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Sikh Sovereignty: The Relentless Battle for Khalistan

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Author

Mundi, Harkirat

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Dr.
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Dr. Richard Cardullo, Howard H Hays Jr. Chair, University Honors

Abstract

Table of Contents

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Khalsa Akhbar | 2-5 |
| Sikh Sovereignty: The Relentless Battle for Khalistan | 6 |
| Origins of Sikh Sovereignty | 7 |
| The Right to Khalistan | 11 |
| Anti-Colonial Nationalism | 14 |
| Subaltern Studies..... | 17 |
| Conclusions | 19 |
| References | 22 |

KHALSA AKHBAR

100th ANNIVERSARY OF JALLIANWALA BAGH MASSACRE

Silence from Britain as the anniversary of Jallianwala Bagh massacre approaches

Balwinder Kaur

On April 13th, 1919, The British army, under the command of Colonel Reginald Dyer, shot at thousands of protesting Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims gathered at Jallianwala Bagh for Vaisakhi, the day the Khalsa was established by Guru Gobind Singh Ji in 1699. Many have pushed for a formal apology from Britain. Former Prime Minister David Cameron, although visiting the site of the attack in 2013, did not issue an apology, but said that it took place before he was born and so there was no need to “reach back into history and seek out things to apologize for.” Earlier this month, MP Bob Blackman called on current Prime Minister Theresa May to formally apologize. She expressed “deep regret” but did not officially apologize.



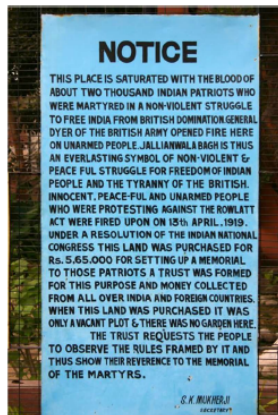
Current Jallianwala Bagh “Flame of Liberty” Memorial

Honoring Punjab’s dead with a monument built from its soil

Kartar Singh

2019 marks 100 years since the British army opened fire upon civilians without warning at Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar, home to Hamandir Sahib (Golden Temple). The British fired for ten minutes and exhausted all ammunition, at the end of which 379 lay dead according to the British, but up to 1,526 casualties according to the Punjab Police. Families of victims are still angry about the British count, which they charge downplays the gravity of the event. To pay respect to the victim’s families and honor the lives lost, the government of Punjab has plans to erect a new monument made from the soil of all 13,000 of its villages. It is meant not only to remind the state of its colonial past but to recognize the contribution of those villages in the fight for independence from the British.

Etched with the Ashoka Chakra national emblem, the current “Flame of Liberty” monument was built in 1961, post-independence, under the direction of American architect Benjamin Polk and unveiled by Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the first president of the Republic of India. The Department of Rural Development will work with each village’s council and oversee the collection of the soil for the new monument, which will not be located near the current monument, though its site has yet to be determined. The Department of Cultural Affairs and Tourism is developing the design of the monument with the help of the Arts and Cultural Heritage Trust. However, some question the need for another memorial, and there have been accusations made against the Jallianwala Bagh National Memorial Trust (JBNMT) of mismanagement of funds and neglect of the current site’s upkeep.



Jallianwala Bagh Commemorative Plaque

IN THIS ISSUE

**JAGTAR SINGH
JOHAL**

**DARSHANI DEORI
DESECRATION**

**JALLIANWALA
BAGH**

Jagtar Singh (Jaggi) Johal and the crisis of Sikh political prisoners

The Indian government incarcerates indefinitely to contain the Sangarsh.

Jaswant Singh

On November 4th, 2017, while shopping on the streets of Jalandhar, Punjab, Jagtar Singh Johal, a Scottish citizen, was kidnapped in broad daylight by the Indian security forces disguised in plain clothes. His new bride and cousin were witnesses, and claimed the men threw a sack over Jaggi's head and threw him into a van before driving off. There was initially no clear justification for his arrest. His family suspects that his Sikh activism and website 'neverforget84.com,' which is no longer active, are behind his violent arrest and detention. The website includes information about the state-led 1984 Genocide, a source of ongoing tension between Sikhs and the Indian government. The National Investigation Agency (NIA) is now implicating Jaggi in high-profile murder cases against politicians and has him detained in Punjab. Johal has faced 83 pre-trials and 20 trial hearings that all concluded with no verdict or were dismissed because of lack of evidence or falsified evidence. His lawyer states that Jaggi has passed him a letter making claims of mental and physical torture and that threats against his family have been made as well. It also states that Jaggi has been denied medical attention. He intends to use this to ask the British government to intervene on Jaggi's behalf. March 18th marked his 500th day in detention. The #FreeJaggiNow campaign has taken social media by storm, sparking riots for justice in nations across the world with a Sikh population. Sikhs, especially men, have been charged in increasing numbers in recent years with conspiracy against the government of India and disruption of civil life. Theresa May stated in 2017 that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office were actively "pursuing the case with concern and will take action if necessary." The Foreign Office Minister of the Scottish National Party has also expressed concern, but both have yet to take official action.



Babu Surat Singh Khalsa
(currently on strike in Punjab)



Jagtar Singh Hawara (Jathedar of Akal Takhat)

Appointed Jathedar (leader) of the Akal Takhat during the Sarbat Khalsa on November 10th, 2015, Jagtar Singh Hawara remains imprisoned for life in Tihar Jail in New Delhi. Bhai Dhyani Singh Mand has been appointed acting Jathedar. The Sarbat Khalsa, held in Gurdwara Baba Naudh Singh in Amritsar, Sikhs in attendance resolved that Sikh political prisoners should be freed immediately and unconditionally, along with others linked to independence movements in India, such as the Kashmiris and Nagas. Sikhs at the Sarbat Khalsa also declared India responsible for Babu Surat Singh's health, which has continued to worsen as he has maintained his hunger strike in the four years since the Sarbat Khalsa, which he began in 2015 to protest what he calls the inhumane treatment and the illegal detention of Sikhs. In the past, the government justified their actions by citing the 1985 Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, which granted law enforcement free reign to detain anyone suspected of terrorism or "socially disruptive activities." This act was deemed controversial due to provisions with numerous human rights violations and has since been repealed. The government now cites the Indian Penal Code (IPC), which includes provisions against sedition and terror. In one 9 month period in 2017, at least 52 Sikhs were arrested for violations of the IPC. According to Amrinder Singh, the current Congress Chief Minister of Punjab, 18 Sikh prisoners have been permanently released and those with long-term sentences have been released on temporary parole, but this is only a fraction of the Sikhs who have been detained, most of whom have served the full term of their sentences but nevertheless remain in custody.



Jagtar Singh Johal (currently held in Tihar Jail)

Sikh men face life imprisonment for possessing literature on Sikh history

Sundar Singh

Arvinder Singh, Surjit Singh, and Ranjit Singh (pictured below), all under the age of 30, were arrested in January under section 121 and 121A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). The Nawansher court convicted them on both counts in "waging war against the state" and "preparing to wage war against the state," finding them guilty of possessing "incriminating literature" that could "demolish the unity and integrity of India." An anonymous tip was given to a Senior Investigator (SI) on patrol duty in Rahon on May 24th, 2016 that Arvinder Singh, supposedly a member of Babbar Khalsa International (BKI), had returned to India 7-8 months earlier after traveling abroad and was attempting to recruit people to join the what the government alleges is a terrorist organization. Surjit Singh and Ranjit Singh were arrested after posting images with Khalistan slogans during Holla Mahalla at Anandpur Sahib. The three were sentenced to serve consecutive sentences: life in prison with a fine of 100,000 rupees under section 121 and "rigorous imprisonment" of 10 years with a fine of 25,000 rupees under 121A. The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act was also cited in the charges but was dropped for a lack of proper sanction. The men possessed literature on Sikh history, some of which related to Operation Bluestar, which security forces claimed could be used to fight the state for Khalistan, an independent Sikh state. They also had pictures of martyrs from the Amritsar Massacre in 1978. In total, 97 books, 198 photographs, and 1000 books in connection with Sukhdev Singh Babbar, the leader of BKI, were recovered. The government deems the members of this group "terrorists," so possession of material linked to it is a crime. Sikhs have protested their arrest in front of the Indian High Commission in London, calling it a violation of their right to free speech.



Tarn Taran Sahib's Darshani Deori Destroyed by Karsewa Seminary Reconstruction becomes a debate about preservation versus renovation.

Bharpur Singh

On the night of March 30th, the Karsewa Seminary, headed by Baba Jagtar Singh, demolished the historic Darshani Deori (main entrance gate) of Darbar Sahib, Tarn Taran. Singh justified his action by claiming the 200 year-old gate was "deteriorating." The Seminary had planned to take it down in September 2018, having obtained permission from the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), which represents the political body of the Sikhs globally, but did not go through with it because of local Sikh opposition and protests. Locals were suspicious that the demolition began late in the day as if to avoid attracting attention. Local Sikhs began to protest and spread the word internationally, leading to a demand for a judicial inquiry.

Karam Singh Bhoian, the leader of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), began a sit-in strike, in addition to submitting a memorandum to the Tarn Taran Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) to press charges against the Karsewa Seminary. Bhoian also demanded the right to rebuild the Deori himself. The SGPC has denied giving permission despite giving demolition permission to the seminary. The SGPC is being investigated by Gurmeet Sangha Rai, the officiating president for India's National Council on Monuments and Sites, because it had allegedly signed contracts with Karsewa without consulting the Council, which is charged with preserving significant historical sites. The Deori was first constructed in the 1800s by Naunihal Singh, the grandson of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

Of special concern to some in the Sikh community is the fact the gate was constructed with nanakshahi bricks, which date back to the early 20th century and are now rare. 'Karsewa' is a Sikh tradition of performing voluntary and selfless service, in this case, where Sikhs, not the secular state, were to construct or rebuild religious structures through the funding and effort of the community. The Akal Takhat Sahib, for example, was built through karsewa. The Karsewa Seminary excludes the Sikh community in Punjab and abroad from its decision-making and it has been accused of a lack of transparency in the collecting and spending of funds. Other religious structures, such as the Thanda Burj, where Mata Gujri and the Chote Sahibzade were imprisoned, and the home of Bebe Nanaki in Sultanpur Lodhi, were also demolished by order of the Seminary.



Darshani Deori demolition.

The Ongoing Desecration of Guru Granth Sahib across Punjab

Jarnail Singh

The saroops of Guru Granth Sahib Ji have been repeatedly damaged since the 1970s. Their angas have been burned, tom up, and thrown in the streets, landing in dirt, wells, and open drains. The saroops were stolen from gurdwaras by people allegedly told to do so by the Indian government. The Nirankaris, a controversial, heterodox sect of Sikhi, were notorious for sacrilege during this decade. Since 1943, their third "Guru," Gurbachan Singh, stepped on a saroop and called it a "bundle of papers" and a "bulky miscellany." He also publicly defamed the Sikh Gurus and their bani, Sikh history and principles, and the Sikh code of conduct.

Enraged by these acts, mainstream Sikhs clashed with the Nirankaris, resulting in the Amritsar Massacre in 1978. Another series of desecrations took place beginning in June 2015, the most recent in 2018. In October 2015, an incident on the streets of Bargari in Faridkot was reported, sparking Sikh protests, which became violent when the Punjab police tried to stop them, resulting in 2 dead and 60 injured. This event led to the 2015 Sarbat Khalsa, where Sikhs as a collective body passed resolutions to address this issue and other grievances. The Punjab police estimates over 100 cases of sacrilege in the past four years, and it has been claimed that some involved the police themselves.

The Indian Penal Code (Punjab Amendment) Bill 2018 regarding sacrilege states that anyone who is guilty of "injury, damage, or sacrilege against the Guru Granth Sahib, the Quran, Srimad Bhagwad Gita, or the Bible with the intention to hurt the religious feelings of the people" will face life imprisonment. Despite this recent amendment and ongoing investigations by the Justice Zora Singh Commission, no one has been formally charged. Recent developments in the case point to the involvement of Parkash Singh Badal, the former Chief Minister of Punjab, and his son Sukhbir Singh Badal. They are alleged to have conspired with Dera Sacha Sauda.

PAGE 3

OPINION

What has changed since the days of the Rowlatt Act?

Gulab Kaur

In the days leading up to the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, the Rowlatt Act, also known as the Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act of 1919, was passed in March by the Imperial Legislative Council in Delhi. Indians preferred calling it the Black Act/Bills because of its repressive nature. It allowed the British Raj to indefinitely extend emergency wartime measures of preventive detention and incarcerate those suspected of conspiracy or terrorism without trial for up to 2 years. This Act, passed on the recommendation of British judge Sir Sidney Rowlatt, was meant to curtail the rise of nationalism and independence movements in India. Michael O'Dwyer, the Lieutenant Governor of Punjab, who was also in fear of an uprising, supported the Act. Under the command of Reginald Dyer, the army set an unannounced curfew on the day of Vaisakhi, banning any sort of assembly or protest after becoming aware of a one-day hartal (strike) called for by Gandhi at the Bagh to challenge the Act. Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus gathered to do so and to challenge the arrest of two Sikh leaders who had helped organize the hartal, Dr. Satya Pal and Dr. Kitchlew. Hearing about masses gathered at the Bagh, on April 13th Dyer immediately intervened with troops, blocking the main entrance and all other exit routes to trap people in the garden. He then ordered his troops to fire continuously and directly into the crowd without warning and until their ammunition was exhausted. This lasted about 10 minutes. Unarmed members of the crowd tried to flee, and some even jumped to their deaths in the Bagh's well. On March 30th, 1940, Udham Singh, now regarded as a Sikh hero, shot and killed O'Dwyer in a London court for his role in the massacre. Ironically, General Dyer was given a sword inscribed with the motto "Savior of the Punjab" by the House of Lords, even though most Punjabis do not view him as such. Many believe this was reprised with Operation Bluestar in June 1984, with the Indian government in the role the British had played. Like the British, the government has used sometimes violent tactics to silence Sikhs and has sought to cover up that fact.

Several inside sources recount that Indira Gandhi had planned this attack in 1982, 2 years before it even happened, claiming a model of the Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) was constructed to lay out a visual plan for the attack and block the entrances and exits just as Dyer had in 1919, which would maximize the loss of life. Leading up to the army intervention in Darbar Sahib, a media blackout was enforced and all flights leaving the country were halted on June 1st, just days before Bluestar began. On June 3rd, Sikhs far and wide came to commemorate the martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev Ji. People were let in but not allowed back out because the army had blocked the exits. On June 4th, the army fired on those in the Golden Temple complex and in 38 surrounding gurdwaras. The shooting continued intermittently for four days. Four months later, on October 31st, Indira Gandhi's two Sikh bodyguards, Beant Singh and Satwant Singh, assassinated Gandhi in revenge for Bluestar. Although the Rowlatt Act was repealed in 1922, it has set a precedent for corruption in the Indian political system. India has been an independent nation since 1947, but its citizens are still feeling the effects of two centuries of British occupation, especially religious minorities. The symptoms of colonial rule, in which the colonizer controls the lives of the colonized through social, political, and economic means, are difficult to cure, as they involve an erasure of traditions at odds with the secular values of western modernity. Today, India has been reconceived as a Hindu state. Marx and other radical thinkers argued more than a century ago that the ideas of the ruling class become the ruling ideas because the state spreads and enforces them, since it controls the mainstream media and public education, as well as the military and police. The tactics of violence and cultural genocide have been used by the British pre-independence and the Indian government post-independence in the name of national unity and peace. So what has changed since the Rowlatt Act? Just the hands that hold the gun which remain pointed at the oppressed.



Jallianwala Bagh Massacre (April 1919)

ਸੁਣੋ ਨੰਦ ਲਾਲ ਏਹੋ ਸਾਚ

“Listen, Nand Lal, this is the veracity,

ਪਰਗਟ ਕਰਾਉਂ ਆਪਣੇ ਰਾਜ ॥ (੫੬)

Through which (I) reveal my sovereignty. (56)

ਚਾਰ ਬਰਨ ਇਕ ਬਰਨ ਕਰਾਉਂ

All the four castes, (I) blend into one caste,

ਵਾਹਿਗੁਰੂ ਕਾ ਜਾਪ ਜਪਾਉ ॥ (੫੭)

And popularize the worship of Waheguru. (57)

ਚੜ੍ਹ੍ਹੈ ਤੁਰੰਗ ਉੜਾਵੈ ਬਾਜ

They will mount the horse and fly the falcon,

ਤੁਰਕ ਦੇਖ ਕਰ ਜਾਵੈ ਭਾਜ ॥ (੫੮)

Seeing them as such, Turks (enemies) will flee. (58)

ਸਵਾ ਲਾਖ ਸੇ ਏਕ ਲੜਾਉਂ

(I will) make the one combat a hundred and twenty-five thousand.

ਚੜ੍ਹ੍ਹੈ ਸਿੰਘ ਤਸਿ ਮੁਕਤ ਕਰਾਉਂ ॥ (੫੯)

The Sikh proceeding thus, will be emancipated. (59)

ਝੁਲਣ ਨੇਜੇ ਹਸਤੀ ਸਾਜੇ

The spears wave and the elephants are decorated,

ਦੁਆਰ ਦੁਆਰ ਪਰ ਨੌਬਤ ਬਾਜੇ ॥ (੬੦)

At every door the victory drums beat. (60)

ਸਵਾ ਲਾਖ ਜਬ ਧੁਖੈ ਪਲੀਤਾ

When a hundred and twenty-five thousand fireworks sparkle,

ਤਬ ਖਾਲਸਾ ਉਦੈ ਅਸਤ ਲੋ ਜੀਤਾ ॥ (੬੧)

Then assume that, Khalsa has attained victory. (61)

– Guru Gobind Singh (Tankhahnama, 13-14)

The above stanzas are taken from *Tankhahnama*, written by Bhai Nand Lal, who was an Arabic and Persian poet, one of fifty-two poets chosen by Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru, in the early eighteenth century to share their work with the community¹. *Tankhahnama*, a religious penal code for Sikhs, is in the form of a conversation between Bhai Nand Lal and Guru Gobind Singh. Bhai Nand Lal asked, “Which deed is ethical, and which is unethical?” Guru Gobind Singh answered by outlining specific practices that a Sikh should not engage in and the punishments for violating the rules. This code also touches on a few main practices that a Sikh should follow, such as meditating on *naam*, but a stronger focus is put on what a Sikh should abstain from. The Guru ended the dialogue with the above stanzas that highlight the ways in which he would establish his sovereignty, and it is in this text that he discusses just actions that also promote Sikh sovereignty: advocating a rejection of the caste system, forging Sikhs so effective through *miri-piri* and *sant-sipahi*, maintaining a balance between spirituality and worldly affairs, that each could defeat 125,000 enemies, like the Turks, and propagating the name of *Waheguru*, the name of God. In this way, Guru Gobind Singh detailed concrete ways to challenge the status quo and transform the tyrannical rule of the Mughals under Aurangzeb (1658-1707) into Sikh self-sovereignty and equality.

Origins of Sikh Sovereignty

Guru Gobind Singh was only further institutionalizing the universal message of equality and *patishahi*, or sovereignty which Guru Nanak Dev had already established in 1469. Sikhi, from its inception, was declared a sovereign religion by Guru Nanak Dev, as written in *Ramkali Ki Vaar* by bards Satta and Balwand, wherein he “established the kingdom” and “built the true

¹ Guru Gobind Singh invited 52 poets, scholars, and scribes from various religious and cultural backgrounds to showcase their compositions in Kavi Darbars; he also assigned some to scribal work. For further explanation see, “52 Court Poets of Guru Gobind Singh.” *52 Court Poets of Guru Gobind Singh - SikhiWiki, Free Sikh Encyclopedia.*, Dec. 2012, www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/52_court_poets_of_Guru_Gobind-_Singh.

fortress on the strongest foundations” (Guru Granth Sahib [GGS], 966). In other words, he constructed Sikhi so strong in its foundations in truth that it would not succumb to the rule of another, a key aspect of sovereignty. Sovereignty entails an “indisputable right to a freedom of expression,” in this case, of a unique belief system and divine values through which Guru Nanak envisioned freeing humanity of its oppression (Singh, Pashaura, 2). There are several anecdotes about Guru Nanak Dev in the *Janamsakhis*, a biography of his life, and they all generally reflect his life’s mission to spread the name of God and uplift the downtrodden who suffer from subjugation at the hands of the ruling elite.

Based on the examples set by Guru Nanak, sovereignty thus requires equality because all people should be treated with the same respect and dignity. Despite growing up in a Hindu Kshatriya family, he created a new religion that asserted the equality of humanity, even if it meant breaking age-old traditions and laws. He was not only opposed to the ruling Mughal empire and its laws but also challenged many Hindu practices as cited in the *Janamsakhis*. For example, he rejected wearing the *janeu*, which in Hinduism symbolizes the boy’s transition to adulthood in the Guru caste. This simple yet revolutionary act changed the way people thought about their relation to one another, because it questioned Brahman power dynamics and privilege. Each of the subsequent ten gurus, including the current Guru, the Guru Granth Sahib, have reiterated the point to defend the sovereignty of all Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike. It is only if an egalitarian society is established that people can be sovereign within the limits that equality requires.

Guru Hargobind, the sixth Guru, emphasized Guru Nanak’s teachings through the concept of *miri-piri*, a balance between temporal and spiritual matters. Also referred to as “double sovereignty,” *miri-piri* was born when Guru Hargobind first wore two swords, *Miri* and

Piri (Singh, K). *Miri-piri* was physically manifested in the form of the Akal Takhat Sahib, the “highest temporal authority” of Sikh governance, established by Guru Hargobind in the early seventeenth century (Singh, Patwant, 39). The Takhat itself carries historical and spiritual significance, as it is the first of five Takhats, or “royal thrones,” present throughout India, including Damdama Sahib in Talwandi Sabo, Kesgarh Sahib in Anandpur, Patna Sahib in Patna, and Hazoor Sahib in Nanded (Singh, Partap, 43). Positioned across from Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple), which represents the *miri* (spiritual), the Akal Takhat, meaning the “Almighty’s Throne,” or the “Eternal Throne,” represents the *piri* (temporal), the worldly political authority and justice of Sikhs. It is a political space where Sikhs could address grievances and engage in “communal decision-making” where *hukamname*, or royal orders from the Guru, are also issued to instruct the Sikh population worldwide.

Other ways in which Guru Gobind Singh upheld the teachings of his predecessors include instituting the principle of *sant-sipahi*, or saint-soldier, developing a strong foundation of spirituality (*sant*) and assuming the role of a warrior (*sipahi*) when necessary (Singh, Partap, 43). In addition, Guru created the *dumalla*, or turban, which was worn on the battlefield, but can now be worn as an everyday style. Under Mughal law during the early eighteenth century, it was illegal for a non-Muslim civilian to wear a turban, as it was a mark of royalty (Amit & Joothi). *Dumalla* loosely translates to two turbans, and it is a small turban with another wrapped one on top, making it bigger than a normal turban. This, like the elimination of the *janeu*, helped people view themselves as equals rather than as subservient to those of higher rank. Since then, wearing a turban has become part of the Sikh identity, a reminder of equality and sovereignty to empower future generations. Guru Gobind Singh also introduced the *Nash* Doctrine or the “Five Freedoms” as a means for initiated Sikhs to declare their sovereignty from social and spiritual

constraints. Initiated, or baptized, Sikhs “renounce their *krit nash* (previous occupations) to work for *Akal Purakh*, God; sever their *kul nash* (family ties) to join the family of the Guru; reject their earlier deeds through *dharam nash* to accept the Khalsa; replace *karam nash* (karma) with ‘the Grace’; and erase *bharam nash* (superstitions) for sole belief in God (Friedrich & Singh, 83). These freedoms based Sikh sovereignty and faith in obedience to God rather than to any worldly entity.

In some books, such as *The Sikhs* by Patwant Singh, Sikhi is categorized as a *tisar* panth, a third faith quite different from Hinduism and Islam, the dominant religions of India (5). Whereas Hinduism relies on Brahmanical traditions and Islam relies on sharia law, Sikhi relies on a *rehat maryada*, or code of conduct, based on the creation of a Khalsa in 1699 (Singh, Partap, 43). However, it should be noted that categorizing religions solely based on ideals elaborated in religious or historical texts essentializes them because it ignores the “actual behavior of practitioners,” so a broad analysis of the religion’s episteme, geographical history, and evolving human practices is also necessary (Oberoi, 31). While honing the Sikh identity through the Khalsa, Guru Gobind Singh also created equality among men and women by assigning the last name “Singh” (lion) to all men and “Kaur” (prince/sovereign) to all women. The name Kaur in particular, is significant because it essentially translates to sovereign. This was a deliberate act to uplift the status of otherwise subjugated women in Mughal India, in addition to erasing caste distinctions through the use of last names. In other scholarly texts, Sikhi is considered sovereign through the idea that God or *Akal Purakh* (Eternal One) is the “*Sacha Patishah*” (True Sovereign) of this temporal realm, in which humans are sovereign in so far as they are a creation of *Akal Purakh* (Singh, Pashaura, 2). In other words, people are all created sovereign where they are subject to only God and divine right and wrong, rather than temporal

authorities, regardless of gender, class, caste, or religion because God is a sovereign being and can so ordain it. Thus, all Sikhs believe they have a right to self-determination, and when that right is infringed upon, steps are taken to rectify that.

The Right to Khalistan

Some 30 years after Indian independence had been achieved, the original pluralist vision for India was betrayed by the rise of Hindu nationalism and increasing violence against religious minorities, including Sikhs. Cynthia Mahmood, an American scholar and anthropologist, experienced some of that firsthand because she did her field work while at a research institute in India in the 1980s, some of which concerned Sikhs. She studied tribal conflicts, human collectivity, and how religious and ethnic identities are formed but was later led to the idea that those identities conflicted with one another, as with Buddhists and Hindus. She was later introduced to Sikh-Hindu conflict in Punjab by Sikhs in the United States after hearing about her work. After witnessing the injustices Sikhs were facing in 1983 and 1984, such as the attack on Darbar Sahib, Amritsar known as Operation Bluestar, she decided to pursue the topic and became involved in activism when she could no longer remain dispassionate. Despite threats from the Indian authorities for investigating and speaking out about a highly sensitive and polarizing topic, Mahmood was gang-raped, knifed, and had her legs broken by rogue police officers, which only increased her resolve.

The Khalistan movement beginning in the 1970s and gaining traction in the early 80s stemmed from a nationalist idea for a separate homeland for all Sikhs, wherein they would owe their “primary allegiance to Truth (*sach*) and morality” and “must never submit to the exclusive claim of the secular state to govern their bodies and minds” (Singh, K). Indian authorities have a history of criminalizing dissent, as did the British with the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre in 1919, a

clear example of that, which led to a rise in Sikh political prisoners incarcerated for their resistance. Mahmood explains why Khalistan is necessary in *Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogues with Sikh Militants*, which includes her conversations with Sikh freedom fighters and refugees in the US, Canada, and United Kingdom. She outlines a history of relentless battles fought by Sikhs against oppressors, by sword or pen, and claims that Sikh battles for Khalistan were part of a general backdrop of conflict in India, which gave Sikhs a “historical justification to fear for the future of their religion” as Hindu nationalism developed and intensified (Mahmood, 121).

By 1986, the conflicts had intensified to the point where a Sarbat Khalsa gathering was called at Akal Takhat Sahib where the formal declaration of Khalistan, an independent and autonomous Sikh state, was made (Singh, H 2019). Despite this formal resolution, Khalistan as a whole is a highly contentious topic among Sikhs and Sikh scholars. The term’s denotation, “land of the pure,” derives from the Arabic word *khalis*, meaning pure, which Guru Gobind Singh used to name the *Khalsa* Panth, a brotherhood of initiated Sikhs, in 1699. It established the outward identity of the Sikhs with the 5 Ks, *kes* (unshorn hair), *karha* (iron/steel bracelet), *kirpan* (sword), *kanga* (comb), *kashera* (undergarments), through the *amrit sanchaar*, or baptism ceremony, and a “national status for participants in the Sikh Revolution” by “uniting the Panth and Granth” (Friedrich & Singh, 81). This is where the concept of Guru Granth-Guru Panth was born. It conveyed that the authority lay not only with the Guru and scripture, but also the worldly community, or Panth, and its edicts – the Khalsa, both of which would guide the exercise of Sikh sovereignty.

The *Khalsa* is at the heart of Sikh sovereignty, an idea reiterated by Sikh scholar Rattan Singh Bhangoo in his book *Sri Gur Panth Parkash* (1841) who said, “the *Khalsa* must

be...autonomous and self-respecting...never submitting to the sovereignty of anyone else, except the sovereignty and autonomy of God alone” (Friedrich & Singh, 83). Since the *Khalsa* mainly consisted of converts from low- and middle-class Hindus, the authority Sikhs granted it led to anti-Sikh sentiment among the high-caste Hindus (Friedrich & Singh, 87). As Hindu violence against Sikhs escalated over the 1980s and 1990s, Sikh support for Khalistan grew, becoming a full-fledged nationalist movement. It set a motion for Sikh governance, which had precedents from arguably one of the most influential Sikhs of the twentieth century, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. But so too did resistance to such nationalism on the part of some Sikhs, who favored a pluralist India, rather than nations homogeneous in religion. Master Tara Singh, a Sikh political leader who created the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbhandak Committee (SGPC), was tasked with the job to guide Sikh action during partition. In April 1947, he rejected an offer made by Muhammad Ali Jinnah for a Sikh state comprising areas from the west of Panipat to the east of the left bank of the Ravi River because it fell within the outlined political boundaries of Pakistan (Singh, Partap, 31). Instead he placed implicit faith in the Congress and Hindu majority to integrate Sikhs politically, socially, and economically in India.

Today, however, most disagreement among Sikhs concerns the future of the Panth. According to a 2018 survey done by the Sikh Research Institute involving 1,237 Sikhs in 27 countries around the world, most respondents felt that the Akal Takht Sahib plays an active role in the Panth (63%), influencing both local level Gurdwaras, the Sikh place of worship (52%) as well as the global Sikh world-view (55%). (Singh, H, 26). Another 66% of Sikhs believe the Akal Takhat should be granted the authority to “lead global Sikh affairs,” including education and humanitarian aid, “enforce Sikh principles and decision,” and facilitate Sarbat Khalsa”

(Singh, H, 27). This implies that more than half of Sikhs desire to utilize it for practical and political purposes, as opposed to merely acknowledging its symbolic existence.

Also highlighted in the report by the Sikh Research Institute are ways to bridge the divide between the defined purpose of the Akal Takhat and its utilization for the well-being of the Panth. On the individual level, Sikhs who do not agree with the Akal Takhat's global influence (34%) or those who are unsure (11%) should perhaps shift their mindset to assign more authority to the Takhat and readily accept its *gurmata* (mandates) from *Akal Purakh* (Singh, H, 29). On the institutional level, Sikhs as a collective body should pursue independent governance of the Akal Takhat for the Sikh Panth by Sikhs in order to shift their form of leadership back to the "Gurmat model," one that follows the Guru's wisdom, rather than local gurdwaras exercising power independently of the model (Singh, H, 30). Historically, a Jathedar (leader) was chosen through merit, beginning with Guru Hargobind, but the current Jathedar Jagtar Singh Hawara is serving life in prison. As a result, the Indian government has chosen leaders who do not endorse Khalistan but instead have chosen leaders who failed the pursuit for a Sikh nation at large. For those who are critical of nationalisms of all sorts, given its history of imposing homogenization and necessitating violence, nationalism does have roots in resistance to oppression and promoting equality.

Anti-Colonial Nationalism

Nationalism is an investment in a nation as a body of people with a bounded territory and a shared set of interests. It is determining what these mean that leads to disagreements. Partha Chatterjee, a scholar of subaltern studies (discussed later), addresses nationalism in, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Although he discusses the nation and nationalism in the context of colonialism, particularly in Bengal, his ideas can explain

nationalism in different eras and outside colonialism. Chatterjee argues that the domain of sovereignty is more spiritual than worldly and material (26). The spiritual domain consists of the essential marks of cultural identity such as language and religion, which the colonized try to eradicate and replace the more “Christian” identity with their own language and traditions, which are usually presented as better. A fundamental feature of anti-colonial nationalism, especially in Asia and Africa, is protection of the spiritual domain, in part because this domain is at odds with the materialist values of Western colonial economics, science, and technology (Chatterjee, 6). This domain is important to preserve the cultural identity of the subjugated because of a risk of its erasure.

Nationalism is consolidated by what Anderson calls “print capitalism,” newspapers, magazines, editorials, and others forms of communication on paper, which allowed for the development of a modern national language (Anderson, 45). Print capitalism’s ability to disseminate information pertinent to the state of affairs in a nation fueled homogenization of language and helped affect the ruling elite’s wish to define “Indian” culture. Print capitalism is analogous to Oberoi’s “print culture,” first popularized by McLuhan, which distinguishes cultures based on oral and scribal knowledge from societies where ideas are reproduced through the printing press (263). Oberoi utilizes this term when arguing that the homogenization in a common language also homogenizes ways of thinking, barring a diversity of opinions and means to resist colonial power and the imposition of values at odds with indigenous spiritual traditions.

Punjabi newspapers became a form of anti-colonial resistance. Created in 1886, the *Khalsa Akhbar* was one of the first Punjabi periodicals, and became the “most important Sikh paper in the last quarter of the nineteenth century” (Oberoi, 286). The *Ghadar*, based in San Francisco, was created in 1913 by Kartar Singh Sarabha, a Sikh student attending UC Berkeley

at the time. It became one of the most famous due to its explicit critique of the British Raj as it uncovered atrocities committed by the British against Sikhs. For example, documents uncovered in the National Archives revealed that in a military installation at Rawalpindi in the early 1930s, Sikhs, referred to as “sepoys” by the British, were experimented on to test the effects of mustard gas used in chemical warfare in World War II which they suffered severe burns (Evans).

More recently, Richard Mann argues *The Times of India* stigmatized Sikhs and justified state-based violence against Sikhs by publishing defamatory articles and headlines such as “Help fight Punjab extremists: PM” (137). Some scholars have argued that religion and politics are mutually exclusive, but that is a misconception, since the media in this case can be used to promote political agendas of either the government or the opposition (Singh, Pashaura). Today, Anderson’s ideas are modified, since print media no longer play the same role they did, given the importance of new technologies that in some respects recreate “oral culture” Oberoi and McLuhan contrasted with scribal (manuscript and print) culture. The #FreeJaggiNow Twitter campaign advocates for the release of Jagtar Singh Johal who is detained in India for allegedly being involved in the murder of a well-known Indian politician. However, Indian security forces have failed to present evidence proving his guilt. The Twitter campaign is one example of using print capitalism and social media to not only advocate for the release of Sikh prisoners, but also to resist the Indian government’s draconian laws and influence.

In India, the British rule was based on preserving a British elite, creating a set of “othered,” subjugated masses through a divide and rule policy in which Indians were to adopt a British national identity in order to consolidate British colonial power (Chatterjee, 10). British policy created “subalterns,” people who were unable to emulate a British, “modern” identity because they had little education or access to the ideologies and language associated with it. One

way the British tried to homogenize Indians was by introducing the paunchvi style turban worn by soldiers to create a uniform appearance for their army. In the precolonial period, Sikhs normally wore a gol dastaar (round turban) or *dumalla*. This was one way for the British to colonize their subjects and simultaneously have a profound impact on the way the turban would be perceived by Sikhs and non-Sikhs.

Subaltern Studies

When it comes to studying nations and their ruling politics, there are a multitude of perspectives from dominant historical narratives that are left out due to the nature of power dynamics. During colonial rule, Sikhs were subalterns who resisted homogenization through the Singh Sabha Movement in the 1870s which rejected the colonial religious imposition of Protestantism and remained true to Sikhi (Oberoi). Subaltern studies, first established in 1979 by Ranajit Guha with the publication of a series of essays called *Selected Subaltern Studies*, recounted Indian history and peasant resistance and used the term “subaltern” for it. That word was borrowed from Antonio Gramsci, who defined it as the people who were socially, politically, and geographically excluded from the socio-economic institutions of the nation. Subaltern history and resistance are missing from the official story of India, just as they were from the story of Gramsci’s Italy, and subaltern studies attempts to negate their erasure by focusing on the marginalized, such as the urban poor, peasants, women, refugees, exiles, and more recently religious minorities (Guha & Spivak, vi). In essence, it recovers the voice of the subaltern and expresses what their interests might be and have them be respected through insurgencies that didn’t always register as “political,” let alone as “nationalist.” So what was different for Sikhs was that right away it embraced a language of nationalism.

A large portion of what Gramsci calls “cultural hegemony” is fueled by nationalist sentiments. Nationalism serves a dominant set of interests and ruling ideologies. The nation, as Benedict Anderson defines it, is an imagined political community, one whose ideals are both inherently limited and sovereign (5). It is sovereign in the sense that it promotes more democratic rule through republican, representative governments, which gradually came to favor not a ruling body of aristocrats whose interests the nation would serve, but instead a ruling body of the middle class, the class achieving hegemony as capitalism replaced feudal, agrarian economies and the absolute monarchy mode of rule associated with them. Further, it is inherently limited because the nation has borders that are geographic and cultural, and sometimes linguistic. But those borders are flexible and under negotiation because a constant struggle remains to secure power through hegemony.

By signing the Indian Independence Act of 1947, India was no longer a British colony, and instead an independent nation free to exercise its own style of governance. Sikhs have become subaltern based on being a religious minority, which was solidified through the partition of 1947 and the government’s reneging on a promise of a land for Sikhs in the immediate aftermath of independence. The months leading up to partition were brutal for Sikhs. Sikhs harbored Muslim animosity when they refused to accept the establishment of Pakistan, and that led to violence against them, notably, the Rawalpindi massacre in March 1947, in which approximately 2,000 Sikhs were killed (Singh, Patwant, 193). Killings also occurred in other parts of West Punjab prior to partition. Shortly after, Jawaharlal Nehru became the first prime minister of India who the Sikhs entrusted to grant them an autonomous land. Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi gave their explicit support to Sikhs when creating an official constitution for independent India stating, “no constitution will be accepted which does not provide full

satisfaction to the Sikhs” (Singh, Partap, 30). More importantly, this took the form of officially supporting “the carving of an autonomous Sikh state in North-West of India where they too could ‘breathe the air of freedom.’” But when it came time to put pen to paper, Nehru recoiled and instead opted to divide Punjab along linguistic lines (Singh, Partap 30).

Suffering from loss, murder, and betrayal, the Sikhs were even more determined to establish an official homeland with the Guru to guide them. Now, a few decades later, Sikh political prisoners, Sikh genocide, sacrilege against Sikh sites and scriptures, rapes, and extrajudicial violence have become the norm. During the state-led genocide, Operation Bluestar in 1984, the Akal Takhat was attacked, which not only constituted desecration, but a symbolic attack on Sikh sovereignty (Singh, Partap, 120). Post-independence, Sikhs have become subaltern under Hindu hegemony. Consequently, Sikhs have become insurgents, resisting Hindu hegemony, and like other independence movements, they have been labeled as “reactionary,” “terrorists,” or “militants” (Sooklal, Anil & Pillay, 1991; Jetly, 2008). Anderson’s definition of a sovereign state aligns with what the Gurus had in mind when endorsing the *patishahi* mindset for Sikhs, in that they both encourage democratic rule in a nation where Sikhs have political representation and are able to set their own laws.

Conclusions

Sikh traditions and principles, such as *miri-piri*, *sant-sipahi*, and the Sarbat Khalsa, all signify the essence of Sikh sovereignty. The Gurus laid the foundation for this sovereignty while ensuring equality of all humans in the process. The pursuit of Khalistan today depends on whether those principles are followed in every aspect of their intents and purposes. By pursuing an independent nation, Sikhs follow

What seem like isolated incidents toward Sikhs, whether they are as minor as “microaggressions” or as major as genocide, are actually symptoms of the same larger problem. No matter the type of injustice shown by the ruling elite, the broader context in which it occurs cannot be ignored. Most of these incidents can be traced to notions of Hindu superiority and Hindu nationalist sentiment. It has led to constructing a state that serves the interests of the Hindu elite, namely Brahmans and other high castes. Chatterjee expands on this idea by revealing that in the contest for political power, the subaltern’s nationalist project is to “fashion a ‘modern’ national culture that is nevertheless not Western” (6). Arguably, Hindu nationalism does that, since it is based on a religious class, a caste, and not strictly speaking an economic class. But since class and caste went together in India, Hindu elites also emerged as the middle and upper classes in economic terms, since they already owned most of the property before the British ever came. Now, Hindus are no longer a subaltern group. Sikhs, some of whom were consulted during the independence movement and therefore were not subaltern, have become subaltern as the pluralist nation has been made to serve Hindu elites above all others in recent decades, making religious minorities into subalterns of sorts because their spiritual values are not recognized by the ruling Hindu elites. The struggle for Sikh sovereignty is rooted in the life and principles set out by the Gurus that developed in opposition to the Mughal empire, the Hindu caste system, the British Raj, and now the current Hindutva ideology.

Learning about the world’s history and its wrongs helps us figure out what is right and how to create a future to realize that. Understanding the history we are taught in school is key so that we don’t repeat those mistakes. For Sikhs, understanding equality and sovereignty are key. Guru Nanak Dev laid the foundation of Truth and justice, thereby establishing Sikhi as a sovereign religion from its origins. In contemporary society, Sikhs must remain true to the

Gurus' principles in order to remain sovereign and equal, otherwise they risk another era of subservience, which the Gurus renounced, which is why pursuing Khalistan is important now more than ever.

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