhat	throne, five historical shrines
Taksal	traditional Sikh seminary
Tankhah	penance, for disobeying the basic rules of Sikh discipline
Udasi	a Sikh sect taking its origin from one of Guru Nanak's sons
Ulama	legal scholars of Islam and Sharia law
Vahiguru	title for god, the wonderful guru, sometimes spelled as Wahiguru
Vand Chakna	Shared eating, pooling resources for philanthropy
Var	heroic ballad, a poetic composition
Varan/ Baran	classical Hindu division of society into four castes: Brahman, Kashtriya, Vaishya and Sudra.
Zafarnama	Guru Gobind Singh's epistle of victory addressed to the Emperor Aurangzeb, included in the Dasam Granth
Zat or jati	endogenous community, traditionally sharing a hereditary occupation

# Preface

This is one of a series of six background papers prepared as part of the Religions and Development Research Programme. Each aims to provide an introduction and overview of the teachings of one of the major faith traditions with which the programme is dealing: Christianity, African traditional religions, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism. Their purpose is to summarize recent material produced by the relevant religious organizations and by some of the main academic interpreters to provide background material on the understandings of 'development' that arise out of the core beliefs and values of each faith tradition.

Each review seeks to identify concepts and teachings relevant to human development within the relevant faith tradition, with reference to its teachings/ethics and theology. It also considers the extent to which the understandings have evolved over time; identifies major differences in the understanding of concepts developed by different branches within a faith tradition; and discusses the extent to which views associated with particular religious organizations and their adherents arise from their religious beliefs or are influenced by the social and cultural context in which adherents live.

The writers were asked to concentrate on the key concepts underlying the notion of 'development': development (goals, obstacles and appropriate strategies), poverty (and its causes), wealth, inequality and wellbeing. They were also asked to consider issues of particular relevance to the various components in this research programme

- a) Credit and debt
- b) Gender roles and equality
- c) Education (the role of education and access to educational opportunities)
- d) Engagement in public life through politics, social movements, advocacy, community organization etc
- e) Corruption/ethical behaviour in public life
- f) Livelihood decisions e.g. building wealth, seeking improved wellbeing, begging.

The contemporary discourse of development post-dates most religious teaching, which is not historically or even today couched in terms of the conventional international development discourse. However, each religious tradition has ideas about 'right social ordering' and provides guidelines to individuals and societies about the values and ethics they should adopt in their pursuit of a life that is not just spiritually rewarding but also morally and socially responsible. Interpreting these teachings in a

relatively short paper in the light of the terminology of development is problematic and the interpretations and views put forward by the authors of these papers are necessarily partial and provisional.

Moreover, all religious traditions have developed schools or denominations that present different interpretations of core teachings and practices. Religious traditions have also developed under the influence of different sorts of inputs: for example, from mystics, theologians, philosophers, ritual specialists or legal experts. While at certain times and in certain places particular interpretations of religious traditions may dominate, it is impossible to talk about a single view of development, for example *a Christian view* or *a Muslim view*, and instead we may find a range of opinions or even competing views. This difficulty is compounded by the fact the interpretation of teachings may vary between the authorities responsible at the highest level and local religious specialists, between the official sources and everyday lived religion, over time, and between places, where it is interpreted through the lens of differing cultural traditions.

Some of this variety is captured in the papers, but certainly not all. The authors themselves come from different backgrounds: not all are scholars from within the religious tradition about which they are writing, and not all are adherents of that tradition. Each has his or her own interests and preoccupations. The accounts are also dependent on the available sources, which do not necessarily deal with all the issues that the authors were asked to consider. Although each of the papers adopts a basically similar approach, their coverage and detailed organization vary.

These papers were initially prepared for the use of the large international team of researchers engaged in the Religions and Development Research Programme. We hope, however, that they will be a useful resource for all those interested in the topic.

Carole Rakodi  
Director, Religions and Development Research Programme.

## Summary

This paper provides a review of literature that bears on the relationship between Sikhism and development. At its most general level, this review raises the question of whether the Sikh tradition is compatible with or hinders development, as generally understood in the mainstream 'development discourse.' Various facets of development are discussed by examining the Sikh scriptural writings on those subjects, and how Sikh norms and beliefs have evolved into particular ethical practices bearing on developmental issues. Thus, the teachings of Sikhism on key development concepts and practices, such as wealth, poverty and inequality, are discussed along with related topics of debt, credit and usury. The paper also tests a popular image of Sikhs' contribution to rapid economic development in Indian Punjab and juxtaposes it with the contemporary crisis in Punjab agriculture, which is marked by decreasing productivity and an environmental crisis.

Besides the role of the Sikh religion in the economic domain, the paper also addresses how religious values underpin the social hierarchy within the Sikh community, examining in particular gender and inter-group social relations. The issue of gender equality within Sikh society is taken up, noting how the religious tradition's emphasis on gender equality has been compromised by widespread cultural norms and practices. In order to understand how the Sikh religious tradition has contributed towards a particular understanding of social hierarchy, Sikh religious teachings and social practices, and the relationships between them and the caste-based social stratification commonly found among Hindus in India, are also examined.

The paper notes how the Sikh religious tradition is tied up with the fate of a minority community in contemporary India. The role of the Sikh religion assumes great importance in the developmental process, not only in terms of the beliefs and value system of its adherents, but also as an instrument of political mobilization by Sikh leaders seeking a fair distribution of both economic and non-economic resources from the Indian federal government. In the more recent period, Sikh leaders have also asserted the Sikh community's status as an ethno-national community with a distinct historic, linguistic and cultural heritage. India's federal government has faced several rounds of 'confrontations' from Punjab-based Sikh political leaders; a particular campaign in the 1980s seeking 'autonomy' for Punjab involved a decade-long severe disruption of civilian and economic life in the state.

Finally, the paper also devotes some space to the Sikh view of inter-religious dialogue and human rights. In a rapidly globalizing world and especially in view of the emergence of a large Sikh diaspora, whose members have asserted their right to be 'different', the Sikh position on cultural integration and multiculturalism is significant. The paper concludes by citing some examples of Sikh non-governmental organizations engaged in developmental projects.

# 1 Introduction

This paper provides a review of literature which bears on the relationship between Sikhism and development. At its most general level, the review raises the question of whether the Sikh tradition is compatible with or hinders development, as generally understood in the mainstream 'development discourse' (Nkurunziza, 2007). This question is discussed by examining the nature of Sikhism, its evolution over time and the values, beliefs and practices of its adherents.

However one defines Sikhism, which has its origins in fifteenth century mediaeval India, over the course of its five hundred years' history, it has acquired all the ingredients of what sociologists recognise as a religion: a system of belief centred on a sacred book, religious institutions known as *gurdwaras*, a set of beliefs and ritual practices, and an ethical discourse based upon its teachings and beliefs. As such, Sikhism is now generally acknowledged as the youngest religion on the world scene, with Punjab as the homeland of its followers, the Sikhs.

Although, like most other religions of the world, Sikhism is predominantly concerned with people's quest for God, it departs radically from other Indic religions, which invariably advocate some degree of renunciation of the world to achieve the spiritual ideal. Sikhism, in contrast, firmly situates man's salvation *in* this world. Its theology, the essence of which is captured in the statement: 'those who serve in the world, only they attain salvation' ('*vich duniya sev kamayie, tan dargah baisan jaiye*') and an ethical discourse flowing from this theological imperative, had profound implications for its followers in terms of their outlook, generating beliefs, practices and values that foster proactive and positive participation in social life and the affairs of the world.

This paper is divided into three sections, starting with a brief overview of Sikh teachings, beliefs and practices and what these imply in terms of understanding the nature of development. In the second section the relationship between Sikhism and key development concerns is discussed, drawing on the relevant literature. The final section presents a brief synoptic view of some Sikh faith-based movements and organizations involved in developmental projects, focusing on their main areas of concern and the kind of services provided.

## 2 Sikhism and key development concerns

The RAD programme is exploring some of the relationships between development issues and religions. As noted in the Preface (also see Rakodi, 2007), this paper is one of a series that examine how the major world religions perceive development and how the values and beliefs of adherents of each religion affect their attitudes towards and actions in economic, social and political life. The teachings of different faith traditions with respect to interactions with members of other faiths and the functioning of faith-based organizations are also relevant to development. The aim of this paper is to examine what the teachings of Sikhism have to say about some key development concepts and practices, such as wealth, poverty and inequality, while also taking note of how selected issues, such as debt, credit and usury, are handled. How religious values can contribute towards discrimination or disadvantage is also an important issue, for example in the case of women's lives or social groups, which in the Indian context are influenced by a caste-type hierarchy sanctioned by religious traditions.

A study of Sikhism in the above context is both necessary and relevant. As a comparative exercise, this discussion can draw out parallel and contrasting features with the Hindu and Buddhist traditions of the Indian subcontinent in particular. It can also highlight how adherents of Sikhism – a significant number of people, although a small minority of India's population - have been influenced by their beliefs in carving out a distinct economic and social life in the Punjab state.

**Table 1: Religious communities of India: 1961-2001**

	1961		1971		1981		1991		2001	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Hindus	366,527	84.4	453,292	83.5	549,779	83.1	687,647	82.4	827,579	81.4
Muslims	46,941	9.9	61,418	10.4	75,512	10.9	101,596	11.7	138,188	12.4
Christians	10,728	2.4	14,223	2.6	16,165	2.5	19,640	2.3	24,080	2.3
Sikhs	7,846	1.8	10,379	1.9	13,072	2.0	16,260	2.0	19,216	1.9
Buddhists	3,256	0.7	3,812	0.7	4,720	0.7	6,387	0.8	7,955	0.8
Jains	2,027	0.5	2,605	0.5	3,206	0.5	3,353	0.4	4,225	0.4
Others	1,499	0.3	2,186	0.4	2,766	0.4	3,269	0.4	6,640	0.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>439,235</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>547,950</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>665,288</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>838,584</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1,028,610</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Notes

■ Total Population in '000s

■ Excludes Jammu and Kashmir, and Assam states.

Source: Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, Report, 2004.



According to the 2001 Census of India, Sikhs constitute 1.9 per cent of the country's one billion plus population. Of the Sikh population of over 19 million, more than 80 per cent live in Punjab, the rest being either settled in India's large metropolitan cities of Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata and or scattered across the country. In Punjab, the Sikhs constitute a majority community. The main constituent of Sikh society consists of Jats – a landowning social class from rural Punjab. The second largest group comprises Ravidasi and Mazhabi Sikhs, a landless class generally dependent upon Jats. They are followed by Ramgarhias – artisans, carpenters and others - and finally there is small group of urbanized Khatri Sikhs<sup>1</sup>. Historically, several sects have been prominent; among them Nirmalas and Udasis constituted a priestly class. Currently, three sects, Namdharis, Nirankaris and Radhasoamis, all of which began during the colonial rule, have a considerable number of followers. There are also *sant* traditions in rural Punjab – the Nanaksar, Rarewala, Bhindaranwala, Akhand Kirtani Jatha and others<sup>2</sup>. Each is headed by a lineage of saints, usually lasting three or four generations, who developed a distinct pattern of worship or some other distinguishing characteristics, and often had considerable local influence and spiritual authority.

A noteworthy characteristic of Sikh demography since the 1960s has been the emergence of a global Sikh diaspora, currently estimated at two million people, of whom a majority is settled in three major western countries - Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom (Tatla, 1999). It is mainly the Sikh diaspora that has helped to gain the community's international recognition, as many individual Sikhs have asserted their right to be 'different', by launching campaigns for the right to wear the turban, and challenging host states' conventions and policies on integration and multiculturalism. At the same time, members of the new generation of overseas Sikhs have raised many uncomfortable questions regarding their religious heritage by contending prevalent interpretations of Sikh ethics and theology and offering alternatives in the light of many issues they face in the contemporary world. In addition, the Sikh diaspora has contributed financially to several faith-based movements and organizations, as we shall see in the last section of this paper.

Sikh religious values and beliefs influence the actions of both individuals and the various social groups that make up Sikh society. This review examines how Sikhism has influenced the economic outlook and social ethos of its followers. In recent times the Punjab economy, especially its agrarian sector, has undergone a form of capitalist development. Many observers have attested that the Sikh peasantry

was largely responsible for the success of the green revolution. In more recent years, however, leading environmentalists and economists have noted that Punjab's rural economy is in serious crisis, due to over-exploitation of the land and underground water and excessive use of chemical pesticides. They have called for radical solutions, from diversification to popularizing of organic farming. While this transformation has invited many commentaries, especially from economists, the role of religion in agrarian change and the developmental process has attracted little attention. Nevertheless, the developmental phase of Punjab's economy provides enough data and field studies to see how Sikhism has provided a particular understanding of 'development' and how far the 'work-ethics' of its adherents are relevant to the economic changes observed. On the basis of this discussion, it is also possible to make some generalizations regarding the relationship between religious values and beliefs and a particular model of economic development.

Religious values, beliefs and practices do not only affect economic life, they also influence social relationships at family, community and societal levels. For example, membership of a religious group can and does affect livelihood decisions, a person's sense of social inclusion or exclusion, and the ways and means of social and political engagement. Given the social composition of a particular community, the question arises of whether and how some groups are discriminated against, how various social groups feel about their social position and the reactions of those who feel marginalized. Ideas of inclusion or exclusion within a religious tradition are particularly relevant, given the dominance of Jat Sikhs.

Sikhism's influence and geography is centred in Punjab. However, an exercise that focuses on evaluating the role of religious values in development in Punjab can also be of comparative use, for example in examining the influences of Sikhism and Hinduism in other Indian states.

Before examining the relationships between Sikh teachings and development concepts and practices as such, an overview of Sikh teachings and ethics, which bear on adherents' beliefs, social values and practices, will be presented.

### 3 An overview of Sikh teachings, beliefs and practices

In the first part of this section, the emergence of Sikhism will be outlined, paying attention to both how the religious tradition emerged and how it became linked to a political strategy and identity. Second, the three sources of Sikh ethics are identified, and finally, the main ethical teachings are summarized.

#### 3.1 The emergence and teachings of Sikhism

Sikhism has been described in various ways. Sikh theologians have been at pains to register it as an independent world religion, depicting its founder Guru Nanak (1469-1539) as a divinely inspired sage who propagated a new mission by declaring in Sultanpur at the age of thirty, “There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim” (*Na ko hindu na ko musalman*). Historians of Indian religions, on the other hand, usually situate Guru Nanak’s religious milieu within North India’s Bhakti tradition. An example is Hugh McLeod (2000, p. 4), whose writings include the first systematic biography of Guru Nanak, in addition to studies of *janamsakhis* (writings that purport to be biographies of the Guru) and *rahitnamas* (written codes of conduct), general essays on Sikh history and society (including Punjabi settlers in New Zealand), and who places Sikhism firmly in the *sant* tradition, particularly in the beliefs of the so-called *nirguna sampradya* (tradition or lineage of disciples).

Among Sikh historians, J. S. Grewal, whose writings are even more prolific than those of McLeod and who is equally respected for his rigorous regard for methodology and examination of original texts, has rejected this version. In his pioneering study, *Guru Nanak in History* (1969) Grewal shows how Nanak was familiar with all the major forms of contemporary religious belief and practice, whether ‘Hindu’ or ‘Muslim’, and how he clearly rejected them and offered an original vision. Nanak’s writings provide a wide-ranging commentary on the *ulema* (Islamic scholars), *qazi* (Muslim officials) and sheikhs, the *pandits* (scholars) and *jogis* (followers of Gorkhnath), Jain monks and *bhakti* doctrine. Nanak’s attitude towards Islam and Hinduism was, “Neither the Veda nor the Kateb know the mystery”. He summarised the ways of *qazi*, the *pandit* and the *jogi* as:

The qazi utters lies and eats what is unclean;  
 The Brahman takes life and then goes off to bathe ceremoniously;  
 The blind jogi does not know the way;  
 All three are desolated (AG, 662, also 951).

Nanak rejected Jain monks as inconsequential and repudiated Hindu deities and the associated scriptures, arguing that God created Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh and Shiv, none of whom is equal to God. Significantly, Nanak doubts that the Vedas (scriptures) were revealed by Brahma, while dismissing other scriptures (the Puranas, Smritis and Shastras) as mere assertions. He thus questioned the authority of Hindu scriptures and denounced traditional Hindu modes of worship and religious practices, including the pilgrimage to sixty-eight sacred places, idol worship and ritual charities. A Hindu sect of *jogis* dominant in Punjab was denounced for its emphasis on acquiring supernatural powers through ‘body-discipline’ and renunciation of the world. Nor did Nanak find any virtue in the Bhakti tradition of Krishna and Rama, who he did not consider to be deities (manifestations of God through incarnation).

As far as Islamic beliefs were concerned, Punjab was at that time home to an Islamic religious tradition due to successive settlements of Muslims from neighbouring Afghanistan and other Islamic countries. Nanak and the successor gurus were witnesses to the new dynastic rule established by the Mughals. Nanak made a terse commentary on Babur’s invasion of India. He was pained at the forcible conversion of the Punjabi and Hindustani population to Islam, noting how *zaziya* (a tax on non-Muslim subjects) was discriminatory and unjust. Nanak rejected the *ulama* and *sheikh* as firmly as the *jogi* and *pandit*. According to Nanak, ‘there were thousands of Brahmas, Vishnus and Shivas created by God, so were millions of Muhammads – the Quran and other Semitic scriptures sung the glory of God but they were not ‘revelations’ of God. Being a follower of Muhammad, in Nanak’s view, ensured nothing – neither paradise nor salvation. Although Nanak lauded the path of Sufis over that of the *ulama*, he qualified his approval of Sufis. For example, noting that a true *dervish* abandons his ‘self’ to the Creator, Nanak observed how many *shaikhs* subsisted on revenue-free land granted by rulers.

Having rejected the prevailing religious traditions of his times, Nanak then set out an alternative vision; distilling his philosophy in a stanza with which begins the *Adi Granth* or *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* (AG, p.1):

ੴ ਸਤਿ ਨਾਮੁ ਕਰਤਾ ਪੁਰਖੁ ਨਿਰਭਉ ਨਿਰਵੈਰੁ ਅਕਾਲ ਮੂਰਤਿ ਅਜੂਨੀ ਸੈਭੰ ਗੁਰ ਪ੍ਰਸਾਦਿ  
 (There is One God, Truth by name, Primal creator, Without fear, Without enmity,  
 Timeless in form, Unborn, Self-existent, The gift of the Guru)

As might be expected, this passage has been treated as the most fundamental to Sikh teaching, with numerous commentaries, including recent feminist interpretations. Most commentators agree that the core of Sikh doctrine consists of a belief in one formless divine God, immanent, ever-present and all-powerful, and that this world is His creation, with no particular aim other than His pleasure or will. The human being is regarded as the highest form of life bestowed by the divine, and the main aim of this life is to attain liberation (*mukti*) from the fate of perpetual suffering through reincarnation.

Why are human beings subjected to such a cycle of reincarnation and suffering? Because, it is believed, their psyche (*man*) is dominated by impulses of the self (*haumai*), which need to be controlled. The ideal is to attain *sahaj* (detached balance) between life's temptations and complete renunciation. A human being should endeavour to transform a self-directed life (*manmukh*) into a guru-directed life (*gurmukh*), through daily remembrance of God's name and performance of service (*seva*) to fellow humans. In this endeavour the key figure is the guide, the true guru (*satguru*), who through divine grace "might allow the possibility of such transformation of life from *manmukh* to *gurmukh* and thus a human being can apprehend reality of truth" (*sach*) and thereby end the cycle of perpetual suffering of a human being (Shackle, 2002, p.71).

In pursuing the spiritual ideal of salvation, what is the distinctive contribution of the Sikh religious tradition over other Indic religions? The most significant aspect is Sikh gurus' rejection of the prevailing notion of asceticism (*sannyasa*). This stance was in sharp contrast to contemporary religious thought in mediaeval India, where the Hindu religious tradition in its dominant manifestations, the Nathpanthis, Jogis and the Bhakti movement, emphasized renunciation as the main means of man's salvation. Two other major religious traditions, Buddhism and Jainism advocate a degree of renunciation as an essential ingredient of people's religious quest, while the Sikh doctrine emphasizes social life (*grihast*) amidst the world while remaining unsullied by worldly temptations.

The founder, Guru Nanak, provided an example of such a fusion of spiritual and social life by settling down to the life of a householder at Kartarpur, a new town he established on the banks of the Ravi after visiting major religious centres, including those at Hardwar, Baghdad, and, according to tradition, Mecca. For the congregation, a building known as *dharamsala* was reserved (later called *gurdwara*), where his followers gathered to share in the spiritual life, not as a monastic order, but as individuals

with different capacities working in a cooperative spirit. Nanak's nine successors added to the foundation through more verses and precepts, as well as establishing appropriate institutions and towns for the growing number of followers. Amritsar and Goindwal emerged as two major Sikh centres; the former acquiring holy status for its temple surrounded by a pool built by the fourth and fifth gurus. The second guru, Angad, started the institution of a community kitchen, which provided free meals (*langar*), and was initiated to break caste barriers and pool devotees' earnings in kind and cash to provide welfare for the needy and hungry. Women worked in the *langar*, their admission into both the common kitchen and the congregation removing any doubt about their equal status for spiritual pursuits. The fifth guru then took this further when he decided to include in the Guru Granth the works of 'low caste' poets (Kabir, Namdev and Ravidas), whose verses strongly denounced the caste hierarchy. Sikhism was forced into political history when the fifth Guru, Arjan, was executed on the orders of the Mughal emperor Jahangir. As a reaction to the martyrdom of the fifth guru, his son, the sixth guru, started wearing weapons and constructed a fortress-type structure, the Akal Takhat (literally immortal throne) facing the Harmandir (God's home). He also devised new rules for public life, propagating a judicious mix of 'righteous politics directed by religious ethics' (*miri-piri*).

The organizational structure of early Sikh society was given a decisive shape by the tenth and last guru, Gobind Singh. He ended personal guruship in favour of the Guru Granth – the sacred composition compiled by the fifth guru, which has been placed at the centre of the Sikh temple in Amritsar (Harmandir) since 1604. Gobind formally transformed, by and large, what was still a pacifist society of Sikh followers into a more close-knit religious community through a formal initiation ceremony called *amrit*. He called the new order of Sikhs the Khalsa Panth (brotherhood of the pure) and specified that their personal attire should include 5Ks to reflect their identity as a true Sikh<sup>9</sup>. The last guru, Gobind, while trying to negotiate a more respected life for his adherents, fought several battles against hill Hindu rajas patronised by the Mughal authorities of Delhi. In a famous letter of victory (*Zafarnama*) he wrote to the Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb, accusing him of being a tyrant and justifying his rebellion on the grounds that the emperor was not a 'just' ruler.

A direct consequence of this shift from a meditative religious life to active involvement in worldly affairs led to a century of trenchant Sikh warfare with the Mughal and Afghan rulers of Lahore, which paved the way for Sikh rule in Punjab in 1765, in 1849 to be annexed by the expanding British colonial power

in India. The emphasis on Guru-Panth was replaced by Guru-Granth, which implied the supremacy of the holy book over the community (Grewal, 2007). During the eighteenth century, the military pursuits of Sikh bands (*misls*) seeking political autonomy or outright control of local areas was accompanied by several injunctive resolutions by the representatives of the Khalsa Panth (*Sarbat Khalsa*) issued after regular deliberations at the Akal Takhat. The institutionalization of the religious community necessitated further corporate rules of behaviour. These orders (*firmans*) varied from consensual resolutions (*gurmata*) to prescriptive orders (*hukamnama*) and penance for the guilty (*tankhah*). The nominated Jathedar (head) of the Akal Takhat developed great moral and spiritual authority and assumed the role of *the* custodian of Sikh 'national interests'.

### 3.2 Sources of Sikh ethics

There exist three separate sources for deriving Sikh ethical practices. The first and foremost is the Guru Granth Sahib, the most sacred Sikh scripture, which is revered as the living embodiment of the ten gurus and which sits at the centre of every *gurdwara* as the focal point of worship and prayer. Composed over a period of almost two hundred years, the Guru Granth contains the verses of six gurus, several Bhakats and others in a variety of the languages of north India, including Persian, Sanskrit, Hindi, Hindustani, Urdu and Punjabi and incorporating several dialects. Deservingly, the Guru Granth's poetry has invited several competing and complementary commentaries and expositions<sup>4</sup>.

Among the other sacred Sikh literature, the *vars* (heroic ballads) of Bhai Gurdas, the scribe of the original Guru Granth, are considered a 'key' to the Guru Granth's ethical message<sup>5</sup>. The Dasam Granth, compiled by Mani Singh, contains the compositions of Guru Gobind Singh<sup>6</sup>. However, there is general agreement that the bulk of the Dasam Granth volume consists of writings by the guru's court poets (*durbari kavi*). Its largest section is comprised of Hindu classical tales of mythical warfare between the forces of evil and the gods. Within the sacred literature genre, there are *hukamnamas* (orders) presumed to be written by some of the gurus, especially the ninth and tenth gurus<sup>7</sup>. These are distinguished from a later set of *hukamnamas* issued by the head of Akal Takhat, Amritsar (*sarbrah* or *jathedar*) in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The second source of Sikh ethics is prescriptive literature, known as *rahitnamas* (codes of belief and practice). There are several, varying in content and size. Among the earliest are those compiled by



Nand Lal (1695), Prihlad Singh (1695/1705) and Chaupa Singh – all close followers of the tenth guru, as well as by other authors later<sup>8</sup>. These tracts or manuals contain ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’ of social conduct, with relevant quotes from the Guru Granth. The early ones claim endorsement directly from Guru Gobind Singh. More *rahitnamas* have subsequently been added to address new issues. Containing instructions and prescriptions for expected Sikh behaviour, some of the manuals also list penalties for violating the stated norms. Matters covered include details of the initiation ceremony; rules of social life; ceremonies regarding birth, marriage and death; prohibitions on gambling and smoking; the expectation that Sikhs will fight valiantly in battle; and how a Sikh must not make a distinction between the rich and poor, the high and low status. *Rahitnamas* are thus rules for an ideal life of ethical purity and spiritual aspiration.

The final source of Sikh ethics includes the *Janamsakhi* and *Gursobha* literature<sup>9</sup>. These writings consist of hagiographic accounts of the gurus, especially of the founder. Narrating episodes from the lives of Nanak and his successors, these stories are suggestive of appropriate moral behaviour. Until recently, *Janamsakhis* were popular reading among both lay and educated Sikhs.

However a general difficulty should be noted in suggesting that there is a ‘standard Sikh ethics’ derived from the sacred and prescriptive literature. This is the absence of any agreed authority for interpretation within the Khalsa Panth. Lacking such institutional authority or priestly class to interpret and resolve any differences, the usual recourse is to invoke the authority of the Gurus, the Guru Granth and history in support of particular views. However, any proclamation from the Akal Takhat, Amritsar is treated as binding because of the history associated with the sacred building where, according to the tradition and supported by history, community leaders held deliberations, sorted out their differences, punished the guilty and issued proclamations that were considered to be mandatory for Sikhs at large. Ordinary Sikhs look for moral and political guidance to the Akal Takhat, although some proclamations issued by its Jathedar have run into difficulties since the 1984 tragedy (see Section 4). In the 1930s, faced with diverse religious practices within Sikh society, the elected Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) initiated a long process of consultation within the community and published a standard *Sikh Rahit Maryada* (SGPC, 1953). The ‘Rahit’ provides a succinct outline of what it means to be a Sikh, setting out the definition and essence of the religious, social and ethical framework within which the religion’s followers were expected to live. As the SGPC



was also empowered to appoint the Jathedar of Akal Takhat, an institution which commanded eminent legitimacy among the Sikh public, it could exert moral sanctions and authority in enforcing the religious code.

### 3.3 Sikh ethics

Writing to draw the attention of English language readers in the western world, M. A. Macauliffe, a colonial officer who undertook the first systematic exploration of Sikhism, summed up Sikh ethics in 1909:

To sum up then the moral and political merits of the Sikh religion; it prohibits idolatry, hypocrisy, caste distinctiveness, the con-cremation of widows, the immurement of women, the use of wine and other intoxicants, tobacco-smoking, infanticide, slander, pilgrimage to sacred rivers and tanks of the Hindus; it inculcates loyalty, gratitude for all favours received, philanthropy, justice, impartiality, truth, honesty, and all the moral and domestic virtues known to the holiest citizens of any country (Macauliffe, 1909, vol. 1, p. xxiii).

Much later, an assessment by Niharranjan Ray (1975, p.61) concluded that

Guru Nanak's genius lay in the fact that he tore away from the atmosphere of negation and declared himself positively in favour of worldly life, of acceptance of the duties and obligations of the human individual to the temporal and the material, and at the same time of equal importance of the duties and obligations of religious discipline and spiritual quest for the ultimate. After long centuries, he gave back to the people of India the idea and ideal of a balanced life.

Adding Macauliffe's enumeration of Sikh social ethics to what Ray calls the "atmosphere of negation", it seems fair to conclude that the Sikh religious tradition did not accept the 'fatalism' associated with the *karmic* theory of Indic religions, according to which human beings' actions were of little use since their fate is predetermined by the *karma* of their previous lives. The Sikh tradition qualified this fundamentally, regarding people's situation as subject to change by conscious human action in this life. Indeed, according to Sikh theology, a guru can bestow *nadar* (grace or bliss) on an earnest person in return for rightful conduct and thus wipe out his or her karmic fate altogether. Fatalism had no place in the new Sikh theology. In addition, neither caste nor gender was a barrier to spiritual pursuits.

This is significant in the context of thinking about development, as people were prompted to improve their situation. Nor was it necessary to abandon the world to attain spiritual ideals. Rather than rejecting the world, Nanak's vision emphasized the social aspect of emancipation i.e. spiritual perfection can only be attained through engaging with the world, through *sangat* - the congregation of well-intentioned people. The Sikh vision rejected extremes of both austerity and over-indulgence and instead advanced what has been called a 'life-affirming doctrine'.

Beyond these two fundamental precepts, the Sikh scriptures provide an ethical discourse on several aspects of social life. Human behaviour, according to the scriptures, is motivated by *kam* (lust), *krodh* (anger), *lobh* (greed), *moh* (materialism) and *ahankar* (ego), which are "learnt dispositional activities rather than biological characteristics" (Singh, Avtar, 1996, p.54). An ideal is to achieve *sahaj*, a balanced equilibrium in human life, by disciplined individual use of each of the above traits. The essence of social and spiritual life is to live amidst the world positively but in a disinterested way; being aware of the world's avarice, falsehoods and temptations. The human body is to be treated as the temple of God (Bala, 1999, p.177), not regarded as something evil to be tortured, as *jogis* do, but disciplined through austere living and spiritually purified through God's name. According to Avtar Singh (1996), who undertook a major study of Sikh ethics, there are also four precepts arising from the Sikh scriptures, namely universal brotherhood (*ek pita eks ke ham bark*), social equality (*sarbat da bhala*), seeking the wellbeing of all and an obligation to social service (*seva*).

Let us now consider how the above theology translates into concrete social ethics (Nesbitt, 2007). First, a Sikh must endeavour to dwell on God's name (*nam japo*); second, a person must earn a living through earnest means (*kirt karo*); and third, earned surplus should be shared (*vand chakna*). The imperative of earnest living through work and sharing of earnings with the needy can easily translate into active pursuit of economic activities and allocating a share of one's earnings for social welfare schemes for the less capable or disabled, or indeed in building other institutions of community welfare. The notion of altruism (*seva*) was translated into an obligation: a tenth of one's wealth to be donated for the welfare of the poor or other charitable causes (*daswandh*). In the times of the gurus, designated persons (*masands*) collected tithes, but the practice was discontinued by the tenth guru because he found that these middlemen were corrupt. However the concept survives, though Sikhs have lacked any institutional arrangement for translating it into a viable contemporary practice.

Individuals were prompted to a life of virtuous and engaged living. Verses written in the language spoken by common people extolled them to rise in the morning and undertake mundane tasks with enthusiasm, thus creating an ethics of 'infectious living' while remembering God's name.

He who considers himself a disciple of the true guru  
 Arises early in the morning to recite God's name  
 Then go to earn livelihood enthusiastically working hard  
 Lo, you are ready for a bath in God's pool of nectar  
 Such is the blessing of the guru (AG: 305).

Redemption is at hand,  
 Live and earn with devotion  
 And it comes amidst work, play and joy.

Through such prompting, a spirit of individualism was fostered, freeing Sikhs from supposedly pre-assigned places in society. In addition, much of the sacred literature was thought to inspire individuals with a cheerful disposition in adversity (*chardhi kala*) and a spirit for 'passionate living'.

This individual rationality was further fostered through repudiating rituals. The guru period was characterized by a cult-dominated religious tradition associated with Vaishnavas and *jogis*, magic, superstitions and popular beliefs in cult figures. The scriptures encouraged 'true knowledge' and aimed to raise followers' social conscience. Accepting 'cause and effect' procedures, the scriptures emphasized gaining true knowledge: "true education is one which prompts a person to altruistic deeds" (AG, 356). The pursuit of knowledge is stated as to prevent ignorance and develop a healthy attitude towards the world: "True learning springs from reflection and is manifest in goodness of character" (AG, 152). Some more speculative thought, such as Nanak's view of the earth as one amongst hundreds of similar planets and the human form as not only the highest living organism but also capable of further refinement, have been commended by Sikh theologians as proof of Sikhism being 'scientific' and 'rational'.

What is more reasonable to say is that Sikh ethical discourse lends itself easily to a social ethos which fosters positive and active roles for individuals, encouraging people to take the initiative in building their lives rather than passively accepting their destiny and place in society – what Sen (1999) calls an essential role of religion to ensure 'quiet and contentedness' in the face of life's incapacitating

hardships. The Sikh tradition thus fosters individual spirit while repudiating the debilitating effects of caste, which binds people's fate to their previous incarnations. At the same time, the tradition emphasizes collective action for the welfare of the needy and weak. Thus an individual's mind is to be nourished through his or her membership of the congregation (*sangat*), while obligations to the less fortunate are to be fulfilled by contributing towards caring for fellow beings.

## 4 Ethical behaviour in public life: political advocacy, organisation and governance

With its emphasis on a this-worldly vision over the inner meditative and other-worldly realization of the transcendent, it should not be surprising to see that the evolution of Sikhism through its five hundred years of history has been accompanied by an intense engagement with the political regimes in power. In order to see how Sikh discourse about politics, organization and ethical behaviour in public life has evolved, it is necessary to have an overview of Sikh history. From the viewpoint of the relationships between religion and development, we can identify three issues which need to be considered:

- How the Sikh religious tradition views politics: does it offer any criticism of, or alternative to, historically existing forms of political system i.e. theocracy, democracy and communism?
- What has the characteristic form of Sikh political expressions and mobilization been through history to the contemporary period?
- What are Sikh ethical values as perceived by adherents in their attitudes towards other religions and the major functions of state: inter-religious dialogue, public accountability and corruption, human rights and violence?

These questions will be addressed in the following five sub-sections, which will, in turn, consider political ideals and advocacy, political mobilization and organization, issues of governance and corruption; human rights and questions about the concept of a 'just war'; and finally, Sikh views about the truth claims of other religions and their implications for engagement in inter-religious dialogue.

### 4.1 Political advocacy: political ideals

Like other religions, the Sikh scriptures are mainly concerned about the human spiritual quest, and regard the primary function of humankind as being to attain the divine blessing. These scriptures do not offer any blueprint for a political framework, but Sikh theologians have discovered a range of political ideas and ideals relevant to both rulers and subjects. In view of Sikhs' prolonged warfare with the Mughal and Afghan rulers of Punjab and the eventual establishment of Sikh rule in Punjab, there has been considerable debate on the one hand about the relationship between the Sikh religion and politics and on the other, whether the accomplishment of Sikh rule in Punjab was the realization of the political motif of the Sikh religious tradition and how far this kingdom fulfilled the ideals of a Sikh polity implied in the scriptures.

When trying to make sense of Sikh political philosophy, most historians start with Guru Nanak's outlook towards political rulers. As a contemporary witness to Babur's invasion of India, Nanak condemned the battle between the last of the Lodi (Afghan) rulers and the new dynasty of Mughals. He found political rule at that time to be unjust, discriminatory and oppressive and especially condemned corruption and the clergy's collusion with the rulers. He warned rulers who had lost their sense of duty in the pursuit of pleasure, reminding them how God can unmake a ruler in a moment. He showed scant regard for political authority. However, the Sikh scriptures do not offer any specific political ideology or constitutional framework other than general religious principles to guide the good conduct expected of rulers. According to Grewal (1969), there is "clear primacy for man's moral commitment over his political obligations... [with important] implications if the distinction between moral allegiance to God and political allegiance to the state was to be carried out to its logical conclusions". Grewal (1969, p.166) distils certain norms of political behaviour from the scriptures, both for the ruler and the ruled:

That the foremost duty of the ruler was to be just, both legally and morally. The foremost duty of the ruled was to meet the valid demands of the ruler. From the functionaries of the government he (Nanak) expects honesty and integrity in the performance of their duties and consideration for common people. ...His condemnation of oppression and corruption delivered in bold and clear terms may be taken as a form of answer. If rulers and their representatives failed in their duties, then Guru Nanak's attitude appears to support 'revolt' depending upon the nature and extent of 'oppression'.

Other commentators find in the condemnation of oppression more than mere moral judgment and a piteous call for reform. Contributions by Kehar Singh, Jagjit Singh, Dharam Singh and Gurbhagat Singh have built on the notion that the Sikh concept of God is of an active agent who oversees justice. They detect a blueprint for an ideal state in early Sikh literature in terms of a 'theology of liberation.' Dharam Singh (1991, p.152), for example, argues that the Sikh scriptures emphasize that God is the real king (*sacha patshah*) and that all worldly kings are false.<sup>10</sup> Gurbhagat Singh (1993, p. 251) elaborates on how the Sikh God is a "combative" God who kills "demons" and punishes all "egoists" i.e. kings, landlords, and officials who are 'parasites.' From God being an active protector of "good" and destroyer of the "unjust", Sikh historians see a logical development to the last guru's pronounced mission "as upholder of the righteous against the wicked" (Grewal, 2007: *Bachittar natak* or proclamation of a mission). Thus Guru Gobind Singh's decision to turn a largely passive community of the faithful into active, dedicated Sikhs ready to rebel against the unjust kings and lay down their lives

for justice is seen as the culmination of the Sikh political ideas initiated by Guru Nanak. The many battles against Afghan and Mughal rulers by the Khalsa thus became inevitable, as the former were largely seen as unjust rulers and oppressors.

However, the subsequent evolution of Sikh history has thrown up sufficiently complicated events to make a coherent narrative quite problematic. Much of the tenth guru's life was spent in negotiating an honourable space for his followers, including several battles with Hindu Rajas and Mughal authorities. He established a semblance of a sovereign state at Anandpur and within two years of his death in 1708, the Sirhind region of Punjab had been conquered by Sikhs led by Banda Singh. The question of whether political sovereignty is implied by Sikh philosophy naturally arises. And there are further issues. The incessant battles by the Khalsa bands from 1708 onwards, which coincided a weakening of the Mughal state due to repeated Afghan invasions from the west, led to the Khalsa rule in 1765 under Jassa Singh Ahluwalia. Then Punjab saw the emergence of several Sikh chiefs who declared themselves as rulers. By 1799, the domains of these chiefs were amalgamated under Ranjit Singh, who declared his rule as *Sarkar Khalsa* (the government of the Khalsa). Parallel to these developments, Ala Singh founded the largest state of Patiala, thus laying the foundation for several other states ruled by Sikh princes. The nature of the relationship between religion, the political organization of the Khalsa and the nature of Sikh regimes arises. Historians' view of the Sikh polity differ: some see no connection between the religion of the Khalsa and their polity, others see in the Sikh faith the birth of a new nationality (e.g. Cunningham, 1849), which was bound to seek political expression. Related questions concern whether Sikh rulers conformed with Sikh theological imperatives. What was the nature of their polity: a theocracy, a monarchy, an oligarchy (e.g. Malcolm, 1812) or a "theocratic confederate feudalism", as Cunningham called it? Did they dispense justice to all, irrespective of their background? Were these kingdoms free from discrimination and did they care for the poor and the weak?

Of all the rulers, Ranjit Singh's conduct has most assessments. Historians testify that he neither enforced conversion to Sikhism (unlike his Muslim predecessors in relation to Islam) nor failed to patronise religious orders other than Sikhism - his patronage extended to Muslims, Sufis, Hindus and other saints and fakirs. Surveying Ranjit Singh's rule, Grewal (2007, p.217) concludes that

The ruling class in his reign was composite, and state patronage was extended to all categories of his subjects irrespective of their religious affiliation. There was no discrimination in principle but Sikhs were represented by a larger proportion in the civil administration and the army than men of other religious communities. The identification of a larger number of people of the region in the state, irrespective of their religious creed and social background, was a measure of what is now regarded as its secular character.

Khushwant Singh, however, prefers to read, in the identification of a large proportion of the region's population with Ranjit Singh's regime, the seeds of unfulfilled Punjabi nationalism. Still others regard Ranjit Singh's rule as a monarchy and autocracy, a clear deviation from Sikh political philosophy.<sup>11</sup> For an ideal Sikh polity, Grewal (2007) looks favourably at Jassa Singh Ahluwalia's regime, which emerged between 1746 and 1765, and during which the Sikh concepts of political organization took definite form through the institutions of "Rakhi, Misl, Dal Khalsa and Gurmata ... the bearing of these 'institutions' on the acquisition of power and acquisition of territories was quite close" (p.168).

There is a further strand of Sikh thought which sees in the concept of *miri-piri* - alongside Ravidas's ideal of *begampura* - a political framework of a state based on egalitarianism. Seen as a forerunner of a socialistic society, a similar vision informed the launch of the revolutionary Ghadar Party in California in 1914. Inspired by the fiery rhetoric of a Hindu intellectual, Lala Hardayal, the aim of the Ghadar Party was to establish a secular socialist republic of India free from British rule. If its ideology was a mixture of revolutionary socialism and Sikhism, the means it adopted left little doubt about the Party's links with the Sikh past. Although the Ghadarites failed abjectly in their aim, they nevertheless advocated a socialistic society and founded the first Communist Party in Punjab (Singh, Gurharpal, 1987). Ever since, an influential section of the Sikh elite has embraced a version of communism.

## 4.2 Political organization and mobilization

We can now turn to the second question, namely do the characteristic forms of Sikh political expression and mobilization bear the stamp of their religious tradition?

Except for a brief period of sovereignty over Punjab, Sikhs have lived for most of their history under foreign rulers or under rules framed by others. As seen above, the Sikh tradition has certain codes of conduct for rulers and their subjects. Successive interactions with rulers have seen a variety of mobilizations and the emergence of different organizational forms. However, it is possible to identify



some common ideas and issues which have influenced Sikhs' mobilization in both the colonial era and contemporary India, and also among the Sikh diaspora.

First among the mobilizing ideas is a shared concern to defend the faith. In this concern the tradition of martyrdom has played a central role. The Sikh martyrdom tradition (*shahidi*) began with Guru Arjan, who was tortured to death at Lahore by the orders of Jehangir (Singh, Pashaura, 2006). This was followed by the execution of the ninth guru, Tegh Bahadur, which was ordered by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (Fenech, 2005; Nijhawan, 2006; Grewal, 2007, p.126). To this can be added the memory of several Sikh martyrs who died in defence of *Sikhism*. The period following the death of the last guru and the emergence of Khalsa rule under Jassa Singh Ahluwalia is remembered as a 'heroic age' of sacrifices by Singhs, who faced persecution as rebels against the Mughal raj. Defending the faith took a characteristic form: defending the external symbols of the Khalsa, of which a Sikh's hair (*kes*) was the most conspicuous. Historical narratives abound of Sikh martyrs who preferred death to removal of their hair or turban in the mid-eighteenth century. Grewal (2007, p.131) rephrases Chaupa Singh's emphasis on the inter-relationship between the external marks of the Sikh faith and the martyrdom tradition as:

The Keshadhari Sikhs are like a mote in the eyes of Hindus and Musalmans; it cannot be removed, it does not dissolve; it is a constant source of irritation. ...The *pahul*, the *kesh* and martyrdom go together to serve as the markers of Sikh identity.

The memories of such sacrifices and narratives of martyrdom in defence of their faith continue to stir orthodox Sikhs' consciences in the contemporary world. It is one reason why baptized Sikhs feel so indignant when asked to remove their turbans, which has led to several prolonged legal battles and mobilizations as far afield as Vancouver, London and New York, indeed wherever Sikhs have settled around the globe (Tatla, 1999; Bennett, 1999).

During the colonial era, the political organization of Sikhs was also dictated by the fact that they were a minority amidst large majorities of Muslims and Hindus. Even during Sikh rule, Sikhs constituted less than a tenth of Punjab's population. Thus in a very real sense, Sikh hegemony in Punjab emerged from unpromising foundations. This was reinforced by colonial rule, when numbers instead of traditional valour became crucial to securing access to political power and resources. In the first Census, conducted in 1881, the Sikhs formed just 14 per cent of Punjab's population and a miniscule portion of

Hindu India. The new imperial rules granted limited representation to indigenous people in the State legislative assemblies first introduced in 1909 and further expanded in 1919. Unable to compete with the demographically dominant Hindus and Muslims of Punjab, the Sikh leaders emphasized the community's role as a large revenue payer, as well as pleading for special recognition of their disproportionate contribution to Indian armies.

The community's minority status was reinforced by other developments. Christian missionaries converted a few leading Sikhs, among them Maharajah Dalip Singh, heir to the Punjab throne. A larger threat was perceived from the 'boa constrictor' of Hinduism, due to Arya Samajis' aggressive proselytization aimed at re-absorbing Sikhs into the Hindu fold. In reaction, local associations (*Singh Sabhas*) were formed, the first in Amritsar in 1873. These challenged the Arya Samaji campaign by emphasizing Sikhs' distinct history, and religion, and sought legal backing wherever possible. The colonial state pragmatically recognized the Sikh marriage ceremony in the Anand Marriage Act of 1909. However, a larger mobilization was required for freeing historical shrines from hereditary priests (*mahants*), stories of whose moral laxity and financial irregularities were common and who, it was alleged, had indulged in Hindu rituals and ceremonies within Sikh shrines. The newly formed *Akali jathas* (Sikh militant bands) that spearheaded this movement gained widespread support, especially after a group of baptized 'untouchables' were refused entry to the Golden Temple. The government passed the Gurdwaras Act, 1925, which provided for an elected body of Sikhs to manage historical shrines, including the Golden Temple and Nanakana Sahib.

As the colonial administration decided to relinquish power, the Sikh dilemma as a minority was acute. Given the demand for Pakistan, on the basis of a separate religious identity, the Sikh leadership, led by the Akali Dal, put forward its own claim for a homeland, on the basis that the community's history, geography and religion were all centred in Punjab. Although sympathetic to the Sikhs' predicament, wedged as they were between two large majorities of Hindus and Muslims, the colonial rulers finally partitioned the Punjab, forcing massive migration of Sikhs and Hindus from the western areas into Indian Punjab and of Muslims into the new state of Pakistan.

Recovering from the painful dislocation and violence that accompanied the partition, Sikh community leaders faced a different set of rules governing political representation in the new India. The dominant

Hindu elite chose a democratic federalist system, with separate State legislatures and a federal government chosen from a parliament, with ultimate powers vested in a centralized state in New Delhi. The switch to a universal franchise immediately penalized Sikhs. Even within Punjab, Sikhs formed just a third of its re-assembled population. Unless they could hold political power in Punjab, the community faced the question of whether it would be possible to safeguard its interests.

Nehru's secular vision and the Indian constitution, with its 'no reservations' policy for any religious minority except 'untouchables', meant that Akali Dal's leitmotiv of mobilization as a 'religious minority' was brushed aside (Gill, 1998). As the Indian government had accepted 'layered nationalisms' of language and culture as a basis of collective identity, the Akali Dal accordingly sought bifurcation of the province based on the Punjabi language. After a long campaign, in 1966 the government of India agreed to redraw Punjab's boundaries, with the result that Sikhs became a bare majority. However, the new Punjab was divested of its capital city, Chandigarh, while disputes festered about sharing Punjab's rivers with the neighbouring states of Haryana and Rajasthan. In addition, the dream of gaining political power within Punjab was not fully realized by Akali leaders due to electoral factors - the Akali Dal could only secure power by forming coalitions with other parties. Frustrated thus, the Akali Dal launched its second campaign in 1981 under the 'Anandpur Resolution', with a mixture of religious, economic and political demands that included acknowledgement of India as a multi-national state (India, Government of, 1984; SGPC, 1996).

By then the Indian polity had undergone far-reaching changes. The Indian state no longer based its legitimizing ideology on secular nationalism, but had shifted it to religious-majoritarian nationalism (Pantham, 2004, p. 444). National leaders found this alternative strategy for obtaining an electoral majority, based on "appeals to the majority religious community against minority communities", attractive (Kohli, 1989, p. 309) Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India, chose to project the Sikh campaign as 'separatism', thereby gaining immense popularity as a saviour of Indian unity. Her son, Rajiv Gandhi, reaped the fruit with a landslide victory at the polls in late 1984.

For the Sikh community, the Indian government's decision in 1984 to send armies into its holiest shrine is the greatest tragedy in its history. They rose in protest at this highly provocative and humiliating action and a war ensued between the Indian security forces and Sikh militant bands

organized on the model of the eighteenth century *misls*. In this unequal struggle, Sikh resistance was crushed. Some 30,000 Sikhs are believed to have lost their lives in Punjab, while a systematic pogrom of genocide occurred in India's capital after the assassination of India Gandhi in October 1984. Two decades later, the Indian state is still mopping up the debris. Besides the physical damage to the Sikh religious centre in Amritsar, which included the destruction of the Akal Takhat, the 1984 tragedy has left a more damaging impact on Sikh psyche. With the destruction of the Akal Takhat, the building that symbolized the doctrine of Sikh sovereignty, any hope of converting this idea into public policy lies buried. Consequently the standing of the Akal Takhat, its Jathedar and his proclamations (*hukamnama*) have also lost their consensual sanction and legitimacy.<sup>12</sup> So has the dream of Punjab as the bastion of the ethical standards of a 'Sikh civilization' been laid to rest?

At a practical level, the Akali leadership was severely emboldened by the debacle. It has, since sought partnership with the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), whose view of an 'Indian nation' based on Hindutva could hardly be palatable to ordinary Sikhs. But such has been the impact of the Indian state's violence towards the Sikh community that Akali leaders have eschewed their former demands and prepared themselves to disarticulate the community's distinct cultural practices while extending qualified support to the BJP's Hindutva agenda. More recently, there has been much concern about the infiltration and meddling in religious affairs of a Hindu fundamentalist organization, the Rashtriya Sewak Sangh, with a view to undermining Sikhs' separate identity. The Akali Dal's significant shift away from its traditional concern about religious identity is seen in it moving its headquarters from Amritsar to Chandigarh, broadening its base to include Hindus after the 'Moga Resolution', and rallying solely around general economic issues. While the unfinished agenda of Sikh demands includes separate personal laws for Sikhs, changes to the Hindu Code Bill and extension of control over all the historic Sikh shrines in India, alongside these religious demands, there are demands designed to protect the material interests of the community, including raising the support prices for wheat and rice, control of river waters, industrial projects for the State, the transfer of Chandigarh and Punjabi speaking areas to Punjab and the re-casting of centre-State relations in favour of the States. Seen in a longer term perspective, the Akali Dal seems to be secularising, educating and bringing home the new political reality of rising Hindu nationalism in India to its followers, the ordinary Sikhs. However, unless they can show some tangible gain by way of extracting concessions from the central government, they could lose political control. Moreover, there is potential for re-alignment around stray voices calling for

a restoration of Sikh 'honour' and the Punjab economy's 'health' by carving out a separate State. These ideas and ideology have been gathering ground since the tragedy of 1984, while material support could come from the Sikh diaspora. Such a course would also help to resolve the serious dilemma many overseas Sikhs face with respect to how to maintain a Sikh ethnic identity as a stateless minority in the world.

Meanwhile, academics have been grappling with the causes and consequences of 1984 for the Sikh community and Punjab. While Hindu commentators would generally agree with Naipaul that a modernizing Sikh society was misled by its leaders who were living by outdated conventions (Naipaul, 1991; Tatla, 2003), other diagnoses vary. In a major study, Gurharpal Singh (2000) locates the Sikh predicament in the progressive centralization of the Indian polity and the rise of Hindu nationalism. In contemporary Indian society, the options for a non-Hindu religious minority are limited: they can either "accept the Hindu hegemonic order... [or face] violent control". Gurharpal Singh suggests that the Indian version of secularism effectively embodies a Hindu notion of tolerating differences by incorporating and hierarchizing other religious traditions. Thus Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism are all considered to be inferior versions of Hinduism (also see Madan, 2004). Deol (2000) suggests that the rise of Sikh nationalism is due to the emergence of a print culture, the revolution in communications and the material progress of the community. Grewal (1998b) has argued that, despite the Indian state's proclamation that Akali Dal's real intention was to carve out a separate state of Khalistan, such a demand was never adopted by the party. Brass (1974, 1991), however, sees in Sikh social history the progressive and logical, if somewhat haphazard, evolution of an ethnic community towards a nation in the modern sense, hence the appearance of Sikh nationalism that is attempting to claim a separate Sikh country in Punjab. Nirvikar Singh (1998) sees Sikh discontent with the Indian polity as arising from weakened institutional arrangements for the division of resources: in his view the central government acts arbitrarily as far as the developmental priorities of Punjab are concerned.

Arguably, the underlying cause of the 1980s crisis concerned future models and strategies for development of the Punjab economy and Sikh society (Leaf, 1984). In the Akali Dal programme, which is exclusively centred on the Punjab economy, society and culture, one can perceive a struggle for resources and power to implement a more appropriate strategy for this region, which has suffered badly from policies devised from an all-Indian perspective. Thus questions relating to Punjab's future

development and appropriate strategies are bound up with the fact that the province is an historical homeland for a religiously defined community. That such a configuration of region, religion and society is likely to suffer in contemporary India should alert us to consider religious tradition as an important factor in the developmental process.

### 4.3 Governance and corruption

We can now turn to the third question posed at the outset of this section, namely what role have Sikh ethical values played in adherents' attitudes towards the state's major governance functions? We have already seen how the Sikh religious tradition has laid down certain expectations from rulers. In this paper, this issue is largely examined through Sikh attitudes towards one major issue of modern governance, the phenomenon of corruption.

Guru Nanak wrote of corruption under the Mughal regime and condemned it strongly. He was particularly pained to see how *qazis* and *Brahmans* sought favour from the state as;

Qazi dispenses the justice thus  
He tells the rosary beads uttering God's name  
While accepting the bribe and hurts the rightful (AG, 951)

And elsewhere, the scriptures show familiarity with corruption:

The *rajas* (rulers) are lions and the *muqaddams*, (revenue collectors) dogs  
They fall upon the *raiyat* (general public) day and night.  
Their agents inflict wounds with claws (of power)  
And the dogs lick blood and relish the liver. (AG, 1288)

During the colonial era, the Indian administration drawn from the Oxbridge elite was considered virtually corruption-free. In postcolonial India, however, corruption has become widespread and the abuse of power for personal gain is almost a way of life for administrators and politicians. How then does the Sikh ethic direct its followers to conduct themselves in public life? With much emphasis on honest living and obligations towards fellow human beings, the Sikh religious tradition suggests a strong ethical prescription for fairness, justice and presumably also against corruption in public life.

However, this flies in the face of widespread corruption in contemporary Punjab, in the bureaucracy and other institutions. Reports of favouritism and corruption are frequent, including, in recent years, the SGPC, which is the main religious organization expected to uphold the highest standards of decorum and decency. Several of Punjab's ministers, state officials and religious functionaries have been investigated, allegedly for corrupt practices; currently both the incumbent chief minister and his predecessor face such charges, as does a former chief of police. A World Bank (2004) report listed public works, including engineering, road construction, water supplies and sewerage schemes, as areas in which graft is a standard practice in awarding contracts.

Leaving aside routine and petty corruption, the question of why Sikh political leaders are thought to be generally corrupt is relevant. Is it because they insist on the Sikh ideology of high ethical standards in public life, but frequently fail to maintain the appropriate standards themselves? Many believe that the observable discrepancy between the expected and actual behaviour of politicians and administrators in public life has lowered their credibility and created general apathy towards state and community institutions. It seems that people prefer to solve problems using their own initiative and try to avoid dealing with the state bureaucracy unless this is necessary for patronage or power and then only as a last resort. For instance, even reporting of an accident on the road is avoided by commuters, fearing the police might charge or harass them. Partly due to widespread corruption, there is general lack of confidence in government-sponsored initiatives. While there are numerous private charitable organizations and these are growing more rapidly than registered Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) in the state. The experience of Sikh philanthropists seeking government partnerships and assistance for already-sanctioned schemes has generally been bitter (Dusenbery and Tatla, 2008). With few channels of redress or NGOs mediating between the state and the people, the rich often bribe officials to favour their cases, while the poor helplessly wait for the slow bureaucratic wheel to decide their fate.

Despite religious edicts against corruption, the public appears to view the system as beyond repair and seems resigned to it. In such circumstances, any promise to reform the police or officialdom can expect a thunderous reception from the poor, as shown by the popular image amongst Punjabi peasantry of Bhindranwale, a Sikh militant who opposed the Indian government and was killed by Indian soldiers in 1984 in the Golden Temple, or, in the Indian context, the common people's reception of the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi during 1975-77.



There have been few serious explanations of the widespread 'culture of corruption' beyond the 'social milieu of the new Indian elite.' In Punjab's case, an interesting explanation was advanced by a British social anthropologist, Pettigrew (1975, 1990), who found the disjunction between Sikh social norms and the political structure of the Indian state as decisive in Sikh leaders' susceptibility to corruption. Given the Sikh desire for communal autonomy is an unrealizable vision within the wider socioeconomic and political realities of contemporary India, Sikh political leaders, in their dealings with non-Sikh national leaders, regard themselves as being forced to ignore certain important codes associated with traditional culture and ideology. Sikh leaders thus face the dilemma of trying to remain faithful to their communal tradition while needing to accommodate themselves to political realities which extend beyond communal boundaries. This leads to a situation in which their followers perceive Sikh leaders as being personally corrupt. However, according to Pettigrew this is an inadequate reading of leaders' behaviour.

In practice, every potential Sikh leader has to build a local network of supporters. For this a leader needs to dispense patronage, thus building vertical links to the government in Delhi is necessary political behaviour. Dispensing patronage includes absolving one's lieutenants and supporters from their omissions and misconduct. This sense of 'absolute loyalty', irrespective of personal and socio-religious ethical principles, in Pettigrew's view, necessarily involves both fair and unfair use of power, something that is in-built in the system. Hence ethical imperatives, even when strongly held at personal level, are cast aside by leaders who sincerely believe that the larger interests of the community will be served by their so acting. Pettigrew thus pleads for an understanding of such 'political corruption' (to be distinguished from petty corruption) as a function of the state structure, which especially affects a minority leadership like that of the Sikhs. The compromises, she asserts, are part and parcel of Sikh politics in contemporary India.

#### **4.4 Human rights and the concept of a 'just war'**

The idea of human rights is a modern western concept that finds no direct echo in Sikh tradition or history. Indeed, with the attribute of being a 'martial race' that is attached to Sikh men and the popular image of macho- and hyper-masculinity, it is difficult to imagine Sikhs as compassionate or protectors of others' rights. However, prompted by the global ethical standards expected of any respectable social community, Sikh theologians have traced passages from the scriptures that could be construed as supportive of human rights.



Thus Kaur (M. 1998a) and Singh (Pritam, 1998) provide an elaborate defence of Sikh scriptures in terms of human rights imperatives, arguing that the ninth Guru Tegh Bahadur sacrificed his life defending the right of Kashmiri Hindus who were facing discrimination and religious persecution by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. Aurangzeb was using political power to promote the interests of Sunni Islam at the cost of other branches of Islam. Thus a “conflict between the practice of coercion and the principle of freedom was inevitable” (Grewal, 2007, p. 128). The traditional account says that in 1675 Guru Tegh Bahadur received some Brahmans, who narrated the plight of their co-religionists who were facing persecution in several parts of the empire. The Guru decided to defend the freedom of conscience that the emperor was denying, on principle as well as in practice. He set out to meet the emperor but was arrested and executed in Chandni Chowk, Delhi in November 1675. Tegh Bahadur’s sacrifice is noted by his son and his successor, Guru Gobind Singh in *Bachittar natak*:

‘Without a murmur he gave up his life for the sake of holy men. For the sake of *dharma* he gave up his head... Guru Tegh Bahadur did what none else could do. He defied the rulers of Delhi to the point of sacrificing his life.

This principle of resistance to tyranny was also implied in Guru Nanak’s denunciation of the discrimination practised by the regime at the time, which was taxing Hindus and their temples. Guru Nanak had earlier shown sympathy for the victims of Babur’s invasion of India and was a witness to the indiscriminate rape of Hindustani, Turkani, Bhattiani and Thakurani women, forcible abductions and a large scale massacre perpetuated by Babur’s troops. Nanak denounced the ravages caused, and was particularly pained to see the innocent and the weak hurt – people who had nothing to do with war and politics:

With the marriage-party of sin, he has come from Kabul and demands charity (*dan*) by force. Honour and morality have hid themselves and falsehood struts in the open. Not the *qazis* or *Brahmans* but *Satan* presides over (social life) the rites of marriage (AG 722-23).

He questioned God for allowing such suffering of the poor masses “If mighty lion falls upon a herd of cows, the master is answerable why did not you feel compassion for suffering and lamentation?” Nanak’s explanation for this historical event is a significant aspect of his theology: the destruction and ravages caused by the invading armies was in his view God’s punishment on the rich for abandoning their social morality.

As a prime example of early 'Red Cross' ideals, the Sikh tradition also narrates the life of Bhai Ghanaiya, a disciple of the tenth guru, who was reputed to have given water to the thirsty and helped the wounded during the battles, without distinction between enemy and Sikh soldiers.

If human rights are interpreted as the rights of the weak for dignity and equality following Sen's work on entitlement rights, then support for such rights is even more firm within the Sikh scriptures. There is a continuous emphasis on the dignity of individuals, especially those considered to be marginal and vulnerable. The poor and weak are entitled to solace and, because thought to be near God, are not to be socially ostracized. Such people are considered to be God's favourites, and in many passages, such as one below, the Sikh gurus persistently identify with the vulnerable and weak.

Says Nanak, I am with the lowly of the lowliest  
I do not emulate the wealthy or mighty  
For God dwells among the low and the unsung  
Where the poor are valued  
There is the blessing of God. (AG, p.15)

An emphasis on equality and an awareness of exploitation by others are fundamental aspects of Sikh theology. According to Madanjit Kaur (1998), "Guru Nanak's philosophy of protest against the inequalities of the existing social system and the oppression of the political set up lay the seed of a vital and progressive vision of human rights". As neither caste nor political power can confer real status on any person, the dignity of the poor and vulnerable becomes the yardstick of human worth – this is the contribution of Sikh tradition to a foundation for human rights doctrine. The history of Sikhism illustrates this process; it grew by the influx of low caste Jats, who thereby gained in status. This process, whereby low caste people have embraced Sikhism in order to escape their social position, was an on-going process until the 1940s, transforming the Sikh faith in ways that await further analysis.

In practice, have Sikh regimes respected human rights? And as an extension of human rights theory how does the Sikh tradition view the idea of 'just war'? It has been pointed out by historians that during Ranjit Singh's reign, hanging was rarely used as a punishment and there was no forcible conversion. However, there is no concept of pacifism amongst Sikhs (Singh, G., 2003) and with much of Sikh history replete with violent confrontations with the state authorities, did Sikhs observe any rules while

conducting those battles? During the early eighteenth century hostilities with Mughal and Afghan rulers, when rules of battles lacked ‘constraints’, how did Sikh warriors treat non-combatants, for example, women and children? During the Anglo-Sikh wars of 1846-49, both sides are on record as having perpetuated much cruelty. Whether Sikh warfare was particularly marked by barbarity and cruelty, as certainly exhibited by Sikh soldiers while assisting the English in putting down the rebellion of 1857, is something that needs more research (Naipaul, 1991).

Examining much sacred literature and history, Singh (G, 2003) has tried to deduce the Sikh concept of a ‘just war.’ Sikhs believe in waging war in the defence of righteousness (*Dharam Yudh*). However, such a war must be the last resort – all other means of resolving the conflict must be explored first and the motive for war must not be revenge or enmity<sup>13</sup>. Further, in actual execution of the war, only disciplined soldiers are supposed to participate and they should employ minimum force and not harm civilians. Any annexed territory or seized property must be repatriated. Contrasting these ideas with the Western concept of a just war, Singh observes that “although this seems quite close to western ‘Just War theory’, the crucial difference lies in that for Sikhs a just war must be undertaken regardless of the consequences”. Singh then considers this doctrine in the context of the recent experience of *Dharam Yudh* (from 1981 to 1994), when these rules were generally flayed by Sikh militants, stressing the need to draw lessons regarding martyrdom in Sikh history.

## 4.5 Truth claims and inter-religious dialogue

The Sikh position on the different truth claims made by major world religions and the implications of this for inter-religious dialogue is of special interest. As people of different faiths are interacting in a rapidly globalising world, how does the Sikh religious tradition view other faiths and how does it guide its disciples to treat followers of different faiths?

Mandanjit Kaur (1998b), in her book on *Religious Pluralism and Co-existence*, contends that Sikhism favours dialogue and is relatively free from strictures on other faiths. Sharma, in his study of Sikh philosophy (2007, p. 233), interprets the common Sikh precept that ‘there is neither Hindu nor Musalman’ as indicating that Sikh tradition allows spiritual paths to differ and recognizes that the truth that people seek could well be the same, a matter which has been interpreted by John Hick (1990) in detail. Cole and Sambhi (1998) argue that the gurus considered other faiths’ claims to possess

exclusive truth about God as worthless. This position is supported even more emphatically by Grewal (1969) who, after careful reading of the scriptures, concluded that “the Sikh scriptures reject Hindu, Islam and other Indic religions’ claims both doctrinally as well as their rituals”.

The Sikh tradition’s emphasis on one God common to humanity and its acknowledgement that different paths could lead to the same goal have been rightly interpreted as supportive of a pluralistic theological vision. Moreover, by emphasizing ‘right conduct and truthful living’ over any doctrine, the Sikh tradition itself does not claim to possess an exclusive monopoly over the spiritual domain or God. The practical implication of this stance is the religion’s lack of interest in encouraging conversion. There are no ‘foreign missions’ or camps for conversion organized by Sikhs in any part of the world. Some individuals have inspired conversion (e.g. Yogi Harbahajan Singh, who saw a considerable number of Americans converting to Sikhism) but he is an exception.

However, it must be admitted that historically, Sikhs’ relations with Muslims rulers in particular and Punjab’s Muslims in general were characterized by considerable discord: as noted above, history records battles against Mughal and Afghan rulers during the eighteenth century. Further, as briefly discussed above, the Sikh martyrdom tradition drew sustenance from a portrayal of Mughal and Afghan rulers as aggressors and oppressors. As a result, until 1947 social interaction between Sikhs and Muslims was very limited even while living as next door neighbours in the same village.

*Rahitnamas* prohibit *halal* meat, recommending instead *Jhatka* (instant slaughter), and smoking (a common practice among Punjabi Muslims) was proscribed. Although under Maharajah Ranjit Singh’s rule many Punjabi Muslims held high positions, general prejudice against Muslims persisted, eventually resulting in bloody Muslim-Sikh riots during the partition of Punjab in 1947.

Since 1947, when east Punjab was cleared of its Muslim population except for a small pocket in Malerkotla, the Sikh discourse has been at pains to adopt a ‘correct’ approach towards Muslims by rewriting past prejudices. For example, in the immediate aftermath of the 1984 tragedy, distinct sympathy for Muslims’ position and its realization in Pakistan was expressed, and the Indian state, which became equated with ‘Hindu imperialism’, was blamed (Das, 1995). Since 1984, much bonhomie has been in evidence, bringing Punjabi Muslims and Punjabi Sikhs together on many common platforms, and in literary, academic and cultural meetings. The nuclear build-up by India and

Pakistan is seen as a common concern that threatens the Punjabi population of both countries. Studies have pointed out the potential benefits of increasing trade and tourism between the 'two Punjabs.' Some limited developments, such as easier travel between the two by train and bus, have been welcomed, while a direct road to Nankana Sahib, the birthplace of Guru Nanak, is under consideration. Concern with the common heritage of the Punjabi language, coupled with dissatisfaction with the Indian and Pakistan polities in the two Punjabs, has seen some airing of the idea of forging a common Punjabi nationality. Another noteworthy development consists of some joint academic ventures between Sikh and Muslim scholars across the Punjabi diaspora.

## 5 Education

Sikh theologians often remind listeners that ‘Sikh’ literally means ‘a learner’. Usually this is in the context of stressing the role of Sikh tradition in encouraging knowledge and logic as a means to live a more ‘rationalist’ life. It is stressed how the scriptures denounce rites and rituals based on ignorance and superstition or tales of the supernatural. Thus pouring water towards Ganga, or giving away cows to Brahmins for the souls of dead relatives, worship of snakes, or rites associated with pollution and purification are regarded as futile. Neither the torturing of the body through yogic contortions, nor baths in so-called sacred rivers are recommended; instead there is support for thoughtful debate (*gosati*) in order to seek ‘truth’ and for broadening one’s vision through knowledge of nature and its wonders.<sup>14</sup>

While education is generally considered a positive virtue, there is also a caution against learning merely for the sake of knowledge. In this view, formal education is sheer waste unless it makes human beings more compassionate towards the less fortunate - a true education must always lead to philanthropy (*vidia vichari tan prupkari*). Mere knowledge, it is asserted, adds to arrogance and ego, both of which divert people from the real aim of life (*parh parh gaddi ladiye, ...hor haumai jhakhna jhakh*, AG, p.467).

More practically, how has education as part of the modern developmental process affected the Sikh tradition and its adherents’ sensibilities? Exposure to western education has affected the Sikh tradition in three distinct ways. First, it has posed the challenge of re-interpreting scriptures and associated literature in the face of ‘modernity.’ Earlier Sikh literature in the post-guru period from 1708 to 1900 was largely the product of traditionally educated elite from two Sikh sects of *Nirmalas* and *Udasis*. Attached to historic *gurdwaras*, and managed by *Udasis* or *Nirmalas*, education at such *pathshalas* or *taksals* (traditional religious schools) consisted of scriptural learning through the *Gurmukhi* script, with young males, many of them handicapped or blind, were prepared as preachers (*granthis* or *mahants*) in historic shrines. Some of them wrote exegetes on sacred writings or history. The patronage of historic shrines, which extended to different denominations, by Maharajah Ranjit Singh was noteworthy (Banga, 1978). It was from such traditional religious schools, of which only Bhindran has survived intact, that Sikh luminaries like Bhai Santokh Singh, Tara Singh Narotam, Giani Gian Singh and, in the contemporary period, Joginder Singh (the current Jathedar of Akal Takhat) obtained their training (Mann, 2005). However, the introduction of western style education in the colonial Punjab led to the sharp decline of traditional religious schools.

A second consequence of western education was the formation of a new Sikh identity with sharply defined boundaries. Although the *Khalsa* identity had already emerged as pre-eminent, the newly educated Sikh elite, through a sustained reformist movement (the Singh Sabha), spread the *Khalsa* identity, with the 5Ks representing the normal appearance of Sikhs. Sharply distinguishing the Sikh tradition and practices from the Hinduised version (so-called Sanatan Sikhism, which contains many Hindu rituals and practices) adopted by Udasis at historical shrines, reformers launched a movement to get rid of all such Hindu practices and rituals and successfully forged a distinct identity for the community. They were helped by British oriental writers impressed by the *Khalsa* soldiers during the Anglo-Sikh wars of 1846-49, who saw the potential 'nationality of a sovereign people.' The British administrators of Punjab considered Sikhs to be a 'martial race' and made the 5Ks compulsory for Sikh recruits to the Indian armies. While the reformist movement was able to define precisely 'who is a Sikh' from what was previously a loose category with an ambiguous relationship with the local Hindu tradition, another ethnic characteristic slipped into Sikhs' identity. This was the Punjabi language in the Gurmukhi script in which Sikh sacred scriptures were written. The issue arose when the government sought the introduction of a vernacular language in primary schools. In the 1890s, when an Education Commission invited suggestions to improve the school curriculum, it was the 'language issue' that dominated in Punjab. Punjabi was the most commonly spoken language in a large region of the province, but pundits and sheikhs were able to convince Hindus and Muslims to link their *religious* traditions to language, the former advocating Hindi/Sanskrit and the latter Urdu/Arabic as a suitable medium for literacy. Although leading Sikhs put forward secular arguments for the teaching of Punjabi in government schools, in the face of Hindus and Muslims linking religion and language as part of their communal identity, Sikh leaders were forced into accepting Punjabi as part of Sikh religious identity.

The resulting rivalry between the Hindu and Sikh elites led to an opening of denominational schools. The Arya Samajis of the Hindu community, who had more resources, were the first to open Dayanand Aryan Vedic (DAV) Schools and Colleges. The Singh Sabhas followed by opening Khalsa Schools and a major achievement was to establish the Khalsa College at Amritsar in 1892. In keeping with the Sikh tradition's emphasis on gender equality, there was considerable emphasis on female education and most Khalsa schools were open to girls. However, a pioneering effort to establish a school exclusively for girls at Ferozepore by Takhat Singh, a Singh Sabha member, aroused considerable controversy. In the postcolonial era, the vast expansion in education from primary schools to university level has

fuelled the old concern with Sikh religious education. The pre-colonial rivalry of DAVs versus Khalsas has widened, with new entrants to the debate, some of whom adopt an even more aggressive 'Indian nationalist' policy.<sup>15</sup> The SGPC has encouraged the study of Sikh history and religion, and provides support for two specialist colleges, besides controlling a number of other educational institutions.

The new Sikh elite, concentrated largely in the Khalsa College, Amritsar, faced another challenge: the form of 'oriental writing'.<sup>16</sup> In particular, adverse comments by Ernest Trumpp (d.1885), a German theologian asked by the government to elaborate the Sikh faith for western readers, led to several Sikhs collaborating with another government officer, Mr. Macauliffe (d.1913), who resigned from his post to write a major study of Sikhism which was published by Oxford University Press in 1909. The post-colonial era ushered in even more critical work, including studies of the composition of Guru Granth, the role of Singh Sabha, the martyrdom tradition, etc., leading to considerable controversies regarding the state of 'Sikh Studies', its methodology and future directions.<sup>17</sup> In particular, questions raised by the scholarly works of the New Zealand scholar, W. H. McLeod, have seen several publications in response. The role of foreign scholars generally, as well as those appointed to positions in Sikh studies at some North American universities, has come under close scrutiny, even invoking the traditional authority of the Jathedar of Akal Takhat.

Besides funding education, the emerging Sikh diaspora has sought the 'religious establishment' at Amritsar to state the 'true' Sikh position on women's equality, mixed marriages, environmental pollution, human cloning, inter-religious dialogue and human rights.<sup>18</sup> Since the 1980s, web-based internet facilities have enabled communications among Sikhs across the continents. The Sikh diaspora is emerging as a major player in the economic and social life of Punjab. The new setting of Sikhs in western countries has also made the recognition of turbans worn by Sikh males an international issue, although a majority has opted for more anonymous clean shaven faces in order to escape subtle and not so subtle discrimination.



## 6 'Sikh economics'

This section considers whether the teachings of the Sikh religion have implications for various aspects of economic development. First, analyses of the general relationship between the religious tradition and economic development, including aspects of Sikh history, are discussed. In Section 6.2 the focus is on some of the key underlying concepts: wealth, poverty and debt. Finally, the relevance of Sikhism to some of the adverse impacts of economic development is considered.

### 6.1 Sikhism and economic development

We have already identified attitudes towards riches and calls to refrain from over-indulgence in the Sikh scriptures. According to the development economist Arthur Lewis (1989), a religious system can be regarded as consistent with the requirements of economic development if it lays stress upon material values, work and productivity, thrift and productive investment, honesty in commercial relationships, experimentation and risk-bearing and equality of opportunity. Judging by these criteria, the Sikh religious tradition would seem eminently suitable for economic development. With much of its ethical discourse emphasizing a work ethic, albeit through honest means, and rationality helped through discouraging any beliefs in popular cults or magic and superstition, it seems that the social psychology of Sikh peasants should be geared towards worldly achievements.

Sociologists have long debated Max Weber's thesis on Indian religions. Put in its simplest form, Weber asked 'does religion impede or advance development'? He compared the economic ethic of different creeds in his essay 'The social psychology of world religions' (1915) and concluded that ascetic Protestantism was particularly adapted to the development of capitalism, a thesis he elaborated in his influential title *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). Applying Weberian analysis to India's slow growth, Lewis (1989), Singer (1956) and Bauer (1961), in their bid to identify the cultural and religious factors in economic growth, observed how Hindus 'disdain' manual labour. In their view, this, coupled with Jaini attitudes to animals, could well have held up Indian's economic development. Kapp (1963), a sociologist, also concluded that the 'other-worldliness' of "Hindu culture and Hindu social organization are determining factors in India's slow rate of development".<sup>19</sup> Sikhism has occasionally been labelled the 'Protestant ethic of South Asia'. Unshackled by caste restrictions on occupations, Sikhs could choose (or change) their occupations and livelihoods. With an emphasis on manual labour and a number of elements in its theology that aid individual rationalism, the followers of Sikhism seemed well adapted to economic development.

Elaborating this thesis further, Marian Smith (1948) noted “The characteristic feature of Sikhism is the affirmation in it of the opposites, the synthesis of the worldly and other-worldly, of the temporal and the spiritual.... In Sikhism, effectual religious devotion is fully compatible with ordinary duties of life”.

How does the record of the Sikh peasantry stand up in the light of above remarks? Although there are scattered small scale studies of economic achievement by Sikhs during colonial times, there is none which covers the entire span of their history. However, two recent studies can help us to build elements of ‘Sikh economics’. The first study is by Dass (1988), who examined ideas propagated by the Sikh tradition and analyzed how these could have inspired economic activities by fostering an entrepreneurial spirit among the religion’s followers. He interprets a range of Sikh scriptures for their bearing on economic activities and notes how these might have contributed to Sikhs’ understanding of development and economic life. The second study is by Kaur (U, 1990), who examines the record of Sikhs’ economic achievements starting from the 1960s, a period when the ‘green revolution’ strategy was being promoted by the government of India.

Examining economic ideas contained in the Sikh sacred writings, Dass found many verses directly relating to issues of trade, wealth, capital, commerce, savings and wages, as well as commentaries on various occupations. He found several of such verses were constitutive of a positive attitude towards economic life. Dass draws attention to the often-cited Sikh precepts of honest labour (*kirt karna*) and sharing earnings (*vand chakna*), contrasting them with the general Indian religions’ emphasis on renunciation (*moksa*). The gurus, he noted, “preferred the life of a householder to that of a wandering holy man (*sadhu*)”, reminding men and women to strive for better lives through work. The scriptures endorse no distinction between occupations per se, nor do they restrict mobility or travel. As a result, Sikhs have not refused any occupation as inherently ‘bad’ or ‘polluted’ and have travelled far and wide in search of livelihoods, crossing the seas when such a journey was taboo among a section of the Indian population. Although aware that a multi-cast of factors play a part in moulding people’s attitudes towards economic life, in the case of Sikhs Dass (1988, p.1) asserts that “one important element appears to be their religion” and goes on to observe that “Close examination of the Sikh people reveals that their bent of mind, their physical frame, their religious fervour, their enterprising quality, and their life-style are different from the majority of other Indians”.

While Dass' study is concerned mostly with the scriptural and prescriptive ideas which might have moulded Sikhs' behaviour towards the economic aspects of life, Kaur analyses how such ideas were translated into practice by the faithful. In particular, she explores the role of religion in the economic development of Punjab, where a majority of the Sikh population live and work. Starting with the view of Marshall, a Cambridge economist, that the "two great forming agencies of the world's history have been the religious and the economic" (1949, p.1), Kaur states her hypothesis as:

Sikh religion has imparted to its followers values which have greatly fostered their moral and material progress. It has encouraged worldly success and fulfillment of one's social responsibilities (Kaur, 1990, p. 57).

Kaur tests her hypothesis by undertaking a brief survey of Sikhs' economic history. She starts in the 1880s, when the British administration launched a major agrarian project aiming to convert Punjab's western wastelands into farmlands by diverting river water through digging new canals. Thousands of Sikh peasants were persuaded to colonize the newly irrigated areas. In less than a generation, 'bar colonies' as these lands were popularly known, grew into highly productive farms. At one stage, Punjab's surplus wheat was exported to several countries, including the United States. Malcolm Darling, the British administrator and keen observer of the agrarian scene, noted how Sikh farmers converted the "ugliest and dreariest part of India... [into the] breadbasket of India" and applauded the Sikh farmer "as the backbone of the colonies, as he is of the Punjab" (Darling, 1937).

Kaur then turns to the postcolonial era. She notes how the Sikh peasantry, due to the partition of Punjab, had to abandon highly developed irrigated lands but recovered remarkably from the tragedy in less than a decade. This was an outstanding feat, as farmers were, as a rule, allocated smaller areas than the farms they had left behind (Randhawa, 1974), with the result that several thousands migrated further, to other parts of India, the Terai region in UP (now Uttaranchal Pradesh). The Alwar, Bharatpur and Ganganagar districts of Rajasthan were other main areas of new settlement. Others diversified into the transport business. Offering a comparison, Gosal (1977), a geographer, observed that both within and outside Punjab, Sikhs have shown greater mobility in the pursuit of economic opportunities than their Hindu brethren. In a real sense, the uprooting of 1947, rather than breaking the 'Sikh spirit', energized it (Nair, 1979; Randhawa 1974).

In the 1960s, as the Indian government tried to boost agricultural production through the promotion of new technology and high yielding varieties of wheat and rice, Sikh farmers were at the forefront of implementing this 'green revolution' strategy. In summing up how Sikh farmers' outlook has been largely moulded by the values and virtues of their religious tradition, Kaur finds Sikhs' work ethos as having religious inspiration. Indeed, some commentators have read in Sikhs' work ethic a marked tendency towards 'earning for the heck of it' and have even detected a 'masochist culture' and a strong belief in 'upping the Joneses'. Although Punjab still remains a predominantly agrarian economy, Sikhs' presence in its small scale industrial and services sector is also noteworthy, although there are no studies of this aspect.

## 6.2 Wealth, poverty and debt

On wealth and its accumulation, Nanak condemned "the business that is carried on without truth and a sense of piety" and states that ideally a "true lender, true businessman, true trade vastly fulfils Guru's desire". However, he also recognized that accumulation of wealth always involves exploitation, calling it sin: "Without sins one cannot accumulate wealth, on death, it accompanies not"; "Nor men are satisfied with vast wealth, hence greed must be controlled". The scriptures also contain constant reminders of the ephemeral nature of wealth. The gurus were also acutely aware of economic inequalities and offered explanations largely in terms of excessive greed (AG, v: 182). The Sikh tradition reminds followers that God is the sole owner of 'all the wealth' of the universe and that 'it must be shared.' It is believed to be excessive greed that leads to unequal distribution of wealth. If there were a choice, the scriptures say, the Sikh way must be to avoid indulgence:

If world were to be encrusted with the diamonds and rubies,  
My bed studded with rubies,  
And if there were an alluring damsel  
Her face glistening with jewels tempting me with seductive gestures,  
Forbid it, O Lord, that beholding such temptation,  
Lest I should forget thy name (AG, 14)

Thus blind pursuit of wealth and riches must expect ruin unless rich people pause to reflect and think. The scriptures contain stark reminders of the fate of those who lived a life of indulgence in palaces and amassed wealth at the cost of others:

Where are those sports, those stables and horses, those trumpets and clarions?  
 Where are those sword-belts, those chariots and those scarlet tunics?  
 Where are those mirrors and those handsome faces?  
 They are nowhere to be seen.  
 Where are those houses, mansions and palaces and those seraglios?  
 Where are those soft beds and those beautiful women whose sight banished sleep?  
 Where are those betel and those harems?  
 They have vanished! (AG, 415)

Wealth, it is averred, must be earned through earnest means, not as a result of exploiting the poor. Here, a famous passage from history has become part of Sikh folklore and ethical understanding of earnest living. Nanak in his travels rejected a feast offered by Malik Bhago, a rich man, preferring to take a simple meal with Bhai Lalo, a poor man who had earned his bread with honesty. To illustrate this fully for his followers, it is believed that when Nanak squeezed Bhago's richly fried *puris*, blood dripped from them, while milk flowed from the poor man's earnestly made *chapattis*.

It is fair to suggest that in contemporary Punjab, there are few Sikh businessmen and entrepreneurs of Birla's or Tata's standing. One assumes that this is primarily due to the generational instability of Sikh business families rather than religious strictures on the accumulation of wealth. Among the handful notable businesses owned by Sikhs are a pharmaceutical firm (Ranbaxy), some hotels, and a small slice of the banking and financial sector (Punjab and Sind Bank, Bank of Punjab, although the first was taken over by the government and the second absorbed by the corporate sector). Even in the farming sector where, according to economists, the capitalist mode of production has become fully operational, there are few Sikh capitalists who own or monopolize large parts of agricultural production, marketing or related activities.

With respect to Sikh attitudes towards poverty, it is noteworthy that in a land where begging as a profession has survived all social influences to the contrary, no Sikh is found as a beggar. Observers also noted that, even in the dire circumstances following the partition of Punjab, when over a million Sikhs became refugees, no Sikh was seen begging. Unlike Hindu ascetics, as noted above, poverty is not regarded as a sign of holiness or as essential to spirituality. Instead the emphasis of Sikh teachings is on earning through honest means and sharing wealth with the needy. It is said that the Punjab chief minister, the late Partap Singh Kairon, when returning from a visit to Delhi, found a Sikh

begging, he kicked the beggar saying, 'you are insulting our religion'. The Sikh religious tradition provides spiritual dignity to the poor and exhorts them to improve their lot, while identifying with those who are struggling against the rich.

There is no scriptural injunction against usury. In contrast, it has been part of folklore and administrators' persistent complaints about the Punjab peasantry that it has a long legacy of living beyond its means – borrowing in lean times and consuming with abandon with the harvest in sight (Darling, 1937). During the colonial era, indebtedness among Punjab peasants was a recurrent issue, as frequent reports by British administrators confirm (van den Dungen, 1972). In the 1890s, the issue of a debt-ridden peasantry became so serious that the colonial state passed the Land Alienation Act of 1900, which barred the transfer of land to non-farming classes, thereby penalizing the money-lender urbanite class of *baniyas*.

In the post-independence period, the expansion of banking services into rural areas, providing comparatively cheap credit to farmers, has ensnared many peasants into the debt trap again. More recently, with stagnant or declining agricultural productivity, many peasants have fallen behind with repayments. In the last decade, many farmers have committed suicide. The Punjab government has acknowledged at least 2,116 suicides since 1986, while commentators believe the numbers are just the "tip of an iceberg", as many cases remain unreported (*Tribune*, August 10, 2005; B. P. Singh, forthcoming). Summarizing the results of several studies relating to farmers' suicides, Gill and Lakhwinder Singh (2006) conclude that

Suicides were attributed to a number of reasons, ranging from poverty to crop failure, indebtedness, marital discord and alcoholism, but in our view it [the rise in suicides] was mainly due to the economic crisis that the peasantry, in Punjab, in general, is facing and which has led them to borrow heavily.

It might be argued that many peasants have forgotten the balance between exploitation and conservation so clearly stated by the Sikh tradition in other aspects of social life. Although it is unclear why such an imperative can so easily be forgotten, the clue might be to look for other factors. In this case, a farmer with a small landholding is easily tempted by the state's incentives in the form of cheap finance, while also being forced to use excessive amounts of chemical fertilizers and pesticides (many of them un-regulated and dangerous) to maintain production. This process may take such a

small farmer into the debt trap and is contributing to an economic crisis that many consider is threatening the fabric of contemporary Punjabi social life.

### 6.3 Ecological and social crisis

The evidence from the farming sector certainly suggests that the Sikh tradition has a positive influence. However, there is a downside to it. While the Sikh work ethic has helped in raising agricultural production, the net impact of the 'green revolution' has led to undesirable outcomes. The Punjab countryside is facing a severe environmental crisis: over-exploitation of underground water for irrigation and farm land has brought about an ecological crisis. Besides decreasing productivity, there is soil degradation and the appearance of a variety of environment-related diseases. The indiscriminate use of pesticides and chemical fertilisers has contributed to this ecological disaster (World Bank, 2004; Shiva, 1991). Several Sikh economists, the most eminent of whom is S. S. Johl, have strongly advocated switching to more ecologically sustainable farming practices, including rotation of diversified crops (such as sunflowers and other oil-yielding varieties), organic farming, horticulture and re-forestation.

During the last three decades Punjab has rapidly been integrated into the Indian economy. For all practical purposes, the region resembles a specialized colony geared to the primary production of food grains, with few incentives for diversification or industrialization. The initial gains of Punjab's agrarian economy did not result in balanced development of the countryside and instead have led, as noted above, to an ecological crisis. This raises questions about the Indian government's regional policy and the implications of Indian federalism, but there are as yet with few studies on this topic (See Rao and Singh, 2005).

Here, we can only point out the consequences of Punjab's prosperity since the 1960s turning into shrinking economic opportunities in the new millennium. As contemporary Punjab, with its small and stagnant industrial sector and corruption-fuelled service sector, offers few prospects for its increasing pool of unemployed educated youth, an exodus of young men and women is taking place. Emigration has emerged as the largest expanding industry. As the culture of migration has taken firm root, the means used are anything but fair. To cite one example, among widespread illegal means encouraged by the 'emigration industry' is the 'marriage racket' used by young men and women as a mere 'deal.'

Hundreds of 'convenient' marriages are taking place, with wide implications for social ethics. Effectively human-trafficking, this trade has resulted in several hundred 'abandoned brides' - a social problem calling for urgent legal and social measures.

Punjab's recent development experience raises a further serious question: has the Sikh ethical understanding of 'development' proved adverse in the long run even if it aided economic development in the short term? The answer might be a qualified yes. Insofar as religious values made Sikh peasantry economically active, the ethical discourse has played a positive role. However, Sikh teachings provide little guidance on how to deal with the resulting unforeseen consequences. Currently, attempts are being made to search relevant passages for guidance, for example, on ecological matters. For example, a Sikh economist has argued that the uncontrolled pursuit of wealth without consideration of moral, social, religious and spiritual obligations is the root cause of the present malaise. Arguing that economic activity should not degenerate into greed or lust for power over others, Arora pleads that

Ultimate world peace can be achieved when prosperity comes through a happy combination of religion and economic activity. Socialist economies have failed to bring peace to mankind and have bred corruption and lower standards of living for everybody. The free capitalistic economy, where big fish eats small fish, often leads to various aberrations and depressions, where the poor become poorer and wealth is accumulated in the hands of a select few. It is time to give a trial to voluntarily regulated economic activity dominated by religious ethics and based on universal brotherhood (Harjit K. Arora, [www.Sikhnet.com](http://www.Sikhnet.com) accessed 28/1/2007).

Referring to possible technological solutions, Chahal (2005, p.133) argues that "theologically, genetic engineering cannot be justified from the Sikh perspective", and that the search for improving or perfecting nature through such manipulation is doomed. On a practical plane, only the Namdhari sect, members of which adhere to strict vegetarianism and homespun clothes, are dedicated to conserving the 'mother planet' for all.



## 7 Sikh society and social exclusion

Peculiar to the Indian subcontinent, one of the most notable causes of social differentiation is caste – an indigenous Hindu religious philosophy that justifies a hierarchy (*varna-ashram*) of four social groups. By virtue of one's birth into a particular *varna*, a person belongs to that social group, the particular caste group. The top social strata was occupied by Brahmans, followed by Kshatriya and Vaishya, with the lowest being Sudra, with members' status being pre-determined through previous incarnations. The corresponding occupational and spiritual domain is defined for each social group, with Brahmans mainly engaged in spiritual and religious pursuits, Kshatriya being soldiers and warriors, Vaishya pursuing trade and other professions, while the Sudras, with no claims to spirituality, are assigned menial work.

With the weight of Hindu religious tradition behind this hierarchy, the 'Hindu system' that emerged was a formidable hegemonic order brooking no challenge from those at its receiving end. In practice, the lowest caste of Sudras were considered 'untouchables' and commensurability between castes was spurned through notions of 'purity' and 'pollution', with associated rituals and the sanction of Brahmans, who held authority by virtue of their position and as interpreters of sacred laws derived from the Vedas, *Shastras* and other Hindu texts. Sudras could not worship at temples, indeed, in theory they could not even aspire to emancipation, as their previous *karmas* were so low as to give them this status in perpetuity. Whatever its beneficial impact on the stability of society, the main plank for its justification by apologists for the caste hierarchy, the system of social distinction and stratification into particular social strata based merely upon the incidence of birth has faced continuous challenges, especially by those at the bottom.

### 7.1 Sikhism and caste exclusion

Like many reformist movements within and independent of Hindu religion, Sikhism severely criticized the practice of social exclusion on the basis of caste, thereby offering an alternative. Indeed, this was one of the defining characteristics of Guru Nanak's message, which offered emancipation to all, irrespective of the caste in which they found themselves. In his view, it did not matter what caste one was born into, as in the eyes of God everyone is considered to be the same. Instead, one will be judged through deeds, for which status at birth is irrelevant. In an oft-cited passage, Nanak repudiated the caste hierarchy and its associated notion of pollution:

Worthless is caste and worthless an exalted name  
For all mankind there is but a single refuge (AG, 83)

This is just one of numerous pronouncements on caste stratification in the Sikh scriptures, all of which repudiate caste in social as well as spiritual life. This message was reinforced by third Guru Amar Das who, as already pointed out, built on the concept of spiritual equality through initiating a common kitchen (*langar*) for the congregation (*sangat*), thus promoting commensurability through sharing food together (*pangat*). The fifth guru built the Harmandir with four doors open to all (*updes chaun varna ko sanjha* – preaching to all four castes in common). Guru Arjan, in compiling the Guru Granth, decided to include the writings of Bhagats who were *sudra*, Ravidas, Namdev and Kabir being three most prominent. Finally, the idea of equality was given full institutional legitimacy through the initiation ceremony of *amrit* or '*khande ki pahul*' introduced by the tenth guru – nectar drunk from the same bowl. The doctrine of distinction based upon caste was ultimately buried, along with the notion of 'pollution', by this ceremony of initiation into Sikhism. At the original initiation ceremony in April 1699, several hundred low caste men joining the Sikh religion took *amrit*. All of the first five baptized by the Guru himself belonged to the lower castes, although it is said that some upper caste men refused to drink from the same bowl.

How was this new Sikh religious tradition of inclusion translated into actual practice by its new followers, who were largely drawn from Hindu society with its caste distinctions?

As all the Sikh gurus belonged to the Kashatriya caste of Hindus, the early Sikh constituency was mainly drawn from Khatrias. However, attracted by the egalitarian message of the Sikh gurus, Jats, who belonged to the Sudra caste, were increasingly attracted to the new faith. Such attempts at collective social mobility through religious conversion by low caste people have been a common feature of India's society. After the last guru's death in 1708, the history of Sikhs is largely synonymous with the ascendancy of Jats into the Panth. The Jats, newly converted into Singhs, formed the backbone of the bands fighting against the Afghan invaders as well as the Mughal state. Organized into several bands, they captured different regions within Punjab, each known as the *misl*. Of the twelve such *misls*, ten were held by Jats and the other two by Ramgarhias, another low caste which had joined the Sikh order. The elevated status of Jats was confirmed by Ranjit Singh of Sukerchakia *misl*, who consolidated different *misls* into a united empire and became its sole ruler by capturing the capital, Lahore, in 1799.

The presence of 'Jat tribes' was also noted by English travellers and colonial officers after the annexation of Punjab in 1849. The English administrators were surprised how caste-free Sikhs allowed "foreigners of every description to join their standard, to sit in their company".<sup>20</sup> During the mutiny of 1857 the first regiment Lawrence raised from Punjab was comprised of low caste Chuhras baptized as Mazhabi Sikhs. As a result of the mutiny, the Indian armies were reorganized, with Hindustanis being replaced by the newly discovered 'martial races' of Punjab. Jat Sikhs from central Punjab emerged as the favourite recruits, who were inducted into exclusive Sikh regiments, enhancing their status and making them into the beau ideal of manhood.

The modernization impulses unleashed by colonial rule led to revivalist movements among the three main communities of Punjabis. Faced with the prospect of political representation on the basis of census data, Hindu, Sikh and Muslim leaders tried to consolidate their numbers. The 'untouchable' social groups, who occupied an ambiguous middle ground between Sikhs and Hindus, were especially targeted both by the Singh Sabha and Arya Samaj reformers, who tried to persuade them to enumerate themselves as Sikhs and Hindus respectively. Both offered the way to social mobility via a religious ritual: Singh Sabha through *amrit* while the Aryas offered *shudhi* (a ritual to reclaim higher caste). In 1881, when the first Census was conducted, the data clearly showed how many ex-untouchables from the Hindu fold had declared themselves as Sikhs. The largest groups among untouchables were Chuhras and Chamars, who were reclassified as Mazhabi Sikhs and Ramdasia Sikhs respectively. Both these categories continued to grow until 1941, adding to the Sikh population, despite the fact that an anti-caste social movement was also launched by a section of Chamars in Doaba region.<sup>21</sup> After his return from California, Magoo Ram propagated a doctrine of Ad-Dharam and gained a substantial following in the 1930s and 1940s (Juergensmeyer, 1988). In the 1940s, B. R. Ambekar, a Dalit leader from Gujarat, was so impressed by the Sikh tradition's egalitarian message that he seriously considered recommending all 'untouchables' from the Indian provinces to convert to Sikhism. However, in 1955 he eventually opted for Buddhism, recommending his followers to follow suit.

Despite Sikh rejection of caste, contemporary Sikh society consists of some 30 caste-like social groups, of which Jats form a large majority, almost two-thirds of the total population (Marenco, 1974). The next largest category is Ramgarhia or Rahitia Sikhs, largely drawn from the artisan classes, who

form about one tenth of the total. The ‘Dalit Sikhs’ constitute more than 15 per cent , while the Khatri, formerly the dominant constituent of the community, are about five per cent.

The ‘untouchables’, also classified as Scheduled Castes (SCs) in the Indian constitution and increasingly known as Dalits, a term that has gained currency over all others, form more than a quarter of contemporary Punjab’s population, far above the Indian average of 16 per cent.<sup>22</sup> The majority of Dalits are either working tenants or labourers for peasants, with fewer than five per cent being cultivators, owning a negligible proportion of the farm land (0.4 per cent). Their landlessness is partly attributed to the 1900 Land Alienation Act, whereby the British administrators barred non-agricultural classes from owning farms. This measure was felt to be necessary to stop the usurpation of land by the commercial classes, mostly *baniyas*.

Given Sikh doctrine’s prohibition of caste distinctions, how can caste-type differences and differentials within Sikh society be accounted for? The issue embraces two separate strands. The first concerns the intention of the Gurus regarding caste, as seen through the scriptures. McLeod (1984, 2007) acknowledges the gurus’ genuine crusade against Brahmanism, but suggests that their strictures against caste were intended to undermine the philosophy and legitimacy of caste rather than being a radical agenda for caste abolition. McLeod studies the word *varan* or *baran* found in the Guru Granth and interprets it as broadly signifying the classical four-fold pattern of Hindu society, i.e. Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra, while the word *jati* is used for the endogamous group into which a person is born. McLeod then argues that the Gurus “accepted caste both in terms of *varan* and *jati*, but not as a system of high and low status”. In other words, “they accepted caste in horizontal terms but not in vertical”, as the gurus’ main concern was to “flatten but not demolish the caste system”. McLeod then finds a similar principle endorsed in the *rahitnamas*. So how was the Sikh ideology of a casteless society born? McLeod attributes this ideology to the Singh Sabha movement during the colonial Punjab, from the 1870s onwards, when a campaign was launched to eradicate the Hindu notion of caste from Sikhism. This campaign found an iconic expression in Kahan Singh Nabha’s publication *Ham Hindu nahin* in 1898. McLeod concludes his analysis as follows (2007, p.112):

The Sikh notion of caste (in theory at least) requires the elimination of the *varan* differences. Note this is not saying that Sikhs reject the *jati* concept, only the *varan*. The *varan* concept remains but it is shorn of all differences of status. Doctrinally, the Sikh faith ...dismisses theories of status or power based on sacred claims; in theory it is against any notion of purity as opposed to pollution. .... As an ideal, the Sikh concept of caste excludes the *varan* theory.

McLeod points out how Sikh practical behaviour falls short of this ideal. In terms of marriage and social mixing of different social groups, a large majority of Sikhs follow *jati* and *gotr* regulations and commensurability restrictions are also observed, although supposedly without damaging adherence to egalitarian principles. What McLeod then states plainly is that social reality is evidence of something which is denied in theory. McLeod's analysis is disputed by several Sikh commentators, who argue that the Sikh social system offers a radical rupture with the Hindu caste system, asserting that Western historians' and social scientists' insistence upon caste as integral to all South Asian societies only underlines their ignorance of Sikh society, which in their view is an exception to the rule (see Singh, Jagjit 1981).

The second strand of debate concerns the practical plight and status of Punjab's 'untouchables' in the light of political developments in the last decade. Taking note of increasing economic and social differentials within the Sikh caste-like groups since the 1960s due to the increasing prosperity ushered in by the green revolution, several contributors have noted the emergence of 'casteism' amongst Sikhs. This is despite the fact that Dalit Sikhs have earned a respectable place within Sikh society, from the arts to the political arena. For example, the SGPC employs Dalit Sikhs routinely and there are twenty elected members. Of the five Jathedars of historic shrines and most senior priests of the Golden Temple, several have been Dalit Sikhs.

Despite these examples, have Sikh ideals of social equality failed to materialize? If so, how has the process of 'Sanskritization' worked in parallel to 'Sikhization' in the case of Sikhs (Juergensmeyer, 1988)?

In a wide-ranging review of Dalits' status in contemporary Sikh society, Puri (2003), an academic at Guru Nanak Dev University in Amritsar, found contradictions in the Sikh rhetoric of equality and widespread discrimination against 'Sikh low castes'. He cites specific cases of tension between Jat Sikhs and Dalits in some Punjab villages and identifies separate Ravidas *gurdwaras* where a picture of Ravidas is kept alongside Guru Granth<sup>23</sup>. He alleges that Jats' political domination through the Akali Dal in Punjab is responsible for blocking land reforms that would have benefited Dalits. He also sees double standards amongst the Sikh leadership, in pleading the case for Sikh Dalits' inclusion in the

‘scheduled groups classification’ offered by the government of India while “pretending that Sikhism is egalitarian” (Puri, 2003, p. 2697).

Ram (2007) also underlines the failure of the Sikh tradition in devising a casteless society, citing cases of Jat Sikh and Dalit confrontation in some Punjab villages. He further argues that many lower social groups have turned to *deras* (new syncretist religious movements headed by saints) as further proof of their disenchantment with Jat-dominated Sikhism. However, in presenting such signs of Dalit ‘rebellion’, Ram and other commentators tend to ignore retrogressive *dera* practices, such as individualized personality worship, mimicry of Sikh practices with a ‘sacred book’ compiled of dubious religious poetry and folklore, and preaching of an incoherent religious theology.

Another sociologist, Jodhka (2002, 2006), who undertook extensive fieldwork among Punjab’s Dalits, has offered a more balanced evaluation. Jodhka notes that Dalit Sikhs, who consider mainstream *gurdwaras* to be dominated by Jat Sikhs, have built separate *gurdwaras* as statements of their autonomy. Jodhka interprets cases of discriminatory practices by the landowning class of Jats against landless Dalits as economic, social or cultural rather than religious in nature. Discrimination has usually taken the form of bonded labour or specific cases of oppression. He points out how gains from the ‘green revolution’ have been uneven, with farmers (Jat Sikhs) generally gaining more in terms of higher productivity, while economic opportunities for landless labourers (Dalits) have not kept pace. Indeed the bargaining power of farm labour was reduced further, due to large scale in-migration of non-Punjabi labour from neighbouring states. Thus there have been widening income differentials between landed farmers, who are mainly Jat Sikhs, and landless labourers, who are usually ‘Dalit Sikhs.’ This widening gap in terms of both resources and expectations has coincided with the new political identity asserted by Dalits elsewhere in India, seen in the rise of a new political party, the Bahujan Samaj Party. Punjab’s Dalit elites may be looking for a political solution rather than religious emancipation as a priority. In such a quest, it is cultural sources for mobilization, based on a real or imagined history of oppression, that become convenient. Thus, when particular cases of oppression occur in Punjab, these usually have both religious and political overtones. Recent local disputes over religious places, alleged oppression, access to land or even inter-caste marriages have turned into contentions of political alliance or manipulation.<sup>24</sup> Thus the issue seems not so much to be a case of the Sikh religious tradition failing to reorder oppressive social relations, as of new developments and potentialities presented by the new Indian regime of a democratic power structure.

## 7.2 Sikhism and gender inequality

Sikh theologians have credited the Sikh religious tradition with a very positive attitude to the gender question. They have pointed out how the scriptural literature lauds women as equal to men in the spiritual sphere. With this scriptural backing, practical steps were taken to invite women to participate in public life. In both congregations (*sangat*) and community kitchens (*langar*) women were invited to play a role – serving one and all just as expected of men. The *gurdwara* was open to them just as it was for men and they could take part in its upkeep and management. Amar Das, the third guru, advocated marriage based on equality; stressing fidelity, he condemned *pardah* (the veil covering women's faces) and female infanticide. He also spoke against the practice of *sati* (immolation of the widow on the pyre of her husband), and encouraged the remarriage of widows. Historians also record twenty-two *manjis* (preaching centres) established by him to collect offerings from followers far and wide followers, who included four women. Today, women are initiated into the faith just as men through the ceremony of *amrit*, they read scriptures both at home and in the *gurdwaras*, they can serve as *granthi* and they can participate in all religious activities outside the home including the management of religious institutions.

Apart from biological differences, women are considered to be equal to men before God and all men or women are to be judged by their deeds, regardless of sex, creed and birth. More significantly, woman's traditional role in Indian society as elucidated in Hindu scriptures was seen to have been radically reversed by Sikhism. A well known couplet of Guru Nanak is often quoted in support of this thesis:

Of woman are we born, of woman conceived, to woman betrothed and wedded?  
 Woman we befriend, by her continues the human race;  
 When woman dies, woman is sought for; it is she who maintains the world order.  
 Why revile her of whom are born the great?

Besides scriptural references, more injunctive proclamations against denigrating women or subordinating them as inferior human beings are found in *rahitnamas*; one such injunction forbids female infanticide, another cautions against the custom of *sati*, *pardah* is discouraged, and another commands a social boycott of those indulging in female infanticide (*Kurhi-mar nal na varto*). Besides scriptural and injunctive literature, it is contended that Sikh history shows that some women played prominent roles. For example, the highest religious body, the SGPC, was at one point headed by a woman.



In contrast to this rather celebratory discourse advanced by Sikh theologians, Jakobsh (2003), a Canadian scholar, offers a far more critical assessment of the position of Sikh women through history. While not discounting that the Sikh religious tradition did make a clear break from Islamic and Hindu traditions, she contends that much of celebratory literature produced by Sikh theologians fails to recognize the empirical reality of the subordinate role Sikh women have continued to play throughout the history of the religion, and which continues today. Starting from the position that “historical questions regarding women within the Khalsa order have either been ignored or historians simply have furthered the ‘highly biased’ outlook of the Singh Sabha reformers” (2003, p.235), Jakobsh characterizes the guru period as one when a patriarchal value system was already in place. By the end of seventeenth century; this system had been transformed into an order that gave “religious, symbolic, and ritual sanctioning to a specific gender hierarchy within the Sikh society”. The so-called heroic age of the eighteenth century, when Sikh men sought martyrdom in defence of their faith was accompanied by a primary focus on male Sikh identity, while women were relegated to a secondary position and, according to Jakobsh, a “‘theology of difference’ based on gender was ... firmly in place” (p.238). The British rule in Punjab, she suggests, accentuated such gender-based differences, due to the well-defined conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity permeating the thinking of the British Raj, with the result that the hyper-masculine ethos prevalent since the formation of the “soldier-saint” ideal was elevated to the, “beau ideal of the people”. It was left to certain sects within the Sikh tradition, such as Namdharis, Udasis, Nirankaris and Nirmalas, to provide alternative visions of gender, allowing many women to question their subordinate position.

Thus, in terms of decision-making within the household, access to public services or women’s roles in public life, Sikh women’s lot has been and continues to be no better than that of women in other Indian religious traditions, despite scriptural allurements. As an acid test, it is pointed out how the campaign of some overseas Sikh women who contended the symbolic right to participate in the ritual cleaning of the inner-sanctum of the Golden Temple at midnight was thwarted by the SGPC, while at the same time it confirmed the theory of women’s equality.<sup>25</sup> In the words of an American-born Sikh girl, who expressed her frustration at the hypocrisy in the Sikh community by asking:

Why haven’t Sikh women risen up a long time ago in protest against such treatment, reciting the words of the gurus? Why did we not endeavor long ago to realize fully the freedom and equality the gurus preached for all human beings, regardless of gender?<sup>26</sup>



In a major effort to explain the discrepancy between the scriptural and practical position of women in Sikh society, Singh (N-K., 1993, 2000, 2005, 2007) has evolved what has been called a neo-orthodox position, arguing how Sikh scriptures have been systematically interpreted from a male viewpoint. Singh (N-K, 1995) instead offers a 're-reading' of the scriptures. Starting with God's description as 'gender-neutral', as originally formulated by Guru Nanak, she shows how much of sacred writings are written through a feminine voice, arguing that the scriptures therefore could very well lay the foundation of Sikh feminist thought. She argues persuasively that in Sikhism God is viewed as feminine, as mother and not just as a male figure or father. She points out how Guru Nanak and subsequent gurus repeatedly depict the relationship between God and human beings as that of man/husband and woman/wife. God is thought to be the husband/beloved of all, while all men and women must act to please Him. Everyone, she argues, can as a bride (*suhagan*) feel the intimacy of a relationship with the husband if they present themselves with humility, endeavour and good deeds. In addition, she contends that much of the Sikh religious tradition remains compromised by Hindu cultural factors which continue to be operative for many Sikhs even today. This, she asserts, is the chief reason why Sikh women's subordinate position is maintained and they are consigned to marginality. Insisting on a revised reading of the Sikh scriptures, Singh sets out an agenda for women to contest the established structures of power as well challenge theological practices in the light of a 'true' interpretation of the scriptures. Mediating in this discussion, Grewal (1993) places Guru Nanak's thought as a "radical idea in Indian history", but regards his teaching as still falling within the existing patriarchal framework:

Total equality of women with man in the spiritual realm was a radical idea in Indian history, especially because it embraced all women: it was not confined to female *bhikhus* or *bhaktas*. Guru Nanak's symbolic attack on discrimination against women due to psychological differences carried the idea of equality a long step forward. If he does not carry it into the home, he does not say anything which can be used to support inequality of any kind. However, much of the space he creates for women is created within the patriarchal framework.

A third explanation for the continued subordination of women takes account of structural factors and the socio-cultural milieu of the contemporary Sikh society in which women operate. Even within the existing social milieu, it is argued, there is great scope for reproduction of the culture by Sikh women. This is argued, for example, by Bhachu (1991), who, although writing mainly of diaspora Sikh women, considers her proposition to be equally applicable to Punjabi Sikhs' environment. She argues that Sikh women are active agents of cultural reproduction. However, they tend to be portrayed as mere passive

recipients or victims, whereas in her view this underplays their engagement not only in shaping their identities but also their roles as “cultural entrepreneurs” and spheres of “self-determination”.

Such neo-feminist Sikh discourse, which has emerged only during the last ten years, tries to combine a normative critique of theological teaching and societal practices with the discourse and language of gender discrimination. This has posed an unsettling threat to the established authorities within Sikhism, while creating a new space for Sikh feminists disenchanted by the conventional radicalism of Western feminist thought. This new discourse potentially provides a “critical agenda within the discourse of Sikhism for women to contest established structures of power” (Singh and Tatla, 2006, p 181). Such a debate marks a departure from the dichotomy between traditional versus radical interpretations, as it poses a threat to established theological discourse on the one hand while trying to find a new space for Sikh feminists disenchanted with western feminist thought (Kanwaljit Kaur, 1992; Prabhjot Kaur, 1997).

While the theoretical discussion continues to use the religious tradition as a cultural resource, the focus of the debate is shifting to popular culture and its effect on Punjabi women. In the opinion of Basarke, Sikh women need to apprehend the distinction between the cultural ethos and their religious tradition, otherwise “how can women expect equality when the Sikh community seems unable to distinguish between religious tenets and culture imposed by the majority community which engulfs them?” (Basarke, 1996). It is thought that much of the Sikh cultural ethos has accepted ideas, roles and practices from Hindu culture. What is meant here is that in practice Sikhs women’s rights are governed by the more regressive legal framework of the Hindu social system. Thus it is argued that property inheritance laws, as also laws governing divorce and annulment of marriage, have been framed without fully taking account of the Sikh tradition.

While considering the issue of gender inequality, it is pertinent to note the influence of the cultural values of Punjabi society. Some Punjabi parents, especially from the upper classes consider a daughter a liability, as her marriage entails a considerable dowry and wife-givers have a low status. For such cultural reasons, neglect of female children and in some cases female infanticide became a common practice almost a century ago. It was shortly after the acquisition of the trans-Sutlej territories that John Lawrence, the commissioner of the Jullundur Doab, found “not even a single girl among

2000 Bedi families” (cited in Panigrahi, 1972, p 25). This priestly clan of Nanak’s lineage was at the time well-known as girl-killers (*kurhi-mars*). Other officers of the crown corroborated evidence of female infanticide until an Act to suppress it was passed in 1870 by the Viceroy’s Council. Indeed, such was the wide acceptance of female infanticide in Punjab that in 1857 Browne repeated popular reports about newly-born female children, who were starved to death by being denied their mother’s milk, given a small dose of opium or asphyxiated with cotton pushed into their nostrils and left to die, with a ritual incantation:

Gurh khayin puni katin, Aap na aain, bhai nu ghattin  
(Eat sweets, spin the thread; don’t come again, send your brother)

There has been a vigorous debate regarding the imperial attitude towards female infanticide and how the scarcity of girls in Punjab affected the province’s rural and urban society (Panigrahi, 1972; Malhotra, 2000; Oldenburg, 2003; Snehi, 2003; Miller, 1997). The first census in 1881 proved colonial administrators’ worst fears right, as the figures showed just 847 females per 1000 males. In the Punjab states, this ratio was even lower at 828 females per 1000. The next census in 1891 showed a marginal improvement, at 854 per 1000, while for the Punjab States it was 834, still a dismal figure. In the post-independence period, Punjab continues to trail behind other Indian states. The 2001 census found just 793 girls per 1000 boys, the lowest among the Indian provinces. The ratio of girls per 1000 boys in the age group of 0-6 years is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Sex imbalance in Punjab**  
*(Number of girls to 1000 boys in the age group of 0-6 years)*

Year	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001
Numbers	894	899	908	875	793

Since the 1980s, the figures suggest that another factor or rather facility has assisted in killing girl children – the increasing availability of ultrasound scanning as part of the new technology of abortion, has led to an increase in ‘foeticide’. In contrast to former times, when infanticide was largely confined to richer sections of society, the new technique has ‘democratized’ the practice to include the peasantry, with only the poor and God-fearing families remaining immune from the menace of such ‘modernity’.

Although in the Prenatal Diagnostic Act the government has banned the sex-determination test, non-stringent implementation of the legislation has meant that the test is widely available and used. Alarmed by the sex imbalance among Sikhs, the Jathedar of Akal Takhat in 2001 issued a dictum against female foeticide.<sup>27</sup> The religious tradition firmly underlines that the moment of conception marks the rebirth of a fully developed person who has lived through many previous lives and further, that every human being is born with a purpose as, according to scriptures, “only in this birth, by devotion to the Lord and service to humanity” can salvation be achieved. Abortion or infanticide sends the soul back into the *karmic* cycle of rebirth. Hence such a premature termination of pregnancy or infanticide is unjustified. It is not known how far the legal ban and religious injunction has stirred Sikh mothers’ consciences. Indeed a social scientist has argued that the contradictory behaviour revealed in female infanticide is viewed by many Sikhs with a clear conscience because, with two or three children as the norm, the economic stability and social status of families can be maintained (Sorta-Bilajac 2004).

The prejudice against girls emerges again when they reach puberty and again on marriage. One hears occasionally of ‘honour killing’ of wayward daughters. In addition cases of ‘bride burning’, in which dowry and the dissatisfaction of in-laws have been cited as the main reasons for the killing of young brides. The Government passed the Prohibition of Dowry Act in 1985, but it has not made any discernible impact.

Finally, the question of differences in sexual orientation is generating much debate through Sikh websites, especially through the voices of young Sikh gay students at universities in western countries. For example, gay Sikhs have pleaded for due recognition of their ‘difference’ as an issue of equality and call upon the egalitarian principles embedded in the Sikh tradition, while also noting that Sikh rulers were amused by male concubines. Although Sikh rural society is generally thought of as hyper-masculine, with the Sikh male as an icon of ‘manliness,’ such representations mask serious ambiguity about homosexuality and bisexuality which are prevalent and widely tolerated. With the modernization process affecting rural Sikh society, such issues are surfacing and inviting the attention of the religious authorities. For example, a case of two girls deciding to live in partnership gave rise to widespread comment during 2007. Followed by a Canadian Sikh Member of Parliament’s support for the recognition of gay marriages, the Sikh authorities in Amritsar denounced such marriages as originating from ‘sick minds’ and urged that they must be ‘stopped’.<sup>28</sup>

Although the numerical strength of the lesbian, gay and bisexual lobby remains small, the questions they have raised pose new kinds of issues for which Sikh theology has yet to find suitable answers. So far the answers and injunctions that have emerged invoke tradition and culture rather than scriptural authority.

## 8 Sikh faith-based organizations (FBOs)

Finally, we need to see whether the Sikh tradition and its ethical imperatives have inspired faith-based organizations. First and foremost is the *gurdwara*, as the most distinctive faith-based organization. A *gurdwara* should be seen not merely as a place of worship but as a network for the distribution of social charity. Much individual philanthropy is distributed in the form of free meals for the needy, dispensing of clothes and other items, first aid for patients, a contact point for the resolution of personal economic and social problems and a natural habitat for the orphan and disabled. Large historic *gurdwaras* have traditionally supported several kinds of philanthropic projects, such as supporting needy families from their funds, leasing out their land to deserving families, reservation of funds for education and religious learning, and support for the disabled and orphans. There are sometimes regular schools, hospitals, libraries and other institutions attached to major historic shrines.

Besides *gurdwaras*, a variety of voluntary organizations that carry out particular philanthropic activities have been inspired by the Sikh religious tradition. The prime motive for forming such associations is the organizers' religious sensibility and their desire to fulfil their sense of obligation to others. The activities undertaken by such FBOs include helping vulnerable persons through the provision of resources and information, providing medical aid to the sick, caring for the disabled and destitute, and widening educational opportunities for gifted but poor pupils. Although some such institutions, especially earlier ones, restricted themselves to helping members of the religious community, a more recent trend is towards institutions being open to all, thus contributing to the public good in the broadest sense. An interesting and common feature of many such associations is the way they have drawn upon resources of the global Sikh diaspora. A small selection of such organizations and their activities are described below.

### 8.1 Chief Khalsa Diwan (CKD)

CKD is an example of an early charitable institution inspired by the Sikh religious tradition. Established in 1902, mainly by leading urbanite Sikhs in Amritsar, its primary aim was to establish such 'modern' institutions as were considered necessary to facilitate the development of the Sikh community. Here development meant mainly setting up educational institutions, in view of the colonial state's demand for educated personnel from the indigenous population. The CKD had to compete with the Arya Samaj, members who were well-entrenched in urban centres. In particular, they were influential in

Lahore, where a commercial bank had been founded and primary and high schools, including a college, established. One of the major accomplishments of CKD was a biannual education conference, as a platform to discuss the Sikh community's future prospects.

The CKD opened a chain of schools in the first two decades of the twentieth century. It also assisted similar initiatives in villages by encouraging overseas Sikhs to provide resources. For the Sikh diaspora, CKD acted as a trustworthy intermediary for the transfer of funds for educational and other charitable causes. As the colonial era closed in 1947, the number of Khalsa schools had increased to 347. The CKD established a house for orphans: the Khalsa Orphanage at Amritsar. It was also instrumental in establishing the Punjab and Sind Bank as a counterpart to Punjab National Bank set up in 1895, which was mainly an Arya Samaji initiative under the patronage of Dyal Singh Majithia.<sup>29</sup> Through its educational institutions including the Khalsa College, Amritsar, the CKD thus played a crucial role in creating educated Sikh elite during the colonial era. In addition its educational conferences since 1906 have served as major venues for discussion of the community's developmental agenda.

## 8.2 Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC)

Formed after a long struggle involving large-scale mobilization against the priestly class (*mahants*), who were mismanaging the historic shrines and exploiting the associated large estates for selfish uses, the colonial government agreed to hand over all the historic shrines to an elected body of Sikhs. Under the Gurdwara Act of 1925, historic shrines were transferred to the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC). (Singh, Kashmir, 1989). Popularly known as the Sikh parliament, the SGPC has played a highly significant role in shaping the community's religious institutions while also serving as a training ground for budding politicians. Working with pilgrims' donations offered at historic shrines, over half of which are given at the Golden Temple alone, the SGPC has gradually expanded into a large bureaucratic body employing several thousand men and women responsible not only for the upkeep of historic shrines but also for its numerous educational institutions, charitable hospitals and a large printing press for sacred literature. In order to enable poor and needy Sikh pupils to obtain educational qualifications, it also provides several scholarships.

The network of schools and colleges assisted or funded by the SGPC, which includes three engineering colleges and a medical college, has increased. As part of the third centenary celebrations of Guru Granth Sahib, a private university is planned by the SGPC at Fatehgarh, with faculties of theology and philosophy alongside departments of engineering, information technology and management.

The SGPC is, therefore, the single largest FBO amongst the Sikhs. Its multifarious activities are sometimes termed a state within a state. Under the colonial state it was closely watched but its work was more or less free from government interference. During the post-1947 period, however, it has seen frequent intervention by the Indian government through changes in its statutes, treating its claim to jurisdiction over the historic shrines as a political matter and the use of state patronage as both a carrot and stick policy. Its power to appoint the Jathedar for the Akal Takhat has become highly politicized, as seen through frequent dismissals of Jathedars and raging wrangles between holders of the office and Akali politicians or the President of the SGPC. Several controversial judgements and injunctions issued by successive Jathedars, obviously under political pressure, have almost destroyed their former impeccable standing among the Sikh public. As a result, not only has the SGPC's functioning been questioned for the first time, but there have also been serious allegations of malpractice. The close relationship of the SGPC with the Akali Dal has led not only to misuse of its income, but more seriously to a loss of trust in its integrity. In 2007, the newly formed Akali-BJP government privileged SGPC members to travel in cars accompanied by security guards, and accorded it the exclusive right to publish the Guru Granth, while its earlier decision to declare Sikhs a minority in Punjab was challenged in court and awaits judicial decision.

These observations illustrate how faith-based organizations can be subject to political control and intervention; indeed the larger their remit of work, the more likely it seems that they will be manipulated by the state. As a uniquely structured FBO, the SGPC's working environment remains under intense gaze by the State government, internally by the Akali Dal and externally by the Government of India, reminding us how major FBOs, especially those established by minority communities, need to negotiate a cautious balance to achieve their declared aims in India's secular polity.



### 8.3 Kali Vein Environment Project

The Kali Vein Environment Project is an example of a time-bound FBO geared to a specific task. It has been relatively successful. Kali Vein is a tributary of the Beas River, which runs southwards from Dhanoa village in Hoshiarpur district to Sultanpur Lodhi in Kapurthala. Passing through some 46 villages and seven towns over a one hundred kilometres stretch, this canal served the local farming community while sustaining a variety of aquatic life. With the passage of time, the canal had become clogged up and turned into a seeping barrage of water hyacinth plants which blocked the water flow. Dumping of chemical effluents from nearby towns posed a health hazard for the villages and towns along its banks. The tributary is associated with the founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, who, according to the traditional account, took a bath in it at Sultanpur Lodhi, from which he emerged to proclaim his new message. In 2000, Balbir Singh of Seechewal, a Sikh saint, realising the potential for mobilization of funds due to its sacred status, set out to clean up the tributary. He mobilized several hundred local people and, after several rounds of volunteer work, the project is nearly complete, with fresh water flowing from the Beas River at Mukerian. India's President, during a visit to the site in 2006, described it as a "proud achievement of environmental regeneration". To cap it all, Harjinder Singh and Hira Singh Bodlan, two British Sikhs, have donated three boats for recreational navigation for visitors to Guru Nanak's memorial place.

### 8.4 Other faith-based developmental projects

Amritsar city, the most sacred centre of Sikhism, has naturally attracted most of the patronage and philanthropic aid from followers. A tour around the sacred pool of the Golden Temple, where there are numerous inscriptions recording donations, confirms this attachment. In addition, several institutions inspired by similar considerations have been established in the city. Among them, two are worth mentioning, as they combine humanitarian aid with developmental concerns. The first is Khalsa Orphanage, which is the earliest charity established by members of the Chief Khalsa Diwan, in 1906. Prompted by an unattended toddler at an educational conference, a small home was established, with patronage from a number of prominent Sikhs. Further funds were mobilized by sending special emissaries to Malaysia and Hong Kong – two major regions of Sikh settlement in the first decades of twentieth century. Later, more facilities were added with additional buildings, and several blind and disabled children were admitted. Provision was made for their training as technicians and applied trades people, while some were instructed as religious preachers who would then find employment

elsewhere. The institution is known for its discipline, training facilities and caring administrators and continues to draw on the goodwill of patrons from Punjab and abroad.

The second noteworthy institution in Amritsar is Pingalwara, a home for the destitute and dying. This has been compared with Mother Teresa's mission house in Calcutta, if only in terms of the sheer dedication of its founder, Bhagat Pura Singh, since his modest beginnings in 1947 as a refugee from Lahore (Singh and Sekhon, 2001). Bhagat Pura Singh crossed the newly demarcated border carrying a severely disabled man, Piara. The centre he founded has now grown into a large institution catering to over a thousand disabled, destitute and dying patients, with a well-equipped dispensary backed by medical and other staff. It has opened branches in three other towns. Funding is raised from volunteers, collections at bus stops and substantial contributions from regular donors both in India and abroad. In recent years, Canadian Sikhs have emerged as the largest donors. The centre also runs a printing press that publishes pamphlets written by its founder on many subjects, ranging from Sikh religious discourse to issues of the environment, pollution and the ecological crisis.

Another fine example of Sikh ethics working through an inspired individual is Budh Singh of Dhahan village, who migrated to Canada in the 1960s. After earning considerable wealth in British Columbia, he felt called to *seva* and returned to Punjab in 1972. In the following thirty years of dedicated work, he established a 300-bed hospital, a Secondary School and a Nursing Training College, and plans are in hand for a medical college. The project has involved local people, who offer volunteer work for constructing the buildings besides donating land and funds. Budh Singh has also utilized his connections abroad, raising funds from Punjabis all over the world. He has ensured transparency and accountability by listing all small and large donors at home and abroad in a regular magazine. Although inspired mainly by the Sikh tradition, as is common practice, facilities at the hospital and other institutions at Dhahan-Kaleran are open to all irrespective of creed, caste or gender.

Among other Sikh Diaspora funded projects in Punjab is Fateh, a charity organization based in Chandigarh, which was established by like-minded American Sikhs concerned with Punjab's deteriorating ecology and environment. Coming to work for six months, several American Sikh students have acted as volunteers carrying out short term projects, including serving in a drug de-addiction centre, publicizing the need for renewable energy sources, and raising awareness about pollution and environmental decay.

Notice might also be taken of Sikh contributions to relief following recent natural disasters in South Asia, when several Sikh saints responded to the needs of people in distress. Thus the tsunami tragedy, Kashmir earthquake, Orissa floods and Gujarat riots saw many kinds of philanthropic assistance being provided from Punjab.

## 9 Conclusion

This short review shows how the Sikh religious tradition has inculcated certain kinds of values; attitudes and inclinations among its followers, many of which have a bearing upon economic activities. It has been seen that Sikhs' understanding of 'development' has been facilitated by ethical values derived from the religious tradition, which provide them with a generally rationalistic, this-worldly and individualistic outlook. As a result, Sikhs have competed with each other and others to improve their own lot and the situation of their families, as well as contributing in a characteristic way to various collective ventures and welfare activities inspired by the Sikh religious tradition of *vand chhckna* (sharing) and *seva* (service).

Understanding development as an individual enterprise, seeing one's well-being as related to one's own endeavours, the religion's adherents have utilized their skills, abilities and resources through a strong work ethic that shuns begging and includes a 'here and now' attitude and an enthusiasm for all things economic and material, based on an expectation of 'whatever you sow, so shall you reap'.

It would be fair to conclude that this this-worldly approach has contributed to the economic development of Punjab, where the pace of development has generally been ahead of other Indian regions, during both the colonial and postcolonial periods. Imbued with a competitive spirit, the Sikh peasantry made a success out of the 'green revolution' strategy adopted by the government of India in the 1960s. However, by the 1990s, the green revolution had exhausted its potential, with Sikh farmers having reached the limits of production of wheat and rice; and over-exploitation of pesticides, fertilisers and underground water, especially for the rice crop. Trapped by governmental incentives, the Punjab countryside today is a scene of ecological crisis, with the water table dropping fast and the productivity of both rice and wheat cultivation falling while mechanised agriculture is unable to absorb a large pool of educated Sikh youngsters.

On some of the wider issues arising from developmental concerns, it can be suggested that the record of the Sikh tradition's influence on its followers seems to be mixed. The case of gender equality is a prime example of this, with the religious tradition advocating equality, while the inertia of cultural factors prohibits women from participating equally in public life. Similarly, those for whom caste has been a debilitating factor in their personal lives and a source of stigma for social groups have found much solace in the Sikh tradition's emphasis on social equality and equal entitlement to a spiritual life

and religious institutions. The lower social castes of Hindu background from Punjab have found enhanced social position through conversion to Sikhism. However, the large scale historical conversion of Jats, an erstwhile Sudra social group of Hindus, to Sikhism during the guru period meant that their status was elevated, as the predominant component of the existing Sikh community. Because Jats are also the landowning class in Punjab's countryside, they have tended to dominate all other Sikhs, who are mostly landless or dependent on landowners. Thus Sikhism as a basis for a Sikh society without caste distinctions has different meanings for different economic classes, Jats being politically, socially and economically favoured and other groups remaining disadvantaged.

A study of Sikh history, along with its ethical discourse, also facilitates our understanding of the characteristic mode of political organization and advocacy undertaken by its adherents. While the Sikh religious tradition has equipped its adherents to expect certain norms of governance, it has also been the main inspiration in forming a characteristic mode of organization and mobilization. Sharing core religious values which emphasize resistance to unjust rule, Sikhs pursued political freedom from persecution immediately after the Guru Period. That they established Punjab as a sovereign country under Sikh rule has become part of their ethno-cultural identity. As the colonial rule ushered in modernization through improved communication, development of the print media and western style education, the widening of Sikh consciousness saw their claim widen from that of an ethnic community towards ethno-nationalism; in a world of nation-states to seek community's status as a state-less 'nationality'. As a minority among Hindus and Muslims of the Indian subcontinent, Sikhs have continued to be concerned about maintaining a clear identity based on external visible traits, and have relied upon a characteristic form of mobilization using religion as the main mobilizing factor and the Golden Temple as the main centre of mobilization.

As globalization brings the world even closer and throws up new issues and challenges, as a first step Sikhs will continue to seek answers from their religious tradition – the Sikh scriptures, the history of the community, and the institutions which have come into being. Its adherents will have to resolve clear contradictions between two poles of Sikh ethical discourse; radical individualism, which has become part of the Jat Sikh culture, and theological collectivism, which emphasizes an inclusive vision for Sikh society. Whatever the result of any attempts at such a resolution, it can be confidently said that much of Sikhs' contemporary social and political life continues to be defined with reference to

their religious tradition. Not only the life cycle of birth, marriage and death, but all important events in individuals' lives (economic, cultural, and political) are negotiated through reference to the religious tradition. This review has provided a rough guide to the way the religious tradition is likely to influence Sikh responses to development issues, even though some of the answers provided by the religious tradition for modern developmental problems may be inadequate or indeed may not be available from the scriptures and religious tradition.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Sikhism is not a proselytizing religion but some Americans have adopted Sikhism under the influence of Yogi Harbhajan Singh.
- <sup>2</sup> The term *Sant* is derived from the Sanskrit. Its root meaning is 'one who knows the truth' or 'one who has experienced ultimate reality'. It can be loosely translated as 'saint', but also has overlapping usages: truth, real, reality, honest, right.
- <sup>3</sup> 5Ks consist of kachehra (underwear), kara (steel bangle), kes (unshorn hair), kangha (comb for hair) and kirpan (sabre). Men's names were to add Singh (lion), and women Kaur (princess).
- <sup>4</sup> Adi Granth, or Sri Guru Granth Sahib to give its full title, is regarded as the most sacred book. It was composed in 1604 by the fifth Sikh guru, Arjan. It contains the compositions of six gurus and several bhagats, including Kabir, Namdev and Farid. It is available in a standard format of 1430 pages. The first numeral indicates author i.e. this composition is by the first guru, Nanak; the second figure indicates the page. Among its English translations see complete text in Singh, Manmohan (1962-9) (tr), Sri Guru Granth Sahib, 8 vols, Amritsar: SGPC. Selections of Guru Granth Sahib are also available, see Singh, Nikky Gunninder Kaur (1995) *The Name of my Beloved*. San Francisco: HarperCollins. Singh, Tirlochan; Singh, Jodh; Singh, Kapur; Singh, Harkishen and Singh, Khushwant (1960) (tr) *The Sacred Writings of the Sikhs*. London: Allen & Unwin. Trumpp, Ernest (1989) *The Adi Granth*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal (reprint). McLeod, W. H. (1984) *Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. Macauliffe, M. A. *The Sikh Religion*. New Delhi: S. Chand and Co. (reprint, 1963, first published in 1909 by Oxford University Press)
- <sup>5</sup> Singh, Jodh (1998), *Varan Bhai Gurdas Text, Transliteration and Translation, Vols 1 and 2*, Patiala and New Delhi: Vision and Venture.
- <sup>6</sup> Singh, Jodh and Singh, Dharam (1999) *Sri Dasam Granth Sahib: Text and Translation. Vols 1 and 2*. Patiala: Heritage Publications. Jaggi, Ratan Singh and Jagii, Gursharan Kaur (2007) *Sri Dasam Granth Sahib*, Delhi: Gobind Sadan, 2 vols. Selections are available in; Loehlin, C. H. (1971) *The Granth of Guru Gobind Singh and the Khalsa Brotherhood*. Lucknow: Lucknow Publishing House.
- <sup>7</sup> Singh, Fauza (Ed) (1976) *Hukamamas of Shri Guru Tegh Bahadur*. Patiala: Punjabi University Press. Singh, Ganda (Ed) (1967) *Hukamnamey*. Patiala: Punjabi University Press. Singh, Rup (2003) (Ed) *Hukamname, adesh, sandesh: Sri Akal Takhat Sahib*. Amritsar: Singh Brothers. Also see Kaura, Balbir Singh (2003) *Beimaan rajniti ch phasiya Akal Takhat*. Jalandhar: Panth Khalsa Parkashan
- <sup>8</sup> SGPC (Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee) 1953 *Sikh Rahit Maryada*. Amritsar: SGPC. McLeod, W. H. (1985) *The Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama*. Dunedin: University of Otago Press. McLeod, W.H. (2003) *Sikhs of the Khalsa: A History of the Khalsa Rahit*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. McLeod, W.H. (2006) *Prem Sumarg: A Sanatan Sikh's Rahit*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. Shamsheer Singh (1967) (Ed) *Senapati's Sri Gur Sobha*. Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee. Singh, Nripinder (1994) *Rahit-namas and aggrandizement of Khalsa tradition*. In Dharam Singh (ed) *Sikhs and Secularism: Essays in Honour of Prof. Harbans Singh*. Delhi: Harman Publishing House, pp. 301-23.
- <sup>9</sup> McLeod, W.H. (1980) *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of Janam-sakhis*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. McLeod, W. H. (1981) *The B40 Janamsakhi*. Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University.
- <sup>10</sup> "No king measures up to the grandeur of the God....worldly kings hold their sway temporarily and indulge in evil deeds" (AG, 856).
- <sup>11</sup> It is recorded that the Akalis found the king guilty in his personal conduct as well as in abolishing the gurmata – an important instrument of Sikhs' collective decision-making process till then. As a result Maharajah Ranjit Singh was summoned to Akal Takhat, Amritsar and given punishment (tankhah), which he accepted as a 'humble Sikh.'

- <sup>12</sup> The de-legitimization process started immediately after June 1984, when two injunctions were issued calling for a social boycott of the Sikh ministers in India's central government: Buta Singh, the Home Minister, and Zail Singh, the President of India. Accused as collaborators in sending armed forces into the Golden Temple, they were later exonerated, with a negotiated apology. Since then, other orders have run into controversy; among them, an injunction against the use of chairs in the dining halls of gurdwaras abroad, and another regarding the newly devised 'Sikh calendar.' The appointment of the Jathedar has become subject of political machinations or expediency. In addition, the prestige and sanctity accorded to the Akal Takhat, for which ordinary Sikhs, despite the 1984 tragedy, continue to have high regard (considering its injunctions as binding), has suffered. Rup Singh (2003, see note 4) lists hukamnamas and resolutions adopted at the Akal Takhat and Kaura, Balbir Singh (2003) *Beimaan Rajniti ch Phasiya Akal Takhat, Jalandhar: Panth Khalsa Parkashan* discusses some controversies in detail. A new Punjabi daily Spokesman has campaigned against the right of the Akal Takhat to issue hukamnamas.
- <sup>13</sup> The couplet in Persian written by Guru Gobind Singh is "Chu kar az hama hilat-i-darguzasht, Halal ast burden b' shamshir dast" (When there is no other way of dealing with the situation it is legitimate to take up the sword).
- <sup>14</sup> One of Nanak's compositions is called *sidh gosat* (debate with Nath Jogis), while the tenth guru reminds listeners of the need for knowledge as a basis for rational discussion (*gian ki badhni mano hath lai katrta kutwar vuharai*)
- <sup>15</sup> For instance, in Delhi Public Schools, a chain of newly established schools in major cities across Punjab, the management insists on sari as compulsory dress for women teachers – among them many Sikh women whose 'Punjabi' dress is deemed 'unacceptabl' and who have been 'advised' to wear the 'Indian' dress.
- <sup>16</sup> See Mann (2005). From the late nineteenth century onwards, leading Sikh intellectuals received both western and indigenous education e.g. Kahan Singh Nabha (1861-1938), Shamsheer Singh Ashok (1903-1986), Piara Singh Padam (1921-2001). At Khalsa College, Amritsar, Teja Singh, Jodh Singh (Singh, 1998; Singh, J. and Singh, D. 1999) and Sahib Singh produced commentaries on liturgical texts. In the post-1947 period Khushwant Singh and J. S. Grewal, two noted Sikh historians, were instructed in formal western education, both receiving higher education in Britain.
- <sup>17</sup> For a lucid exposition of the issues involved see Grewal, 1998a. Two major controversies have arisen, the first out of the works of Harjot Oberoi [1994], who published a monograph on diversity within the Panth, while Pashaura Singh was admonished for his research on the compilation of Guru Granth. Professor McLeod whose extensive writings on Sikh history have drawn a mixed reception, was a mentor of both.
- <sup>18</sup> The first Sikh position was largely funded by the Canadian Sikh community at the University of British Columbia in 1988. It was followed by a similar position at the University of Michigan. Individual donors have endowed Sikh chairs at the University of California, Santa Barbara and Hofstra University, New York, while similar funds are available at Irvine, Riverside, and San Jose State University. In particular, Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany has emerged as a leading philanthropist with respect to Sikh education.
- <sup>19</sup> Given the record growth rate of the Indian economy since the 1990s, following the federal government's trade liberalization, a straightforward relation between cultural or religious practices as unambiguously retarding or aiding economic development is difficult to sustain. Indeed, as Arvind Sharma (1980) has argued, in the case of a tradition as complex as the Hindu religion, there might be a positive relationship in spite of apparent contradictions, especially as caste stratification could very well be suitable for sustaining trades and the associated skills of entrepreneurship required for the accumulation of financial and human capital.



- <sup>20</sup> See James Browne (1783) *History of the Origins and Progress of the Sicks*, included in Ganda Singh [ed] (1962) *Early European Accounts of the Sikhs*. Calcutta: Maitra, For example, it was noted by George Forster in his letter to Gregory at Lucknow dated 1783, how the Sikh doctrine “totally overthrows those wonderful Barriers which were constructed and affixed by Brihma [Brahma, sic Manu] for the arrangement of different ranks and professions of His people...”.
- <sup>21</sup> The population of Mazhabi Sikhs and Chuhra Sikhs was 45,834 in 1991, 94,872 in 1891, 30,478 in 1901, 57,522 in 1911, 106,709 in 1921, and 169, 247 in 1931. Gill (2007) discusses the post-1947 census data regarding the number of Sikhs and suspects them of being manipulated.
- <sup>22</sup> For the origin of the word Dalit and its other variations, see Webster (2007). Dalit bandhu was first used by V. R. Shinde in a periodical started in Pune in 1930 and then picked up by Ambedkar. Punjab’s Dalit population stood at 29 per cent in 2001. Punjabi Dalits are comprised of 37 social groups, of which Chuhras and Valmiki/Bhangis form 41 per cent (30 and 11 per cent respectively), Ad Dharmis 16 per cent and Chamars/ Ravidasis 26 per cent, while the remaining 33 groups constitute only 16 per cent of the total Dalit population.
- <sup>23</sup> Ravidas, a leading Bhakat of mediaeval India, was born in a village near Varanasi, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India in 1376 CE. His devotional songs are included in Guru Granth and he has been hailed by Punjab’s Chamars as their Guru, he has considerable following in Maharashtra state also. A movement by low class Punjabi Chamars to demarcate themselves from Jat Sikhs as a Ravidasi community has gained momentum due to a number of factors in Punjab. See more details in Juergensmeyer, 1988.
- <sup>24</sup> See Jodhka (2007), who highlights how the Punjab government headed by Zail Singh in 1975 ordered a ‘quota’ within the Scheduled Castes’ quota as an example of the political manipulation of caste groups.
- <sup>25</sup> The case attracted wide attention as two British Sikh women led the campaign to participate in the ritual which is traditionally open to amritdhari men only. See [www.Sikhwomen.com](http://www.Sikhwomen.com) for details.
- <sup>26</sup> Valerie Kaur, ‘Equality of women in Sikh ideology and practice,’ [www.Sikhwomen.com](http://www.Sikhwomen.com); accessed March 6, 2005. Kaur wrote, “As a Sikh girl born and raised in the United States, I have felt confusion and frustration upon recognizing the hypocrisy in the Sikh community in the subjugation of women. ...I am told that upon my birth, distant relatives sent my parents blessings that sounded more like condolences than congratulations. Apparently they pitied the supposed dowry my family would have to prepare, the inheritance I could never receive and the family name that could never survive by me. One can imagine their joy and relief upon my brother’s birth two years later. Such hypocritical actions bewilder me”.
- <sup>27</sup> *Tribune* April 18, 2001. “Sikh clergy, Takhat bans female foeticide – offenders to be ex-communicated”.
- <sup>28</sup> The Canadian Liberal Party’s decision to move a Same Sex Marriage Bill in the Canadian parliament in 2005 invited the ire of the Akal Takhat Jathedar, who denounced it. The issue was brought to the Jathedar’s attention by some Canadian gurdwaras and societies. He issued an ordinance against the proposal saying: ‘the rising trend of same sex-marriages in Western countries was a matter of concern.’
- <sup>29</sup> Dayal Singh Majithia (1849-98) was a descendant of a Hindu Brahman family from Uttar Pradesh whose father had converted to Sikhism and worked in the Sikh court. After the loss of the Sikh empire, the Majithia clan emerged as influential estate owners due to the large land grants conferred on them by the late Maharajah. Under the influence of Brahmo Samaj, Dyal Singh reverted back to Hinduism. His religious status was the subject of a famous judicial case after his death, when his Sikh wife filed a case contesting his will. Dyal Singh Majithia left a large legacy by establishing a library, a college and an English newspaper, ‘*The Tribune*’ in Lahore (see Tandon, 1988).

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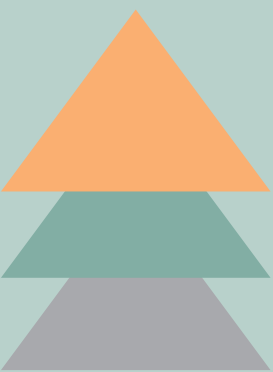
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