

Uniformities and Differences of a Sikh Nationalist Identity: Opinions and Practices of Ordinary Sikhs

Natasha Behl

University of California, Los Angeles

This article contributes to an understanding of Sikh identity by examining the narrative construction of identity through an examination of opinions and practices of ordinary Sikhs. The particular contours of a nationalist identity narrative and its four narrative themes are developed through a close analysis of interview responses. The interview responses provide evidence to support the arguments that (1) a segment of the Sikh community narrates their identity through a public Sikh nationalist narrative that emphasizes the pursuit of truth, justice, and recognition and is characterized by four narrative themes; and (2) this particular narrative identity generates certain forms of unity and homogeneity while also creating differences and ambiguity, thus decentering a binary approach to understanding Sikh identity.

Introduction

Much of the scholarship in Punjab and Sikh Studies centers on a debate regarding the unity and homogeneity of a Sikh identity. N. Gerald Barrier (1993) argues that Punjab and Sikh Studies can in large part be characterized through two major approaches: one emanating primarily from academic institutions in the Punjab and the other originating from Western universities. The first approach is more concerned with demonstrating the unity and homogeneity of a Sikh identity, while the later is more interested in the differences and ambiguities of a Sikh identity. Both approaches focus largely on the Singh Sabha movement, because it was during this period that “certain symbols, historical events, and records gained legitimacy, while others were rejected or given a secondary status” (Barrier 1993, p. 27). Both approaches also rely heavily on textual analysis of official colonial discourse, political pamphlets, and religious texts. Often what remain unexamined in both these approaches to Sikh and Punjab Studies are the opinions, behaviors, and practices of common Sikhs.

This article moves away from a focus on the Singh Sabha period in an effort to understand present-day perceptions of Sikh identity among ordinary Sikhs. This article also focuses primarily on the opinions, behaviors, and practices of ordinary Sikhs by examining in-depth, open-ended interview responses of 40 individuals. By doing so, the article contributes to an understanding of Sikh identity by examining the narrative construction of identity through an examination of interview data. I argue that one can understand identity formation processes – how identities are created, maintained, and challenged –

by exploring the narratives that social actors use “to make sense of – indeed, to act in – their lives” (Somers 1994, p. 618). An exploration of narrative identities demonstrates how individual Sikhs understand themselves through and act based on a public Sikh nationalist narrative that generates a certain unity and homogeneity of identity that is dependent upon and constitutive of particular differences and ambiguities. This particular approach to studying Sikh identity formation has explanatory value because it (1) decenters a binary approach to Sikh identity as either uniform and homogeneous or differentiated and ambiguous by demonstrating how these two binaries are mutually constitutive; and (2) demonstrates that the forging of a seemingly uniform and homogenous public Sikh nationalist identity is intimately tied to a selective remembering of Sikh history and lived experience one that privileges some while marginalizing others.

My main fieldwork research in Punjab took place during Spring 2009. I conducted 40 in-depth interviews in Punjabi in two districts of Punjab – Mohali and Amritsar – with approximately the same number of men as women from each of the three major caste groups – Jats, Khatri, and Scheduled Castes/Backward Castes. Also, I conducted interviews with respondents of varying ages (21 to 71) and educational levels (illiterate to highly educated). In addition to conducting in-depth interviews, I had the opportunity to gather crucial information through follow-up interviews, informal conversation, and observation of religious and social activities. This research also builds on one summer of preparatory research conducted in 2005.

The rationale for using a qualitative, exploratory research design is that such a design has distinct advantages when trying to understand identity-formation processes. First, qualitative methods permit the definition of key concepts like martyrdom and Khalsa Raj to be determined by ordinary members of the Sikh community, not by religious and scholarly elites. Second, a qualitative approach does not assume that Sikh nationalist identities are a simple reflection of Sikh scripture or Sikh religious history; rather it builds an understanding of Sikh nationalist identities from the ground up.

Selection of interview respondents occurred in two ways: first, I relied on my informants in Mohali and Amritsar districts to help make initial contact with respondents; second, respondents whom I interviewed suggested other potential respondents and introduced me to individuals in their workplace, religious, and social networks. Through these two methods of selection, I was able to interview Sikhs of varying socio-economic backgrounds, degrees of religious observance, and political affiliation.

When asked about the treatment of Sikhs in India, Hardev Singh Saini, a 43-year-old Backward Caste man, says, “In the nation, when people see a Sikh about 70% of those people are actually against him. They are opposed to Sikhs because Sikhs have their own identity, their own religion, their own everything.” When asked the same question, Hardeep Kaur Bedi, a 55-year-old Khatri woman, answers:

We don’t need anyone to give us anything; we Sikhs have our own separate law. We love our religion; we have our own way of dress;

we have our own identity; we have created our own social norms of how we interact and interrelate. We have created all of this on our own. Our *qaum* [nation or community] is just like this; no one needs to give us anything. We don't need anything. Our Gurus have given us so much, and they continue to watch over us, and we actually do better on our own, as the lions that we are.

The statements made by Saini and Bedi raise interesting questions: How does one make sense of a Sikh identity that values separateness and distinctness from India? How is this identity constructed? What discourses are at play in this particular identity formation? How can the homogeneity and ambiguity of this identity formation be conceptualized? And lastly, who is privileged and displaced by these particular forms of homogeneity and ambiguity?

This essay makes sense of Sikh identity formation by drawing on Margaret Somers' notion of narrative identity. Narrative identity is premised on a new interpretation of narrative that is not limited to representation, but defines "narrative and narrativity as concepts of *social epistemology and social ontology*" (Somers 1994, p. 606). This conception of narrative posits "that it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities" (Somers 1994, 606). In short, Somers argues "all of us come to *be* who we *are* by being located or locating ourselves in social narratives *rarely of our own making*" (1994, p. 606). Somers describes this relatively abstract formulation of narrativity by outlining four different dimensions of narrative – ontological, public, conceptual, and metanarrative (1994, p. 617). For the purposes of this analysis, the most relevant dimension of narrativity is public. Public narratives are "attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual, to intersubjective networks or institutions" (Somers 1994, p. 619). Public narratives, for Somers, can range from the narratives of one's family to those of the workplace, church, government, and nation.

I operationalize Somers' notion of narrative identity to explore the uneasy way in which individuals understand themselves through and act based on a public Sikh nationalist narrative, which generates certain forms of unity and particular types of differences. The goal of the analysis is to make sense of the process through which nationalist identities are created, maintained, and challenged by reading interview responses as generative of a public Sikh nationalist narrative rooted in truth, justice, and recognition. By doing so, one is able to better understand the formation of a separate yet narrow Sikh nationalist identity, an identity that gives rise to certain forms of homogeneity and unity by selectively drawing from Sikh history while simultaneously producing particular forms of privilege and marginalization.

It is important to note that a Sikh nationalist narrative is only one way in which Sikhs understand their identity. A Sikh public narrative of integration, in addition to others, is also a prominent identity narrative among Sikhs. Unlike a

Sikh nationalist narrative, an integrationist narrative envisions a more harmonious relationship with the Indian state.¹

Sikh Nationalist Narrative

This article relies on interview data to outline the contours of one identity narrative that is prominent among Sikhs, a public Sikh nationalist narrative. The particular contours of a nationalist narrative and its four narrative themes are developed through a close analysis of interview responses. The underlying basis for a public Sikh nationalist narrative is respondents' widespread sense of identification based on four narrative themes – sacrifice and martyrdom, injury and injustice, Khalsa Raj, and recognizable identity – that reinforce the common goal of truth, justice, and recognition. Interview respondents develop this particular narrative by selectively drawing from Sikh history and lived experience. However, the very forging of this seemingly uniform and homogenous nationalist narrative is dependent upon and intimately tied to difference and ambiguity.

Sacrifice and Martyrdom

One of the components of a public Sikh nationalist narrative is the narrative theme of sacrifice and martyrdom, which connects individual Sikhs to one another both historically and contemporarily. Respondents narrate their own position in relation to other Sikhs by constructing a narrative of sacrifice and martyrdom that draws selectively from the Guru period [1469-1708], Khalsa Raj [1765-1849], Indian independence struggle [1920s-1947], and militancy period [1980s-1990s]. Respondents not only narrativize their lives in relation to other Sikhs, but also in relation to the lives of the Gurus, which allows them to understand their personal history as part of a larger set of sacred communal memories, thus creating a seemingly uniform and homogenous identity that is stable across time and space.

Interview respondents make sense of Sikh socio-political realities through a narrative emphasis on sacrifice and martyrdom, one that consistently points to the sacrifices of the past to make sense of the present. For respondents, sacrifice and martyrdom represent a fundamental institution of Sikhism, one present since the faith's very inception.² For example, many respondents, such as Hardeep Kaur Bedi, discuss the Indian independence struggle as part and parcel of a larger Sikh narrative of sacrifice and martyrdom:

Many young people, like Bhagat Singh, who were shrewd and sharp, are now identified as the martyrs of that time, the martyrs of the independence movement. But nowadays if they were among us we would call them militants. We would, right? Many people rose to the occasion, and the British attempted to put down the movement. Some like Mahatma Gandhi would agitate half-naked in front of official buildings. He would refuse to move and the British said, "This old man is very obstinate." And for us, these

people are martyrs, and for the British they were militants. They used to call Guru Gobind Singh a militant because he fought for his nation; he sacrificed his entire family for his *qaum* [nation or community].

Bedi connects Bhagat Singh and Mahatma Gandhi to Guru Gobind Singh, thus connecting three men from two different time periods with different religious, political and ideological commitments through a narrative focus on sacrifice and martyrdom. Bhagat Singh, for example, explicitly framed his participation in the Indian independence struggle vis-à-vis his Marxist, atheist, and anarchist beliefs. Mahatma Gandhi, in contrast, understood his participation in the Indian independence struggle through his particular conception of Hinduism. Unlike Bhagat Singh and Mahatma Gandhi, Guru Gobind Singh's sacrifices are arguably best understood through his creation of the Khalsa, the Sikh brotherhood. Bedi overlooks these differences by relying on a narrative of sacrifice and martyrdom. In short, Bedi is forging a uniform and homogenous narrative by purposefully ignoring the differences between these individuals. Furthermore, Bedi constructs a gendered notion of sacrifice and martyrdom by selecting male martyrs to make her argument. By relying solely on male martyrs, Bedi constructs a narrative that uses gender differences, in this case maleness, to define the ideal sacrifice and martyrdom. Bedi privileges men in her narrative while simultaneously marginalizing women because she defines men as the ideal martyr.

Bedi also explores the meaning of martyrdom by claiming that if Bhagat Singh were among us now he would be considered a militant, not a martyr. She elaborates by stating that for the British Mahatma Gandhi and Bhagat Singh were militants, not martyrs. And ultimately, Bedi ends her discussion of martyrdom by discussing the sacrifices that Guru Gobind Singh made for his nation. Bedi seamlessly brings together three men with distinct religious, political, and ideological commitments from two different time periods because she makes sense of these two time periods through the common narrative theme of sacrifice and martyrdom. Consequently Bedi is able to make sense of the Indian independence struggle and the Guru Period as part and parcel of a public Sikh nationalist narrative by obscuring the differences between these periods.

A narrative of sacrifice and martyrdom is not only apparent in the way in which respondents understand a Sikh socio-political reality, but is also evident in their concern for external recognition of a narrative of Sikh sacrifice and martyrdom.³ For example, when discussing the Indian independence movement, Fateh Singh, a 42-year-old Scheduled Caste man, states "Sikhs are the ones who gave up their lives, who martyred themselves to gain independence for this country." He continues by stating that, in the present day, the Indian government does not sufficiently recognize the sacrifices of the Sikh community:

This thing [Sikh sacrifice] bothers the Indian government. They don't count the sacrifices that we have made. For example, the government presents Indian history on T.V. or in other mediums

by characterizing Sikhs as nothing. Why did they do this? See, no one has made the type of sacrifice that Sikhs have made. If they [Indian government] recognize our sacrifice, then they become nothing because they have admitted that they didn't sacrifice. As long as they keep Sikhs down, characterize Sikhs as zero, as nothing, and as long as they keep a divide-and-rule policy, then they can continue to rule.

According to Fateh Singh, Sikhs sacrificed and martyred themselves for Indian independence, but this sacrifice and martyrdom is not acknowledged in dominant accounts of Indian nationalist history. In particular, Fateh Singh argues that the Indian government has purposely obscured and ignored Sikh sacrifice and martyrdom in an effort to characterize Sikhs "as zero, as nothing," and in doing so the Indian government is able to keep Sikhs down. Fateh Singh also implies that if the supposed sacrifice and martyrdom of the Indian government is revealed to be false then the government will be sapped of its power, of its ability to rule. Fateh Singh calls for the Indian government to recognize the truth of Sikh sacrifice and martyrdom. For Singh, according to a public nationalist narrative of truth, justice, and recognition, the Indian government is required to publicly recognize the sacrifices made by the Sikh community for the Indian nation.

It is important to note that both Hardeep Kaur Bedi, 55-year-old Khatri woman, and Fateh Singh, a 42-year-old Scheduled Caste man, adhere to a public Sikh nationalist narrative. These two individuals are differentiated both in terms of gender and caste, but nonetheless they adopt a narrative theme of sacrifice and martyrdom to connect Sikhs across time and space through a seemingly uniform and homogenous identity.

Injury and Injustice

A second component of a public Sikh nationalist narrative is the narrative theme of injury and injustice, which allows respondents to connect their lived experience under Hindu/Congress Rule⁴ to the lived experience of Sikhs during Mughal and British Raj. Respondents emphasize the narrative theme of injury and injustice in order to (1) create a connection between Sikhs irrespective of time and space; and (2) explain their commitment to truth, justice, and recognition, which for a segment of the respondents is attainable through Khalsa Raj.

Respondents such as Beena Kaur, a 65-year-old Khatri woman, claim that Sikh history and contemporary life are best characterized through a narrative of injury and injustice:

Behind all these things there are some very deep issues; our history is very deep. It is a very painful history. For example, if we begin to speak of our history, it becomes difficult. It is difficult to speak of the small, small children whose throats were squeezed; at one

point, their necks were squeezed, and later they were covered with tires.

Beena Kaur's version of Sikh history is intelligible only through a narrative emphasis on injury and injustice. She is able to discuss the physical abuse of Sikh children during Mughal rule and the brutal mistreatment of Sikh children during Congress Rule – specifically the 1984 riots in Delhi⁵ – as a seamless narrative irrespective of the differences between monarchical and democratic forms of governance.⁶ Beena Kaur expresses pain at the thought of “small, small children” being brutalized in different ways, in two distinct eras and contexts. Irrespective of these differences, Beena Kaur is able to speak of these atrocities as connected because both give rise to a narrative of injury and injustice rooted in a sense of pain and trauma experienced by Sikhs under foreign rule, be it Mughal monarchical governance or Hindu/Congress democratic governance. In short, Kaur forges homogeneity out of difference and ambiguity by relying on a narrative theme of injury and injustice, thus demonstrating the mutually constitutive nature of the two.

Women and children play an integral role in a narrative of injury and injustice. For example, when Beena Kaur makes a distinction between Sikh and Singh, she justifies this difference by describing the mistreatment of Sikh women during Mughal Rule:

When there was Muslim rule the degree of violence and atrocity was very high. They would kidnap daughters and sisters. When Guru Sahib saw that these atrocities were occurring, that our daughters were being kidnapped before our eyes, he asked, ‘Are we so weak that we can't protect our own daughters?’

According to Beena Kaur, Guru Gobind Singh initiated the *khande di pahul* ceremony to create Singhs, whose duty is to fight for justice and to protect daughters and sisters against injury and injustice. In Beena Kaur's narrative both women and men are narrowly defined. According to Kaur, Singhs exist to protect and sisters and daughters are to be protected. Kaur's narrative characterizes men as agents who are capable of protection and women as passive and therefore in need of protection. As a result, Kaur privileges men by characterizing them as agents capable of pursuing truth, justice, and recognition while denying women this same privilege.

Fateh Singh and Surinder Singh, a 22-year-old Jat man, connect their demand for justice with the injury experienced by Sikhs in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. For example, Fateh Singh focuses his attention on the state's inability to provide justice:

There [in Delhi] innocent people were burned to death with tires. How many years has it been? It's been 24, 25, 26 years. But justice has yet to be attained. Justice hasn't been served. Why hasn't it? Our politics is beholden to the chair, to the seat of power. If politicians seek justice, then they lose their seat. They lose their seat. Then why do these individuals claim that they are

the rightful representatives of the Sikhs? These people are the enemies of the Sikhs. Since 1984, these people haven't been able to prosecute the perpetrators of this crime; these people haven't been able to pursue justice. Ask who has suffered through this incident: those individuals who lost mothers, fathers, sisters; those individuals who are now orphans.

Fateh Singh is outraged by the fact that so much time has passed since the atrocities of 1984, yet the victims have not received justice. According to Fateh Singh, in the current political structure a politician who actually pursues justice will lose his or her position of power. Fateh Singh is criticizing the very structure of the state by claiming that the state and its agents (i.e. politicians) cannot pursue justice if they want to remain in power, and therefore, in Singh's narrative formulation, Sikhs will never attain justice within the current Raj. He concludes by stating that it is the victims who continue to suffer; it is the victims who endure injury and injustice on a daily basis; it is the victims who search for truth, justice, and recognition. Similarly, Surinder Singh raises questions regarding accountability and justice:

Take for example, the 1984 riots; it's been 25 years and there still hasn't been a resolution. If Tytler⁷ didn't have a hand in the riots, then who did? Someone has to be behind the riots; if it isn't Tytler, then whom should we hold responsible? Someone was behind these riots, and if it isn't you, then who is it? Someone is behind this, and we still don't know who it is.

Surinder Singh repeatedly asks, "If Tytler didn't have a hand in the riots, then who did?" Singh claims that someone has to be behind the riots, and he or she must be held accountable. Interestingly, Surinder Singh was born after the riots occurred, but this fact does not diminish the pain he experiences; despite his age. Surinder Singh creates a connection between himself and those who suffered in 1984. As a result, Surinder Singh is committed to finding out the truth about the 1984 riots and garnering justice for the victims even though he was not directly involved.

Respondents connect a discussion of injury and injustice to the need for Khalsa Raj, where truth, justice, and recognition can be attained. To make such an argument, many respondents explain that foreign rule – irrespective of governmental form – fails to provide justice. For example, Fateh Singh states:

The state doesn't think it's a sin to kill innocent people. The state simply says, "A big tree has fallen; no big deal, some will die." But was the big tree right? Was the big tree just? If you bring injury to someone's religion, then the religion will rise. Even if people like me stay sleeping, there are some out there that have been filled by the religion, and they will rise. That injury gave rise to a call for justice.

Fateh Singh integrates the language used by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi following Indira Gandhi's assassination into his nationalist narrative to underscore the injustice of Congress rule. According to Amiya Rao, Rajiv Gandhi "explained away this unprecedented orgy of violence [1984 anti-Sikh riots] comparing it with a natural phenomenon: 'there is a shaking of the earth, whenever a big tree falls'" (1984, p. 2066). Fateh Singh interprets the "big tree" as Indira Gandhi and the "shaking earth" as the killing of innocent Sikhs. This narrative formulation allows Fateh Singh to question if Indira Gandhi's actions were just. Fateh Singh follows with a statement in which he argues that if the Sikh religion is injured then it will rise in the name of justice. Thus, Fateh Singh explicitly connects the experience of injury to a Sikh nationalist narrative that claims to pursue truth, justice, and recognition.

Similarly, Beena Kaur argues, "If the nation gave us justice, then we wouldn't need Khalsa or Khalsa Raj." However, the fact that Sikhs have yet to attain justice for the atrocities committed in 1984 allows Kaur to maintain that Sikhs need Khalsa Raj. The need for Khalsa Raj is justified not only through the unjust treatment of Sikhs under Hindu/Congress Rule, but also through references to past atrocities inflicted by other rulers, such as Mughal and British rulers. Thus, the narrative of injury and injustice allows respondents to create a seemingly uniform and homogenous history of atrocity across time and space. In turn, respondents argue that this history of atrocity must be met by a commitment to and pursuit of truth, justice, and recognition, which, according to some, is only attainable through Sikh rule, Khalsa Raj.

Once again, it is important to take note that irrespective of gender and caste differences, respondents adopt a narrative theme of injury and injustice to connect Sikhs across time and space in pursuit of a common goal of truth, justice, and recognition through the forging of a seemingly uniform and homogenous identity.

Khalsa Raj

The third component of a public Sikh nationalist narrative is the narrative theme of Khalsa Raj, which, according to respondents, functions as both a religious symbol and a collective memory. A segment of respondents who adhere to a public nationalist narrative claim that Khalsa Raj is the only way to truly attain truth, justice, and recognition for the Sikh community.

A majority of respondents narrate the historical memory of Khalsa Raj with great pride and dignity. Hardeep Kaur Bedi, for example, boasts about Ranjit Singh's rule:

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was an amazing *raja*; his reign was outstanding. Before the British Raj the Sikh religion really grew; this happened during Maharaja Ranjit Singh's time. He was able to bring all Hill Kings into his kingdom. He won over all of Punjab including Peshawar and Lahore. He conquered all the way to Pakistan and Afghanistan all the way to Kabul. His rule was strong up 'til Kabul. But the Sikh nation was badly damaged by the

British when Maharaja Ranjit Singh's son Dalip was kidnapped and held against his will in England. And that was the end of the Sikh nation in the world.

Bedi describes with pride the way in which Ranjit Singh was able to build a Sikh Empire that spanned from current day Punjab through Pakistan to Afghanistan. Bedi also points out that the Sikh religion grew during Khalsa Raj. She ends her narrative by stating that initially the Sikh nation was damaged by the British, and ultimately brought to an end. Others, like Jatinder Singh, a 24-year-old Scheduled Caste man, also take pride in the international connections that were forged during Khalsa Raj: "During Maharaja Ranjit Singh's time we had a connection with Europe – we had established links with Europe. For example, the French people traveled here to give [military] training, and therefore our identity was known in foreign lands."⁸ Singh takes pride in the knowledge that a Sikh identity was recognized around the world. Many respondents look back to this historic period with pride and honor because this is one of the few times when the religious symbol of Khalsa Raj took concrete form, thus leading to the growth of Sikhism.

Other respondents speak of missed opportunities by narrating moments at which Khalsa Raj was potentially attainable. A few, for example, describe the period of the militancy as a missed opportunity when Khalsa Raj could have been established under the leadership of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale.⁹ But many more respondents discuss the period of Indian independence as a missed opportunity. For Jatinder Singh the period of Indian independence marks a significant moment:

They [Sikh political leaders] didn't become aware at that time. If they had become aware, then we [Sikhs] could have had some success – we could have had our demands met by the British. But we experienced failure during this time. Sikhs could have gained a state during this time, but they failed. Muslims were absolutely smarter. For example, Muhammad Iqbal¹⁰ writes "*Saara jahan se achchha, Hindustan hamara*" [Better than the entire world, is our Hindustan]. But after that he is a staunch supporter of Pakistan, of independent Pakistan. How did this man's thinking change? How could he at one point say that Hindustan is the best and then so soon thereafter demand Pakistan? We have been let down by our political leaders.

This period, according to Singh, represents the moment when Sikh demands for an independent Sikh state, for Khalsa Raj, could have been met. Unlike their Muslim counterparts, Sikhs were let down by their political leaders. To reinforce this statement, Singh turns to a narrative description of Dr. Muhammad Iqbal, who, according to Singh, was initially a supporter of Hindustan, but seized the opportunity to help create a new Muslim state, Pakistan. For Singh, this is where Sikh leaders failed; Sikh leaders were not able to translate this opening for the potential creation of Khalsa Raj into a

concrete reality, thereby missing an opportunity to attain truth, justice, and recognition for the Sikh community.

Beena Kaur argues that Sikhs made a grave mistake by collaborating with Hindus:

Pundits [Hindu priests, also a *jati* or birth group] are not our friends. This is *Pundit Raj* [Hindu rule]; they aren't our friends. The *pundits* said that we [Sikhs] would receive our piece; when Pakistan and Hindustan divided they told us, "For now give us your support, and then you will be given your own territory where you will be able to rule yourself, where you will be able to spread your religion." And later we [Sikhs] were told by the *pundits*, "The time for Sikh self-rule has passed." They [*pundits*] backed down.

According to Kaur, during the independence struggle Sikhs had the potential of reinstating Khalsa Raj because Hindus had promised Sikhs their own autonomous territory. However, after partition, according to Kaur, Hindus backed down on their promise to Sikhs, thus destroying the possibility for reinstating Khalsa Raj and instead subjecting Sikhs to *Pundit* rule. The idea of a missed opportunity resonates with a specific segment of the Sikh community that adheres to a public nationalist narrative.

Other respondents, however, like Jasveer Singh Gill, a 54-year-old Jat man, equate the creation of a Punjabi-speaking state in 1966 with Khalsa Raj:

In 1966, the *Punjabi Suba* [Punjabi-speaking state] was created. Akalis [Sikh political party] participated in peaceful agitations, they went on strike, they were jailed and they managed to create a *Punjabi Suba*, but the Congress people say they were wrong in doing so. But I don't say this. I think that they [Akali Party] did the absolute right thing. It is the right thing because today's Punjab, doesn't matter what the count is, it could be 40 percent, 30 percent, 25 percent Hindus, but ultimately whose state is it? Punjab is a Sikh state. This is the one demand of ours that has been met. If we still had a *maha*-Punjab [Super Punjab, composed of Punjab, Haryana, and Himachal], then Punjab would never be a Sikh state. It would have been a Punjab of Punjabis, or a Punjab of those who live in Punjab, but today it is a Punjab of Sikhs; Punjab is a Sikh state.

After the language-based re-organization of Punjab, the demographics of Punjab shifted dramatically. Sikhs, who were a minority in Punjab, became a majority. Currently, Sikhs represent over 60 percent of Punjab's population. This demographic shift, according to Gill, also signals a shift in power. A demographic shift can be equated with a shift in power relations because the Khalsa is a form of religious state formation. According to Peter van der Veer, the Khalsa amounts to a religious state because "there is the emergence of a supralocal religious identity, the rise of powerful and authoritative institutions that control the public domain, and the development of particular ways of

organizing production and consumption” (1994, p. 56). In short, Punjab is a Sikh-majority state, and therefore, for a segment of the Sikh population who adopt a nationalist narrative, it is also Khalsa Raj committed to the pursuit of truth, justice, and recognition. This particular formulation of Khalsa Raj is significant because the state of Punjab is majority Sikh, but not solely Sikh; Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Jains also live in Punjab.

Respondents repeatedly discuss the importance of Khalsa Raj within their nationalist narratives. However, there is no agreement on what constitutes Khalsa Raj. For example, for some, the independence period marks a missed opportunity to establish Khalsa Raj, whereas others argue that Punjab in its current form as a majority Punjabi-speaking state is Khalsa Raj. The fact that a majority of Sikhs who adopt a public nationalist narrative privilege the notion of Khalsa Raj demonstrates some uniformity within this narrative. However, the fact that respondents are divided on whether the current state of Punjab is a failure or a fulfillment of Khalsa Raj represents difference and ambiguity within a public Sikh nationalist narrative. Thus, demonstrating the fact that uniformity is intimately tied to ambiguity.

Interestingly, for those who envision a Punjabi-speaking state as Khalsa Raj there is yet another type of ambiguity in their narrative. Present-day Punjab is a majority Sikh state, however, this does not mean that it is solely a Sikh state; Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Jains also live in Punjab. Khalsa Raj is described by respondents as the location from which Sikhs can pursue truth, justice, and recognition; however, what does it mean to pursue a Sikh understanding of truth, justice, and recognition in a state that has religious minorities? How do Sikhs who adopt a public nationalist narrative understand their relationship to religious minorities? How do Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Jains experience a Sikh understanding of truth, justice, and recognition? The relationship between Khalsa Raj as the location from which to pursue a Sikh understanding of truth, justice, and recognition and the presence of religious minorities who may or may not adopt a Sikh understanding of truth, justice, and recognition represents one source of ambiguity within a public Sikh nationalist narrative. A source of ambiguity on which the apparent uniformity of the Sikh nationalist narrative depends.

Recognizable Sikh Identity

Lastly, respondents characterize a public Sikh nationalist narrative by emphasizing the importance of a recognizable Sikh identity. Most respondents adopt the concepts of *amritdhari* [bearer of *amrit* or nectar], *kesdhari* [bearer of long *kes* or hair], and *sahijdhari* [bearers of slowness] to define and delimit who is a member of the Sikh community.¹¹ According to some respondents, Sikhs are only those who have undergone the *khade di pahul* [baptismal ceremony]¹² and live according to *rahit* [Sikh code of conduct]. Others, however, define Sikhs more inclusively as those who keep unshorn *kes*. Still other respondents define Sikhs simply as those who live according to *gurbani* [word of god]

irrespective of outward appearance, which is the most inclusive definition. For example, Jasveer Singh Gill defines Sikh identity by focusing on *kes*:

A Sikh's heart should be full of Sikh teaching even if a Sikh doesn't conform completely to the required outward appearance. But I also don't believe that a Sikh can cut all their hair. The main characteristic of Sikh identity should remain intact; the most important Sikh characteristic is a Sikh's *kes*. If a Sikh keeps his *kes*, if he ties his turban, then he looks like a Sikh; he looks to be a Sikh. But if this same Sikh cuts his *kes* – even if he is wearing a *kirpan* [sword] – then he doesn't look to be a Sikh. This is the identity that I believe in...You must have hair, you must tie a turban, and your beard can be cut, but it needs to be cut, not shaven. People like this should be considered pure Sikh and should receive full respect and dignity.

According to Gill, *kes* and turban are the most important characteristics of Sikh identity because this is what makes a Sikh look like a Sikh. For Gill, if an individual appears to be a Sikh, then he should be considered pure Sikh, and in turn be granted full respect and dignity. Gill's emphasis on a Sikh's identifiability is reinforced by his explicit exclusion of *sahijdhari* Sikhs: "Sahijdhari Sikhs aren't like me; *sahijdhari*s are those who belong to the Sikh religion, but they cut their hair, so I don't consider them Sikhs."

Many respondents share Gill's opinion regarding Sikh identifiability. For example, Hardeep Kaur Bedi describes Sikhs as those who can be identified: "Unlike Americans or Chinese, Sikhs have a recognizable identity. Sikh identity is, you know, of his turban, of his beard; Sikhs have a separate identity." Bedi's narrative description includes both *amritdhari* and *kesdhari* Sikhs because both categories of Sikhs are recognizable through their unshorn hair, beard, and turban. As such, both Gill's and Bedi's narrative descriptions of Sikh identity can be read as fairly inclusive, excluding only *sahijdhari*s. Both Gill and Bedi want to maintain a separate Sikh identity by emphasizing one's hair, beard, and turban as the boundary marker, but they also want to open up the religion to those who have not undergone the *khande di pahul* ceremony.¹³

According to Gill, the Sikh religion needs to open up its ranks to less observant Sikhs in order to avoid decline:

I believe that the Sikh religion needs to change: it needs to become more liberal. It needs to change in a manner, for example...every time a religion has fractured, it has happened due to increased rigidity, increased conservatism. The change that needs to be brought about is that the Sikhs who cut and trim their beards, like myself, they should receive complete respect and dignity in the Sikh religion, in the Shiromani Committee, our Sikh [democratically elected] body; Sikhs like myself should receive full respect. Sikhism will grow only if this change is adopted; otherwise Sikhism will go into decline because to keep a beard and to become a true Sikh isn't something everyone is capable of. To

maintain this position one needs to work extremely hard. And when you have to work harder and harder to maintain Sikhism, then little by little people will begin to leave the religion.

Gill's narrative can be read as an inclusive nationalist narrative because he attempts to retain a separate Sikh identity, which is marked by *kes* and turban, while simultaneously opening up the religion to Sikhs who are less observant. According to him, the prescriptions associated with *amritdhari* status are too burdensome, and therefore people will begin to leave the Sikh fold. However, if one opens up the religion by granting *kesdhari* Sikhs the same rights as *amritdhari* Sikhs, then the Sikh religion will grow.

Gill's definition of who counts as a Sikh demonstrates one differentiation within a nationalist narrative; this differentiation is controversial because it can disrupt the current power structure in the Sikh community. If *kesdhari* Sikhs are elevated to the same position as *amritdhari* Sikhs, then they will be granted full rights and privileges in Sikh institutions, including the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC).¹⁴ According to Peter van der Veer, since the 1920s "the control of this committee has become the most coveted prize in Sikh politics" (1994, p. 74).

Another source of ambiguity is the ongoing debate regarding the SGPC's definition of a Sikh.¹⁵ Thus far, the SGPC has defined a Sikh in a relatively exclusionary way by only permitting *amritdhari* Sikhs to be full participants in the electoral process. Gill's call for the Sikh religion to become more liberal has vast implications. If *kesdhari* Sikhs are given the same rights and privileges as *amritdhari* Sikhs, this will enable them to be part of the SGPC electoral process. *Kesdhari* Sikhs actually outnumber *amritdhari* Sikhs, thus the extension of rights to this category of Sikhs could vastly change current power structure in the SGPC and larger Sikh community. For example, if *kesdhari* Sikhs were to gain control of the SGPC, the very understanding of who is a Sikh could change dramatically, and this change could, in turn, impact distribution of resources and access to benefits.

The narrative descriptions of identifiable and recognizable Sikh identity are rooted in unity and homogeneity as well as difference and ambiguity, which create specific forms of privilege and certain types of marginalization. Gill and Bedi, for example, deviate from the orthodox definitions of Sikh identity by narrating a more inclusive Sikh identity that creates room for *kesdhari* Sikhs, but they simultaneously exclude Sikh women by emphasizing male markers of Sikh identity, such as turban and beard. Both Gill and Bedi equate Sikh identity with male identity by consistently referring to *his* hair, *his* turban, and *his* beard. According to Brian Axel, Sikh men have become the privileged site for negotiating who is recognized as a member of the Sikh *panth* "by means of particular bodily techniques, religious practices, visual representations, and narratives of Sikh 'identity'" (2001, p. 4). Even though Gill's and Bedi's narrative construction of Sikh identity is more inclusive towards *kesdhari* Sikhs, their narratives are simultaneously exclusive because Sikh women are written out of a Sikh nationalist narrative and a male Sikh identity is adopted as the

norm. It is important to note that Jasveer Singh Gill and Hardeep Kaur Bedi both adhere to a narrative that privileges men over women irrespective of their gendered differences. A public Sikh nationalist narrative generates certain forms of unity and homogeneity around a Sikh male identity that is recognizable and identifiable, while also obscuring a female Sikh identity. The privileging of a recognizable male identity becomes more apparent when compared to an obscured, excluded, and marginalized female identity. Therefore, these two identities – one privileged and one ignored – must be read as mutually constitutive.

Conclusion

An examination of the ways in which Sikhs narrativize a nationalist identity contributes to a specific debate on identity in Sikh and Punjab Studies by demonstrating that conceptions of identity as either uniform and homogenous or differentiated and ambiguous are limited in their explanatory value. This analysis is able to capture the significance of a nationalist narrative in the Sikh community without assuming that this narrative is uniform or monolithic. By doing so, I am able to demonstrate the continued significance of this particular narrative, while also being cognizant of the differences and ambiguities within the narrative, and how these differences and ambiguities function to privilege some and displace others.

Notes

¹ Bachittar Singh Walia, a 40-year-old Jat man, states, “Sikhs are a minority; for example, they are two to three percent [of the Indian population].” Walia also adds, “Sikhs have an identity that is recognized worldwide. But we can’t say that Sikhs have a specific or special national identity.” Thus, for Walia a minority identity does not give rise to a separate national identity among Sikhs. When asked explicitly about the treatment of Sikhs in India, Walia states that the treatment of Sikhs is “fine.” He adds, “There aren’t any major problems, because India is an independent nation in which all religions are given an equal degree of respect. The state doesn’t adopt any policies that privilege one religion over another; all religions are treated equally and given equal respect.” For Walia, Sikhism, like other religions, is recognized and respected by the state. And more specifically, the state does not adopt policies that privilege one religion over another. And therefore, Walia’s understanding of a Sikh minority identity is narrativized as harmonious with the state and its policies towards religious minorities. Even though Walia’s narrative does not completely resonate with the narrative themes emphasized in a Sikh nationalist narrative – injury and injustice, sacrifice and martyrdom, Khalsa Raj, recognizable identity – he does recognize Operation Blue Star as one of the most important moments in Indian history since independence. For Walia, Operation Blue Star represents an injury Sikh sentiment from which Sikhs are still recovering. Walia

understand himself through and takes action from an integrationist narrative, but this does not foreclose his capacity to recognize the importance of injury and injustice, especially in relation to Operation Blue Star.

² There is debate regarding the veracity of the popular belief that Sikh Gurus established martyrdom. Louis Fenech argues that the current understanding of martyrdom that is prominent in the Sikh community is not directly connected to the Guru period. Specifically, Fenech challenges the dominant belief among Sikhs that Guru Arjan, the fifth Guru, was the first Sikh martyr. Fenech is able to decenter this belief through a three-prong strategy: (1) Fenech's critical examination of primary sources "demonstrates that many scholars of the Sikh tradition extrapolate far too much from them, filling in the numerous gaps in these sources' narrative with popular understandings forged in later years" (1997, p. 627); (2) Fenech determines that "a conceptual system of posthumous recognition and anticipated reward" (1997, p. 630) necessary for the accommodation of martyrdom did not exist during the time of Guru Arjan; and (3) Fenech comes to the conclusion that the terms *sahid* and *sahadat* when used in Sikh literatures is used in its Islamic sense rather than what would later come to signify the Sikh martyr (1997, p. 636). Based on these three arguments, Fenech comes to the conclusion that Tat Khalsa ideologues in the nineteenth century appropriated a profound and powerful 'rhetoric of martyrdom' in an effort to produce the far less inclusive definition of the Sikh martyr (1997, p. 642).

³ Many respondents describe Sikh military service as part of Sikh sacrifice and martyrdom. Santokh Kaur, a 46-year-old Jat woman, for example, states, "Sikhs are always ready to fight; they are always ready to give their lives, but no one respects this sacrifice. Take a look at all the borders; the borders are full of Sikh regiments." According to Kaur, Sikhs sacrifice their lives for Indian national security; however, these sacrifices are neither acknowledged nor respected.

⁴ Many respondents who adopt a Sikh nationalist narrative use the terms Congress Raj and Hindu Raj interchangeably. For these respondents secularism is read as a thinly veiled pursuit of Hindu Raj. For example, Fateh Singh states, "Look, before British rule, there was Muslim rule, after the British there is Hindu Raj, Congress Raj. Hindu Raj and Congress Raj is one thing. Their porridge is the same; the only difference is that one speaks to your face and the other says, 'We believe in and respect every religion.'"

⁵ According to Barbara and Tomas Metcalf, public rage in response to Indira Gandhi's assassination took its most hideous and brutal shape in Delhi, with mobs roaming the streets in pursuit of revenge. For three days, gangs of arsonists and killers in criminal collusion with the police and Congress Party politicians were allowed to rampage freely. Consequently, over 1,000 innocent Sikhs were murdered in Delhi, and thousands more rendered homeless. No one was ever brought to jail for these crimes (Metcalf & Metcalf 2002, p. 255). For further details see Metcalf and Metcalf's chapter entitled *Congress Raj: Democracy and Development, 1950-1989*. Others such as Amiya Rao argue

that closer to 5,000 Sikhs lost their lives. (For further details see Amiya Rao's "When Delhi Burnt.")

⁶ For more information on the significance of forms of state power on Sikh identity and politics see Pritam Singh's "The Political Economy of the Cycles of Violence and Non-violence in the Sikh Struggle for Identity and Political Power."

⁷ Jagdish Tytler is a Congress Party politician who recently withdrew from Lok Sabha elections. Tytler was under CBI investigation for alleged participation in the anti-Sikh riots of 1984. In April 2009, the CBI released a report clearing Tytler of any responsibility. This led to widespread protests by Sikhs in Punjab and Delhi. The Congress Party asked Jagdish Tytler to withdraw from the Lok Sabha election in order to avoid further protest. Tytler ultimately withdrew, but maintains that he is innocent.

⁸ Jatinder Singh is referring to fact that Ranjit Singh hired European officers, several of whom served under Napoleon Bonaparte, to train the Khalsa army (Mann 2004, p. 51).

⁹ According to the Indian government, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his followers were fundamentalists and terrorists. However, for a segment of the Sikh population, Bhindranwale is considered a *gursikh* [true Sikh], a defender of *gurbani* [word of god] and the social and economic interests of the Sikh *qaum*. Also, it is worth noting that Bhindranwale was referred to and continues to be referred to as *sant* [saint] by a segment of the Sikh population.

¹⁰ Dr. Muhammad Iqbal was instrumental in the creation of an independent Muslim state, Pakistan. He is also widely regarded as the author of *Saare Jahan Se Achchha*, an anthem celebrating independent Hindustan.

¹¹ Sikhs can be differentiated by degrees of religious observance categorized as *amritdhari*, *kesdhari*, and *sahijdhari*. After implementation of the *khande di pahul*, the Sikh community was composed of two segments. The first was the "kesdharis or Singhs, who had undergone the ceremony of the *khande di pahul* and had taken up the mission of establishing the Khalsa Raj" (Mann 2004, p. 99). The other segment included the *sahijdahri*, who had not undergone the *khande di pahul*. In the nineteenth century, a third category, *amritdhari*, was created to distinguish those who keep unshorn hair and have undergone the baptismal ceremony from those who keep hair but have not been baptized.

¹² According to Peter van der Veer, Gobind Singh's 1699 inauguration of the Khalsa brotherhood was a major development that enabled Sikhs to formulate their own nationalism. In 1699, Guru Gobind Singh declared that (1) he was the last in the succession of Sikh gurus and (2) from then on the authority and unity of the Sikhs would lie in the sacred scripture of the Sikhs, and in the judgment of the entire brotherhood. The formation of the Khalsa brotherhood "was a major development that later enabled the Sikhs to formulate their own nationalism, distinct from that of the Hindus. From then onward, Khalsa Sikhs can be clearly distinguished from those followers of Guru Nanak who did not opt to become part of the Khalsa." (van der Veer 1994, p. 54).

¹³ The respondents' construction of a recognizable Sikh identity is more inclusive than what is often referred to in the literature as the "real" or "true" Sikh identity. For example, Peter van der Veer argues that the hair and dress of an *amritdhari* Sikh functions as a perfect boundary marker: "While it is often difficult to discern the doctrinal differences between members of the brotherhood and followers of other Sikh teachings, the hair and dress of a 'real' Sikh maintain the boundary perfectly" (1994, p. 75-76). In contrast to van der Veer, some respondents are willing to stretch the boundary of who counts as a "real" Sikh by including *kesdhari* Sikhs as well as *amritdhari* Sikhs.

¹⁴ The SGPC is an elected body of the Khalsa. The SGPC first came into being in response to the 1920s Gurdwara Reform Movement. Since then, the SGPC has managed and maintained gurdwaras, prepared a standard edition of the *Guru Granth*, issued authoritative statements on Sikh history, beliefs, and code of conduct, and built a chain of schools and colleges.

¹⁵ See, for example, Opinderjit Kaur Takhar's *Sikh Identity*, W.H. McLeod's *Who is a Sikh?*, and Brian Axel's *The Nation's Tortured Body*.

References

- Axel, B., 2001. *The Nation's Tortured Body: Violence, Representation, and the Formation of a Sikh Diaspora*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Brass, P., 1974. *Language, Religion and Politics in North India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Barrier, N. G., 1993. Sikh Studies and the Study of History. In J. Hawley and G. S. Mann, ed. *Studying the Sikhs: Issues of North America*. Albany: University of New York Press, pp. 25-46.
- Fenech, L., 1997. Martyrdom and the Sikh Tradition. *The Journal of American Oriental Society*, 117(4), pp. 623-642.
- Mann, G. S., 2004. *Sikhism*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall.
- McLeod, W. H., 1989. *Who is a Sikh? The Problem of Sikh Identity*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Metcalf, B. & Metcalf, T., 2002. *A Concise History of India*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rao, A. 1985. "When Delhi Burnt." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19(49): 2066-2069.

Singh, P., 2007. The Political Economy of the Cycles of Violence and Non-Violence in the Sikh Struggle for Identity and Political Power: Implications for Indian Federalism. *Third World Quarterly*, 28(3), pp. 555-570.

Somers, M., 1994. The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A relational and network approach. *Theory and Society*, 23, pp. 605-649.

Takhar, O.K., 2005. *Sikh Identity: An Exploration of Groups among Sikhs*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company.

Van der Veer, P., 1994. *Religious Nationalism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.