

Making Sense of Dalit Sikh History

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Growing out of the powerful, anticaste *sant* tradition of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in northern India, the Sikh variant of Guru Nanak (1469–1539) and his successors evolved into an organized religious movement in the Punjab in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹ It became a rallying cry for the untouchables and members of “lower castes” that they be allowed a respectable social existence. As a young, vibrant religion of the subcontinent, the Sikh religion has witnessed high and low points in its journey of five hundred years. So have the Dalits of Punjab, who joined it in great numbers in the seventeenth century and found dignity and equality within its egalitarian fold. But in the process of its growth and expansion in the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth, its body politic came to be afflicted by casteism and untouchability from which the great gurus had tried to extricate its followers.

Being a religion of the book from within the Indian tradition, Sikhism has received worldwide scholarly attention in the last hundred years. A strong and respectable body of literature about Sikh religion, history, polity, and society has appeared in the last fifty years. Besides academic historians, social scientists, and litterateurs, a large number of activists, professionals, and officers have entered the field and enriched the body of Sikh scholarship. Yet another factor that has contributed to the vast body of literature on various

facets of Punjabi life and Sikh religion is the large Punjabi and Sikh diaspora, especially in the West.²

Whether due to the strong doctrinal position of egalitarian Sikhism or the hegemony of the dominant Jatt Sikh caste, whose members have also been the focus of academic work, the issues of caste and untouchability within Sikhism's history have received scant attention. The remarkable contribution of Dalits to the Sikh tradition has been missing from mainstream Sikh discourse. Naranjan Arifi, a nonprofessional Dalit Sikh historian writing in the Punjabi vernacular, laments the discriminatory attitude of Sikh historians. "If the Sikh historians had honestly and impartially recorded history from the point of view of history writing," he writes, "today's general readers would not have been confused on several issues."³ On the basis of his reading and analysis of the body of historical and hagiographical works on the Sikhs and Sikh gurus, Arifi is convinced that "Sikh history needs to be rewritten from the start without bringing in miracles and magic so as to give a scientific and analytical orientation to history."⁴ While researching the Dalit heroes of the Sikh past and completing the first part of his history of Ranghretas or Mazhabis (untouchables) in 1993, Arifi was made acutely aware of these problems in Sikh history. This chapter first deals with the great attraction of Sikhism for Dalits—that is, its egalitarianism. Second, it covers the forgotten facets of Dalits—their glorious moments, their heroes, and their achievements—within the Sikh tradition. Last, it discusses the emergence of the Hindu caste system, particularly the practice of untouchability, within the Sikh tradition after the mid-eighteenth century and the setbacks and resultant sufferings of Dalit Sikhs. This section also deals with the efforts of Sikh reformers to eradicate the revived untouchability within Sikhism.

Egalitarianism and Caste Hierarchy in Sikhism

The conversion of large numbers of Dalits to Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism amounts to a search for equality and human dignity that had been an anathema to Hinduism. B. R. Ambedkar believed that bourgeois nationalism, republicanism, and traditional Marxism did not provide any satisfactory solution to the problem of caste and untouchability. He therefore turned to religion for sustained relief. Before Ambedkar turned to Buddhism, he had considered the option of embracing Sikhism along with his followers, thereby opening the same path for Dalits of the subcontinent. Being a notable intellectual of twentieth-century India, he carefully weighed the implications of such a move in contrast to turning to other non-Hindu

religions. He was aware of the strong anti-Brahmanical principles and practices of Sikh religion.

Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred text of the Sikhs, consists of the compositions of six of the ten Sikh gurus and contributions of fifteen Sikh bards and fifteen non-Sikh sant poets of various social, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, including the eminent Muslim Sufi, Sheikh Farid. This makes the sacred text an inclusive expression of spirituality in the history of world religions. Spread over 1,450 pages, *Guru Granth Sahib* seeks to build spiritual awareness and searching through a lifelong process of living and learning for the most liberating, empowered condition of human life. One possible way to reach out to the essence, or the core, of the text's message is to see it as a part of the "philosophy of liberation" propounded by the Latin American philosopher Enrique Dussel. He asserts:

Philosophy of liberation is a pedagogical activity stemming from a praxis that roots itself in proximity of teacher-pupil, thinker-people. Although pedagogical, it is a praxis conditioned by political (and erotic) praxis. Nevertheless, as pedagogical, its essence is theoretical and speculative. Theoretical action, the poetic intellectual illuminative activity of the philosopher, sets out to discover and expose (in the exposition and risk of the life of the philosopher), in the presence of an entrenched system, all moments of negation and all exteriority lacking justice. For this reason it is an analectical pedagogy of liberation. That is, it is the magisterium that functions in the name of the poor, the oppressed, the other, the one who like a hostage within the system testifies to the fetishism of its totalization and predicts its death in the liberating action of the dominated.⁵

Following this "pedagogical" device for Sikhism, the very word "Sikh" denotes the relationship between the guru (teacher) and the Sikh (pupil). And the whole Sikh movement was a proximity of thinker-people, an organic relationship between the gurus and their followers. At the pinnacle of Sikh thought, the merger of the two (*aape gur chela*) achieves a radical position within the Indian tradition. J. P. S. Uberoi puts it aptly in the case of the last guru, Gobind Singh (1666–1708): "The tenth guru of the Sikhs . . . became in effect the disciple of his disciples at the new revolutionary moment of reversal, inversion and reflection of the leader/follower relation."⁶ The pedagogy of liberation epitomized in *Guru Granth Sahib* also turns out to be "magisterial"⁷ in the sense that it resists all systems of oppression and injustice, especially perpetrated on the poor. As it speaks in the name of the low, the poor, the

oppressed, the text envelops the philosophy of liberation. It does this so completely that Guru Nanak, coming from the upper caste of Khatris, identifies completely with the lowest of the Indian social order, Dalits:

I am the lowest of the low castes; low, absolutely low;
I am with the lowest in companionship, not with the so-called high.
Blessing of god is where the lowly are cared for.⁸

The Sikh guru embraced untouchables by distinctly aligning himself with them to challenge the Hindu caste system. He destroyed the Hindu hierarchical systems—social as well as political. The subversion of the system reached its climax in the creation of Khalsa by the tenth guru, Gobind Singh, in 1699. The real historical force emerged out of the long gestation of the liberation praxis and philosophy that not only fully integrated the untouchables into the struggle for liberation but also succeeded in abolishing the inhuman practice of untouchability in the Sikh practice. It is another thing that untouchability was to re-enter the body politic of the Sikh religion in the mid-eighteenth century and fully corrupt it in the nineteenth century.

By and large, the literature on Punjab and Sikh studies ignored the aspect of caste prejudice in Sikhism. But as sociological and other empirical studies have highlighted the prevalence of caste and untouchability among Sikhs,⁹ it is no longer possible to avoid or hide this embarrassing question in historical discourses as was the case in the last fifty years. W. H. McLeod, who studied the religion for half a century, recently admitted to such a tendency:

To understand Sikh history and religion adequately, one must first grasp the true nature of Sikh society. It is here that caste becomes significant. To understand Sikh society, one must comprehend the nature of caste as it affects the Panth. An understanding of the future development of the Sikh religion makes an understanding of caste as practised by Sikhs absolutely imperative. Social scientists already recognize this, although some of their books or articles may skate round it or omit all mention completely. For those of us who are historians, it is likewise imperative. Without it our understanding of both the Panth and its religion must inevitably be flawed.¹⁰

By practicing what they preached, the gurus became the exemplars of their message. Guru Nanak felt that the real cause of the misery of the people was the disunity born of caste prejudices. To do away with caste differences and discords, he laid the foundation of *sangat* (congregation) and *pangat* (collective dining).¹¹ Thus, all ten of the gurus took necessary steps to eliminate

the differences of varna and caste. No special places were reserved for people of high rank or caste. The pangat institution in particular was encouraged and strengthened by Guru Amar Das. He insisted that everyone partake of simple food when coming for *sat sangat* (holy congregation). The orthodox Brahmans and Khatri were so alarmed by these revolutionary practices that they complained to Emperor Akbar: “Guru Amar Das [1479–1574] of Goindwal hath abandoned the religious and social customs of the Hindus, and abolished the distinction of the four castes. . . . He seateth all his followers in a line, and causeth them to eat together from his kitchen, irrespective of caste—whether [they] are Jats, strolling minstrels, Muhammadans, Brahmans, Khatri, shopkeepers, sweepers, barbers, washermen, fishermen, or carpenters.”¹²

After a careful reading of the gurus’ compositions, McLeod argues that the gurus “accepted the notion of *varan*, but never as a system of high and low status. All were equal when it came to access to liberation and to this extent it can certainly be claimed that Guru Nanak and his successors preached the end of the Hindu caste system, at least for those who were their Sikhs.”¹³ But to explain the prevalence and persistence of caste and untouchability among Sikhs, McLeod introduces the “Sikh concept of caste,” which he says “is certainly hierarchical, but it structures hierarchy in terms of economic power and (to a lesser extent) the size of the individual jatis. This renders it very different from the traditional concept of caste. The one exception to this (admittedly a large one) is . . . the general treatment by caste Sikhs of those Sikhs who are Dalits.”¹⁴ We get direct testimony from Bhai Jaita (c.1657–1704), a legendary Dalit Sikh, in his epic poem *Sri Gur Katha*, which was composed after the Khalsa formation and before his death in 1704. Bhai Jaita was rechristened as Jiwan Singh, after the creation of “Khalsa,” a new identity of Sikhs conferred by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699 (but I will continue to use his Dalit name). He says that Guru Gobind Singh’s Sikh do not recognise *baran* (varna) and *jaat* (caste) distinctions but considers only good deeds as good *baran*.¹⁵ Quite contrary to McLeod’s contention that Sikh *Rahit-Namas* (manuals of code of conduct) do not refer much to *jati* (caste), the *rahit* (code) by Bhai Jaita in *Sri Gur Katha* begins with a strong denunciation of caste:

Now listen to the *rahit* of the Singhs,
 The Singh should pray to God keeping the war in mind.
 When a victim and a needy person beseeches help;
 Forgetting his own, a Singh should remove others’ suffering.
 Not keeping in mind differences of high and low caste,

The Singh should consider all humans as children of God.
Abandoning the Brahmanical rituals and customs,
The Singh should seek liberation by following the gurus' ideas.¹⁶

Dalit Initiatives in Sikhism

As most literature on Sikh history and religion has failed to take account of the Dalits, John Webster's pioneering formulation on the "Dalit history approach" is quite instructive. Ever since he published the first edition of *The Dalit Christians: A History*¹⁷ in 1992, he has been deepening his thought on the concept of "Dalit" for a non-Hindu religion, and in an important recent article he discusses its implications for Sikh history.¹⁸ According to him, "the Dalit history approach is based on two assumptions. The first is that of Dalit agency. In this case, Dalit Sikhs move to centre-stage to become the chief actors and shapers of their own history; the historian will therefore focus upon them, their views, their struggles, their actions. The second is that a conflict model of society, with caste as not the only but the most important contradiction in Indian society, provides the most appropriate paradigm for understanding their history."¹⁹

There is no work on Sikh history and tradition in English that has been produced from the Dalit history perspective. Major historical works reflect what Webster calls the "Sikh history approach."²⁰ Only a few books available in Punjabi (Gurumukhi) language—not all of which are by professional historians—can be seen as written from the "Dalit Sikh approach."²¹ While denouncing the established histories as nothing but high-caste histories, S. L. Virdi stresses the need for a Dalit history: "India needs such a history that germinates revolutionary consciousness for social change because history plays a very significant role in this respect. Society assumes a character and shape as molded by its history. From this perspective Dalit history has a very important role. 'Dalit history' is another name for 'revolution' in Indian society."²²

While Shamsher Singh Ashok wrote his history of the Mazhabis—commissioned by K. S. Neiyyer, a Dalit Sikh settled in London²³—Naranjan Arifi, a Dalit officer in the revenue department of the Punjab government, wrote a bulky volume on the history of Dalit Sikhs after a great deal of research. He gives us a comprehensive account of Ranghretas or Mazhabis joining the Sikh fold as early as the period of the fifth guru, Arjun (1563–1606). Arifi very diligently extracts Dalit information from the Sikh writings available since the early eighteenth century. In this volume he provides fas-

cinating details about Ranghretas up till the mid-nineteenth century, giving them the names and voices and highlighting their individual and collective participation in the growth of the Khalsa.

The fact that a large number of Dalits, seeking liberation from discrimination and degradation, had joined and secured respectable status within the Sikh order was exemplified by the gurus' special relations with some of the Dalit families. One notable Dalit family was that of Bhai Jaita. His great-grandfather, Bhai Kaliana of Kathunangal Village, near Amritsar, is said to have converted to Sikhism during Akbar's time. He had served the fifth and sixth gurus well. His son, Sukhbhan, migrated to Delhi and became a great musician and established a music school, named Kalyan Ashram after his father, in Raiseena, a nearby village. Kalyan Ashram later came to be known as Kalayane di Dharamshala, and Sikh visitors to Delhi used to lodge there. Sukhbhan's son, Jasbhan, was an equally accomplished musician and a notable Sikh of Delhi, close to the seventh and eighth gurus. Jasbhan's two sons, Agya Ram and Sadanand, continued to render *Gurubani* (Sikh Guru's compositions) in musical notes for the Delhi Sikh congregations. Sadanand emerged as an accomplished musician and became a close companion of the ninth guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621–75).²⁴ Such intimate ties of his family to the gurus motivated Jaita, the elder son of Sadanand, to carry the severed head of Guru Tegh Bahadar under the most violent circumstances from Delhi to Anandpur in 1675. Overwhelmed with emotions, the young Gobind Singh, the tenth guru (1666–1708), had embraced Bhai Jaita with this blessing: "Ranghrete guru ke bete" (The untouchables are the Guru's own sons). Jaita emerged as a fearless Sikh warrior who so endeared himself to the tenth guru that he was proclaimed by the guru as the *panjwan sahibjada* (fifth son), in addition to the guru's own four sons.²⁵ It is at the time of the creation of the Khalsa in 1699 that Bhai Jaita was rechristened as Jeevan Singh. He was killed in a fierce battle with Mughal armies in 1704 at Chamkaur.

Even though the Sikhs have been particular about preserving objects and sites related to the Sikh gurus, heroes, and martyrs, they have ignored iconic figures like Bhai Jaita even though many sites he is associated with have been adorned with *gurdwaras* (Sikh temples).²⁶ Moreover, there are reports that Dalit families who have been taking care of such places have been harassed by workers of the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), the highest statutory body managing Sikh affairs, especially the *gurdwaras*.²⁷ Bhai Jaita remained neglected to such an extent that it was hardly known let alone acknowledged that he was also a scholar poet. He had composed a long poem, *Sri Gur Katha*, mentioned above, that provides an eyewitness account

of important events surrounding Guru Gobind Singh. It is worth noting that this composition had escaped the notice of Sikh scholars, whose efforts to unearth literature and materials pertaining to the Sikh tradition are otherwise remarkable.²⁸ It is only with the recent emergence of Dalit Sikh scholarship that a body of literature has begun to be built up around Bhai Jaita in attempts to recover Dalit Sikh pasts. The way Bhai Jaita had been integrated not only into Sikh religion but also into the family of Guru Gobind Singh makes it understandable that any other identity would have been meaningless to him. His identity as a Ranghreta had been subsumed by his identity as a Sikh, as he says: “O Jaita, the savior guru has saved the Ranghretas. The pure guru has adopted Ranghretas as his sons.”²⁹

The numbers of Dalits who became Sikhs can be gauged from their presence in Guru Gobind Singh’s army. Arifi gives interesting details about some leading Dalit warriors, and some of them were also among Guru Gobind Singh’s fifty-two court poets. The notable among them were Kavi Dhanna Singh Ghai, Aalam Singh, Dhakkar Singh, Dharam Singh, Garja Singh, Man Singh, and Nigahi Singh.³⁰ By the mid-eighteenth century, when—amid sustained persecutions by the Mughals—the Sikhs organized themselves into five *dals* (warrior bands), one of these was composed entirely of Mazhabis or Ranghretas under the command of Bir Singh Ranghreta, who had raised a force of 1,300 troopers. The Dalit reinterpretation of the eighteenth century argues in detail that the rising power of Bir Singh Ranghreta, who had become an influential commander, was put a stop to by the treachery of the Jatt commanders. According to Arifi, the Sikhs had succeeded in establishing their independence by the early 1760s, and some of their commanders aspired to have individual chiefdoms in different parts, which Bir Singh Ranghreta opposed. He insisted on following the guru’s injunction and the democratic principle that power should lie in the Guru Panth, the Khalsa collective. Charat Singh—grandfather of Ranjit Singh and Baba Aala Singh, founder of Patiala State—hatched a conspiracy to invite Bir Singh Ranghreta from Peshawar to Amritsar and treacherously disarmed his soldiers (using as a reason that they should not enter the Golden Temple with weapons), then slaughtered them inside the sacred precinct in the batches of five in which they were told to move.³¹ Thereafter, Mazhabis were not allowed to hold any command position, but their military prowess was used by several *misals* (Sikh kingdoms).³² Mazhabis were present in the Nishania misal in great numbers, even though its leadership was in the hands of Hindu Khatri community. Yet in another group, called the Dallewalia misal, one Mazhabi, Tara Singh Gheba, assumed the leadership of the misal after the death of its founder,

Gulab Singh, and ruled its territories from its headquarters at Rahon, near Sirhand, until his death in 1807.³³

Evidence of Dalits' participation in the Sikh movement coming from the Persian sources, quite hostile to Sikhs in tone and tenor for political reasons, is quite instructive. After the death of Guru Gobind Singh, Banda Bahadur (1670–1716), whom the guru had sent from Maharashtra to save the Sikhs from the Mughal oppression in Punjab, succeeded in mobilizing Sikhs to fight against Mughal governors.³⁴ Muhammad Shafi Warid bitterly underlines the leveling effects of Banda Bahadur's policies after the victory of Sirhind:

After the slaying of Wazir Khan, he [Banda] laid down that of Hindus and Muslims, whoever enrolled among his Sikhs, should be one body and take their meal together so that the distinction in honour between the lowly and the well-born was entirely removed and all achieved mutual unison, acting together. A sweeper of spittle sat with a *raja* of great status, and they felt no hostility to each other. . . .

Strange it was how through God-decreed fate, the courage and bravery of the inhabitants of those places had departed. If a lowly sweeper or cobbler (*chamar*), more impure than whom there is no caste (*qaum*) in Hindustan, went to attend on that rebel [Banda], he would be appointed to govern his own town and would return with an order (*sanad*) of office of government in his hand. . . . He [the official sent by Banda] would demand whatever precious goods were in anyone's house and deposit it in the ill-destined treasury of the Guru.³⁵

The trend continued throughout the eighteenth century, as noted above. The strength of Dalits in the Sikh Panth and Ranjit Singh's army was considerable. We have an account of the Sikhs in Ghulam Ali Khan's history of the eighteenth-century north Indian state of Awadh, written in 1808. He says:

Finally, now [1808 AD] the whole country of the Punjab up to the Attock River [Indus], and this side up to Multan, and from the banks of Sutlej to Karnal . . . is in the possession of this sect. Their leaders of high dignity are mostly from the lower classes, such as carpenters, shoemakers and Jats. . . .

In addition to the army, which they call DAL, the number of Sikhs in the Punjab has reached millions (lit. "thousands of thousands"), since yogurt-sellers, confectioners, fodder-vendors, grain-sellers, barbers, washermen, all [fully] keep their hair and, saying *Wahi Guru di*

fateh, interline with each other. They are not confined to the Punjab only. In the whole of Hindustan from Shahjahanabad [Delhi] to Calcutta, Haidarabad and Chennapatan [Chennai], groups after groups are found to belong to this sect; but most of them are market people (*bazarian*), and only a few are well-born.³⁶

Though substantially diminished in their power, the Dalit Sikhs continued as soldiers and fighters. They continued to be influential during Ranjit Singh's rule, which enabled them to construct the Mazhabi Singhan da Bunga (the lodging of Mazhabis) in the Golden Temple complex in 1826. The Mazhabi Bunga was later demolished and the premise was incorporated into the Guru Ramdas Langar building. Mazhabis had their *Bunga* (lodging) at the holy Sikh temple in the city of Tarn Taran.³⁷ After the British takeover of Punjab in 1849, the control of the Golden Temple and other gurdwaras was given over to the Hindu *mahants* (priests) by removing Mazhabis from all their positions.³⁸ Thereafter, Hindu Sikhs had complete control over Sikh religious institutions, which will be discussed in the next section.

Creativity, especially literary creativity, is another area in which the Sikh religion seems to have played a significantly positive role in the life of Dalits. Reference has already been made to Bhai Jaita's *Sri Gur Katha* (Story of Sikh gurus), an epic composed at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The second Dalit poet, sant Wazir Singh (c. 1790–1859), prolifically composed metaphysical and social poetry, both in Punjabi and Braj Bhasha. He attracted a number of people as his followers, including five poet disciples hailing from high castes. One of the five poets was Nurang Devi, who was the first female Punjabi poet groomed under sant Wazir Singh's tutorship.³⁹ The next Dalit intellectual writer Giani Ditt Singh (1852–1901) emerged as a poet, teacher, polemicist, journalist, orator, and ardent Sikh missionary, who turned out to be the pillar of the Singh Sabha movement.⁴⁰ Sadhu Daya Singh Arif (1894–1946), who came to master the Gurmukhi, Urdu, Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit languages, was the most popular intellectual poet of his time in Punjab. His first poetical work, *Fanah-dar-Makan* (Doorstep to dissolution), was published when he had just turned twenty. The work which made him a household name throughout Punjab was *Zindagi Bilas* (Discourse on life), which was completed in 1916. Overall, it was didactic poetry that caught the masses' imagination, and *Zindagi Bilas* became the most frequently published, read, or heard poetic creation after Waris Shah's *Heer*. All of them have remained neglected in the histories of Punjabi literature. From the early twentieth century a series of Dalit writers are writing with a clear Dalit consciousness.⁴¹

Hinduism Enters Sikh Religion

Caste and untouchability came to afflict the Sikhs, particularly in the past two centuries. There was a gradual rise of Sanatan Sikhism,⁴² a fine admixture of Hindu caste-centric practices and Sikhism, in the second half of the eighteenth century. By the close of the nineteenth century, it had assumed a vicious form. Features of Sanatan Sikhism were first outlined in a genealogical history of Sikh gurus by Kesar Singh Chhibber in *Bansavalinama Dasan Patshahian ka*, completed in 1769.⁴³ Chhibber belonged to a Brahman family of Jammu. He attributes the Guru Gobind Singh's power and success to the worship of a Hindu goddess and gives considerable importance to the role of Brahmans in his account of the Sikh gurus. Arifi devotes more than a hundred pages of his book to a close examination of Chhibber's work and lashes out at him, saying that the work is "a complete conspiracy against the gurus' philosophy as its purpose is to introduce Brahmanical ideas. . . . Even if it is a bundle of lies in which 80–90 percent of the dates are wrong, imaginary characters are introduced, and the principles and traditions of the gurus are colored with Brahmanism."⁴⁴ Historian J. S. Grewal is also highly critical of Chhibber's work and calls it "Brahmanizing the tradition": "Whether consciously or unconsciously, Kesar Singh Chhibber makes a consistent and an earnest attempt at Brahmanizing the Khalsa tradition."⁴⁵

It is ironic that the Hindu caste-centric practices entered Sikhism during the reign of Ranjit Singh (1780–1839), who founded the first Sikh empire in India. Even in the first decade of the nineteenth century the egalitarian spirit of the Khalsa had remained intact, as observed by John Malcolm: "Wherever the religion of Guru Govind [Gobind] prevails, the institutions of Brahma must fall. The admission of proselytes, the abolition of the distinctions of caste, the eating of all kinds of flesh, except that of cows, the form of religious worship, and the general devotion of all Singhs to arms, are ordinances altogether irreconcilable with the Hindu mythology, and have rendered the religion of the Sikhs as obnoxious to the Brahmans, and higher tribes of the Hindus, as it is popular with the lower orders of that numerous class of mankind."⁴⁶

Henry Steinbach, a European soldier in Ranjit Singh's army, made an astute observation about a definite change that had taken place since Malcolm's statement: "The assumption of irresponsible power by Ranjeet Singh destroyed, in some degree, the potency of the Khalsa."⁴⁷ That the Hindu practices were fast creeping into Sikh culture during Ranjit Singh's time was also observed by another European traveler in 1836, Baron Charles Hugel, who noted that

“like every other religion grounded in deism, the faith of the Sikhs is already deteriorated; image worship and distinction of castes are gradually taking place of the precepts enjoined by their original institutions.”⁴⁸

The Golden Temple at Amritsar has been the sanctum sanctorum for Sikhs, as Mecca is for Muslims, and many lives were lost defending the temple’s sanctity during the eighteenth century. It had assumed such an importance in the religious and political life of Punjab that Ranjit Singh abolished the system of collective management and assumed the right to appoint a temple manager. This precedent was used by a subsequent ruler of Punjab, Lieutenant-Governor Sir Robert Egerton, in 1881 to appoint his own temple manager.⁴⁹ By that time, the Mahants had already introduced non-Sikh practices in the precincts of the temple, and the commissioner of the Amritsar Division, Robert Needham Cust, could foresee in 1858 what was in store for the faith. He observed that “unsupported by the State, plundered by its own guardians, in due course of time the temple will fall to ruins; the sect which was founded by Baba Nanak will cease to exist; the nucleus of nationality which was created by Guru Gobind Singh will be dispersed, and [the] proselytising and fanatic Sikh will fall back into the ranks of the lethargic and uninspiring Hindu.”⁵⁰

Idols were placed in the Golden Temple, and Dalits were prevented from bathing in the *sarovar* (holy tank). In 1877, there was consternation among the temple authorities as some Mazhabi soldiers and their families attempted to bathe there.⁵¹ The deterioration in the Sikh religion was observed at the beginning of the twentieth century by John Campbell Oman, a keen student of Indian epics, mysticism, cults, customs, and related issues. During his extensive visits to the Golden Temple Oman noticed quite a few Hindu practices within the complex. In front of the Akal Bunga, goats were slaughtered on the Dussera festival. He found that along the northern side of the pool, a Brahman was worshipping tiny images of Ganesh and Krishna. At the northeast corner of the tank, there was a Shiva temple with a lingam, and along the eastern side there was another temple of *devi* (goddess). At the *devi* temple Oman “encountered Brahmans engaged in worship, *separately*, of course. One had before him a saligram and a picture of the temple of Badrinath; while the other adored a saligram and a *tulasi* (holy basil) plant. The latter worshipper appeared quite at home in the precincts of the Sikh temple, for he blew sundry loud blasts by means of a *conch*, from which he managed to produce some three or four distinct notes.”⁵² In the concluding paragraph of his chapter on the Golden Temple, he observes that the “advanced” party—alluding to the radical members of the Singh Sabha—succeeded in removing

the Hindu idols from the complex in 1905, but he added: “Nonetheless, only last year (1907), an apparently well-informed writer in the *Civil and Military Gazette* of Lahore lamented the fact that the distinctive differences between Sikhism and Hinduism were melting away, a conclusion at which I had myself arrived some years ago.”⁵³

Caste prejudice and the practice of untouchability being central to Hinduism, any individual, organization, or ideology questioning it was always seen as an enemy, and no effort was spared to eliminate the challenge. In the context of the Sikh religion, A. E. Barstow observed in the 1920s that “Hinduism, [due] to its wonderfully assimilative character, had thus reabsorbed a good part of Sikhism, as it had absorbed Buddhism before it, notwithstanding that much of these religions is opposed to caste and the supremacy of the Brahmans.”⁵⁴ Bhagat Lakshman Singh (1863–1944), a scholar and intellectual who was a new convert to Sikhism, believed that the Sikh creed had been Hinduized after the establishment of Sikh rule. The high-caste Hindus had made advances toward the new power in an attempt at reconciliation, and a compromise was affected through which the Sikhs abandoned their revolutionary program.⁵⁵ Sikhism began to lose its distinct identity. Khushwant Singh is straightforward in admitting that “Sikhism did not succeed in breaking the caste system. . . . and Sikhs of higher castes refused to eat with untouchable Sikhs and in villages separate wells were provided for them.”⁵⁶

We have some accounts from Sikh newspapers in the first quarter of the twentieth century that already give evidence of the problems caused by the Hinduization of Sikhism. Dalit Sikhs had started either following the Hindu vedic religion, supposedly casteless, advocated by Arya Samaj or converting to Christianity, which forced the Sikh reformers to address the issue of caste inequality and stem the tide. Singh Sabhas had initiated the process, but caste attitudes were too deep-seated to make much difference. The Sikh press started pushing the cause forcefully. In an editorial titled “Isaai hon de Karan” (Reasons for becoming Christian) in the *Punjab Darpan* of October 10, 1917, the Sikhs were warned to mend their ways:

In the last eight months 1,600 Hindus have become Christians. . . . For this mission, the pastors have relinquished professorships in the mission colleges as they have also abandoned the comforts of churches. Compare this with the Sikh community: there are thousands of those baptized Sikhs rendering Gurbani with musical instruments that are called Mazhabis, Ramdasias, or Bishth. But high-caste Sikhs always oppress those who simply labor for their sustenance. . . . Because these

illiterate Sikhs hate them more than they hate Muslims, it is necessary to inspire the Sikh Sardars, Numberdars, and Zaildars in the villages to embrace their brethren in faith rather than making them the enemies of their religion by rebuking them all the time.⁵⁷

The growing anxiety about the virus of untouchability among educated Sikhs is reflected in most of the community-oriented newspapers and magazines. One reader signing himself “Sewa Singh BA” wrote a letter to *Khalsa* (community) newspaper in 1923 (a translation of the title would be “One’s most necessary duty: for the attention of Chief Khalsa Diwan”), in which he drew attention to the problem of untouchability.⁵⁸ Referring to Arya Samaj, the writer urged the diwan to shoulder “the improvement of untouchable castes.” On June 24, 1923, *Khalsa* published a report on a *divan* (assembly) about a *shudhi* (purification) at Amritsar’s Jallianwala Bagh that had been held on June 21. The diwan was devoted solely to the removal of untouchability. The report said:

Sardar Dalip Singh, the secretary of the diwan, while introducing the purpose of the diwan said that even now Guru Gobind Singh’s baptized Sikhs, who are called Ramdasias, Mazhbis, and Chuhras, are thrown out of *langars* [community kitchens] and their Prasad is not accepted in the gurdwaras. That’s why today’s diwan is organized, to find out remedy for this malaise. . . .

Later on Bhai Mehtab Singh ‘Bir’ lamented how due to our indifference hundreds of our so-called untouchable brothers are being swallowed up by other religions. He reported that twenty-five Rahitiyas became Aryas in 1903 and after that 10,000 Rahitiyas joined the Arya Samaj.⁵⁹

The Sikh leadership by that time had gotten so lost in the struggle to liberate gurdwaras from the clutches of Brahmanized Mahants that the agenda to liberate Sikh minds from casteism was set aside. The helpless situation drove Bhai Pratap Singh, the head *granthi* (priest) of the Golden Temple, to write a treatise on the issue.⁶⁰ Besides looking into the theological and practical high points against untouchability in the Sikh tradition, he summarized the efforts of the SGPC for the removal of untouchability between 1921 and 1933.

Ambedkar’s engagement with Sikhism was another factor contributing to the introspection on the part of a small group of Sikh reformers seeking to remove untouchability. It started with Ambedkar’s powerful move in 1936 to envisage a dignified life for the Dalits in the Sikh religion. Sardar Amar

Singh, secretary of Shri Guru Singh Sabha Shillong (in Assam), wrote two articles in *Khalsa Sewak* on March 17 and 22, 1936 (in English, the title of the articles is “The need of the Sikhs’ preaching among the untouchables and some suggestions for that”).⁶¹ An editorial in *Khalsa Sewak* on March 7, 1936, reports that Ambedkar had written letters to the SGPC but laments that the committee’s response was unsatisfactory. The editorial notes with sarcasm that with all this “the Sikhs are so indifferent that they would not stop bragging of their reforms on paper, which is just a show, but in practice not a single step forward has been taken.”⁶²

It is the Dalit voices that are most vociferous about caste and untouchability in Sikhism. Pandit Bakshi Ram, who was born in a Balmiki family toward the close of the nineteenth century, recalls in his memoirs the condition of untouchability. He narrates two incidents from his village to show how Dalit Sikhs were treated by the dominant Jatt Sikhs. Once, a Rahitia (a Dalit who observed the Sikh code of conduct) boy was beaten up by Jatt boys while drawing water from the school well. Another time, when a Rahitia wedding-party used the village pond for cleaning their backs in the morning, they were thoroughly beaten up by Jatts.⁶³ “Untouchability has become deep-rooted in the Jatt-dominated villages,” Ram says, and asks “Isn’t practicing caste and untouchability against *gurmat* (Guru’s teachings)?”⁶⁴ Observing how after independence the Jatts came to completely control the politics and economy of Punjab as they opposed the Dalits’ economic demands, Ram asks: “If the Jatt Sikhs demand higher prices for their agricultural produce don’t the labourers have right to demand higher wages? And if the latter struggle for their right the former boycott them. Isn’t it the height of injustice? If Akalis have their pickets for their demands why can’t Dalits exercise their right to make their demands?”⁶⁵

Prem Gorkhi, an eminent Punjabi short-story writer who graduated from a daily worker to a full-time employee as a library peon (office-boy), and then becoming a respectable journalist, recalls with bitterness:

I have seen that if Punjabi writers are intimate friends they also carry deep casteist ideas within. . . . I have close relations from the high to the low . . . they respect [me] as well. . . . I go to everyone’s house, eat and sleep there . . . but over taking sides on any vital issue, the cobra within spreads its fangs. . . . There is no drastic change in the caste situation from what it was a hundred years ago . . . only the ways of untouchability have changed. Today if you eat from the same plate, you also kill the same person—and who you call Dalit today is not a century-old

thoughtless, egoless person without identity. He has reached the stage of deciding for himself what is good for him.⁶⁶

Gurnam Aqida, a Punjabi writer and journalist, is forthright about the hegemony of Jatts: “Jatts control all the organizations and institutions that decide the fate of society. They dominate the bureaucracy. They have replaced the traditional minstrels, the Mirasis, in the field of singing, and the traditional thieves, the Sansis; the Jatts have replaced even the famous woman brigand Phoolan Devi in pillages. The Jatts are responsible for Dalitism in villages; they are the police officers, professors, and principals and even the ruling politicians. So much so, that a crime committed by them becomes an entertainment.”⁶⁷

For a fairly long time in the history of Sikh growth, especially during the phase of Sikh struggles against political powers, Dalits and Jatts had served as two arms of the Sikh religion, transcending caste differences in keeping with the spirit of the new religion. During this period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, caste was not completely eliminated and the caste differences that continued to persist did not constitute any kind of caste discrimination. Without religious sanction, untouchability had been reduced considerably within the Sikh fold. But if in the past hundred years Dalit articulations clearly identify the major source of their oppression and misery as the emergence of Jatts as a dominant caste, this requires an explanation. Is it that Sikhism as an ideological and social force was failing and falling? Is it that the liberating religious ideology that had survived political attacks was succumbing to economic ones?

There is no denying the fact that Jatts as ordinary peasants historically shared an oppressed life with other lower segments of Punjab under successive revenue-centric state systems. Their joining the Sikh movement en masse immensely helped them raise their status in the caste hierarchy during the long period of political resistance of Sikhs in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Their carving out of independent political fiefdoms in the last quarter of the eighteenth century—with the eventual formation of the Sikh regional state under Ranjit Singh, who happened to be a Jatt by caste—instilled them with immense pride. Being landholders, they succeeded in establishing their supremacy and hegemony over other castes, including Brahmans and Khatris in the Punjab countryside. The end of the Sikh political power in Punjab at the hands of British colonialism by the mid-nineteenth century did not necessarily mean the end of Sikh social and economic power. By and large Sikhs’ loyalty to the British Raj in the 1857

uprising helped them further consolidate their hold over other castes in the villages, as they came to form the backbone of the Anglo-Indian army.⁶⁸ The Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1901,⁶⁹ though largely an official effort to protect agriculturists—especially distraught Muslim peasants of western Punjab—from rapacious moneylenders, proved to be a grand colonial gift to the Sikh Jatts. The act prevented nonagricultural communities from buying and occupying lands. The Dalits of Punjab proved to suffer the most from this act as they had been declared as nonagricultural menials in official enumerations, despite the fact that within the Sikh fold they had become soldiers, artisans, or peasants. As agriculturists at several places they tilled lands as owners or tenants.⁷⁰ But after passage of the act, even the houses in which their families had been living for generations did not belong to them; all land in villages now belonged to peasant proprietors, predominantly Jatts. Dalits had been completely thrown to the mercy of Jatts and rendered extremely vulnerable by the colonial law. From once honorable warriors of the Sikh religion the Dalits had been reduced to untouchable Sikhs without land or homes of their own. In such circumstances, caste came to be used by Jatts as a convenient way to obtain a virtually free supply of agrarian labor from Dalits for their class interests, in service of their land operations. The Jatt domination of the Sikh religion and in the Punjab countryside in the twentieth century created problems for other dependent caste communities in general (and for Dalits in particular), which resulted in the building of caste-oriented gurdwaras.

Conclusion

Sikhism emerged as a vital religious force and movement with ideas of equality and liberation for the downtrodden. It succeeded in empowering those groups of Punjabi Dalits who joined it. They excelled in several fields, including religion, warfare, and literary creativity. If Sikhism as a social force was failing in its mission, what alternatives were left open to the Dalits of Punjab? Some Dalits succeeded in finding social-religious solutions, such as the Ad-Dharam movement in the 1920s. The movement aimed at securing a respectable place for Dalits through cultural transformation, spiritual regeneration, and political assertion rather than seeking patronage from above. The argument of its founder, Mangoo Ram Mugowalia, that Dalits were the original inhabitants of India had an enormous psychological impact on the untouchables of Punjab, inspiring them to fight for their liberation. Within a short time, the movement became a mass Dalit struggle for a separate

identity. Though after independence it petered out, its success lies in the fact that those who continued to identify themselves as Ad Dharmis have made far greater progress in all fields when compared to those Dalits who continued to follow established religions, including Sikhism.

The nonreligious path to emancipation was a socialist revolution. The Communists have had a few successful movements in Punjab since the 1920s but only once addressed the Dalit question explicitly. The exception was the young revolutionary Bhagat Singh, who wrote a lengthy article titled “Achhut da Sawal” (The question of untouchability) in 1928. Pointing at the competition between different religions to win the untouchables to their respective folds out of sheer political greed and vested interests, he issued a clarion call to Dalits to unite and fight their own battles, as no one else would fight for them.⁷¹ But after Bhagat Singh was martyred in 1931, no Communists followed his approach. Assuming that the end of class rule would automatically resolve cultural issues, the Communists failed to see the significance of caste and untouchability in the Indian cultural context. Even the best Dalit poets and activists in the extreme left Naxalite movement—namely, Lal Singh Dil and sant Ram Udasi—experienced casteist insults and died in difficult circumstances if not altogether in ignominy.

Dalits in general and Dalit Sikhs in particular find themselves at a crossroad as far as the question of religion is concerned. A group of Dalit Sikhs whose families have retained memories of the glorious past are unable to understand what has happened to the religion, and they still entertain hopes that Sikhism will restore what has been lost. Yet a majority of Dalits have experienced the tensions of conflicting attitudes and feel frustrated as they turn away from Sikh religion. Education, political awareness, and Dalit assertion pose the challenge to older religious identities as Dalits find alternative ways to seek dignity and pride.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of a broad range of bhakti sant movements and issues, see Schomer and McLeod, *The Sants*.
2. Grewal, “Contesting Interpretations of the Sikh Tradition”; Juergensmeyer, *Sikh Studies*.
3. Arifi, *Ranghrehitian da Itihas*, part 1, 13. All translations from Punjabi are mine.
4. *Ibid.*, 35.
5. Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, 178.
6. Uberoi, *Religion, Civil Society and the State*, 74.
7. Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture*, 133.

8. “Neechan andar neech jati, Neechi hun ati neech / Nanak tin ke sang sath, Vadian siyon kya rees / Jithe neech sanmalian, Tithe nadr teri bakhshish” (quoted in Puri, “The Scheduled Castes in the Sikh Community,” 2694).

9. Jodhka, “Dissociation, Distancing and Autonomy” and “Sikhism and the Caste Question”; Judge, “Religion, Caste, and Communalism in Punjab”; Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision*; Marengo, *The Transformation of Sikh Society*; Puri, “The Scheduled Castes in Sikh Community”; Indera Singh, “Caste in a Sikh Village”; Walia, “The Problem of Untouchability among Sikhs in Punjab with Special Reference to Mazhabi Sikhs.”

10. McLeod, “Sikhs and Castes,” 106.

11. “Sangat” in Gurmukhi means to accompany or to sit with others. Thus, praising God through the words of the guru in the company of the learned is known as keeping sangat in the Sikh tradition. “Pangat” in Gurmukhi is derived from the Sanskrit *pankti*, which means a line or row. Thus, eating food sitting in a row without any differentiation or discrimination is called pangat in the Sikh tradition.

12. Quoted in Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion*, 105.

13. McLeod, “The Sikh Concept of Caste,” 173.

14. *Ibid.*, 186.

15. Gandiwind, *Shaheed Baba Jiwan Singh*, 174. This important writing by Bhai Jaita (also known as Jiwan Singh) came to light only in the second half of the twentieth century. *Sri Gur Katha* (the full title is *Sri Gur Katha krit kavi Baba Jeevan Singh [Bhai Jaita]*) was first published in Arifi, *Ranghrehitian da Itihas*, part 1, 396–424. Other books in which *Sri Gur Katha* was published are Baldev Singh *Panjwan Sahibjada*, 465–501; Gurmukh Singh, *Bhai Jaita Ji*, 49–82.

16. “Ab rahit sunuh gur singhan ki, hari dhian dhare ur judh chitare / jab arit aye pukar karenh, nij sookh taje tin dookh nivare / nahi jaat sujaat bichar kareh, ar poot khudaye janahen sabare / rahu reet geh nahin bipran ki, ar gurmat prapat mokh duare” (quoted in Gandiwind, *Shaheed Baba Jiwan Singh*, 181).

17. Webster, *The Dalit Christians*.

18. Webster, “The Dalit Sikhs: A History?”

19. *Ibid.*, 138.

20. *Ibid.*, 133.

21. Some of these are Arifi, *Ranghrehitian da Itihas*; Ashok, *Mazhabi Sikhian da Itihas*; Nirbhay, *Mazhabi Sikhian di Jaddo-jaihad*; and Giani Singh, *Guru ka Beta*. For general histories of the Dalits of Punjab, see Ishar Singh, *Sikh Itihas de Visre Panne*; Virdi, *Punjab da Dalit Itihas*.

22. Virdi, *Punjab da Dalit Itihas*, xxxi–xxxii.

23. Ashok, *Mazhabi Sikhian da Itihas*.

24. For details, see Arifi, *Ranghrehitian da Itihas*, 224–26.

25. See the novel by Baldev Singh, *Panjwan Sahibjada*.

26. Murphy, “Materializing Sikh Past.”

27. Gurnam Aqida, “Baba Jeevan Singhji di mahan kurbani nu vi nahin samjhia,” 10–11.

28. The researchers of Punjabi literary texts, especially those pertaining to the Sikh tradition—including Shamsher Ashok, Gurinder Maan, Pritam Singh, and Piara

Padam—and historians including J. S. Grewal, W. H. McLeod, Ganda Singh, and Pashaura Singh do not mention Bhai Jaita's *Sri Gur Katha*. It is just possible that it was not easily available. Naranjan Arifi discovered a copy with Kultar Singh, the oldest son of Daya Singh Arif, which had been given to him by some of the Assamese Dalit Sikhs in 1950s. See Arifi, *Ranghrehitian da Itihas*, 394–95.

29. “Jayayte taranhar gur, taar diye ranghretde / Gur paras ne kar diye, ranghretde gur betde” (quoted in Arifi, *Ranghrehitian da Itihas*, 409); see also Baldev Singh, *Panjwan Sahibjada*, 481.

30. Arifi, *Ranghrehitian da Itihas*, 465–514.

31. *Ibid.*, 432–58.

32. This term seems to have been derived from the Arabic word *misal*, meaning equal.

33. Arifi, *Ranghrehitian da Itihas*, 517–24.

34. Ganda Singh, *Life of Banda Singh Bahadur*; Sohan Singh, *Banda the Brave*.

35. Warid, “Banda Bahadur and his Followers from Muhammad Shafi ‘Warid,” 161–62.

36. Irfan Habib, “An account of the Sikhs, 1808 from Ghulam Ali Khan, Imadus Saadat,” 214–15.

37. Arifi, *Ranghrehitian da Itihas*, 429–65; Ashok, *Mazhbi Sikan da Itihas*, 171.

38. Arifi, *Ranghrehitian da Itihas*, 570.

39. Hans, “Sant Poet Wazir Singh.”

40. Malhotra, “Living and Defining Caste.”

41. Hans, “Rich Heritage of Punjabi Dalit Literature and Its Exclusion from Histories.”

42. According to Harjot Oberoi, “the social universe of Sanatan Sikhism can best be summed up under the Brahmanical paradigm of varnasrama dharma” (*The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, 105–6).

43. Chhibber, *Bansavalinama Dasan Patshahian Ka*.

44. Arifi, *Ranghrehitian da Itihas*, 145. His examination of Chhibber's work spans pages 37–145 of his book.

45. Grewal, “Brahmanizing the Tradition,” 85–86.

46. Malcolm, *Sketch of the Sikhs*, 151.

47. Steinbach, *The Punjaub*, 159.

48. Jervis, *Travels in Kashmir and Panjab*, 283.

49. Kerr, “British Relationships with the Golden Temple, 1849–90,” 140.

50. Quoted in *ibid.*, 142.

51. *Ibid.*, 145. See also Grewal, “Contest over the Sacred Space.”

52. Oman, *Cults, Customs and Superstitions of India*, 98.

53. *Ibid.*, 102–3.

54. Barstow, *The Sikhs*, 19.

55. Grewal, *Contesting Interpretations of the Sikh Tradition*, 71.

56. Khushwant Singh, *The Sikhs*, 45–46.

57. Editorial, “Isaai hon de Karan,” *Punjab Darpan*, October 10, 1917.

58. Sewa Singh, “Ik Atti Jaruri Sewa: Chief Khalsa Divan de Dhian yog,” *Khalsa*, February 21, 1923.

59. Untitled article, *Khalsa*, June 24, 1923.
60. Bhai Singh, *Jaat Paat te Chhut-Chhaat sambandhi Gurmat Sidhant*.
61. Sardar Amar Singh, "Achhutaan vich Sikhi Parchar di lor ate kujh Sujaho," *Khalsa Sewak*, March 17 and 22, 1936.
62. Editorial, *Khalsa Sewak*, March 7, 1936.
63. Pandit Ram, *Mera Jeevan Sangharash*, 4.
64. *Ibid.*, 96.
65. *Ibid.*, 99.
66. Gorkhi, "Dhukhdi Dhooni Pharolani Payee."
67. Aqida, *Kakh Kande*, 55–56.
68. Fox, *Lions of Punjab*.
69. For a detailed account and discussion of the act, see Sri Sharma, *Punjab in Ferment*. On the caste angle of the act, see Cassan, "British Law and Caste Identity Manipulation in Colonial India."
70. For an example, Chet Singh, the Ranghreta general of the Bhangi misal's cavalry in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, owned a large amount of agricultural land, plowed by seven plows, in Bhaike Dialpur village in the present Barnala District. He was killed in a battle with Ranjit Singh's army. Committed to Guru Gobind Singh's idea of the Sikh Panth (collective) and seeing its erosion in the personal rule of Chet Singh, Ranjit's younger brother Kahla Singh had preferred to give up agricultural land and moved to another village of Raisar. These details are recorded by Gurdas Singh Gharu, Dalit writer and activist, in his autobiography, *Pagdandian taun Jeevan Marg Tak*, 29–30.
71. This article was published in the June 1928 issue of *Kirti* under the pen name Vidrohi. See J. Singh, *Shahid Bhagat Singh ate uhna de Sathian dian Likhtan*, 221.

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