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SIKHS AS SUBALTERN: VOICE, INEQUALITY AND POWER<sup>1</sup>

*Introduction*

The term “subaltern” comes from the work of Antonio Gramsci, and was used by South Asian historian Ranajit Guha to conceptualize “Subaltern Studies,” encapsulating “history from below,” history as shaped by the non-elites, the subalterns.<sup>2</sup> Beyond this broad characterization, the concept can be difficult to define sharply. Gyan Prakash, in explicating the field of Subaltern Studies, states that the term ‘subaltern’ “refers to subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language, and culture and was used to signify the centrality of dominant/dominated relationships in history.”<sup>3</sup> Partha Chatterjee points out that Gramsci used the term as a substitute for “proletariat,” to avoid censorship, but that this expanded the scope of its application to peasant-dominated societal contexts, laying the foundations for Guha’s launch of Subaltern Studies.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Peter Thomas returns to Gramsci’s notebooks to extract multiple concepts of the subaltern that are more

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<sup>1</sup> A preliminary version of this paper was presented at a conference at the University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, BC, Canada. I received helpful comments from participants there. Separately, Harpreet Singh read through the paper and made detailed suggestions that resulted in almost a completely new, and hopefully better, analysis. I also benefited from interactions with participants – especially Timothy Brennan and Keya Ganguly – at the workshop, “Gramsci: Southern Questions,” organized by Guriqbal Sahota and supported by the Aurora Chair in Sikh and Punjabi Studies. The paper has had a long gestation period. Of course, I alone am responsible for remaining shortcomings.

<sup>2</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Letters from Prison*, Edited and translated by Lynn Lawner (New York and London: Harper and Row, 1973); Ranajit Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India.” In *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian Society and History, Vol. VII*, edited by Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 37-44.

<sup>3</sup> Gyan Prakash, “Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism,” *American Historical Review*, 99 (5) (1994): 1477.

<sup>4</sup> Partha Chatterjee, “Subaltern Studies: A Conversation with Partha Chatterjee,” Interview by Richard McGrail, 2012, <https://journal.culanth.org/index.php/ca/subaltern-studies-partha-chatterjee>, accessed March 7, 2023.

general than those of the marginalized or the oppressed, extending to the ordinary citizen within the modern state.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, El Habib Louai, retracing the terminology through the work of Gramsci, Guha and Gayatri Spivak, suggests that, “Throughout its history since the beginning of the twentieth century, the concept of the subaltern remains one of the most slippery and difficult to define.”<sup>6</sup>

Spivak herself cautions against an overly broad use of the term, that “subaltern” is not “just a classy word for oppressed,” but that “everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern – a space of difference.”<sup>7</sup> But Chatterjee credits Spivak with giving the concept of “subalternity” a “new inflection,” taking it beyond class to questions of gender, race and so on.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Spivak asks, “Can the subaltern speak?” querying the possibility of using the hegemonic discourse, and answering in the negative.<sup>9</sup> Spivak explores how social markers other than class can delineate subaltern status. She focuses particularly on gender, but religion, race and sexual orientation can also be part of the bounding conditions, and this intersectionality is arguably in Gramsci as well.<sup>10</sup> Spivak also criticizes the role of academics, even well-meaning ones, in maintaining power structures and denying subalterns a true voice: an idea that will be one of the foci of this paper.<sup>11</sup>

Subaltern Studies is itself situated within post-colonial studies. Though the concept of the subaltern may be disputed or malleable, it occupies an important place in the broader discourse of postcolonialism. Indeed, Vivek Chibber, in his critique of postcolonial theory, focuses on Subaltern Studies, which he characterizes as, “The most illustrious representative of

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<sup>5</sup> Peter D. Thomas, “Refiguring the Subaltern,” *Political Theory*, 46 (6), 2018: 861-884.

<sup>6</sup> El Habib Louai, “Retracing the concept of the subaltern from Gramsci to Spivak: Historical developments and new applications,” *African Journal of History and Culture*, 4 (1), 2012: 5.

<sup>7</sup> Gayatri Spivak, quoted in Leon de Kock, “Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa,” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*. 23 (3), 1992: 45.

<sup>8</sup> Chatterjee, “Subaltern Studies.”

<sup>9</sup> Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988: 271-313.

<sup>10</sup> Green, Marcus E., “Race, class, and religion: Gramsci’s conception of subalternity,” in *The Political Philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and B. R. Ambedkar: Itineraries of Dalits and Subalterns*, ed. Cosimo Zene (New York: Routledge, 2013): 116-28.

<sup>11</sup> Spivak (“Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 280) somewhat strongly terms this phenomenon “epistemic violence.”

postcolonial studies in the scholarship on the Global South.”<sup>12</sup> Chibber’s critique revolves around capital and capitalism, the extent to which Subaltern Studies succeeds in providing useful insights into the evolution of capitalism outside the West, and whether it accurately captures the role of subaltern groups in this evolution.<sup>13</sup>

This paper engages with the idea of the subaltern, and with post-colonial theoretical framings, but in a different and novel manner. We argue that the idea of the subaltern is useful for understanding the Sikh community and its evolution in its original South Asian context, but also for the manner of its representation in Western academia. In fact, the subalternization of Sikhs in Western academia is significantly influenced by their subaltern history in a materialist sense. The outline of the argument is as follows. Sikhism began as a religious formation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century CE, appealing to a broad cross-section of South Asian society within its home region of Punjab. Many of its doctrines and characteristics challenged subalternity, though with limitations. The origin and evolution of the Sikh community took place within the context of the complete arcs of two successive imperial powers – the Mughals and the British. The specifics of that process of evolution included two crucial markers, those of religion and language, where inequalities of

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<sup>12</sup> Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2013) 5.

<sup>13</sup> Chibber’s critique prompted spirited discussion and fierce debate, e.g., Partha Chatterjee, “Subaltern Studies and “Capital,”” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2013: 48, 37, 69-75.; Vivek Chibber, “Subaltern Studies Revisited: A Response to Partha Chatterjee,” <https://as.nyu.edu/content/dam/nyu-as/faculty/documents/SubalternStudies-Revisited.pdf>, February 21, 2014, accessed March 7, 2023; Ho-fung Hung, George Steinmetz, Bruce Cumings, Michael Schwartz, William H. Sewell, Jr., David Pedersen, and Vivek Chibber, “Review Symposium on Vivek Chibber’s *Postcolonial Theory and The Specter of Capital*,” *Journal of World-Systems Research*, 20 (2), 2016: 281-317.; and Rosie Warren, ed., *The Debate on Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2016). Much of the debate concerns very broad questions around the nature and evolution of capitalism, the relative roles of individuals and communities, and the extent of the universal vs. the specific in the analysis of societal change. Some of these issues are pertinent in the case of the Sikhs, and will be addressed at the appropriate points. A useful brief summary assessment of Chibber and the debates that followed is Alex Sager, “Review of Vivek Chibber: *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, *Marx & Philosophy Review of Books*, [https://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviews/7946\\_postcolonial-theory-and-the-specter-of-capital-review-by-alex-sager/#comments](https://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviews/7946_postcolonial-theory-and-the-specter-of-capital-review-by-alex-sager/#comments), October 2014, accessed March 7, 2023. Spivak (“Can the Subaltern Speak?”) has her own critique of the Subaltern Studies group: for an elementary exposition of Spivak’s various arguments, see Graham K Riach., *An Analysis of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s Can the Subaltern Speak?* (London: Macat International, 2017). A collection of assessments of the impact of Spivak’s ideas is in Rosalind Morris, ed., *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

power tended to perpetuate aspects of subalternity, including the scope for self-expression. Ironically, the study of the Sikhs in Western academia has perpetuated and expanded this subaltern status, in ways that the paper describes.<sup>14</sup> Key features of this latter process have been a foreshortened account of Sikh history and tradition, and a denial of agency to the Sikh community in these academic accounts, so that the subaltern (the community) effectively is not allowed to speak. The foregoing summary uses 'Sikh' in a unitary sense, but, like any other tradition or grouping, there is considerable diversity, and that will be addressed as the arguments are laid out.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The next section provides a bare bones account of the evolution of the Sikh community, trying not to prejudge issues that have been subject to debate, but attempting to justify claims of subaltern status. These debates are discussed in the third section of the paper, where an attempt is made to evaluate different positions, albeit briefly. Section four then discusses the manner in which different scholarly positions are weighted and reproduced, and the reasons for this situation. This is where – we claim – the problem of subalternity arises in a surprising and ironic manner, within postcolonial theorizing. At the same time, the paper is not a defense of tradition or of religious belief. Rather, it is an excavation in the archeology of knowledge production, one that is informed by the perspective of subalternity to highlight inequalities in the reception of certain voices. The final section concludes by summarizing its intended contribution, that of using the case of the Sikhs to highlight aspects of subalternity that are often buried, and using the 2020-21 farmer protests in India to illustrate the weakness of some recent theorizing.

#### *Sikhs: A Summary*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> There are several Sikh Studies endowed chairs in US universities, but they have arguably perpetuated the post-colonial foreshortening of Sikh history. The approach to the subaltern in different contexts of knowledge production has led to explorations in a variety of directions, such as the work of Seana McGovern, *Education, Modern Development, and Indigenous Knowledge: An Analysis of Academic Knowledge Production*, (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013); and Antonia Darder, "Decolonizing Interpretive Research: Subaltern Sensibilities and the Politics of Voice," *Qualitative Research Journal*, 18 (2018): 94-104.

<sup>15</sup> Arguably, the most neutral account of the Sikhs and their history is Jagtar Singh Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), but many earlier histories are also available, offering a range of interpretations. The account in this section is based on evidence that is used by these historians, avoiding interpretational questions. Other recent historical summaries include Wytan Hewat McLeod, *The Sikhs: History, Religion, and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); and Gurinder Singh Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

The Sikh tradition begins with Nanak (1469-1539 CE), considered a Guru, or spiritual teacher, by his followers. To what extent his intention was to establish a new religious community, whether the term “religion” is appropriate, and how much his message was a reworking of those of others who came before him, are all matters of scholarly debate. Even within the Sikh community, there are varied opinions on these matters. However, it is reasonably well established that he traveled widely during his lifetime, seeking to spread his message, before settling down in a specific place in the Punjab region of South Asia, where he was surrounded by followers. These followers were also in other places where Nanak had previously traveled.

Nanak composed verses that were meant to be sung to musical measures (*raags*), which consist of praise of the Divine, reflections on the nature of the Divine, and moral and ethical guidance. In his verses, he criticized unjust uses of power by government officials and rulers, as well as the insincere practices of figures of religious significance or authority, including Brahmin priests (*pandits*), Muslim clerics, and members of yogic orders (*siddhs*). He advocated for personal internal transformation, through “truthful living,” which included reflection on the Divine, charity, and purity of thought and action. “Sikh” means student, learner or disciple, and it is used by Nanak in this sense in his writings for his followers. Another term used in this sense is *gurmukh*, literally someone who faces the Guru, and the terms are used together, or combined (*gursikh*) in ways that convey the general normative meaning of being a “Sikh.”

Nanak had nine human successors, each of whom used the signature “Nanak” in their own writings. Contemporary verses by bards in the Sikh community indicate that this was seen as a continuity of spirit or “light,” the same divine inspiration that was in Nanak. In most cases, the successor was chosen by the incumbent Guru, unless the latter met an unexpected end. In two cases, the fifth and ninth Gurus, this was at the hands of Mughal authorities, in the first case after some form of physical torture, in the second, in a public execution by beheading.

Before his demise (1606 CE), the fifth Guru, Arjan, compiled the writings of the first five Gurus into a single canonical text. Later in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the verses of the ninth Guru were added to this compilation. This text also included verses of over a dozen others: some who are now associated with what is termed the *bhakti* movement, bards within the Guru’s *darbar* (court), and one Sufi Muslim spiritual leader. The Sikh Gurus themselves used the appellation *bhagat* (the Punjabi equivalent to *bhakta*) for a

defined set of individuals, indicating that this grouping was understood as such in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. A strong Sikh tradition holds that the tenth and last human Guru, Gobind Singh, appointed the canonical text as the Guru of the Sikhs, and it firmly holds that status in the community, being the center of worship in multiple forms (recitation, singing, listening, interpretation, discussion, and ceremonial actions). This tradition is documented in contemporaneous sources of that time, the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. The text is now known as the Guru Granth Sahib (GGS), the last term being meant to convey respect. Often, additional terms of respect are added. The text was originally authenticated by Guru Arjan, and immediately began to be copied and distributed to Sikh congregations wherever they were in South Asia. The GGS is written in a regional script, systematized by the Sikh Gurus, and now always known as Gurmukhi, because of its association with the text. The languages in the GGS are a range of regional vernaculars of the period.<sup>16</sup>

In their writings, Guru Nanak and his successors viewed caste markers and associated social and spiritual hierarchies as irrelevant for, and even inimical to, spiritual advancement. This was aligned with the caste status (including outcastes) and writings of several of the *bhagats* whose work is included in the GGS, although the Gurus themselves were all from a merchant caste. According to the collected verses in the GGS, the goal of a Sikh was to make a connection to the Divine, by becoming free of a sense of separation from the Divine and Divine creation. This had to be achieved while engaging in worldly responsibilities, and not through asceticism or renunciation. Therefore, honest work and material success are acceptable, but within boundaries of fairness, justice and equity, and without allowing material success to engender pride or arrogance. Actively sharing the fruits of material success is important.

As the Sikh community evolved and expanded, the message of the Gurus attracted a wide range of followers, including erstwhile outcastes, and lower castes such as artisans and peasants. A major numerical component of the growth of the Sikh community came from the Jats, a range of clans that had migrated into the region in earlier centuries. They were originally pastoralists who were, in this period, adopting agriculture and local religious identities. Evidence from early 17<sup>th</sup> century writings, of a prominent Sikh (Gurdas Bhalla) suggests that some

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<sup>16</sup>Christopher Shackle, *An Introduction to the Sacred Language of the Sikhs* (New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1983).

Jats were part of the Sikh community by this time, and they constitute a majority in the contemporary community.

The century and a half after Arjan's death was marked by intensified disputes over succession, doctrinal differences connected to those disputes, and a pattern of conflict and accommodation with successive Mughal emperors and their representatives. This pattern also included imperial attempts to control the succession to the mantle of Guru. A key event in the community's evolution occurred at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when Gobind Singh created a new initiated order of Sikhs, the Khalsa. The Khalsa were to have direct allegiance to the Guru, without the intermediaries who had played an institutional role as the community had grown and spread. They were to abandon caste ties by adopting the common surname "Singh," – as did Gobind himself at this time – and adhere to a code of conduct and dress, including carrying a dagger or sword (*kirpan*), and keeping uncut hair (*kesh*), covered with a turban. These visible markers of identity have been associated with an ideal of fearlessness, and willingness to stand up against any form of oppression. A metaphor that came to be commonly used was that the creation of the Khalsa would turn sparrows into hawks.<sup>17</sup> The significance and position of the Khalsa within the Sikh community has been a matter of continual debate from its inception, including its meaning, status, precise markers, and so on. Scholars of the Sikhs have participated in these debates, in ways that, as will be discussed later in the paper, are often at the center of issues of subalternity. In contemporary India, about three quarters of Sikhs keep uncut hair, but only 20-30 percent of this number have undergone the formal Khalsa initiation.<sup>18</sup>

As the 18<sup>th</sup> century progressed, the Khalsa became a force of resistance to the Mughal authorities in Punjab, as well as to invaders from the northwest, as the empire began to collapse. At first, a confederacy of small Khalsa-ruled principalities emerged, and by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, most of these had been absorbed into a kingdom led by one of the Khalsa chiefs, Ranjit Singh. By this time, most of South Asia was already under the control of the East India Company, and they completed their conquest by military victories and annexation of Punjab in 1849 CE. The latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the Sikh community becoming entangled in the British colonial project, and they followed Hindus and Muslims in negotiating this new situation, in terms of legal and political structures, language, jobs and new

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<sup>17</sup> Purnima Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks: The Making of the Sikh Warrior Tradition, 1699-1799* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Pew Research Center. *Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2021).

technologies. All three communities worked to define themselves to fit the colonial legal and political framework, as well as pursuing educational and other projects to position their members more favorably. For Sikhs, as a relatively small community with a short history and no national level presence, defining themselves as distinct was particularly important. This need was heightened by claims of inclusion in a larger “Hindu” tent,<sup>19</sup> and explicit efforts at conversion.<sup>20</sup>

This period is, of course, the focus of post-colonial studies, and Sikhs are variously viewed as having reformed their tradition, or as having reinvented it. The Sikhs who led this project are viewed as inspirational heroes, aggressive usurpers of tradition, or victims of the trauma of colonization. In all these cases, there is a strong focus on leadership and elites of various kinds, very much the opposite of an approach that would be consistent with the Subaltern Studies project.

An important feature in historical accounts of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, as British colonization was negotiated, then opposed and rejected by the indigenous populations, is the minority status of the Sikh community, even within the region of Punjab, where they were, and remain, concentrated. When Punjab was partitioned as the British left in 1947, being a numerical minority almost everywhere created a situation of extreme precarity. Sikhs have continued to struggle with minority status, even after the creation through division of a Sikh-majority state of Punjab in 1966, and conflicts of various forms with the national government have been persistent, including a period of violence and repression in the 1980s and 1990s. Much of the growth of scholarship on the Sikhs has occurred during this period and its aftermath, and it has arguably shaped that scholarship, as well as its perception by members of the Sikh community.

### *Defining the Sikhs*

Many of the issues relating to the definition of the Sikh community revolve around issues of identity and origins. One complication is that the community is heterogeneous, and there are different perspectives from within the community. However,

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<sup>19</sup> Most prominently, Mohandas Gandhi wrote, as late as 1936, that “Today I will only say that to me Sikhism is a part of Hinduism.” He was opposing Bhimrao Ambedkar’s plan to lead his Mahar community of outcastes in converting to Sikhism. See Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Volumes 1-100* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Government of India, 1956-94), Vol. 63, p. 267.

<sup>20</sup> Kenneth W. Jones, *Arya Dharm: Hindu Consciousness in 19th-Century Punjab* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976).



it is not clear that these features are any different or more extreme than for other religious traditions. This assessment, and possible special features of analysis of the Sikhs are taken up in the next section.

A very basic issue is that of antecedents of the Sikh tradition, and Nanak's message in particular. A common scholarly position is that Nanak can be placed within a so-called Sant tradition, consisting of *nirguna bhaktas* such as Kabir, Namdev and Ravidas, whose writings are included in the GGS, and who were chronologically prior to Nanak. The most vigorous proponent of this view is Hew McLeod, but it can be found initially in the work of Pitamber Barthwal.<sup>21</sup> However, the category of Sants was created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, whereas the concept of *bhaktas/bhagats* existed at the time of the early evolution of the Sikh tradition.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Nanak does not mention or otherwise acknowledge the *bhagats*: their introduction into the Sikh tradition comes with Nanak's second successor, and the structure of the GGS, as well as specific verses, indicate their conceptual subordination to the line of Nanak and his successors. None of Nanak's successors label the *bhagats* as Sants. Claims that the language of the GGS was that of the "Sants" turn out to be circular.<sup>23</sup>

Another common scholarly position is that Nanak and his successors could not have created a separate religious tradition, because such a concept did not exist in Indic culture. Many scholars have made this claim for the Sikhs, and it can be supported by observations such as intermarriage among what are now called Sikhs and Hindus, lack of distinct life cycle rituals, and acceptance of a range of beliefs and practices that do not fit within a clear, commonly accepted definition of what it means to be a Sikh. This is contrasted with more clear-cut creedal definitions for religious communities. This is a more complicated and deeper issue than the current scope allows,<sup>24</sup> but the

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<sup>21</sup> See Wystan Hewat McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968); and Pitamber D. Barthwal, *The Nirguna School of Hindi Poetry*, Banaras: Indian Book Shop, republished with minor changes as *Traditions of Indian Mysticism: based upon Nirguna School of Hindi Poetry* (New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1936).

<sup>22</sup> On the origin of the "Sant" category, see Mark Juergensmeyer, "The Radhasoami Revival," in Karine Schomer and W.H. McLeod, eds., *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India* (Delhi: Berkeley Religious Studies Series and Motilal Banarsidass, 1987): 329-355

<sup>23</sup> These arguments are detailed in Nirvikar Singh, "Guru Nanak and the Sants: A Reappraisal," *International Journal of Punjab Studies* 8 (1) (2001): 1-34.

<sup>24</sup> Analyses of the applicability of the term "religion" include Talal Asad, *Genealogies of religion: Discipline and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: JHU Press, 1993); Mark Taylor, "Refiguring Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 77 (1) (2009): 105-119; Gil Anidjar, "The idea

equation of “religion” with non-Indic or Christian definitions is at odds with much of the social science literature, which takes a more inclusive position on how the word is used.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Islam had been present in South Asia since the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, so it would have been well known as a model of spiritual beliefs and practices when Nanak lived, though the community of Islam encompasses its own heterogeneities. Finally, 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Sikh writings in the GGS and by Gurdas Bhalla explicitly mention Hindus and Muslims in terms of their beliefs and practices, identifying Sikhs as being neither of these communities.<sup>26</sup> If the principle is one of self-definition of identity based on spiritual beliefs and associated practices, then the nomenclature issue is arguably of second-order importance, possibly even leading to mischaracterization.

The role of the Khalsa in Sikhism also elicits a range of positions. Some scholars characterize it as one of many expressions of Sikh tradition, and view it primarily as a militaristic subset of the broader community.<sup>27</sup> Others recognize its importance to the Sikh conception of community, even to the point of the Guru being embodied in the collective of the Khalsa, as the Guru Panth (*panth* meaning community) complementing the Guru Granth.<sup>28</sup> Less metaphysically, many Sikhs view the Khalsa as representative of an ideal of service and sacrifice, associated particularly with the example of Guru Gobind Singh in his own life. At the same time, it is accepted that practice falls short of ideals, even in traditionally heroic contexts such as the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>29</sup>

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of an anthropology of Christianity,” *Interventions* 11, no. 3 (2009): 367-393; and Gil Anidjar, “Christianity, Christianities, Christian,” *Journal of Religious and Political Practice* 1, no. 1 (2015): 39-46.

<sup>25</sup> For a comprehensive overview of this approach, see Ara Norenzayan, Azim F. Shariff, Will M. Gervais, Aiyana K. Willard, Rita A. McNamara, Edward Slingerland and Joseph Henrich. The cultural evolution of prosocial religions. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 39, e1, (2016): 1-65

<sup>26</sup> Rahuldeep Singh Gill, “The Works of Bhai Gurdas,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014): 147-158.

<sup>27</sup> For example, see Pashaura Singh, “Re-imagining Sikhi (‘Sikhness’) in the Twenty-First Century: Toward a Paradigm Shift in Sikh Studies,” in *Re-imagining South Asian Religions: Essays in Honour of Professors Harold G. Coward and Ronald W. Neufeldt*, Pashaura Singh and Michael Hawley, eds. (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2013): 27-48; and Susan E. Prill, “Sikhi Through Internet, Films, and Videos,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014): 471-481.

<sup>28</sup> For example, see Louis E. Fenech, “The Khalsa and the Rahit,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014): 240-249

<sup>29</sup> Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks*.

Scholarly positions that put less weight on originality, distinctiveness and a common core in the first two centuries of Sikh history align with what has become the dominant perspective on Sikhism in the Western academy, that its contemporary beliefs and practices are fundamentally different from pre-colonial history. Harjot Oberoi's narrative is the most well-known, arguing that there was no sense of a definite Sikh identity, prior to the colonial era.<sup>30</sup> Instead, there were a range of traditions, beliefs and practices, all within a larger collection of such traditions that was separately distilled into Hinduism.<sup>31</sup> Sikhs who created a new, restricted Sikh identity were "aggressive usurpers," displacing a more pluralistic, tolerant tradition. An alternative account of a rupture associated with colonialism and modernity is that of Arvind-Pal Mandair, who accepts the existence of a prior Sikh tradition, but also views it as fundamentally different, in terms of its philosophical underpinnings as well as its practices.<sup>32</sup> He emphasizes trauma and shame as drivers of this colonial-era rupture in Sikh tradition. Richard Fox, on the other hand, claims that the Sikh community in its modern form is a product of the British, who nurtured the Khalsa identity and brought it back from near extinction.<sup>33</sup> What is common in all three narratives is that the colonial power causes a transformation of the community, either directly, or through the efforts of elites who are either aggressive or traumatized. An alternative perspective is more nuanced, recognizing the influence of earlier Sikh tradition and thought, as incorporated in the GGS, or the role of the Sikh masses, consisting chiefly of the peasantry, as well as the complicated negotiations in which representatives of different interests and ideologies within the Sikh community engaged, and how they sought compromises to balance inclusion and distinctiveness.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Harjot S Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>31</sup> However, as noted, Hindu leaders such as Gandhi never accepted this separateness.

<sup>32</sup> Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). For example, he states (p. 32), "neither Sikh experience nor the broader Indic culture from which it is derived can claim to possess a word for "religion" as signifying either a mystical or theological core or a *unified faith community*." [italics are mine]

<sup>33</sup> Richard Fox, *Lions of the Punjab: Culture in the Making* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

<sup>34</sup> These three perspectives are treated, respectively in Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, "Review of *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* by Harjot Oberoi," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 55 (3) (1996): 760-762; Mohinder Singh, *The Akali Movement* (Delhi: The Macmillan Company of India, 1978); and N. Gerald Barrier, "Competing visions of Sikh

Much of the process of definition of the Sikhs in scholarship situated in the Western hemisphere begins in the 1980s, at a time of political turmoil in Punjab, and focuses on the Sikh diaspora, which is particularly numerous in Anglophone countries (Canada, Britain and the United States). Adopting the perspective that contemporary Sikh identity is almost wholly a modern construct, literally, “a gross transgression of Sikh doctrine,”<sup>35</sup> Sikh identity in the diaspora is described as a recent phenomenon. For example, Brian Axel states, “Khalistan [the name of a projected independent Sikh nation] is an idea that...has become a generalized trope of social practice and representation central to the post-1984 (re) constitution of the Sikh diaspora.”<sup>36</sup> A similar approach leads to assertions that early Sikh migrants to California saw themselves as cosmopolitan Punjabis or even Hindus, rather than as followers of narrowly religious Sikh tradition.<sup>37</sup> Other academic writing on the Sikh diaspora follows similar lines, though not exclusively so.<sup>38</sup> Building sometimes on some early ethnographic studies,<sup>39</sup> there has been a tendency to emphasize Punjabi rather than Sikh identity, with the latter being reduced to a manifestation of “identity politics.”<sup>40</sup>

#### *Voice, Inequality and Power*

This section develops the central arguments of this paper, by analyzing the intellectual genealogy of the kinds of debates outlined above, uncovering the effects of inequality and power in that process. As a prelude, note that scholarship on the Sikhs – as that term is used in the modern academy – begins during the colonial period, and it has two strands. One strand is work by Sikhs, in modern Punjabi, which is part of the project of reform and “modernization.” Some of this effort is doctrinal in nature, explicating or interpreting the GGS, and because of its language and goals, it is internally directed. It is intertwined, however, with attempts to construct a unified historical narrative that is

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religion and politics: The chief Khalsa Diwan and the Panch Khalsa Diwan, 1902–1928,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 23, no. 2 (2000): 33-62.

<sup>35</sup> Oberoi, *The Construction*, p. 323.

<sup>36</sup> Brian Keith Axel, *The nation's tortured body: Violence, representation, and the formation of a Sikh “diaspora”* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

<sup>37</sup> Karen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992); and Leonard, “Transnationalism, Diaspora, Translation: Comparing Punjabis and Hyderabadis Abroad,” *Sikh Formations*, 3 (1) (2007): 51-66.

<sup>38</sup> For example, N. Gerald Barrier and Verne A. Dusenbery, *The Sikh diaspora: Migration and the experience beyond Punjab* (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1989).

<sup>39</sup> For example, Arthur W. Helweg, “Punjab Farmers: Twenty Years in England,” *India International Centre Quarterly*, 5 (1) (1978): 14-22.

<sup>40</sup> For example, Sunit Singh, “On the Politics of the Sikh Diaspora,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 14 (1) (2005): 157-177.

empirically based. The second strand consists of historical narratives in English, written initially by colonial observers, and then by non-Sikh Indians who were part of the new colonial higher education system. Post-independence, the second strand also begins to include Sikh academics. As one might expect, even the second strand includes a variety of perspectives and interpretations, especially on questions of identity, and how sources are used and weighted.

One example of the second strand that gets elevated in status, to the point that it is projected as a driver of the Sikh engagement with colonialism, is the work of Ernst Trumpp.<sup>41</sup> Trumpp was commissioned by the colonists to translate the GGS. He was a German Indologist, Sanskrit scholar, and sometime missionary. While he was charged with translation into English, he admitted later that his own knowledge of English was imperfect. He eventually produced a partial translation, accompanied by a summary history of the Sikh tradition. Trumpp himself was a latecomer to an established tradition, one which has subsequently been labeled “Orientalism.”<sup>42</sup> In the 19th century, German Indologists “discovered” the sacred classical traditions of India, and formalized these as Hinduism, recognizing the enormous diversity of practice as well as the evolution of beliefs over time, but nevertheless creating a category that could be viewed in more Western terms. When they came to the Sikhs, as was the case for Trumpp, their reference point was this older Hindu, Sanskritic tradition, as defined by the Indologists, but also by Hindu scholars. The use of Hindu terms and mythological metaphors in the GGS made it easy to take the position that the Sikh tradition was an inconsequential and inferior gloss on classical Hinduism, which Trumpp stated in blunt and uncomplimentary language.

Members of a new Sikh intelligentsia tried to respond to Trumpp's work, because of its implications for how the community would be treated by the colonial political and legal system. They encouraged and supported the work of Max Arthur Macauliffe, who collaborated with members of the community to produce an alternative narrative, which also consisted of a partial translation of the GGS, combined with a historical account of the community.<sup>43</sup> While some Sikhs have seen this as a reclamation

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<sup>41</sup> Ernst Trumpp, *The Adi Granth, or The Holy Scriptures of the Sikhs, Translated from the Original Gurmukhi, with Introductory Essays* (London: Wm. H. Allen & Co., 1877), available at <https://archive.org/details/cu31924023913217>.

<sup>42</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

<sup>43</sup> Max Arthur Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion, its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909) For a summary of the relationship of the Sikh community and leadership to Macauliffe and his work, see, Harbans

of the truth about the community, the perspective of scholars that currently dominates the Western academy frames this dialectic as one of response to shame and trauma, either through defense or aggression,<sup>44</sup> while Fox sees the material incentives to Sikhs provided by the British as an essential part of these developments.<sup>45</sup> All of these perspectives tend to deny the mass of the community any real agency, reducing them to objects of elite manipulation. A more nuanced position has been somewhat lost in this popular framing.

Before considering the specifics of history again, one has to trace the intellectual development of the two strands of scholarship identified above. Essentially, while scholarly writing in Punjabi continued, it has been swamped by writing in English. This new scholarship has claimed to offer two kinds of improvement. First, it has emphasized a return to sources, and a more critical use of these sources, in terms of not taking them at face value. The exemplar of this claim is McLeod in his re-examination of traditional stories of the life of Guru Nanak (*janamsakhis*), pointing out lack of reliable or consistent evidence for almost all of them.<sup>46</sup> Much of this effort has gone into challenging the modern reformist position that Sikh tradition has been well-defined and continuous. As Oberoi states, this effort is meant to parallel a much larger project that offered a revisionist account of Hinduism.<sup>47</sup>

A second intellectual current that is prominent in newer scholarship on the Sikhs is an acknowledgement of different subjectivities and interpretations, so that there is not necessarily a final, unquestionable narrative. Of course, this is a central intellectual feature of scholarship in a range of disciplines and topics of inquiry. In the case of scholarship on the Sikhs, this has led to greater attention to groups that are downgraded or ignored in the dominant reformist narrative, including various sects, challengers to what became the main line of development of the Sikh community, members of erstwhile outcaste groups, and so on. A greater awareness of issues of gender and sexuality, social inequalities, and the validity of normative positions has also come from this approach. Much of this work has complemented the first kind of development: for example, in

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Singh, "Max Arthur Macauliffe," *Encyclopedia of Sikhism, Volume 3* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1998), 1-4.

<sup>44</sup> Oberoi, *The Construction; Mandair, Religion and the Specter*.

<sup>45</sup> Fox, *The Lions*.

<sup>46</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak*.

<sup>47</sup> Oberoi, *The Construction*. One example of the argument for Hinduism is Richard E. King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and "The Mystic East"* (London: Routledge, 1999).

challenging an idealized normative account of the role of women in Sikh tradition by reconsidering historical evidence or documenting contemporary practices.<sup>48</sup>

A significant aspect of the newer scholarship on the Sikh tradition is in how it brings theory to historical narratives. For example, Fox might easily be considered to have an Orientalist approach. He repeatedly plays off the literal translation of “Singh” as “lion,” with chapter and section titles such as “Singh Nature and Habitat,” “British Methods of Obedience Training,” and “An Endangered Species.”<sup>49</sup> But he also quotes or appeals to Bakhtin, Bourdieu, Foucault, Touraine and Williams.<sup>50</sup> This is with the goal of critiquing the “standard anthropological treatment of culture and cultural patterns.” Sikhs are innocent bystanders in this project. The teachings of the Sikh Gurus receive one page in Fox, the 18<sup>th</sup> century history of the Khalsa does not get a mention, and the later Singhs (effectively the Khalsa) are described airily as “one segment of the great arc of Sikh potential.”<sup>51</sup>

Oberoi provides a different causal story for the Sikh transformation in the colonial period, but a similar theoretical basis. He uses Foucault’s concept of an episteme: “the totality of relations that can be discovered for a given period.”<sup>52</sup> Some generic discussion of these ideas is followed by raising the problem of what can explain the shift from one episteme to the next. Here, Oberoi appeals to Bourdieu. By contrast to Fox, who states that Bourdieu cannot explain historical change, Oberoi interprets the “unceasing intervention of human practices” as the drivers of change.<sup>53</sup> However, Bourdieu is not quite adequate for this explanation, and Oberoi turns to the work of Sherry Ortner, and her framework of three modes of human action: routine

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<sup>48</sup>Doris Jakobsh, *Relocating Gender in Sikh History: Transformation, Meaning and Identity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Jakobsh, ed., *Sikhism and Women: History, Texts and Experience* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>49</sup> Fox, *The Lions*.

<sup>50</sup> In particular, he relies on Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981); Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1980); Alain Touraine, *The Self Production of Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); and Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>51</sup> Fox, *The Lions*, p. 8.

<sup>52</sup> Oberoi, *The Construction*, 28, quoting Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Pantheon Books, 1972), 191.

<sup>53</sup> Oberoi, *The Construction*, 28.

activity, intentional action and praxis.<sup>54</sup> The ensuing discussion of praxis by Oberoi is vague, even though it is made into the driver of changes in epistemes. Bourdieu, Foucault and praxis all then disappear from the rest of the narrative, until the ending assertions that the reconstituted Khalsa episteme of the early 20th century represented an epistemic shift or rupture with the past.

In another example of appeals to theory, Karen Leonard uses the theoretical binary of “cosmopolitans” versus “transnationals” to characterize the evolution of the Sikh community in California.<sup>55</sup> In doing so, she compares immigrant Sikh men who married immigrant Mexican women before the Second World War, with Sikh men who married Sikh women from Punjab once immigration policies were changed in 1965. The general normative connotation of “cosmopolitan” is problematic in this context, as is the manner of translation from the original work of Stuart Hall and Pnina Werbner.<sup>56</sup> But the lack of accounting for changing societal circumstances and constraints itself brings the analysis into question. Indeed, Leonard’s initial framing of the temporally earlier case as “making ethnic choices,” and as an example of cosmopolitanism and the unimportance of Sikh religious identity, conflicts with her own examples, such as the Sikh who “changed his name from Singh to Ram because, having taken off the turban and beard, he felt he was no longer a Sikh and did not want to dishonor the Sikh religion.”<sup>57</sup>

Oberoi’s historical narrative is also subject to the criticism of lacking an empirical anchor. For example, Jagtar Grewal, in assessing the pluralistic Sanatan Sikh category that Oberoi uses as a foil to the aggressive reformers, concludes, “His [Oberoi’s] hypothesis of Sanatan Sikhism in the early nineteenth century appears to be vague and vacuous.”<sup>58</sup> N.-G. K. Singh, Grewal, and

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<sup>54</sup> Sherry Ortner, *High Religion: A Cultural and Political History of Sherpa Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

<sup>55</sup> Leonard, “Transnationalism.”

<sup>56</sup> Stuart Hall, “Politics of Identity,” in *Culture, Identity, Politics: Ethnic Minorities in Britain*, Terence Ranger, Yunus Samad, and Ossie Stuart, eds. (Brookfield, VT: Avebury, 1996): 131-32; and Pnina Werbner, “Global Pathways, Working Class Cosmopolitans and the Creation of Transnational Ethnic Worlds,” *Social Anthropology*, 7 (1) (1999): 17-35.

<sup>57</sup> Leonard, *Making*, 127.

<sup>58</sup> Jagtar Singh Grewal, *Historical Perspectives on Sikh Identity* (Patiala: Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, 1997): 29. As Anne Murphy explains, the term ‘Sanatan’ is anachronistic and inappropriate for the early 19th century: see Anne Murphy, “Allegories of difference and identity: Reflections on religious boundaries and ‘popular’ religion,” *International Journal of Punjab Studies*. 7 (1) (2000): 53-71. The term was introduced into the discourse of Hindu reformers and their conservative opponents in the Punjab of the 1870s, and only adopted by a section of Sikhs a decade later: John Zavos, “Patterns of Organisation in



Murphy are among those who offer detailed critiques of Oberoi's analysis based on features of Sikh history.<sup>59</sup> These critiques admit the reality of diversity of views, and disagreements within the community. But they place the colonial period in the context of a longer arc of history, one that is reasonably well-documented. For example, attempts to define boundaries, or to institute reforms designed to bring practices closer to what the reformers viewed as the message of the Sikh Gurus, go back to the late 17<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>60</sup> and the early 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>61</sup> before the colonial period in Punjab. Murphy appreciates Oberoi's attempt to delineate "the diverse religious worlds of early nineteenth century Punjab," but points out that his "tying of 'Sanatan Sikhism' and folk traditions in opposition to the Khalsa episteme" has a shaky empirical basis. She details how Oberoi's construction does not match the actual historical circumstances, instead enacting nostalgia for a non-existent "proto-multiculturalism."<sup>62</sup>

Continuing with the theme of empirical foundations, what is noteworthy about the development of scholarship on the Sikhs in the last few decades is that use of primary sources has been relatively light. For example, Leonard relies entirely on Oberoi for her characterization of Punjab in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>63</sup> Even Barrier relies primarily on English language

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Turn of the Century Hinduism: an examination with reference to Punjab," *International Journal of Punjab Studies*. 7 (1) (2000): 29-52.

<sup>59</sup> Singh, "Review;" Grewal, *Historical*; Murphy, "Allegories."

<sup>60</sup> Naindeep Singh Chann, *Rahit Literature*, in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Sikhism, Volume I: History, Literature, Society, Beyond Punjab*, Knut A. Jacobsen, Gurinder Singh Mann, Kristina Myrvold and Eleanor Nesbitt, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2017): 183-191.

<sup>61</sup> Man Singh Nirankari, "The Nirankaris," *The Punjab Past and Present*, Vol. 7 (1973): 1-11; Bhagat Singh, "The Kuka Movement," *The Punjab Past and Present*, Vol. 7 (1973): 153-161.

<sup>62</sup> Murphy, "Allegories," 59, 60. The import of these criticisms is not that theory is harmful or unimportant. Indeed, theory can be used very effectively in analyzing the case of the Sikhs. In fact, it is Murphy's theoretical analysis, combined with a more careful reading of the historical record, that reveals the problems with Oberoi's narrative. In another example, Rajbir Judge offers a theoretical analysis of Sikh tradition as a mode of continual resistance that is not bounded by the colonial encounter: Rajbir Singh Judge, "There is No Colonial Relationship: Antagonism, Sikhism, and South Asian Studies," *History and Theory* 57 (2) (2018): 195-217. In another theoretically rich account, he explores how the "invisible hand of the Indic" lurks in different ways in accounts of religious boundaries and authenticities in South Asia, but also in supposedly secular democratic formulations: Rajbir Singh Judge, "The Invisible Hand of the Indic," *Cultural Critique*, 110 (Winter) (2021): 75-109. The current analysis is more elementary. Indeed, its message might be conveyed by the words of Sherlock Holmes, "It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts." See Arthur Conan Doyle, "A Scandal in Bohemia," *The Strand Magazine*, July, London (1891).

<sup>63</sup> Leonard, *Making*; Leonard, "Transnationalism."

sources,<sup>64</sup> and McLeod, while a prolific analyst of early Sikh sources, is not always completely accurate or reliable.<sup>65</sup> For many scholars of the Sikhs, lack of knowledge of modern Punjabi, let alone Persian or the language forms used in the GGS, constitutes a barrier to accessing aspects of the contemporary historical record, except if a translation is available. Language is not a determinative factor, and information is not automatically authentic even if the source is read in its original language, but this issue adds a layer of complication to scholarship in the field.

That knowledge of source languages is not the only problem is illustrated by citation practices. Axel, Fox, Leonard and Oberoi are all frequently cited in analyses that emphasize a foreshortened view of Sikh history and tradition. On the other hand, critiques or South Asian sources (Grewal, M. Singh, N.-G. K. Singh) tend to be ignored. While some of the literature that builds on these works considers topics that had been neglected or treated unsatisfactorily, such as gender, the foreshortening and selection in other dimensions introduces new limitations. For example, typical histories of colonial period Sikh reform efforts include struggles with questions of caste and social equality.<sup>66</sup> The reformers discussed this issue in the context of verses of the GGS, and reached conclusions that favored inclusiveness in religious activities, and a normative position against caste distinctions, something that Oberoi ignores.<sup>67</sup> This was, indeed, an attempt to change common practices, but it had its antecedents in the institution of the Khalsa. On the other hand, the “pluralist” Sanatan Sikhs explicitly advocated for caste hierarchies.<sup>68</sup>

Caste hierarchies have persisted, even in religious contexts,<sup>69</sup> and are documented in diaspora contexts,<sup>70</sup> although some practices did change.<sup>71</sup> Nicola Mooney provides some

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<sup>64</sup> Barrier, “Competing.”

<sup>65</sup> For illustrative examples, see Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, “Poetic Rhythm and Historical Account: The Portrait of Guru Nanak Through Bhai Gurdas,” *International Journal of Punjab Studies*, 5 (2) (1998): 127-158; and Nirvikar Singh, “The Challenge of Translating the Guru Granth Sahib: An Illustration and Preliminary Reflections,” *Sikh Research Journal*, 3 (1) (2018): 1-22.

<sup>66</sup> Grewal, *The Sikhs*.

<sup>67</sup> Murphy, “Allegories.”

<sup>68</sup> Avtar Singh Vahiria, *Khalsa Dharam Shastar* (Amritsar: Sodhi Ram Narain Singh, 1914).

<sup>69</sup> Surinder S. Jodhka, “Changing Manifestations of Caste in the Sikh Panth,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech, eds. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014): 583–93.

<sup>70</sup> Opinderjit Kaur Takhar, *Sikh Identity: An Exploration of Groups among Sikhs* (London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>71</sup> Sikhs who are converts from outcaste groups are accorded full equality in major Sikh houses of worship, though not necessarily in rural areas. By contrast,

innovation in this direction, considering gender and caste together, but the unbundling of Sikh precepts from Punjabi, especially Jat, patterns of patriarchy is lacking. Indeed, issues of patriarchal structures are a South Asian phenomenon, as is the phenomenon of caste.<sup>72</sup> When one recognizes these complexities, the simple binary of an “older pluralist paradigm of Sikh faith,” and a “monolithic, codified and closed culture” created by those who “aggressively usurped the fight to represent others,”<sup>73</sup> turns out to be both theoretically and empirically problematic.

Perhaps the most significant example of what is missing from the popular scholarly consensus of colonial-era transformation is the role of the Sikh masses, consisting mainly of peasants, that category also including a large number of ex-soldiers of the British Indian army.<sup>74</sup> While the most cited accounts of Sikhs in the colonial period focus on aggressive or traumatized so-called cultural elites, the inflection point in this era was the agitation for control of historically significant Sikh sites of worship (*gurdwaras*) all over Punjab. This became a non-violent mass movement in which thousands of Sikhs went to jail. Again, Fox credits the British with creating the requisite consciousness,<sup>75</sup> but an alternative explanation is in the ethos of the Khalsa, which sustained Sikh political control of Punjab for almost a century, before the British conquered the region. The motivations for this movement came from moral and emotional factors:<sup>76</sup> the managers of *gurdwaras* were viewed, with considerable justification, as increasingly corrupt and immoral in their conduct, while at the same time, many of these sites were associated with the lives of the Sikh Gurus – where they (and

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in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, these former outcastes could not then enter the Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple) in Amritsar by the same door as other Sikhs: Edmund Candler, *The Mantle of the East* (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1910): 127.

<sup>72</sup> See Nicola Mooney, “‘In Our Whole Society, There Is No Equality’: Sikh Householding and the Intersection of Gender and Caste,” *Religions*, 11(2) (2020): 95; <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11020095>. Even many Muslims and Christians in India acknowledge caste identities: Pew Research Center, *Religion*. Jodhka and Mooney appear to be exceptions in fully engaging with caste in the context of the Sikh tradition and contemporary practices, but do not allow for such attitudes and comparisons in their analysis.

<sup>73</sup> Oberoi, *The Construction*, 25.

<sup>74</sup> Singh, *The Akali*; Tai Yong Tan, “Assuaging the Sikhs: Government Responses to the Akali Movement 1920-1925,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 29 (3) (1995): 655-703. The movement itself began with protests by outcast converts to Sikhism over unequal and exclusionary treatment by the functionaries of the Darbar Sahib, such as what was noted by Candler, *The Mantle*: see Singh, *The Akali*.

<sup>75</sup> Interestingly, Tan (1995), who uses colonial sources almost exclusively, liberally uses the term “extremist” to describe the agitating Sikhs, illustrating the limits of claims of identity consciousness being a product of British manipulation and control.

<sup>76</sup> Tan, “Assuaging.”

sometimes their families and followers) had been born, lived, and died. The Sikh community gained control of Punjab's historic gurdwaras in 1925, over half a century after the creation of the first colonial-era reform organizations. Arguably, this control has shaped the community's subsequent history as much as, if not more than, intellectual debates, because these are the sites where members of the community publicly practice their faith together, and connect with their history.<sup>77</sup>

Recognizing the role of the Sikh masses in defining the community's position in the 20<sup>th</sup> century offers a perspective that is consistent with prior Sikh history, namely, an emphasis on some degree of solidarity and inclusiveness in the religious sphere, engendered by a sense of righteousness and connection to the message of the Gurus, as embodied in their words and their lives. This is a perspective that recognizes the subaltern and their agency, as opposed to scholarly treatments that assign historical significance to elites, whether heroic or misguided. Recent scholarship that ignores the agency of the Sikh masses and simultaneously downgrades Sikh intellectual debates imposes a dual subalternity, both in the sense of class structures, as in Gramsci and the Subaltern Studies group, but also in the sense of religious identity and the muting of voices, as in Spivak's extension of the concept.<sup>78</sup>

The final piece of the analysis involves the invisible (and not-so-invisible) hand of the Indic, to adapt the framing of Judge.<sup>79</sup> One can see this in an example that he does not consider, one which was discussed in the previous section. The claim of a Sant tradition and Nanak's membership in it (as a relative latecomer and a follower of that path) has become embedded in much recent scholarship that ignores the roots of the idea in one aspect of the project of Hindu nationalism – this hand of the Indic is not acknowledged, even though it is in plain sight.<sup>80</sup> It must be noted that the analysis is easily muddied by the multiple uses of the term "sant," since it appears frequently in the GGS, where the contexts suggest a general term for people with some

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<sup>77</sup> Anne Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past: History and Representation in Sikh Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Inderjit N. Kaur, "Sikhism," in *Rituals and Practices in World Religions (Religion, Spirituality and Health: A Social Scientific Approach, Vol. 5)*, David Bryce Yaden, Yukun Zhao, Kaiping Peng, and Andrew B. Newberg, eds. (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2020): 151-165.

<sup>78</sup> Note that debates about universality vs. specificity or West vs. East, some of which dominated the discourse around Chibber, *Postcolonial*, are moot when both universal desires for material well-being and specific religious expressions as instruments of communal solidarity are involved, as is the case of the Sikhs.

<sup>79</sup> Judge, "The Invisible Hand."

<sup>80</sup> This is particularly obvious in Barthwal, *The Nirguna School*.

characteristics of spirituality, a usage that persists today.<sup>81</sup> Matters are complicated further because the term is also a title used for a wide range of factional religious leaders, including the leader of the Radhasoamis (where the idea of a “Sant” tradition was used by their founder to increase legitimacy),<sup>82</sup> and Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a Khalsa Sikh who became prominent in the Punjab conflict of the 1980s.

More centrally, the idea that Sikh, like Hindu, was an amorphous category until the colonial period is explicit in recent scholarly framings.<sup>83</sup> This narrative also fits with some aspects of the claim of a Sant tradition. It is beyond the scope of the current analysis to examine the empirical foundations of this narrative of colonial-era religion-making for the Sikhs, one which allows for diversity but also attempts at establishing boundaries. What is of interest here is the subtext of the Indic. The normative position associated with this narrative is quite explicitly aligned with what one might consider a modern, liberal sensibility. For example, the post-colonial situation is at odds with “the Sikh tradition’s rich, plural, and inclusive past.”<sup>84</sup> Colonial-era reformers were “ideologues [who] employed Protestant categories of Christian missionaries to redefine Sikh concepts. As such, modern Sikhism became a well-defined ‘system’ based on a unified tradition.”<sup>85</sup> This framing is what appeals to scholars who want to posit a cozy cosmopolitanism that should be the norm for migrant outsiders (Leonard, 2007).<sup>86</sup> This narrative, aimed at one audience, fits readily into another, “This concept of unity, like Abrahamic religions, is alien to Indic faiths.”<sup>87</sup> In a nutshell, the framings of a colonial-era rupture in Sikh tradition, all involving a foreshortened (and arguably selective) view of its history, present a choice between two forms of intellectual subalternity for contemporary Sikhs. Post-colonial Sikhs have lost their liberal pluralism, whether that was rooted in the Indic or some other, unspecified, sensibility of cosmopolitanism.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Singh, “Guru Nanak.”

<sup>82</sup> Juergensmeyer, “The Radhasoami.”

<sup>83</sup> Oberoi, *The Construction*.

<sup>84</sup> Singh, “Re-imagining,” 27.

<sup>85</sup> Pashaura Singh, How Avoiding the Religion–Politics Divide Plays out in Sikh Politics, *Religions*, 10 (5) (2019): 13; <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10050296>.

<sup>86</sup> Leonard, “Transnationalism.” This is not to revert to the position that tradition must be uncontested and homogeneous. As Murphy, “Allegories,” 63, puts it in critiquing Oberoi, there is danger in “nostalgia for a lost and idyllic past - whether it be ‘syncretic’ or ‘pure’.”

<sup>87</sup> Sanjeev Nayyar, “Is Modern day Sikhism a Colonial Construct?” *eSamskriti*, December 13, 2019. <https://www.esamskriti.com/e/History/Indian-History/Is-Modern-day-Sikhism-a-Colonial-Construct--1.aspx>.

<sup>88</sup> The argument being made here is not controverted by the fact that conflict with neo-Hindu movements in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Punjab was a strong

Either way, they are framed as intellectually subaltern. Their lack of voice to contest this position is itself a product of inequalities of power, so one kind of subalternity engenders another.

### *Conclusion*

The argument presented here has been about an intellectual subalternization of Sikh tradition(s) in a particular academic sphere. The claim is that an exaggerated and over-simplified narrative of Sikhs' interactions with colonialism and modernity has dominated recent scholarship. In particular, this narrative neglects the agency of Sikh masses (subalterns), instead focusing on elite actions. Alternative interpretations of Sikh history and tradition that do not accept this dominant framework have received much less scholarly attention (as measured, say, by citation counts), which can be attributed to an inequality of power in the particular academic arena in question. The hidden sources of power come from the appealing frame of liberalism and pluralism, shared across a range of intellectual currents, both modern and post-modern. Orientalist tropes also continue to be present. Less obviously, some of the framings used by Hindu nationalists fit well with the claim of colonial-era rupture in the Sikh tradition. Murphy brings this out in a broader frame:<sup>89</sup>

“As cultural critics in the U.S. have made clear, the ‘melting pot’ of U.S. multi-cultural society has also been assimilationist, involving the encouraged and sometimes forced shedding of identity, community affiliation, and the like. As van der Veer [1994] notes, this same dynamic is a feature of valorization of the syncretic in India, as ‘this tolerant and pluralistic spirit of India is essentially Hindu.’ This, unfortunately, is the other side of a happy tale of syncretism and ‘hybridity’: the denial of articulated Khalsa (and other) identities (with an emphasis on the plural), and an erasure of the cultural dynamics of difference (with all

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motivator for Sikh reformers in this period (Jones, *Arya Dharm*). In fact, it reinforces the visibility of the hand of the Indic. In this context, the claim that attempts to strengthen the formation “Hindu” (or, alternatively, Brahman, using Romila Thapar’s distinction between Brahman and Śraman traditions: see Romila Thapar, “Imagined religious communities? Ancient history and the modern search for a Hindu identity,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 23 (2) (1989): 209-231) were a novel phenomenon and a unique product of colonialism seems to be at odds with history: see Frank Usarski, “Facets of the relationship between Buddhism and Hinduism: Interview with Perry Schmidt-Leukel,” *Revista de Estudos da Religião*, September (2007): 157-164.

<sup>89</sup> Murphy, “Allegories,” 64.

of their problems). This is indeed a dangerous route to take”.

Challenging a particular account of the heterogeneous Sikh interaction with colonialism does not imply accepting traditional narratives that take a particular normative stance, nor claiming that any historical account represents stable truth. Methodologically, “all versions of the past deserve an equal measure of critique in order to understand the intellectual as well as material interests that drive them.”<sup>90</sup> In this paper, an attempt was made to provide an account of Sikh history that was stripped of as many normative claims and interpretations as possible, to make the point that, rather than a neglect of consciousness of boundaries or a fuzzy fluidity, self-identification involved drawing boundaries for the community, however contested.<sup>91</sup> This contestation is an ongoing process, with many debates that began in the 17<sup>th</sup> century continuing to the present day.

As indicated earlier in this paper, a key aspect of all these debates is the nature and degree differentiation from Hindu metaphysical thought and social practices associated with that conglomeration, with both being intertwined, of course. The legal and political innovations of colonial rule certainly required greater attention to clarity of boundaries in dimensions that might have been less important earlier, although pre-colonial reform movements (the Nirankaris and Namdharis) had sought sharper delineation based on what they saw as consistency with the Sikh Gurus’ teachings. An interesting example of the complexities of boundary definition was the intense debate over Ambedkar’s plan to convert his followers to another religion. One possible reason for preferring Sikhism over Christianity or Islam was apparently, that “According to Ambedkar, if the untouchables converted to Sikhism, they would leave the Hindu religion but not Hindu culture.”<sup>92</sup>

Many of the complexities of beliefs and practices and their role in constructing boundaries for the Sikh tradition are beyond the scope of this paper. However, ideas of social justice and inclusiveness are present in the writings of Guru Nanak, his successors, and the *bhagats* included in the GGS. These ideas

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<sup>90</sup> Ethan Kleinberg (individual communication, 2022): I am grateful to him for this observation on an earlier version of the paper, although he is absolved of all responsibility for remaining shortcomings in this iteration. Ethan Kleinberg, *Haunting History: For a Deconstructive Approach to the Past* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017) lays out this theoretical position in depth.

<sup>91</sup> Chann, “*Rahit* Literature;” Gill, “The Works.”

<sup>92</sup> Rohit Wanchoo, “The Question of Dalit Conversion in the 1930s,” *Studies in History*, 36 (2) (2020): 206–229.

presumably contributed to lower status Hindus becoming followers of the Gurus, at least as early as the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Conflict with the Mughal empire added a posture of militant resistance to oppression, and this is combined with social equality in the framing of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh. While many Sikhs balked at losing social status and the connection to their larger clan groupings,<sup>93</sup> there is no question that the Khalsa initiation was a radical move in favor of social equality, which has continued to influence the Sikh imagination.<sup>94</sup>

In terms of the original idea of the subaltern, in the context of those in positions of subordination, this aspect of the history of the Sikh tradition, in its attempts to overcome the inequalities of caste and to oppose the unjust exercise of political power, is consistent with a subaltern sensibility, and consistent with Gramsci's original framing, as well as the Subaltern Studies group's development of his ideas. It certainly antedates colonialism.<sup>95</sup> At the same time, as in the case of any other

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<sup>93</sup> See Hardip Singh Syan, "Debating Revolution: Early eighteenth century Sikh public philosophy on the formation of the Khalsa," *Modern Asian Studies*, 48 (4) (2014): 1096-1133. The accurate term here would be *biradari*, theoretically the exogamous subdivisions of the endogamous *got*, itself a subdivision of the broader concept of *jati*, and from there leading to the classical *varnas*, which are referenced in the GGS. For an analysis of how *biradaris* worked in practice among Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs under the rule of Ranjit Singh, see Charles Joseph Hall, Jr., *The Maharaja's Account Books. State and Society Under the Sikhs: 1799-1849*. PhD Dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1981.

<sup>94</sup> Historians have differed with respect to the degree to which the Khalsa represented (to use the currently fashionable term) a "rupture" in Sikh tradition, e.g., Gokul Chand Narang, *Transformation of Sikhism*, 5th edition (New Delhi: New Book Society of India, 1960); and Niharranjan Ray, *The Sikh Gurus and the Sikh Society: A Study in Social Analysis*, 2nd edition (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1975). Another aspect of the Khalsa identity, one which extends to many Sikhs who are not formally initiated, is the idea of standing up for justice for all. This has traveled through time and continents, and is visible in how (at least some) contemporary Sikhs see themselves. For example, a recent news story about a young Sikh American with long hair and turban, and his challenges in participating fully in US society quotes him as saying, "To me, the whole reason we look different is so we stick out and can be a pillar of support for people in need." See Simran Jeet Singh, "Samrath Singh, first turbaned Sikh to play NCAA baseball, is more than the challenges he has overcome," *Religion New Service: Articles of Faith*, August 5, 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/08/05/samrath-singh-first-turbaned-sikh-to-play-ncaa-baseball-is-more-than-the-challenges-he-has-overcome/>. More strongly, for some Sikhs, the Khalsa is the mystical embodiment of the Guru: for example, see Fenech, "The Khalsa," 241.

<sup>95</sup> Rahuldeep Singh Gill, "Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition, Reflections on the 550th Anniversary of Guru Nanak's Birth," presentation at Institute for South Asian Studies, UC Berkeley, November 14, 2019 available at *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* (Fall 2023) 22:2



religious tradition, there are numerous examples of deviations from this ideal, both in detailed formulations and in practice, with respect to caste and gender, in particular, but also when members of the Khalsa achieve political power.<sup>96</sup> Continued heterogeneity in beliefs and practices, and vigorous debates among Sikhs, are enough evidence to question the claim of a “monolithic closed culture,” but the main point to be made here goes beyond assessing a particular narrative of the past.

What is common among many of the different narratives of the colonial period, as well as its antecedents, is a pattern of viewing the evolution of the Sikh tradition as largely a function of elite manipulation. This is a conventional approach to history, in which leaders dominate the determinants of how events unfold. Of course, traditional religious accounts represent this model even more strongly. What has gone unremarked in assessing recent scholarship on the Sikhs is that elites are given a similar dominant role in these narratives. There is little acknowledgement of the agency of members of the community, or else they are viewed as pliant or susceptible or even dupes. At this very basic level, Sikh studies has not incorporated the lessons of Subaltern Studies, despite the Sikh tradition having, as we have argued, significant subaltern sensibilities. Arguably, this assessment is an illustration of one of Spivak’s original perspectives on unequal power in various academic institutional structures.<sup>97</sup>

Recent events arguably bear out the agency of the Sikh masses. In 2020-21, massive farmer protests rocked India, in response to what was perceived as threatening legislative changes in the regulation of agricultural markets. These protests featured a large proportion of Sikhs. The farmers were articulating their fear of monopoly capital, domestic as well as global, and their anger at a government that is aligned with those sources of power.<sup>98</sup> What was striking was how songs of protest

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[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HR5k-cw44nI&ab\\_channel=IsasDepartmental](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HR5k-cw44nI&ab_channel=IsasDepartmental).

<sup>96</sup> Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks*.

<sup>97</sup> Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

<sup>98</sup> This example connects closely to the underpinnings of the use of the term subaltern, in a context of material conditions and unequal social relations, as in Chibber’s critique of postcolonial theory’s treatment of subalternity in its narrative of South Asian history (Chibber, *Postcolonial*). As background, Sikh peasants enjoyed a few decades of relative material prosperity with the success of the so-called green revolution in the 1960s. When Punjab was the most well-off state in India, the idea of subaltern status might have seemed incongruous. However, inadequate water supplies were looming just a few years later. The system that has evolved in the past decades has left (mostly Sikh) peasants in the region in a state of precarity, without easy alternatives. Punjab’s material prosperity has lagged, even as it faces environmental disaster: Nirvikar Singh,

that emerged used historical analogies from the 18<sup>th</sup> century Khalsa period, in which the oppressed stands up to the oppressor.<sup>99</sup> The teachings of the Sikh Gurus were evoked as justification. The language used was Punjabi and there was no intellectual framing of orthodoxy or Protestant ethics. At the same time, the protests were heavily sustained by Sikh community kitchens, free health care, and other ways of self-consciously performing Sikh ideals of service. All of this was in contrast to the views of the Sikh masses in the studies considered earlier in the paper.

There are two additional, deeper, layers of critique that emerge from the analysis. First, Subaltern Studies typically focuses on material conditions and instrumental motives, but religious movements have also been treated in this context.<sup>100</sup> One does not have to go as far as, for example, Dipesh Chakravarty, and choose between two different kinds of approaches to history, analytical vs. affective, in considering religious or religion-based social movements.<sup>101</sup> Religion is not a *sui generis* category, and can be certainly treated as one kind of cultural formation.<sup>102</sup> However, one can also recognize that it has some distinctive features in terms of affect and consciousness. Many of the studies considered here fail to engage with this aspect of religion, implicitly treating it as inferior to more generic ideals of universalism and pluralism.<sup>103</sup> Indeed in the studies

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"Breaking the Mould: Thoughts on Punjab's Future Economic Development," in *Economic Transformation and Development Experience of Indian Punjab*, Lakhwinder Singh and Nirvikar Singh, eds. (Singapore: Springer, 2016): 451-466. The peasants may still be better off than their compatriots elsewhere in India, but they face devastation once the groundwater table declines a little further. Note that the farmers who died during the protests, from a variety of causes, were not large landholders – their average holding was under 3 acres: Vivek Gupta, "Most Farmers Who Died at Delhi's Borders Owned Less Than 3 Acres Land: Study," *The Wire*, November 7, 2021, <https://thewire.in/agriculture/most-farmers-who-died-at-delhis-borders-owned-less-than-3-acres-land-study>.

<sup>99</sup> *Sikh Research Journal*, Songs and Poems of the Farmers' Protests, 6 (1) (2021): 139-159.

<sup>100</sup> Partha Chatterjee, Caste and Subaltern Consciousness, in *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Ranajit Guha, ed. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989): 169-209.

<sup>101</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>102</sup> Russell T McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>103</sup> In a different context, Saba Mahmood reflects on critical theory's reluctance to engage with "religion's metaphysical and epistemological commitments." See Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, *Is critique secular?: blasphemy, injury, and free speech* (New York: Fordham Univ Press, 2013): 91, and her piece is pointedly titled, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?"

critiqued here, there is little or no engagement with Sikh religious teachings, what they reveal about the Sikh past, or how they shaped that past.<sup>104</sup>

The third and final layer of subalternization can be considered as an example of a more general problem, as described by Russell McCutcheon, that of a “cleverly disguised paternal strategy that enables scholars to portray themselves as being in solidarity with the Other while retaining the right not only to distinguish Others from other Others but also to inform both groups where their stories ought to start and end.”<sup>105</sup> Judge uses this quote to contextualize the “invisible hand of the Indic.”<sup>106</sup> What is argued in the current paper also goes beyond a general lack of humility of scholars to postulate a specific combination of power and inequalities at work in the intellectual arena where the Sikh narrative is now being contested and seemingly shaped.<sup>107</sup> Within the academy, Sikh traditions are implicitly subalternized to multiple sources of power, in ways that are yet to be fully excavated. This paper offers a beginning to a project of excavation, but without retreating to unquestioned acceptance of tradition, and without claiming to offer any incontestable truth.

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<sup>104</sup> Again, Grewal, *The Sikhs*, is a major exception to this lacuna, though relatively unacknowledged in the studies critiqued in this paper.

<sup>105</sup> Russell T McCutcheon, “‘It’s a Lie. There’s No Truth in It! It’s a Sin!’: On the Limits of the Humanistic Study of Religion and the Costs of Saving Others from Themselves,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74 (3) (2006): 744.

<sup>106</sup> Judge, “The Invisible Hand.”

<sup>107</sup> Going back to the issue of the claim that there was a “Sant” tradition in which Guru Nanak must be placed, McLeod uses the devices of academic power by asserting that those who disagree with him do so because of religious devotion – this assertion attempts to preempt the very idea that his claim can be subject to legitimate scholarly questioning: Wystan Hewat McLeod, *Sikhism* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997): 101.