

**Janamsākhī: Retracing Networks of Interpretation**

by

Harjeet Singh Grewal

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Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Arvind-pal Singh Mandair, Chair  
Associate Professor Shahzad Bashir  
Professor Madhav Deshpande  
Professor Donald S. Lopez, Jr.  
Associate Professor Christi A. Merrill  
Associate Professor Farina Mir

Harjeet Singh Grewal

[harjeets@umich.edu](mailto:harjeets@umich.edu)

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-9996-7590

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## **DEDICATION**

For my girls.

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Many early scholars interested in Gurū Nānak, the system of thinking he embarked upon, and the communities committed to this system have often remarked that engaging this thinking requires patience, fortitude, and tranquility. Indeed, one of my many interlocutors once told me that textual work in Sikh Studies requires a *faqīr*-like perspective toward the world. It is my hope that this dissertation marks a way to forward through patience and a forgetfulness regarding temporality. However, in writing these acknowledgements I recognize that such work is always the product of a collective that requires support and upliftment from community. The numerous iterations of this project and my thoughts about the archive, janamsākhīs, and ontological language form a nexus through which I try to articulate a ressourcement. In the context of this project, ressourcement is a way to recognize the ability to return to the manuscript archive to examine its relevance to critical humanitarian questions of our time. Opportunities to acquire training for conducting the archival, oral history, and lingual portions of my research are becoming increasingly difficult. Recognizing this, I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation to an increasing number of remarkable people, scholars, and institutions that have recognized the promise of a forward-facing approach to Sikh Studies.

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## NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

Throughout the text of dissertation, I have transliterated Panjābī words into Roman script according to the transliteration scheme outlined in the tables below. I have also italicized any Panjābī words, with the major exception of proper nouns (i.e. names of people and places) and the word “janamsākhī”—which, given the frequency of this word’s appearance in that it forms the topic of my dissertation, would have proved unfruitfully clunky. Where applicable, I have also given preference to the Roman-character spelling of Panjābī names preferred by the person him- or herself, even if that spelling is not consistent with the scheme outlined below (e.g. “Baldeep Singh” rather than “Baldīp Singh”).

### Gurmukhī Lipī (consonants):

ੳ	n/a	ਅ	n/a	ੲ	n/a	ਸ	sa	ਹ	ha
ਕ	ka	ਖ	kha	ਗ	ga	ਘ	gha	ਙ	
ਚ	ca	ਛ	cha	ਜ	ja	ਝ	jha	ਞ	
ਤ	ta	ਥ	tha	ਦ	da	ਧ	dha	ਨ	na
ਟ	ṭa	ਠ	ṭha	ਡ	ḍa	ਢ	ḍha	ਣ	ṇa
ਪ	pa	ਫ	pha	ਬ	ba	ਭ	bha	ਮ	ma
ਯ	ya	ਰ	ra	ਲ	la	ਵ	va	ੜ	ṛa

**Gurmukhī Lagā-mātrā (vowels):**

ਉ	u	ਊ	ū	ਅ	ā
ਇ	i	ਈ	ī	ੌ	o
ਏ	e	ਐ	ai	ੌ	au

**Other:**

ਹ intermediate - *ah*

ਹਿ intermediate - *ai*

ਹੁ terminal - *o*

ੲ - *e*

ੲ initial - *i*

ਈ - *ī*

ੳ terminal – *on*

ੳ intermediate - *o*

ੳ terminal - *au*

ੳ intermediate – *on*

## NOTE ON TRANSLATION

In 1909, Max Arthur Macauliffe, one of the earliest translators of the *Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib*, attempted to legitimize his translation as more authoritative than the translation made by Ernest Trumpp in 1877 by stating that he had considered only “rational interpretations” while rendering the verses into English and selected only suitable contextual translations that were “most in harmony with Sikh doctrines.” Macauliffe was a retired judge who spent much of his career in Panjāb, and he was on familiar terms with Sikh reformers of the Singh Sabhā; he had paid a large sum from his own earnings to have an early janamsākhī manuscript, known as the Hāfīzābād-wālī janamsākhī, lithographed with the assistance of Professor Gurmukh Singh of Lahore College. Given the disrepute of Trumpp’s work in Panjāb, it was likely that Sikhs would be skeptical of the intentions of subsequent translators. Macauliffe’s comments about the process of selecting appropriate interpretations from which to proceed with his translations were meant to reassure his Sikh readership of his recognition of the uniqueness of the Sikh religion and people.

The preparation of a complete exegesis of the *Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib* by a reputed Sikh scholar named Giānī Badan Singh Sekhvarī also followed in the wake of Trumpp’s translation. Badan Singh completed his *Farīdkot Tīkā* by 1883; however, the work was not published for almost two decades. The delay was partly caused by the publishers’ disagreement about the

complexity of Badan Singh’s explanations of the verses. Much of the editing process involved simplifying the interpretations to constrain recourse to philosophical notions that could be mistaken as connected to other South Asian religions. Furthermore, a group of highly vocal religious reformers increasingly cast doubt upon *giānīs* whose interpretations strayed from a singular vision of Sikh doctrines.

Macauliffe echoed these concerns in his translation by stating that he had personally met “so-called gyanis who could perform *tours de force* with their sacred work, and give different interpretations of almost every line of it.” A trend toward avoiding preexisting philosophical concepts and favoring rote or commonplace definitions of words from verses in the *Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib* has continued throughout the twentieth-century.

Proponents favoring this trend have singularized the interpretation of the Sikh Gurūs’ verses and reified definitions through straightforward vernacularization of words. This trend not only strips the *Gurū Granth* of its depth and complexity but also denies any conceptual development within the Sikh tradition. Simplifying translation via preference for the most common or least conceptually abstract meaning of a word artificially fixes the vocabulary that scholars of Sikh tradition can employ. This trend also limits the discursive reach of their analytic, containing it within the vocabulary and conceptual nexus familiarized within the discourse of religion. For this reason, the diversity and individuality of intellectual engagement with a constellation of nonsectarian notions finds short shrift within common English translations of Sikh texts.

With this history of translation in mind—as well as the considerations that I explore in Chapter 4 regarding the extent to which the varying strategies that scholars have adopted when translating Sikh texts have broadly influenced the construal of Sikh philosophy within Sikh



Studies—I have at times veered from providing simple vernacular Panjābī definitions of words in verses of the *Gurū Granth* while translating.

Several reference works have been used to assist me this endeavor including: *Gurusabd Ratanākār Mahān Kosh* by Bhāi Kāhn Singh Nābhā; Giānī Hazārā Singh’s *Srī Gurū Granth Kosh* edited by Bhāi Vīr Singh; and *Gurmat Mārtanḍ* also by Bhāi Kāhn Singh Nābhā. I have also drawn at times from the interpretations of terms and notions from the *Gurū Granth* provided in janamsākhī manuscript recensions. The benefit of these sources is that they often provide multiple definitions of important concepts, drawing indiscriminately from differing religious traditions while at other times retaining a critical stance to those same traditions. I have also restrained myself from drawing one-to-one accordance with conceptual terms with which readers of English may already be familiar. This translational strategy has meant sacrificing stylistic or poetical consideration to bring out some of the ideas and arguments expressed in the texts that I examine.

All translations provided in the text that follows are my own unless otherwise noted. Citations of the *Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib* reference the translation by Manmohan Singh authorized by the Sriomani Gurdwārā Pranbandhak Committee. However, unless noted the translations provided in this dissertation of the *Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib* are my own.

## ABSTRACT

My dissertation, “Janamsākhī: Retracing Networks of Interpretation,” analyzes a genre called the janamsākhī, to argue that, instead of reading these texts as biographies or hagiographies of Sikhism’s founder, Gurū Nānak, we should instead view them as exegetical engagements with Sikh scripture (*Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib*, or SGGS). By taking janamsākhīs as exegetical writings that embed scriptural verse within imaginative tales (*sākhīs*) about Nānak, we can understand the language of these texts as a form of decentered speech that has its own living existence outside of the author or speaker. By reading intertextually between the janamsākhī and the SGGS, I show how this understanding of language allows us to interpret these texts as engagements with Nānak’s philosophy in which markers of identity and difference exist without operating as exclusive or exclusionary.

This reading of janamsākhīs stems from information gleaned during ethnographic interviews with traditional exponents who practice *kathā*—a narrative form of exegesis of the SGGS that deploys *sākhīs* in order to expand upon the philosophy of Oneness in the SGGS. Using an interdisciplinary method incorporating these interviews alongside archival manuscript work and historiography of existing work on janamsākhīs from the colonial period through today, I analyze the networks of reading and interpretation that today form the overlapping layers of hermeneutic approaches to these works.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the concepts of *sākhī* and *kathā* as they appear in the janamsākhīs and SGGS. Chapter 2 presents theories of *kathā* and its relationship to janamsākhī and the SGGS gleaned from my interviews with traditional exponents. Chapter 3 critically examines the development of the janamsākhī manuscript archive through the colonial period. Chapter 4 analyzes how unique conceptions of the nature of language have proved challenging for prominent scholars and translators of janamsākhī, ultimately leading to the common understanding of these texts as biographical or hagiographical. Finally, Chapter 5 critically engages select anecdotes from the janamsākhīs by reading between narrative and scripture to analyse motifs like Nānak's disembodiment or his denials of Hindu and Muslim identity.

## Introduction

I grew up hearing *sākhīs*—stories about the Sikh Gurūs—and *kathā*—a form of interpretation of the Gurūs’ teachings. My initial exposure to *sākhīs* occurred through my mother and other family members, later I sometimes heard them during brief visits by religious exegetes’ from Panjāb who were called *kathāvācaks*. These bhāīs came to local Canadian *gurdwārās*, and it was typically a major event to go and listen to them.<sup>1</sup> The tales they wove and expositions they made also circulated via VHS or cassette recordings collected by family members. These recordings formed a soundscape lending a sense of continuity for migrants like my parents, who left Panjāb to seek opportunities abroad.<sup>2</sup> In the car on trips to the grocery store, on long road trips during summer vacation, in the *gurdwārā* on Sundays – I was accustomed to the slow crescendo of their booming voices as the bhāīs warned against wavering beliefs or

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<sup>1</sup> A *gurdwārā* is where Sikhs go to gather and listen to verses from the Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib being sung or explained.

<sup>2</sup> Community members often listened to *kathā* carried over from Panjāb on video and cassette tapes during important occasions abroad that they could not leave Canada to attend, such as funerary rites. During such moments, faced with death and mortality, uncles and aunts in the community told *sākhīs* to console the bereaved and mourn the deceased. Devoid of the mirth and reverie of the earlier occasion, these *sākhīs* testified to the importance of seeking and finding the truth that Bābā Nānak taught—an importance arising from the finality of death, not as an occasion for rebirth. The diversity of this stock of tales and their applicability to various circumstances was striking. My use of the term soundscape differs somewhat here from Charles Hirschkind’s understanding of the function cassette sermons play in social or political critique. Although there are likely instances where a stronger semblance with Hirschkind’s ethical landscape apply to the Sikh tradition, they are beyond the scope of this study. See Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*, Cultures of History (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

inabilities to ensure children would become practicing Sikhs. We were implored to believe in the Gurūs, become true Sikhs, and be saved.

Although these “*missionizing kathās*” were familiar, I assumed they were reserved for Sikhs in the diaspora. The *bhāis* believing that exposure to foreign cultures imperiled migrants and their children -we were at threat of losing our faith. I was, therefore, taken aback upon hearing similar *kathās* while conducting my research in Panjāb on janamsākhī literature in 2013. After hearing similar exegesis at major religious centers (*takhts*), like Damdamā Sāhib and Harmandar Sāhib, I realized such experiences of *kathā* were pervasive in Panjāb as well. With each new occurrence, I noticed that missionizing moments were a specific form of exegesis which did not resonate with audiences. People often became listless—hurrying off to eat or chat in the *langar*. If such *kathā* were on cassette, my family members would lower the volume, turning it off before the voice climaxed.

There were other types of *kathā*, I recall family memories about exposure to *kathā* and different experiences of it prior to leaving Panjāb during the 1970s. These memories were joyous, marked by excited anticipation for hearing *kathā* as the *kīrtanīās* concluded their singing and gave way to the *bhāī*. Other times they remarked upon the significance given to the arrival of prominent Bābās or knowledgeable *giānīs* at their village – the *giānīs* would often tour the area to give their individualized brand of *kathā*. People sat transfixed as the exponent interwove tales (*sākhīs*) with verse (*sabd*), memory, and established events from Nānak’s life. These memories engendered palpable excitement as family members’ delved deeper into the stores of experience. These conversations became mock-*kathā* sessions, as uncles who had been particularly close to a *giānī* at these major centers recounted those *sākhīs* about Nānak.

As I thought more about the dissonance between the memories I heard about *kathā* and my experience of missionizing *kathā*, I began to wonder whether there was a connection between their memories of *kathā* and the *janamsākhī* manuscript literature. The intimacy with these *sākhīs* about Bābā Nānak were completely unrelated to the accurate rendering of his life or pious reverence of a savior that discursive studies of the *janamsākhī* indicated. Familiarity only increased the anticipation these tales garnered. Waves of uproarious laughter rung out as they heard a favorite rendition of a *sākhī*. A pause in narration, the inevitable question being raised, or calls for an explanation served to bring on another round of stories. Those uncles who spent time with *bhāīs* and *giānīs* often linked a *sākhī* back to a verse from the *Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib* in a similar fashion as the exponent they were channelling – the felicity and joyfulness that the memories retained linked my family to stories with contextualized meanings of *sabd* they accessed and performed during these gatherings.

*Janamsākhīs* form an important sub-genre of *sākhī* literature, they date back to at least the seventeenth century but early version may have arisen during the second half of the sixteenth century. The term “*janamsākhī*” refers to those texts that specifically narrate the life of Gurū Nānak (1469-1539), who today is seen as the first Sikh Gurū and founder of Sikhism. Like the interweaving of *sākhī* and *sabd* that can be heard in skilfully performed *kathā*, *janamsākhīs* feature instances within each anecdote where Nānak performatively recites his poetic compositions.<sup>3</sup> The ever-increasing number of *sākhīs* that circulate aurally amongst Sikh families and *sangats* globally reflects the range of written manuscripts from which some of these tales are

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<sup>3</sup> The term *sabd* literally means word. It also refers to the poetry contained in the *Sri Gurū Granth Sāhib*. In the way that it is used within the *Sri Gurū Granth Sāhib* and the *janamsākhīs* there are several associated meanings which are contextually arrived at through an entire composition or section of a poem.

drawn. Other *sākhīs* are connected to the materiality of relics and religious space but have less clear antecedents. Many are creative engagements with accessing meaning from a *sabd*.

Most janamsākhī manuscripts contain this essential structural feature, presenting a narrative about Nānak alongside poetic expression(s) written/spoken through Nānak. Authors began with a verse to imagine narrative limits for expounding upon poetry through poesis. This particular technique of *kathā* maintained Nānak's figural position by embedding *sabd* within *sākhīs* -portrayals of events, dialogues, and discourses to create a structure of allegory where Nānak stands counterpoised to other figures with whom he interacts. These *sākhīs* used different textures to focus listeners toward the embedded poem, some *sākhī* imaginatively adapted historical incidents, others incorporated, mythic, and legendary elements. *Sākhīs* provide narrative contextualization to create a phenomenal space within which the *sabdic* abstractions could be brought to appearance and illuminated.

This dissertation inquires after possible networks of interpretation formed when janamsākhī literature and performative *kathā* form an analytic lens to think about the early manuscript archive. It builds upon archival research on janamsākhī manuscripts and oral history interviews with contemporary exponents who use *kathā*. I articulate a way that Nānak's figuration in janamsākhī collapses distinctions between person and poesis, in doing so points toward the *sabd* as the interpretive center of *sākhīs*. Repositioning my analytic in this way allows me to consider janamsākhīs as an extension or graft upon a network of interpretation rooted in the *Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib*. This network includes successive configuration and significations using the janamsākhī archive. It extends through the texts to connect authors and audiences to multiple, wide-ranging directions for engaging or enacting *sabd*. To show these engaging enactments, I resurrect broader questions about death, embodiment, and language itself from two

major janamsākhī manuscript recensions; so-called Bālā and Purātan recensions. The interweaving of *sabd* and *sākhī* in janamsākhī manuscripts present non-oppositional thinking to attempt a textual transgression that creates orders of being based upon a philosophy of Oneness.

By “non-oppositional thought,” I refer to the idea that identity need not arise through differentiation -the imposition of mutually opposed existentialities. Non-oppositionality does not erase marks of identification; instead, it renders identity as an insufficient significant. Designifying the logic of archetypal formations reorients the human in relation to a nonsubjective, distinct form of language.<sup>4</sup> Being arises through a relation of difference between individuals and a form of language that exists in and of itself. Enacting lends non-oppositionality an external orientation to individuality that apophatically negates differences between people to privilege a gap between language and its human speaker. In janamsākhīs, one method of writing non-oppositional thinking highlights the unintelligibility of categories like “Hindū” and “Muslim” if humans re-cognize how Oneness *and* plurality formulate being in concert with one another.

Indeed, the tensions between the janamsākhī manuscripts versus the modern, printed, critical editions of janamsākhīs—as well as the translations of these texts into English—reflect shifts in understandings of the nature of language. Since the nineteenth century, traditional exponents, colonial administrators, and secular scholars in Panjābī and Western universities have

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<sup>4</sup> The notion that texts and language are literally alive is central to Sikh thought and religious practice. To put forth this notion of non-oppositionality, I build upon suggestions that the SGGS and *sākhīs* use language as though its ontological existence is imbued with a separate living materiality and being. For example, we can see the ontologized nature of *sabd* in its status as living Gurū—and its treatment as such within Sikh praxis—within the book of Sikh scripture referred to as the *Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib* (SGGS). As I will show in what follows, taking a straightforwardly representational view of language (or what I refer to as deontologized language) prevents us from reading the *sabd* as the philosophical center of the janamsākhī. Arvind-pal S. Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).



produced increasing numbers of critical editions and translations of janamsākhīs, amalgamating various manuscript recensions, retitling anecdotes, and removing “heterodox” elements. Using these critical editions, scholars of Sikh Studies, both in the West and in Panjāb, often read the janamsākhīs as early modern portrayals of Nānak reflecting the reverence of his devotees (Sikhs).

From such a perspective it is not clear how janamsākhīs create meaning by interweaving *sabd* and *sākhī* into a phenomenal structure used during performances of *kathā*. Contemporary notions of textuality and individualized reading practices disavow the importance of *sabd* within the sinew of a janamsākhī. Janamsākhīs are central to the way tradition changes, and remains the same, through successive engagements by trained exponents, Orientalists, and colonial administrators, secular scholars of Sikh Studies in universities in the West and Panjāb, and practicing Sikhs around the world. I read between accretions of changes occurring in edited versions and their translations to pursue layered continuities that return us, sometimes despite themselves, toward a network of interpretive possibilities routed through *sākhī* and *sabd* as ontologized language.

### 0.1 Modern Echoes of Janamsākhī Narratives

In the short story “Karāmāt” (“Miracles,” 1957), twentieth-century Panjābī-language author and litterateur Kartār Singh Duggal<sup>5</sup> highlights the issue of the tension between

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<sup>5</sup> Duggal (1917-2012) was born in the Northwestern region of Panjāb at Dhamiāl, district Rāwalpindī. A seminal figure in modern Panjābī literature, Duggal established the short story genre in Panjābī. His works include poetry, novels, short stories, and dramas. He also wrote nonfictional works, including a discussion of his writing process. Kartar Singh Duggal, *Literary Encounters* (New Delhi: Marwah Publications, 1980); *Kahānī Kalā Te Merā Anubhawa* (Paṭiālā: Bhāshā Wibhāga, Pañjāba, 1987); *Maim Te Mere Samakāl* (Dillī: Shilālekha, 1996). Although themes from his writing are shared with progressive writers, literary critics have maintained a distinction between his writing style and the progressive writers. For instance, unlike the progressive writers, Duggal incorporated religion and *sabd* as motivating conscious force that determined human choices. Jasbir Singh Ahluwalia, "Kartar Singh Duggal: A Critical Introduction," *Indian Literature* 10, no. 3 (1967).

contemporary and archival renderings of janamsākhīs.<sup>6</sup> The story begins with a mother from the Rāwalpindī district of pre-partition Panjāb telling her son the wondrous *sākhī* of Walī Kandhārī. Duggal assumes his readers are familiar with the *sākhī*, while he gives some detail within “Karāmāt,” there are many details that remain implied. The general narrative is as follows: Nānak and Mardānā were returning from their sojourn to Mecca and Medina and arrived at the town Hasan Abdāl. At this town, Nānak heard complaints that the Walī had limited access to water according to his discretion; in response, Nānak reassured the people that their thirst would be quenched, and asked Mardānā to request water from the holy *pīr* known as Walī Kandhārī on behalf of the thirsty townspeople.<sup>7</sup>

After numerous failed requests by Mardānā, Nānak redirected the spring so that its water came up near where the people sat in consternation and concern. The stream was made accessible again, and people drank freely and gave water to their livestock. The Walī stood within his hilltop abode and witnessed the sequestration of the stream. Frustrated by his diminished power over the townspeople, Kandhārī hurled a massive boulder toward the crowd below. Nānak remained calm as the heavy boulder tumbled toward them, at the last possible moment stopping the boulder by outstretching his hand. The impact etched Gurū Nanak’s palm into the stone; this relic housed in a town called *Panjā Sāhib* (in present-day Pakistan). Duggal’s story reads memories of twentieth-century events through this *sākhī*.

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<sup>6</sup> Kartar Singh Duggal, "Karamat," in *Kahani Mala*, ed. Surindar Singh Kohli (Chandigarh: Panjab University Publication Bureau, 1964). pp.78-84

<sup>7</sup> Although Walī Kandhārī is mentioned in Bālā janamsākhī manuscript, Duggal relies on oral narratives created around the relic housed at Gurdwārā Panjā Sāhib. This relic is a boulder with the impression of a hand pressed into it. The managers of the gurdwārā maintain that the impression is of Nanak’s palm print, and the story of Walī Kandhārī provides a context for the presence of the relic. As I discuss below, the interaction between Nānak and Walī Kandhārī focuses on a dialogue about sectarian differences such as the ‘theological’ distinctions that develop between shi’as and sunnis.

Kandhārī had taunted Mardānā every time he asked for water, stating that if his Gurū was indeed a *faqīr*, he should provide them with water. Nānak, in turn, told Mardānā and the crowd that God would not let people die of thirst. After Mardānā’s final return from the hilltop, Nānak had the crowd repeat one of his supplicatory verses. Once they finished reciting together, the stream was redirected as Nānak lifted a pebble from the ground beside him to release water. The *pīr* sought to test Nānak’s *barakat*, wanting to determine whether Nānak abided proximally with the One.

As Duggal narrates the *sākhī*, he focuses on the boy’s rational skepticism toward miracles. Initially, for instance, the young boy is enraptured by his mother’s tale, imploring her to tell him the complete story with haste; however, by the end, the miraculous event leaves the boy unsatisfied, asking “How can somebody stop an avalanching mountainside?”<sup>8</sup> The boy focuses on questions about the probability or possibility of these events, rather than understanding the *sākhī* as miraculous. His doubts only grow as he hears the story repeated at local *gurdwārās*. He even turns to one of his school teachers to ask whether such events were possible. The teacher replies that the people who are unwavering in their belief can achieve the impossible. Still not satisfied by this explanation, the boy continues to doubt the veracity of such occurrences.

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<sup>8</sup> ‘ਕੋਈ ਰਿੜ੍ਹੀ ਆ ਰਹੀ ਪਹਾੜੀ ਨੂੰ ਕਿਵੇਂ ਰੋਕ ਸਕਦਾ ਏ’ ਮੈਨੂੰ ਜਦੋਂ ਵੀ ਇਸ ਸਾਖੀ ਦਾ ਖਿਆਲ ਆਉਂਦਾ, ਮੈਂ ਫਿਕੀ ਹਾਸੀ ਹਸ ਦੇਂਦਾ। ਕਈ ਵਾਰੀ ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰੇ ਵਿਚ ਇਹ ਸਾਖੀ ਸੁਣਾਈ ਗਈ। ਪਰ ਪਹਾੜੀ ਨੂੰ ਪੰਜੇ ਨਾਲ ਰੋਕਣ ਵਾਲੀ ਗਲ ਉਤੇ ਮੈਂ ਹਮੇਸ਼ਾ ਸਿਰ ਮਾਰਦਾ ਰਹਿੰਦਾ। ਇਹ ਗਲ ਮੇਥੋਂ ਨਹੀਂ ਮੰਨੀ ਜਾ ਸਕਦੀ ਸੀ।

*‘koī riṛī ā rahī pahārī nū kiven rok sakda’ mainū jadona vī is sākhī dā khiāl āundā, main phikī hāsī has dendā. kī vārī gurdwāre vic ih sākhī sunāī gāi. par pahārī nū panje nal rokan vālī gal ute main hameshā sir mardā rahaindā. ih gal methon nahī mannī jā sakdī sī.*

“How can somebody stop an avalanching mountainside?” Whenever the thought of this sakhi would come to me, I would laugh bitterly. A few times this story was told at the gurdwārā, but without fail I shook my head when the part about the boulder was recited. I simply could not believe such a story.”  
Duggal, "Karamat."

After that, however, the narrative turns toward events occurring in the historic-fictional time of the story, wherein the mother and boy learn of events following the Gurū Kā Bāgh incident. This incident occurred as a result of Sikh efforts to liberate important religious sites from colonial control—an effort known as the Gurdwārā Movement (1920-1925), led by a group of nonviolent protesters known as *Akālīs* (“Immortals”). In January 1922, one such protest occurred at Gurū kā Bāgh, a *gurdwārā* located just outside Amritsar; police began arresting and violently beating Sikhs who went to gather firewood for use in the *gurdwārā*’s communal kitchen. By the beginning of autumn, after months of continued agitation, Gurū kā Bāgh and the land associated with the *gurdwārā* were reluctantly given over to the Akālīs; meanwhile, however, there had been thousands of arrests and hundreds of hospitalizations, and many of those arrested were tried and sent to prison. In October 1922, the Gurū kā Bāgh prisoners were transported by rail to Nausherā in the Northwestern hill tracts of Panjāb. News of the poor treatment of prisoners—who had been subject to regular beatings, and were starving and thirsty—spread through the countryside like gusts of wind before the speeding train.<sup>9</sup> Duggal uses the historical events of Sikhs’ protests of this treatment as the context for this part of his narrative.

In the story, the mother and son hear of these events from a woman whose husband had been amongst the first to lie before the train in protest. The woman explains how news had spread in the town of Panjā Sāhib about the imminent arrival of the injured, hungry, and thirsty prisoners aboard the train to Nausherā. In keeping with the moral implications of Nānak’s

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<sup>9</sup> See Guru Ka Bagh Morcha and Akālī Movement entries in Harbans Singh, *The Encyclopaedia of Sikhism* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1992). and Sardul Singh Caveeshar, "The Akali Movement," in *The Singh Sabha and Other Socio-Religious Reform Movement in the Punjab: 1850-1925*, ed. Ganda Singh (Patiala: Publication Bureau Panjabi University, Patiala, 1937; reprint, 1997); Ganda Singh, *Some Confidential Papers of the Akali Movement* (Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Sikh Itihas Research Board, 1965).

actions in the Walī Kandhārī *sākhī*, the Sikhs of Panjā Sāhib knew that stopping the train to give food and water was their ethical responsibility. They gathered around the tracks in anticipation of the train’s arrival; only one year earlier, at this very site in Panjā Sāhib, Akālī protesters attempted to liberate the *gurdwārā*, walking headlong into a massacre.

Now, as the train approached, one man lay down calmly upon the tracks. This man’s wife, later narrating these events to the mother and son, describes how she and many other people joined him upon the tracks, their voices joining his to recite the supplicatory phrase, “*ਧੰਨ ਨਿਰੰਕਾਰ... ਧੰਨ ਨਿਰੰਕਾਰ*” – “Blessed is the Unformed...Blessed is Nānak [Nirankārī].”<sup>10</sup> Many were crushed under the wheels of the train as it careened to a stop, blood spilling over from the tracks to the land. However, the train stopped just a short distance from where the woman was lying; Duggal leaves the likely death of her husband dangling before the reader.

In closing the story, Duggal performs the opening scene with a slight variation; on their way home from Panjā Sāhib, the boy’s mother again begins to narrate the same *janamsākhī*. They are accompanied by his younger sister, who raises the same doubts about Nānak’s ability to stop an enormous rock. This time, however, her brother interrupts her and connects myth to history, stating that if people could stop a train, then someone could stop a boulder.<sup>11</sup> Tears fill the boy’s eyes as he thinks about Gurū Nānak stopping the boulder that had been hurled toward a crowd of thirsty villagers. The Sikhs lying in front of the train and the imprint of Nānak’s palm merge into a message about compassion for others.

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<sup>10</sup> I have translated “*dhann nirankār...dhann nirankār*” twice here in keeping with the common trope used in *janamsākhīs* to signal Nānak’s proximal relatedness to the Unformed One or *Nānak Nirankārī*.

<sup>11</sup> ਕਿਉਂ ਨਹੀਂ ਕੋਈ ਰੋਕ ਸਕਦਾ? ਮੈਂ ਵਿੱਚ ਬੋਲ ਪਿਆ, ਅਨੋਰੀ ਵਾਂਗ ਉਡਦੀ ਹੋਈ ਟਰੇਨ ਨੂੰ ਰੋਕਿਆ ਜਾ ਸਕਦਾ ਹੈ, ਤਾਂ ਪਹਾੜ ਦੇ ਟੁਕੜੇ ਨੂੰ ਕਿਉਂ ਨਹੀਂ ਕੋਈ ਰੋਕ ਸਕਦਾ?

“I interjected, ‘Why couldn’t he have stopped it?’ If people can stop a train that was speeding along like a storm wind, then why can’t somebody stop an avalanche?”

In Duggal’s story, the young boy’s dubiousness toward miraculous accounts and search for historical truth mirror debates that surrounded the *janamsākhī* literature throughout the twentieth century, as secular scholars tried to discover the historical Nānak buried within the mythic and legendary elements in the *janamsākhī*.<sup>12</sup> Not convinced by the historical reality of the “mythic” narrative of Gurū Nānak and Mardānā, when the boy has before him a witness to the actions of those who stopped a hurtling mass of iron and steel through sacrifice and supplication his doubt is replaced by astonishment. Duggal describes him as speechless and unable to drink a drop of water the entire day.

Momentarily shelving the numerous nodes and circuits of Duggal’s experimental use of *sākhī* narrative structures, I address some of the questions that Duggal raises about the relationship between recitation and event, and between the miraculous and the everyday. How might *sākhīs* portray a system of thought and action, based on Nānak’s poetic compositions? What do such usages reveal about the connection between recitative speech, or *nām-simran*? How did writing *sākhīs* further this non-oppositional system of thinking? Is it relevant today? Exploring these questions requires moving through the layers of accrued interpretation within the network created by *sākhīs*. This network includes but is not limited to practitioners, political actors, secular intellectuals, and traditional exponents. This dissertation unpacks some of the interpretive layers within this network, while adding further levels by considering how *janamsākhīs* were adapted and translated. To do so, I read changes in the network of interpretation against the manuscript archive.

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<sup>12</sup> Such debates occurred for numerous central Sikh texts during the twentieth century, including the *Srī Gurī Granth Sāhib* and the *Dasam Granth*. See Rattan Singh Jaggi, *Dasama Grantha Dā Paurāṇika Adhiaina* (1965); Robin Rinehart, *Debating the Dasam Granth*, Aar Religion in Translation (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Piar Singh, *Gatha Sri Guru Granth Sahib (Pracin Hatth-Likhat Pothian Ate Birha De Adhar Te)* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University Press, 1992); *Gatha Sri Adi Granth and the Controversy* (Delhi, Michigan: Anant Education and Rural Development Foundation, 1996); Pashaura Singh, *The Guru Granth Sahib: Canon, Meaning and Authority* (New Delhi ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

## 0.2 The Walī Kandhārī *sākhī* in Janamsākhī Manuscripts

For instance, Duggal’s short-story can be compared to janamsākhī manuscripts. The Walī Kandhārī *sākhī* appears in the Bālā janamsākhī recensions, although its contents bear virtually no resemblance to Duggal’s “Karāmāt.” Bālā recensions may have been written during the lifetime of the second Sikh Gurū, Angad; they are the most popular, internally diverse, and well-represented in the manuscript archive. A manuscript from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which I will call “Bālā A,” and a lithograph from the last quarter of the same century, “Bālā B,” help illustrate the importance of the archive.<sup>13</sup>

Both are written using the Gurmukhī script, with very similar narrative content. However, Bālā A is written in dialect, Persian, and a mix of Pashto and Hinduī. Bālā B is written in a more familiar Panjābī, and the use of dialect is gone. This shift in the language of the texts likely reflects a change in reader expectations of and familiarity with janamsākhī texts, as well as the training of the traditional exponents who would have authored these works, that occurred over the course of the nineteenth century. The annexation of Panjāb in 1849 marked a shift in which a specifically religious sphere formed around the production of Panjābī-language texts like the janamsākhī, rather than the previously diverse, pluralistic, and multilingual literary sphere that Farina Mir has called the Panjābī Language Formation.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The first manuscript is at Panjāb University, Candīgarh, Mss no. 863; it bears a date of completion for 1800 A.D. The second is a lithograph by Mālik Dīwān Būtā Singh produced in 1877 A.D. For mss no. 863 I am using Surinder Singh Kohli’s critical edition of that manuscript. Bhāī Bālā, Surindar Singh Kohli, and Singha Jagajīta, *Janamasākhī Bhāī Bālā* (Caṇḍīgarha: Pabalīkeshana Biuro, Pañjāba Yūnīwarasiṭī, 1990); Malik Diwan Butta Singh, ed. *Pothi Janamsakhi* (Lahore: Matbai Aftab Panjab, 1871).

<sup>14</sup> Farina Mir, *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab*, South Asia across the Disciplines ;2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010). Harjot Oberoi’s work also tracks this shift from a (reading) public that would have easily shifted between religious and linguistic idioms without exclusively identifying with any single religious category, to a rigid form of religious self-identification that crystallized with colonial intervention, particularly around the moment of the 1849 annexation. Harjot Singh Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Both manuscripts contain two meetings between Nānak and Walī Kandhārī set in Kandhār, not in Hasan Abdāl or Panjā Sāhib, as in Duggal’s story. They occur late in Nānak’s life after he settles at Kartārpur. The first meeting between the two involves an encounter (*bheṭā*) with Walī Kandhārī, who goes by the name Yār Alī Dārī; and the second meeting consists of discourse (*gosṭī*) between Nānak and Sharaf Pathān. After being introduced by the name Yār Alī Dārī, however, Kandhārī is primarily called “Mughal,” and Sharaf is “Pathān.” The name Yār Alī Dārī, meaning “The one who has Alī as a friend,” marks the Walī as Shī’ā.<sup>15</sup>

In marking the characters via their ethnic, sectarian, and class identifiers, the janamsākhī announces its interest in questions of identity; these categories are put forward and then minimalized within the texts’ philosophy of non-oppositionality. In so doing, the texts recognize categories of identity as significant, even while suggesting that they should not operate as exclusive categories of identification. The text repeatedly puts forth this notion of a non-oppositional identity by shifting between and translating words within the text, playing on the multiple resonances of a word within a given idiom to deploy a proliferation of interpretation that ultimately points back to a singular Oneness.

We can see this use of language in the brief encounter between Nānak and Yār Alī Dārī in the Bālā B account. Alī Dārī asks Nānak what his name is and who his master is. Nānak responds by stating his full name, Nānak Nirankārī, and says his master is *ik khudā* – “the One self-formed,” to whom all creation is beholden. He continues: “The *faqīr* is that one through whose gaze the duality of being is diminished. Whenever and wherever I look, *khudā* is present

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<sup>15</sup> The Sunnī and Shi’a denominations within Islam mark a significant division between Muslims that occurred early in the history of Islam. The division arose following a dispute over who was the rightful successor to the Prophet Muhammad. For a description of the different beliefs between these two groups see Lynda Clarke, “Belief and Unbelief in Shī’ī Thought,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Three*, Encyclopaedia of Islam (Brill); Cornelia Schöck, “Belief and Unbelief in Classical Sunnī Theology,” *ibid*.



and watching (*hāzār-o-nāzar*).” Hearing this, Alī Dārī prostrates before Nānak and asks permission to become Nānak’s disciple (*murīd*).<sup>16</sup> As part of Nānak’s acceptance of him as a disciple, he renames him Walī Kandhārī.

In this *sākhī*, the Bālā B manuscript makes reference to *khudā*, which I translate as the word *khudā* as “self-formed.” I break the word into *khud* (self) and *ā* (come) to suggest that *khudā* is being on its own, a singularity, or the One (*ik*). *Khudā* comes into being through itself. This usage is implicit in *janamsākhīs*, and *khudā* may be used synonymously with *brahm* or *pār-brahm*, which uses a Sanskritic formulation to indicate an impulse before creation acting as a creative spark for self-forming. Similarly, where we find reference to “*Allāh*” or “*illāhī*,” I read an emphasis on Oneness, rather than a specifically sectarian theology or associated religious identity.

This shifting between idioms emphasizes multiplicity in the non-oppositional philosophy of Oneness put forth in texts like the *janamsākhī*. It reflects the dialogic aspect of the creation and dissemination of these *janamsākhī* texts. This dialogic aspect is part of the imaginative creation of discourses based upon Nānak’s writing and performance of *janamsākhī* within a *sangat*, where audiences may interject with questions or clarifications. In such a dialogic context the movement between idioms indicates the author’s attempt to explain the ideas with recourse to multiple traditions. Similar to the interchangeable and variable use of *khudā* and *brahm*, the prevalence of the language of Persian Sufism (*pīr* and *murīd*) occurs alongside Indic forms of reference to the relationship between master and student (*gurū* and *sikh*).

Nānak’s renaming of Yār Alī Dārī as Walī Kandhārī (“Friend/Protector of/from Kandhār”) also suggests a refusal of sectarian markers of identification while retaining a

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<sup>16</sup> We find references to both *pīr* and *murīd* and *gurū* and *sikh* in the SGGS, as well as the works of Bhāī Gurdās.

reference to a locality. The difference between in connotations of “friend” shows this shifting emphasis from a “mystical” sort of friendship based on sectarian belief (“The Friend of Ali”) to one rooted in ethical action within the world (“The Friend of those from Kandhār”). Also, the word *yār* (friend or lover) used in discourses of intimacy becomes *wālī* (friend or protector) which emphasizes ethical responsibility toward another.

We can now contrast the account in the Bālā B lithograph with Bālā A, which uses more Persian language and notions. In the Bālā A, for instance, Alī Dārī asks several questions upon hearing the name Nānak Nirankārī, just as we witness the boy asking questions in Duggal’s story. In Persian, he asks whether Nānak is a Sufī [*mannesifīdīst*]. Nanak replies that he is beholden to *khudā* [*mā bandā khudāe ast*] -refusing the identification of Sufī in response to his interlocutor’s direct question. After asking the name of Nānak’s master, the Bālā A account differs from Bālā B in that the question, “*sumā pīr guft*” is asked twice. In the context of the *sākhī*, it is a statement-question: “He said, ‘You are a *pīr*?’” However, in the movement from Panjābī to Persian, the statement-question is formulated twice: “*tā mughal faqīr boliā sumā pīr guft.*” The English translation would read, “Then the Mughal Faqīr said, ‘He said, you are a holyman?’”

The doubled grammar in the Bālā A makes it difficult to discern the intent of Nānak answering, “I am *Zindā Pīr* (‘living *pīr*’).” When we read such claims within a non-oppositional framework, we can read this idea, explicitly mentioned in the Bālā A, as also reflective of Nānak’s claim in Bālā B that his *pīr* is *khudā*.

Nānak's claim to be "Zindā Pīr" resonates with the status of Khwājā Khidr.<sup>17</sup> In Islamic traditions, Khidr is a humble servant or messenger who brings one to *khudā*.<sup>18</sup> This Khwājā Khidr reference develops an aspect of non-oppositionality associated with Oneness of being by drawing an allusion to the Qur'an and Islamic narratives. It brings Nānak within the ambit of messianism in Abrahamic thought. In Sūrah al-Kahf, for example, the Qu'rān describes an encounter between Moses and a servant whom tradition recognizes as Khidr.<sup>19</sup> Moses accompanies Khidr to gain knowledge hidden from him. However, Moses finds him acting in ways that seem nonsensical. On every one of these occasions, he questions Khidr's actions, and Khidr replies that Moses does not have the patience required to accompany him. Khidr warns him: "You will not be able to bear with me. How can you bear that which is beyond your comprehension?"<sup>20</sup> The third time Moses questions Khidr, they part ways; but before departing, Khidr explains all three actions in turn. At the end, he tells him, "So, I did not do that of my own accord. This is the explanation of things you could not bear with patience."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> There is a shrine in Northern Sindh known as Zindā Pīr, that is associated with Khwājā Khidr. Other shrines associated with the Sheikh Tahih (Jhulelāl) at Uderolal, or Lal Shahbaz Qalandar at Sehwan Sharif are thought to represent sites where Khidr presents himself to guide individuals to encounter Oneness. This reference and other like it in janamsākhī manuscripts stake out a connection between Nānak and other persons associated with Khidr. For popular belief in saints see Harjot Singh Oberoi, "Popular Saints, Goddesses, and Village Sacred Sites: Rereading Sikh Experience in the Nineteenth Century," *History of Religions* 31, no. 4 (1992). pp.363-384 and *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*.

<sup>18</sup> M. Longworth Dames, "Khwadja Khidr," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Encyclopaedia of Islam (Brill). Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār and Arthur John Arberry, *Muslim Saints and Mystics: Episodes from the Tadhikirat Al-Auliya' ("Memorial of the Saints")*, Tadhikirat Al-Auliya' (London ; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1996). In popular practice, Khidr is associated with the uwais tradition, wherein auliya can meet one another in a distinct atemporal (*ek-static*) realm that is not tied to the limits of corporeal mortality. Khidr is thought to take people into this realm from a temporal realm. Khidr was thought to meet wayfarers at the banks of river or their confluences. Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabanni, "Classical Islam and the Naqshbandi Sufi Tradition.," (Islamic Supreme Council of America; 2nd edition (June 2004), 2004). For a discussion on the popular worship of holymen at shrines in Panjāb see Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*.

<sup>19</sup> *Al-Qur'an*, trans. Ahmad Ali (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988).18:60-18:83

<sup>20</sup> Qur'an (18:67-18:68) The translation given is by Ahmed Ali. See *ibid.* p.256

<sup>21</sup> Qur'an (18:82). *Ibid.* p.257

Sūrah al-Kahf takes up the nature of man and his will for knowledge in Moses' encounter with Khidr. The text announces this as a topic under consideration within al-Kahf: "We have explained in various ways all things to men in this Qur'ān, but of all things man is contentious."<sup>22</sup> The sūrah closes with a statement about the separation between humans and the One; that humans are like one another, but the One is separate from them. Humans should not equate any created being with the One.<sup>23</sup> Thus, it takes up themes of action, comprehension, and difference vis-à-vis human being mirroring themes addressed in the Walī Kandhārī *sākhī*. Through the subtle allusion to the story of Khwājā Khidr in the Qur'ān, we can see this *sākhī* drawing from existing discourses on Oneness to put forth a theory of non-oppositional existence.

For instance, a question that inheres across all versions of the Walī Kandhārī *sākhī* relates to the nature of the human, his/her relationship with others, and an ethical obligation to the unknown. Returning to the Bālā A account, Alī unbelievably asks whether Nānak is *Zindā Pīr*, and Nānak replies affirmatively. Alī states that from birth we become concerned with ourselves [*paidāsut murīd shud*]. Nānak responds by stating that *khudā* is *pīr* and all creation is *murīd*; with a remarkable play on words that includes a reference to his interlocutor's Shī'ā name, Nānak states, "*parvadigār nigāhai digar na dārī*" ("Care for others cannot be had through an othering gaze" / "The Caring One [i.e. God] does not have the eyes of othering.")<sup>24</sup>

Hearing this, Alī Dārī plants himself in a submissive pose before Nānak, who continues: "The self-formed is not other, the self-formed has no cause" ("*khudāe digar nīst khudāe na dārī*").<sup>25</sup> Nānak's response addresses Alī Dārī's question about the nature of the One, and how

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<sup>22</sup> Qur'an (18:55). Ibid. p. 255

<sup>23</sup> Qur'an 18:110. Ibid. p. 259

<sup>24</sup> "ਪਰਵਦਿਗਾਰ ਨਿਗਾਹੈ ਦਿਗਰ ਨ ਦਾਰੀ"

Surindar Singh Kohli, *Janamasākhī Bhāī Bālā* (Caṇḍīgārha: Pabalīkeshana Biuro, Pañjāba Yūnīwarasiṭī, 1990). p.263

<sup>25</sup> "ਖੁਦਾਇ ਦਿਗਰ ਨੀਸਤ ਕੁਦਾਇ ਨ ਦਾਰੀ" *ibid.*

knowledge of God’s Oneness translates into ethical action amongst human beings. Nānak’s phrase “*khudāe digar nīst khudāe na dārī*” may be understood as a Persian translation of the Arabic *shahādā*, or statement of testimony to Oneness of being, required for becoming Muslim: “*La ilaha illallah*”—“There is no God but God.”<sup>26</sup> As I describe in the first chapter, *sākhī* shares a notion of witness or testimony with *shahādā*. Testimony or witnessing Oneness is central to the form of textuality that non-oppositional language deploys.

Furthermore, both of Nānak’s responses end with the words “*na dārī*”—“not Dārī”—which foreshadow his renaming of Yār Alī Dārī in accordance to the principles of Oneness, which reject the types of belonging (“*dārī*”) implied by Alī Dārī’s name and actions. Nānak’s response demonstrates the illuminating possibilities of borrowing, translating, and playing with linguistic idioms: by translating the Islamic testimony of faith. Nānak affirms the Oneness of God, demonstrates that knowledge of this Oneness is ethical, and then transforms the disciple. The instant of renaming speaks to the transformation of being in accordance with principles of Oneness – Alī Dārī becomes Walī Kandhārī.

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<sup>26</sup> In the Urdu text *But Shikan Guru Nanak*, Mamoon Tariq Khan (listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for having the most retentive brain in the world) argues that Nānak’s primary intellectual contribution to religious thought was his effectiveness at translating intuitive knowledge, or *m’arifāt*, into an Indic idiom using a variety of different linguistic and poetic strategies. This argument is implicit in my own understanding of *janamsākhis* and their engagement with *sabd* as put forth here. Here is a sample of the argument put forth in the introduction: “*Bābā Gurū Nānak ik mard-i momin waliullah the. Ik jalīl ul-qadr ‘arifullah ne paidāish se pahle hī āp ke wālid ko āp kī bashārat dī thī...jab āp ne buton se mun mor liyā aur āpnā chahra Allāh kī taraf kar liyā toh Allāh ta’alā ne āpne ik māmōr Minallāh ‘Arifbillāh ko in kī hidayat par māmōr kar diyā. Unhon ne nūr-i Qur’an wa imān kī dīyā un ke harīm qalb mein jalā dī toh be ikhtiyār “lā ilāha illallāh Muhammadan rasullullāh” kā na’arā-i tawhīd lagāyā.*” The text also mentions Nanak’s journey to Mecca and Medina and his stay in Baghdad: “*Allah ta’alā ke muntakhib-o māmōr Minallāh Abdī Kāmīl Qutb-i Zamān Hazrat Shah Murād Rahmatullāh Alayhī ke darbār vilāyat mein basad ‘ajz-o niyāz hāsīl hue...Māmūr Minallāh kī nishāni ke taur par Qur’anī ayāt ka kharqā ‘ataa farmāyā... Ik ‘arsā darāz tak muqaddas sarzameen ‘arb mein qayām farmāyā, ulūm-i arabi aur farsi mein muhārat kullī hāsīl kī. ‘Arabi tahzīb aur islām ke rang mein āpne āp ko rang liyā...*” Khvajah Sayyid Muhammad ‘Abdullah, *But Shikan Guru Nanak* (Lāhaur: Dārulislām Majlis al-Ḥikmat al-‘Abūdiyāh, 2001). pp. 11-12. For similar descriptions of Nānak in relation to *tawhīd* (Oneness) see, Sayyid Afzal Haidar, *Farīd, Nānak, Bullhā, Vāris* (Islāmābād: Dost Pablikeshanz, 2003); Khadim Hussain Soomro, *Sufis of Indus Valley : Message of Baba Guru Nanak, Baba Fareed, Shah Abdul Latif*, trans. K.S. Nagpal, 2nd rev. ed.. ed. (Sehwan Sharif: Sehwan Sharif : Sain Publishers, 2001).

By moving between linguistic idioms, the Bālā A manuscript suggests a broader range of potential readers and listeners of *sākhīs* than Bālā B. It exemplifies non-oppositional thought by borrowing freely from multiple linguistic and religious traditions to propound a philosophy of Oneness. In this sense, viewing the language of the text as ontologized helps us to view this movement between categories of religious thought and language as a living example of non-oppositionality. The Bālā B also performatively demonstrates the value of transgressive translation for a philosophy of Oneness. This living language can then provide the basis for transformation on the part of the reader/listener.

Nānak expresses a common identity for humans and an emphasis on acting ethically at the end of *gostī* with Shāh Sharaf. This discussion occurs in the same sequence of *sākhīs*. Before their discourse, Nānak overhears Kandhārī and Sharaf having a heated and divisive debate regarding the term *lutf*—whether the Creator has a moral duty to bring humans closer to Him by ensuring, humans act in ways that assist in this goal. There are acts (*dāvā*) bringing people closer or farther from this goal—but how can people comprehend their acts and align them toward the *dāvā* of intimacy over estrangement? If the creator has a moral duty to be kind (*lutf*), then humans would be compelled to act in ways that increase intimacy. Nānak answers this through a riddle of sorts:

ਲੁਤਫ ਖੁਦਾਈ॥ ਬੰਦਾ ਗੁਮਰਾਹੀ॥ ਕਰਮ ਬਖਸੀਸ ਇਲਾਹੀ॥

*Lutf khudāī. Bandā gumrahī. Karam bakhsīs illāhī*

Being self-formed is kindness; man loses his way; compassion granted by One.

The contours of the debate about *lutf* marks the Sunnī and Shī’ā branches of Islam. The Bālā B manuscript clearly states this when Kandhārī asks Nānak to grant him beneficence, Nānak tells him to diminish the *dāvā* of estrangement, recognizing that Sunnī and Shī’ā and other sects all come from *khudā*—sects are a product of the *khudā*’s light.

In response to Nānak’s words, Kandhārī reveals that since he has been following Nānak’s path, he has stopped his discriminatory actions. In this transformation, then, Nānak’s non-oppositional stance toward difference is not an abstraction (or a “miracle” as represented in Duggal’s story and other popular versions of the Kandhārī *sākhī*), but an alteration of thinking through the poetics of ontological language. In this sense, Nānak’s linguistic play is not simply clever or tongue-in-cheek; his language transforms the nature of being human.

Duggal’s short story highlights the continuity of these issues by mirroring structural elements from the *sākhī* genre; he incorporates supplicatory speech acts to highlight a tragic and violent modern event connected to the liberation of Sikh religious space from colonial influence.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, by incorporating a structure of testimony—in which the young boy first disbelieves, and then transforms into a pious believer after hearing the speech of a witness to miraculous events—Duggal validates the seemingly miraculous, legendary, or otherwise ahistorical aspects of *sākhī* narratives. In other words, Duggal links the miraculous provision of water and the stopping of massive boulder backward—a narrative rupture of temporality through impossibility—to a temporal circuit of possibilities using the story about the Gurū kā Bāgh prisoners. The boy, in turn, undergoes a shift in his stance toward doubting temporal (fact-based) and miraculous (mythic) events as mutually exclusive. Duggal’s narrative—like the *sākhīs* themselves—incorporates mythic, legendary, historical, and biographical strands, showing the resiliency of the *janamsākhī*’s narrative form to broach difficult issues; this resiliency connects the modern event to periodic cycles of violence in Sikh history.

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<sup>27</sup> Duggal’s career is marked by an interest in religious themes as well as the Sikh Gurūs; later in his career he turned to writing *janamsākhīs*. Kartar Singh Duggal, *The Sikh Gurus: Their Lives and Teachings* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1980); *Secular Perceptions in Sikh Faith* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, India, 1982); *Janama Sākh*, Title on T.P. Verso: *Janam Sakhi* (Dillī: Ārasī Pabalisharaza, 2006); *Siphati Salāha: Sikkha Gurū Mahārāja Dī Janamasākh*, Title on T.P. Verso: Sift Salah (Nawīm Dillī: Nawayuga Pabalisharaza, 2007).

At the same time, however, Duggal's validation of the miraculous aspects of this *sākhī* using historical events still privileges the historical as a measure of the *sākhī*'s facticity. Furthermore, the *sākhī* that Duggal references in his story, and which draws from an assumption of his readers' familiarity given the wide circulation of this anecdote about Nānak, does not appear in the manuscript record. This gap points to an important distinction between moralistic themes of piety found in the oral circulation of *sākhīs* amongst practicing Sikhs and the *sākhīs* found in the janamsākhī manuscript archive. The Walī Kandhārī show manuscript to be products of highly learned exponents creatively engaging with *sabd* to illuminate Nānak's non-oppositional thought.

This dissertation begins a comparative task of searching for shades and tones persisting across the centuries-long tradition of appropriating janamsākhīs by collating some recurrences of these *sākhīs*. I scrutinize the presence, absence, or alteration of *sākhīs* that occur amongst manuscript recensions, oral circulation of *sākhīs*, and other adaptations and creative engagements with this genre. These shifts in meaning and significance of janamsākhīs reveal a richly textured network of actors and interpreters over time. Using such moments to return to the manuscript archive reveals the importance of the notion of ontologized language—whether in the wordplay of nineteenth-century manuscripts or in the supplicatory speech acts incorporated into the ethical action represented in Duggal's twentieth-century story—for the transformation of human being through a network of non-oppositional writing. Such moments of non-oppositionality recognize and honor markers of identity while disavowing these markers as exclusivist categories.



### 0.3 Mapping Networks of Interpretation

As we have seen with the examples above, this dissertation is an inquiry into possible ways to reincorporate the vivacity of interpretive possibilities that enhance critical engagement with non-oppositionality. In this dissertation, a *janamsākhī* is a written compilation of anecdotes, or *sākhīs*, created around instances where Nānak (1469-1539) may have composed a poem, or *sabd* propounding philosophical Oneness. As we have seen with Duggal's adaptation of the popular version of the Kandhārī *sākhī*, however, *sākhīs* also have a wide oral circulation amongst lay Sikhs that may or may not bear resemblance to their appearance in the *janamsākhī* manuscripts.

Furthermore, as the opening example illustrates, I see *kathā* as an essential means of circulation of and engagement with both *sākhī* and *sabd*; as I will further elaborate in Chapter 2 using a series of oral history interviews with *kathāvācaks* (exegetes who perform *kathā*, and who have trained as traditional exponents of Sikh texts), seeing *kathā* as a mechanism for producing and performing non-oppositional texts like *janamsākhīs* allows me to consider how non-oppositional texts can be situated in transformative reading and/or recitative speech practices.<sup>28</sup>

By thinking of *janamsākhīs* as textual extensions of the network of interpretation operating in the SGGS, which is centered around expanding Nānak's thought, I seek to inquire about how these networks expanded, contracted, and were altered across instances in time. In

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<sup>28</sup>I am building my argument regarding language upon the suggestions regarding the deontologization of language which occurs during the twentieth century in the Sikh tradition. Deontologization is a term used by Michel de Certeau and reflects a loss of "reality status" by being rendered into a metaphysical understanding of language where meaning is derived through a transcendentalization of the word. Deontologization is a relation to language that occurs through self-conscious forms of foundational thinking where an individual presumes to be the originator and owner of the spoken word. Given Mandair's argument that the process of this transformation occurs primarily during the twentieth century and becomes institutionalized only in the second half of that century, it is implicit in my argument that the *janamsākhī* manuscripts contain an ontologized language, where language has a distinct and separate being from humans. I also suggest that ontologized language is not a lost form of speech but has always been an exceptional attainment that reflects a distinct ontology of the human as well as language -one that speaks non-oppositionality. This argument is put forward in chapters four and five in Mandair. pp. 263-276, and 333-347

this section, I outline the various agents involved in the network of interpretation of janamsākhīs, from the seventeenth century through today, whose approaches to *sabd* and *sākhī* inform my own.

### ***Traditional Exponents***

The term “exponent”—which encompasses a range of Panjābī terms, such as *giānī*,<sup>29</sup> *granthī*, and *kathāvācak*, or *kīrtaniyyā*—refers to individuals whose training is connected to any one of the numerous branches of thought that have inherited and adapt the practices begun by Gurū Nānak.<sup>30</sup> Today, these individuals are trained at centers of learning that operate upon the margins of Panjāb’s cultural tapestry. The term “exponent” recognizes these individuals’ diverse sources of training, which allows them to move freely between sub-sects within Sikhism, as well as other traditions that are today coded as “Muslim” or “Hindu.” Indeed, by using the umbrella term “exponent” in order to elide distinctions between orthodox and heterodox Sikh groups, as well as other markers of community belonging, I aim to privilege these thinkers’ individuality over their institutional affiliations or broader notions of piety and religious community. In so

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<sup>29</sup> Again, Giān Ratnāvalī describes a person called *giānī* as one who recognizes the essence (*joti*) the One beyond limits (*parmesar*) in all humans. “ਜੋ ਗਿਆਨੀ ਪੁਰਸ ਹੈਨ ਸੋ ਸਭਨਾ ਮੈ ਪਰਮੇਸਰ ਦੀ ਜੋਤ ਜਾਣਦੇ ਹੈਨ॥” This definition is given in the context of Nānak’s discourse with the Qāzī at Sultānpur where Nānak is asked whether he is Hindū or Muslim. This narrative is a staple in janamsākhīs although different recensions each add unique interpretation of the events which transpired, the *sabds* recited by Nānak, and the contents of the dialogue. Jasabīr Singh Sābara, *Giāna Ratanāwalī: Janamasākhī Srī Gurū Nānaka Dewa Jī: Sampādana Ate Pāṭha-Ālocana* (Amritsar: Gurū Nānaka Adhiaina Wibhāga, Gurū Nānaka Dewa Yūnīwarasiṭī, 1993). pp. 314

<sup>30</sup> Western scholars of Sikh Studies privilege a historiographic approach to Sikh texts by using the term “critical scholar” in contradistinction to “traditional scholar.” “Critical scholar” signifies a textual-critical approach to the Sikh religion primarily focused on Sikh self-representation for community formation. Conversely, “traditional scholar” primarily refers to scholars who are Sikh and who function in Indian universities, with a critical mass located in Panjāb. Both terms refer to scholars working in modern, secular universities. The term “traditional scholar,” however, requires disambiguation because 1) it suggests that these scholars cannot separate their work from their identity; 2) it misleadingly implies that these scholars have a “traditional” training in knowledge and reading practices beyond the confines of the secular university. In other words, this ambiguity conflates independent forms of knowledge production, textuality, and epistemology beginning during Gurū Nānak’s lifetime with these modern “traditional scholars.”

doing, I also honor the form of non-oppositional thought that I argue forms the core of Gurū Nānak's thought as expressed in the SGGS and the janamsākhīs themselves.

Although these exponents' training has undergone changes and adaptations to the given historical moment in which they live and write, some aspects have remained relatively constant from Gurū Nānak's time until today. For instance, exponents receive training in a wide range of languages, including Panjābī, Persian, Arabic, Braj, Sanskrit, as well as any number of North Indian dialects. This range in linguistic training is reflected, for instance, in the idiomatic diversity of the early nineteenth-century Bālā A manuscript mentioned above. As we have seen, an exponent could use his linguistic range to interpret or expand upon the SGGS in a manner effective for diverse audiences interested in Nānak's teachings.

Similarly, an exponent's linguistic training allows him to pursue study of a wide range of religious texts and their interpretations. While exponents began their training by reading, memorizing, and ultimately embodying Sikh texts like the SGGS, their further training would include extensive study of texts such as the Purānās, the Bhagavad Gītā, the Qur'ān, and/or the writings and poetry of prominent *sheikhs*, *faqīrs*, and *auliya's* like Bābā Farīd, Ghazālī, and Ahmad Sirhindī. These texts could be brought to bear on the exponent's interpretations of the SGGS via comparison, contrast, or borrowing, especially based on his audience's inclinations and/or familiarity with any of the traditions established by these texts. In this sense as well, exponents engage with a form of non-oppositional thinking that avoids reifying associations of any one text or person with any branch of knowledge or religious tradition—instead engaging in diverse, plural forms of learning.

Today, there are three main schools of thought (*sampardāyas*) that draw their lineage from Gurū Nānak: the Udāsīs, the Nirmalās, and the Giānīs.<sup>31</sup> For the purposes of this dissertation, however, I have chosen to focus on the last group, which is most commonly associated with a mainstream, orthodox form of Sikhism; within the Giānī Sampardāya, I focus on three functioning contemporary sub-branches of learning, named for their location: Satto Kī Gallī, Bhindrān, and Mehta Chowk. Each of these sub-branches is called a *derā*, which refers to a place where students engage with resident experts in *kathā*. Each of these *derās* is connected to a broader institution called a *taksāl*, which refers to a multi-generational approach to the system of *kathā*. Together, *derās* and *taksāls* train new generations of experts in *kathā* who can continue the practice, as well as establish their own *derās* based on their own expertise and training. This institutional system allows for a continuity within Sikh forms of thought and practice, while also allowing for adaptation to contemporary circumstances based on an absorption of current forms of knowledge.

In tracing these branches of knowledge and their respective approaches to *kathā*, I follow the explanations given by the following students of *kathā*: Rāgī Singh and Harminder Singh Goldie at Satto Kī Gallī; Jaspreet Singh and Sewadār Singh at Bhindrān; and Gursevak Singh and Rajasthānī Singh at Mehta Chowk. I also gained insights into the system of *kathā* from the current head (*mukhī*) of the Bhindrān *derā*, Bābā Mohan Singh. Finally, Bhāī Baldeep Singh and Bhāī Gurcharan Singh expanded on the relationship between *kīrtan* (sung musical performance of *sabd*) and *kathā*.

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<sup>31</sup> I am indebted to Professor Balwant Singh Dhillon for the realization that the *sampardāyās* or *parṇālīān* may be idealizations that do not reflect the full training of individual exponents. For a more detailed discussion of the schools of Sikh thought, or *sampardāyās*, see Taran Singh, *Gurbani Dian Viakhia Prṇalian* (Patiala: Publication Bureau Panjabi University, 1988).

As mentioned above, these exponents gained a deep training in Sikh texts that sometimes was augmented by learning with other Sikh *sampardāyās*, as well as other religious traditions. This extended training would occur based on a given student's inclinations and interests; for instance, Giānī Jhior Singh at Satto Kī Gallī was mentioned by my interviewees as someone highly learned in Persian and Arabic, who frequently drew upon Persian texts in his *kathā*, while Bābā Mohan Singh at Bhindrān incorporated discussion of Advaita to make contradistinctions to the philosophy of the Sikh Gurūs. Amongst the other students I met at Bhindrān, some had learned Sanskrit with the Nirmalās, while others had studied the Qur'ān with sheikhs at their *khānqāhs*, or domiciles, within Panjāb.

We have seen traces of this training within the manuscript record, with the Bālā A's references to the Qur'ān and Khwājā Khidr using the term *Zindā Pīr*. With their broad training, exponents—whether those performing *kathā* today, or those producing janamsākhī manuscripts in the past—can combine relevant information from a wide range of texts outside of strict demarcations of religious community to expand on Nānak's philosophy of non-oppositionality as found in the SGGS. Exponents ultimately aim to explain this non-oppositional thought to a *sangat* such that individuals can engage in practices of recitative speech that will transform their very mode of being in the world.

In the context of this dissertation's focus on janamsākhīs, the information that I gleaned from my interviews allows me to expand on the use of *sākhīs* in *kathā* as a distinct form of knowledge practice. Furthermore, the relationship between *sākhī* and *kathā* allows me to situate janamsākhī manuscripts as individual interpretations of the SGGS produced by exponents trained in these particular branches of knowledge, and aimed at addressing basic questions of ethical human existence.

## *Colonial Period*

In examining the network of individual interpreters of janamsākhī texts, I aim to re-examine the legacy of colonial encounters with Sikhs in order to recognize this historical moment as foundational to our understanding of Sikh texts. Given the information outlined above about the use of *sākhīs* in the performance of *kathā*, as well as their use in dialogic engagement between master and student, or between exponent and sangat, we can deduce the likelihood of similar patterns of interaction and *sākhī*-based dialogue between earlier exponents and their colonial interlocuters.

When we view colonial sources through this lens, we can overturn assumptions—now entrenched in the scholarly literature on Sikh Studies—that the janamsākhī became an increasingly irrelevant genre with the rise of the Khālsā in 1799. Instead, we can read between the lines of colonial-era works to infer which *sākhīs* were widely circulated amongst lay Sikhs or recited by Sikh exponents in response to the direct questioning of colonial authors. For instance, colonial works on Sikhs and Sikh tradition—particularly John Malcolm’s landmark *Sketch of the Sikhs* (1812)—frequently portray Gurū Nānak (and the Sikh religion that he inaugurates) as relevant to both Hindūs and Muslims. From this perspective, Nānak aimed at a rapprochement between Hindus and Muslims by teaching a form of humanism, *ektā*, that went beyond such divisions.<sup>32</sup> However, by closely reading these works alongside their authors’ comments about

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<sup>32</sup> Other colonial works that describe dialogues with Sikhs where such a perspective was portrayed include: James Browne, *India Tracts: Containing a Description of the Jungle Terry Districts, Their Revenues, Trade, and Government: With a Plan for the Improvement of Them. Also an History of the Origin and Progress of the Sicks* ([London]: Logographic Press, 1788); George Forster, *A Journey from Bengal to England, through the Northern Part of India, Kashmire, Afghanistan, and Persia, and into Russia, by the Caspian Sea* (London: R. Faulder, 1798); Khān Ghulām Husain, John Briggs, and Hājī Muṣṭafā, *The Siyar-Ul-Mutakherin: A History of the Mahomedan Power in India During the Last Century*, Siyar-Ul-Mutakherin (London: Printed for the Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain and Ireland, 1832); John Malcolm, "Sketch of the Sikhs," *Asiatic Reseaches, or transactions of the society instituted in Bengal for inquiring into the History and Antiquities, the Arts, Sciences, and Literature of Asia* 11 (1812); Charles Wilkins, "The Sicks and Their College at Patna, Dated Benares, 1 March 1781," *Transactions of the Asiatick Society* 1 (1788). For a similar account in Persian based upon discussions with Guru Hargobind (1595-

the manuscripts and/or native informants they consulted, we can infer that this notion of Gurū Nānak’s teachings as syncretistic stem from readings of *sākhīs*—especially those focused on Nānak’s birth, death, and experience of God. These *sākhīs* put forth a non-oppositional mode of thought that problematizes the very categories of Hindu and Muslim, this problematization may have been understood as syncretism.<sup>33</sup>

These colonial interventions had wide consequences for the trajectory of scholarly discourse on the *janamsākhī* amongst both secular scholars and traditional exponents. For instance, Malcolm’s work, alongside that of Henry Colebrooke and John Leyden, helps establish the B6 (“Purātan”) and B41 (“Bālā”) *janamsākhī* manuscripts as foundational texts for the burgeoning English-language discourse on Sikh tradition in the early nineteenth century. We see the prevalence of these manuscripts continue with the scholarly works and translations of Ernest Trumpp and M.A. Macauliffe in the late nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup>

Additionally, we can view colonial administrators’ interviews of exponents as introducing a new branch in the system of Sikh exponents’ learning—one indebted to the Western disciplines of philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and history. Indeed, we see important nineteenth century Sikh scholars—including, amongst others, Bhāi Vīr Singh, Bhāi Santokh Singh, Kāhn Singh Nābhā, Ratan Singh Bhaggū, and Giānī Giān Singh—consciously borrowing from these disciplines, and referring in their works to a “Western” school of thought, alongside the schools of Islamic and Vedantic thought—just as traditional exponents freely

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1644) incorporating *sākhīs* about Nānak see Kaykhusraw Isfandiyār, Muḥsin Fānī, and Rahīm Rizāzādah-’i Malik, *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*, Adabiyāt-i Dasatīrī ;1 (Tihrañ: Kitābkhānah-’i Ṭahūrī, 1983). Although this work has traditionally been attributed to Mohsin Fānī, recent research suggests that it is based on travels by Isfandiyār.

<sup>33</sup> See Farina Mir, "Genre and Devotion in Punjabi Popular Narratives: Rethinking Cultural and Religious Syncretism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48, no. 3 (2006). See chapters 3 and 5 of this dissertation.

<sup>34</sup> See Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

borrow from multiple traditions in order to bring various schools of thought to bear on their interpretations of the SGGS.<sup>35</sup>

Although these intellectuals' scholarly practices indicate some indebtedness to the training of traditional exponents, they should nevertheless be understood as colonial actors along with the colonial administrators themselves. Indeed, the network of readers and interpreters of janamsākhī of this period—which involved the overlapping influences of colonial administrators, reformist Sikhs (ecumenes) from the Singh Sabhā movement, traditional exponents, and lay practitioners—shared common concerns regarding the reform and consolidation of Sikh tradition.

Indeed, the textual remnants of Sikh intellectuals' adaptation of various schools of thought to express the concerns relevant to the colonial moment suggest that Sikh intellectuals and exponents did not operate in a vacuum or discursive sphere outside of Western influence; instead, they absorbed Western knowledge and merged it with their already existing knowledge practices. Their works, in turn, now form part of the core of foundational texts that traditional exponents absorb in their training on Sikh thought. In this sense, this cohort of late-nineteenth century Sikh intellectuals produced an immense body of texts that become relevant in the

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<sup>35</sup> Oberoi argues that a new ecumenical class of religious reformers engage and adapt colonial epistemes like religion and philosophy resulting in a more stabilized and singular notion of Sikh identity than was understood in the Northwestern regions of the subcontinent. This was a process that occurred through the institutionalization of education, the creation of ecumenes, the use of print media and the invention of life-cycle rituals. Oberoi identifies the creation of the Anand Kāraj Act of 1909 as a watershed moment in creating a distinct theater of Sikh religiosity and lived-experience. See Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*; "Empire, Orientalism, and Native Informants: The Scholarly Endeavors of Sir Attar Singh Bhadour," *Journal of Punjab Studies* 17, no. 1 & 2 (2010). The Anand Kāraj Act and the Gurdwārā Reform Act of 1925 have enabled the Sikh people to enter the global fiduciary under the category of religion to vouchsafe human rights and freedoms. See Arvind Singh Mandair, "The Global Fiduciary: Mediating the Violence of Religion," in *Religion and Violence in South Asian: Theory and Practice*, ed. John R. Hinnells and Richard King (New York: Routledge, 2007). Interestingly, Oberoi's argument about the reduction of diversity in the notion of being Sikh and the advent of deontologization of language within the Sikh tradition can be mapped upon one another as incomplete process occurring over the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In this dissertation, I recognize the incomplete nature of these coterminous processes to reconsider the implications of the non-oppositional ontologized language in early texts like the janamsākhī, the gurū granth, and other related writings.



twentieth century (and even today) to both traditional exponents operating from local *derās* and secular scholars operating from the universities in Panjāb that were themselves part of the colonial inheritance.<sup>36</sup> The colonial period provides a vivid example of a moment of mutual intellectual influence that I aim to capture through my emphasis on critically examining networks of interpretation that imbricate to form the current body of scholarship on janamsākhī.

### ***Secular Universities and the Rise of Sikh Studies***

Although there are certainly antecedents and connections to early studies on the Sikhs, for the purposes of my dissertation, I understand the discourse of Sikh Studies to have two beginnings: first in Panjāb, coinciding with the establishment of secular universities in the 1950s and 1960s; and second in North America, following the loosening of immigration rules in both the United States and Canada in the late 1960s and 1970s. With these developments, the study of the Panjābī language and the Sikh tradition would have a legitimate, uncontested focus for the first time since the advent of the university system during the British Rāj.<sup>37</sup> During this period, janamsākhīs played an integral role in the creation of Sikh Studies in Panjāb and beyond.

For example, Attar Singh Bhadour, a late nineteenth century secular scholar, helped the British to see Panjābī as a literary language using textual examples from janamsākhīs that he held in his personal library.<sup>38</sup> During the same time period, Gurmukh Singh, professor at Lahore College

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<sup>36</sup> These texts were used by “traditional scholars”—to heuristically use that term—in order to establish a normative/orthodox form of Sikhism as distinct from “heterodox” elements in that tradition.

<sup>37</sup> For a discussion on the status of Panjābī language during the colonial period and attempts at getting it recognized by the British administration see Mir, *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab*; Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*.

<sup>38</sup> For more on Attar Singh Bhadour’s influence to creating an understanding of Panjābī as a literary language, see Mir, *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab*; Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*; “Empire, Orientalism, and Native Informant: The Scholarly Endeavours of Sir Attar Singh Bhadour,” *Journal of Punjab Studies* 17, no. 1-2 (2010). Mir and Oberoi. Richard Temple also had access to Bhadour’s library and refers to janamsākhī as hagiology in his Richard Carnac Temple, *The Legends of the Panjāb* (Bombay: Education Society's Press, 1884).

and one of the early antecedents of Sikh Studies scholars, collected janamsākhī manuscripts to create an authoritative archive. After Trumpp's 1869 translation of the janamsākhīs, included in his translation of the *Ādi Granth*, Sikh reformers began to request versions of the B6 manuscript (known as the “*Colebrookevālī* janamsākhī”), inaugurating a wide interest amongst secular scholars in Panjāb in the chronological development of the community thru philological examination of manuscripts.

In methodology and in fact, then, the establishment of Sikh Studies in Panjāb occurred as an outgrowth of colonialism, as former colonial institutions of learning became secular universities in the postcolonial period. For instance, in 1956, Lahore's premier colonial institution, Panjāb University, achieved reincarnation in Candīgarh—the new provincial capital of Indian Panjāb. Two more universities quickly followed in the 1960s, with the establishment of Panjābī University at Patiālā in 1962 and Gurū Nānak Dev University at Amrīstar in 1969.

This period witnessed an upsurge of scholarly interest in Sikh history with a three-fold focus on Gurū Nānak, Gurū Gobind Singh, and the sociopolitical history of the Sikh nation. The impetus for this upsurge in scholarly activity involved two major historical hallmarks that the Sikh community celebrated in the 1960s: the tercentenary birth anniversary of Gurū Gobind Singh in 1966 and the quincentenary anniversary of Gurū Nānak's birth in 1969. Much of the work on Gurū Nānak dealt either with his teachings or with his biography—using janamsākhīs as primary sources—which, in the context of the newly independent India, were often discussed in the backdrop of the Sikh contribution to the Indian nation.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, the careful attention to

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<sup>39</sup> The violence of Partition, along with Gurū Nānak's quincentenary, led scholars to turn to the janamsākhīs as textual sources that could be interpreted to establish, define, and legitimize a distinctly Sikh religious community. Mention of the quincentenary celebrations being an impetus to create historical biographies about Gurū Nānak can be read in many of the studies from this period. In the prefatory note to Surinder Singh Kohli's *Philosophy of Gurū Nanak*, the Vice-Chancellor of Panjāb University, Sūrāj Bhān, states that, “Gurū Nanak has a unique place amongst the spiritual leaders, preceptors, reformers and saints of India... The impact of this great teacher on Indian society during the last 500 years cannot be easily estimated... We are fortunate that the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the great Gurū

creating and interpreting an archive of janamsākhī manuscripts inaugurated in this period—and particularly Bhadour’s suggestion that each janamsākhī manuscript represents an individual author’s unique creative and intellectual production—provides the basis for my own archival inquiry here.

A few decades later, the advent of Sikh Studies in North America began through the mutual investment by academics and community members in increasing the prominence of the various facets of the Sikh tradition in scholarship across several humanities disciplines. Sikhs living in North America—alongside a cohort of non-Sikh scholars like Mark Juergensmeyer and N.G. Barrier—began arguing for the establishment of this field of study in North American universities.<sup>40</sup> Attempts to develop research chairs in Sikh Studies began in the 1980s following the Berkeley Conference on Sikh Studies; the 1990s saw the development of three chairs of Sikh

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has fallen during our life...The Panjab University, Chandigarh also decided to pay its respectful homage to Gurū Nanak not only by holding celebrations, but also by publishing nine standard and scholarly books on the life, teachings, philosophy, poetry and other aspects of the great teacher.” Surindar Singh Kohli, *Philosophy of Guru Nanak* (Chandigarh: Publication Bureau, Panjab University, 1969). iii & iv. The same note is given by the Vice-Chancellor as a “Foreword” in Surjit Singh Bal’s, *Gurū Nanak in the Eyes of Non-Sikhs*. A Prefatory Note by Principal P.L. Anand adds the rejoinder, “The Quincentenary Birth Celebrations of the great Gurū Nanak are being celebrated enthusiastically all over the country. The primary focus on the reconstructive vision of the great saint, and to emphasize the significance of those ethical and spiritual values, which are reflected throughout his message of ‘pursuit of Truth and practice of Virtue.’” See, Sarjit Singh Bal, *Guru Nanak in the Eyes of Non-Sikhs* (Chandigarh: Publication Bureau Panjab University, 1969). vii. Trilochan Singh writes in the preface to his work, *Gurū Nanak Founder of Sikhism (A Biography)* that he spent fifteen years collecting janamsākhī manuscripts and critically studying and analyzing other sources on Nānak’s life. He goes on to state, “little did I dream that it would be completed and published in the Quincentenary of Gurū Nanak. The foreword written by Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji, President of the Sahitya Akademi states, “Sri Gurū Nanak Dev, who is respected all over the world... This year, (1969), the official celebration of Gurū Nanak’s birth fell on the full moon night of *Karttika* on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November... The people of India as a whole, including the millions of Sikh... celebrated with devoted zeal and gratitude... The Government of India has inaugurated a series of Seminars on Gurū Nanak and his personality and teachings in five different important centres in India -Delhi, Calcutta, Madras, Bombay, and Ludhiana...through these Seminars a good deal of recent information about Gurū Nanak is being systematically brought to the notice of the Indian scholarly world...The memory of a great historical even is in this way conducing to an intellectual upsurge of this character. See Trilochan Singh, *Guru Nanak: Founder of Sikhism; a Biography* (Delhi: Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, 1969). ix, xix, and xx. Kirpal Singh makes a similar statement written in Panjābī regarding the auspices of his own study; 1966 ਵਿਚ ਜਦੋਂ ਅਸੀਂ ਗੁਰੂ ਗੋਬਿੰਦ ਸਿੰਘ ਜੀ ਦੀ ਤਿੰਨ ਸੌ ਸਾਲਾ ਜਨਮਸ਼ਤਾਬਦੀ ਮਨਾਉਣ ਲਈ ੧੯੬੯ ਵਿਚ ਹੋਣ ਵਾਲੀਆਂ ਪ੍ਰਕਾਸ਼ਨਾਵਾਂ ਦੀਆਂ ਯੋਜਨਾਵਾਂ ਬਣਾਈਆਂ, ਇਨ੍ਹਾਂ ਵਿਚੋਂ ਜਨਮ ਸਾਖੀ ਯੋਜਨਾ ਪਰਮੁੱਖ ਸੀ. See Kirpal Singh, *Janamsakhi Parampara* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1969).

<sup>40</sup> Mandair. pp. 241-244

Studies at the University of Michigan, the University of California Santa Barbara, and the University of British Columbia. Furthermore, the creation of non-profit organizations like the Sikh Research Institute ensured that plans for the development of Sikh Chairs at other universities would continue.<sup>41</sup>

A Sikh Studies conference at University of California, Berkeley in 1978 is often noted as a landmark in the development of the field. Here, Mark Juergensmeyer enumerated the benefits to humanities discourse from a concerted effort toward the creation of a multidisciplinary Sikh Studies. Juergensmeyer called for sociological, historical, religious, literary-philological, and philosophical studies of the Sikh system.<sup>42</sup> In his seminal essay, "Sikhism: The Forgotten Tradition," Juergensmeyer recognizes the impact of studying Sikhism:

Studies of the Sikh tradition and community are valuable in their own right, especially considering the paucity of such studies among Western scholars. But more than that, Sikh studies may have a provocative effect on other areas of scholarship, turning our attention to hidden subjects, helping us reassess the nature of India's religious tradition, and providing new strands of insight for comparative analysis of religious phenomena.<sup>43</sup>

My research attempts to traverse these directions particularly by examining janamsākhīs using multiple methodologies, including, but not limited to, literary close reading and anthro-historical research based on interviews with traditional exponents. I approach the janamsākhī for what they reveal about practices of writing, expanding, and receiving texts.

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<sup>41</sup> There has been very little research on how the mutual interest between scholars and influential members of the Sikh diaspora led to not only the development of the Sikh Studies Chairs in North America but helped develop a network of non-profit organizations and various philanthropic endeavors by the growing diasporic community. For more about the Sikh Research Institute see <http://sikhri.org>

<sup>42</sup> The diversity and benefits of applying these perspectives to Sikh Studies are iterated first in the introduction to the published essay. The headings under which studies about Sikhism could occur include: religion, history, origins, texts, and Sikhs abroad. See Introduction in Mark Juergensmeyer and N. Gerald Barrier, *Sikh Studies: Comparative Perspectives on a Changing Tradition: Working Papers from the Berkeley Conference on Sikh Studies*, Berkeley Religious Studies Series ;1 (Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 1979). and Mark Juergensmeyer, "Sikhism: The Forgotten Tradition " in *Sikh Studies: Comparative Perspectives on a Changing Tradition: Working Papers from the Berkeley Conference on Sikh Studies*, ed. Mark Juergensmeyer and N. Gerald Barrier (Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 1979). pp. 13-23.

<sup>43</sup> ; *ibid.*Juergensmeyer, 23

## *Studies of the Manuscript Archive*

In the mid-twentieth century, secular scholars of Sikh Studies demonstrate a marked historical interest in Nānak and the early Sikh community through critical analysis of janamsākhī manuscript recensions. Harbans Singh, Kirpal Singh, J.S. Grewal, and other prominent scholars from Panjāb use a “textual critical” apparatus to develop a biography of the life of Nānak.<sup>44</sup> These historicist notions and entrenched prejudicial assumptions about Sikhs involved in this scholarly apparatus, however, ultimately proved detrimental during the violence occurring through the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>45</sup>

During the same time period, W.H. McLeod—who remains one of the most influential scholars of Sikh Studies—published two landmark works, *Gurū Nanak and the Sikh Religion* (1977) and *Early Sikh Tradition* (1989), both of which turn to the janamsākhī manuscript tradition to consolidate the Sikh community.<sup>46</sup> In *Gurū Nanak and the Sikh Religion (GNSR)*,

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<sup>44</sup> Surjit Singh Bal, *Gurū Nānak in the Eyes of Non-Sikhs* (Chandigarh: Publication Bureau Panjab University, 1969); Sarjit Singh Bal, *Life of Gurū Nānak* (Chandigarh: Publication Bureau, Panjab University, 1969); Grewal, *Gurū Nānak in History*; Surindar Singh Kohli, *Philosophy of Gurū Nānak* (Chandigarh: Publication Bureau, Panjab University, 1969); *Travels of Gurū Nānak* (Chandigarh: Publication Bureau, Panjab University, 1969); Fauja Singh and Trilochan Singh, eds., *Sikhism* (Patiala: Panjabi University Patiala, 1969); Gurmukh Nihal Singh, *Gurū Nānak, His Life, Time, and Teachings*; *Gurū Nānak Foundation Quincentenary Volume* (Delhi: Published for Gurū Nānak Foundation [by] National [Pub. House, 1969]); Singh, *Gurū Nānak and Origins of the Sikh Faith*; Jodh Singh, *Gurū Nānak Lectures*, *Gurū Nānak Lectures, 1970* (Madras: University of Madras, 1969); Trilochan Singh, *Gurū Nānak: Founder of Sikhism; a Biography* (Delhi: Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, 1969); Gurbachan Singh Talib, *Gurū Nānak: His Personality and Vision* (Delhi: Gur Das Kapur, 1969).

<sup>45</sup> For a discussion of the problematic association of historical cycles of violence and attempts to assert an exclusive form of religious identity using the signifier “Sikh” see, W. H. McLeod, *The Evolution of the Sikh Community: Five Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976); “Cohesive Ideals and Institutions in the Sikh Panth,” in *Evolution of the Sikh Community: Five Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); *Who Is a Sikh: The Problem of Sikh Identity* (Oxford : New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1989); “The Origins of the Sikh Tradition,” in *The Sikhs: History, Religion, and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); W.H. McLeod, “Sikhs in the Modern World,” in *The Sikhs: History, Religion, and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); Arvind Singh Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

<sup>46</sup> The connections between Nānak, the Sikh community, and Sikhism are made clear by McLeod, who states that studying the janamsākhī “take us back to the beginning [of a period of religious revival] in the history of the Panjab and the history of religions. It concerns Gurū Nānak, the acknowledged founder of the Sikh religion and incomparably the greatest of the Gurūs in the shaping of that religion...the religious content of Sikhism remained, and still remains, the content given it by Gurū Nānak. For this reason the primary and by far the most important part of a study of the Sikh religion must be a study of the life and teachings of its first Gurū.” W.H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968). p. 3

McLeod argues against the prevalent scholarly trend of viewing janamsākhīs as biography, instead exhorting scholars to read these texts as hagiography.<sup>47</sup> Twelve years later, McLeod published *Early Sikh Tradition (EST)* as a companion volume to *GNSR*, conducting a historical analysis of janamsakhis as hagiography; in it, he argues that janamsākhīs as hagiography speak to the earliest foundational moments of the community around a shared belief in Nānak. In both of these works, McLeod suggests that janamsakhis represent values of piety and belief held by the Sikh community during the Gurū Period, addressing the need for cohesion within a small, vulnerable community by extolling the greatness and charisma of Nānak.

After the works of McLeod and his colleagues working from universities in Panjāb, however, scholarly interest in janamsākhī manuscripts largely dwindled. Nevertheless, two recent philological and hermeneutic studies of the process of canon formation constitute significant manuscript studies of the Sikh archive by Sikh Studies scholars outside of Panjāb, both of which advocate for a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of the Sikh archive: first, Pashaura Singh's *The Gurū Granth Sāhib: canon, meaning and authority* (2000), which is a study of scripture formation and canonization; and second, Gurinder Singh Mann's *The Making of Sikh Scripture* (2001), which is a historical reconstruction of the development of the *Ādi Granth* using a *longue durée* analysis of the evolution of compilations, or *pothīs*, from Gurū Nānak's time up to the present.<sup>48</sup> Both studies show the benefits of archival research to reveal nuanced interpretations of the Sikh tradition.

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<sup>47</sup>McLeod states that “the *normal practice* of relying on the Purātan janam-sākhī cannot produce reliable biography... The janam-sākhīs must be regarded as examples of hagiography and any inclination to treat them as biographies will distort both our understanding of Gurū Nānak and our appreciation of the true value of the janam-sākhīs themselves.” Ibid. p.33

<sup>48</sup> Mann; *ibid.*; Singh.

Pashaura Singh's work begins by contextualizing canonization as requisite in the Mughal context for gaining legitimacy as a religious community. Scripture not only helped the community gain the recognition of political elites but also facilitated the defining of the contours of the community itself. Singh's study elucidates the editorial principles used by Gurū Arjan when compiling the *Ādi Granth* in the early seventeenth century. This work sheds light on heretofore unrecognized aspects of the text's structure; it also leads to Singh's deduction that the three different manuscript recensions may have partially developed from the ignorance of scribes about these editorial decisions.

Singh maintains a distinction between the true meaning of the *Ādi Granth* and the historical meanings arising from successive individual engagement with the scripture. The textual authority of scripture lends to the text the power of determining the shape of the community's distinctive identity. This is partly due to the intersection of scripture with personal piety, a developing liturgy, and the corporate life of believers. This distinction between "true meaning" and "historical meaning" not only recognizes the plurality of interpretation as a permanent historical feature of the Sikh tradition but also implies that Sikh scripture has an enduring potential for further interpretation. In my own consideration of the relationship between *sākhī* and *sabd*, I am indebted to Singh's study of the enduring and plural interpretive potential and the use of *sabd* from the *Granth* as framing devices for shaping individual disciples' entrance to the interpretive depths of these texts.

Similarly, Mann's study contends that writing and textuality have been central to the community since its beginnings. He shows that the passing of compilations of verses began when Angad succeeded Nānak and continued until the SGGS was invested with authority of a living Gurū by Gobind Singh. Mann was granted access to manuscripts held in familial collections and

was able to draw upon the oral histories of the familial descendants of the Sodhī lineage. His study situates the progression to canonization of the SGGS through a context of developing Sikh doctrine and evolving institutions. His incorporation of oral histories helps provide greater complexity to the issues surrounding the development of texts and differing manuscript traditions. This example was pivotal for my own consideration to conduct oral interviews of contemporary Sikh exponents. The insights gleaned from these interviews in turn informed my understanding of janamsākhī as a form of *akath-kathā*, which closely read moments in the janamsākhīs wherein the text relies on the notion of ontologized language to expand on Nānak’s philosophy of Oneness—thereby allowing me to capitalize on and contribute to the interdisciplinary nature of Sikh Studies.

### ***Problematizing Religion***

In contrast to these sociocultural analyses of Sikh texts, however, recent studies by Harjot Oberoi and Arvind Mandair have problematized the dominance of religious identity as the single analytic lens used for Panjābī culture and textuality. They address this problem using different methodological approaches: Oberoi takes an anthro-historical approach to colonial Sikh history, while Mandair uses a critical discursive analysis of “religion” within Sikh Studies. My own approach returns to the archive in order to closely read the literature in light of the insights gleaned from Oberoi and Mandair, such that I examine how the structure and content of janamsākhī texts facilitate diversity over singularity via non-oppositional thought.

In his *Construction of Religious Boundaries* (1999), Harjot Oberoi recognizes the limited extent to which the precolonial period can be engaged without a thorough analysis of the breadth and depth of the effects of colonialism on all aspects of life in Panjāb, but especially on its



religious underpinnings.<sup>49</sup> The most provocative suggestion of his analysis is that identity prior to colonial interdiction was based in a different form of thinking. This pattern of thought and expression has been difficult to access from our modern subjective perspective and is often overpowered by scholarly projections of sameness. The current understanding of religion-based yet secular subject-centered agentive speech cannot come to grips with the nature of the diversity of Panjāb due to changes in the dominant frames of thought and language which interdict the past during colonialism.

In response to problems emanating from the translation of Sikh thought and practice into religion, Mandair's *Religion and the Specter of the West* (2009), examines how this vision of Sikhism as a distinct religion transgresses the previous structure of thought and enters the living structure of Sikh identity in postcolonial subjects. Mandair examines how the ideas used to fabricate a structure of thinking about the Sikh tradition as a religion become the central mechanism for identity production both in South Asia and in global Sikh Diasporas. Mandair particularly notes that the Indian state and Sikh elites perpetuate the structures of colonial governance by mimicking philosophical concepts used in the colonial order created to govern and incorporate Sikhs in the British colonial army.<sup>50</sup>

Using Nānak's writings in the *Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib*, Mandair also traces the creation of a model of representation and mimesis for the Sikh community by interpreting narratives in the *janamsākhī* as relating Nānak's "authentic" or "original" religious experience.

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<sup>49</sup> Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*.

<sup>50</sup> Five imbricating discourses are analyzed to trace a circuit of repetition tracking the movement of ideas as they form subjectivity exclusively around religious identity. These five discourses are enumerated as: 1) History of Religions, 2) Postcolonial secular theory, 3) Religious Reform Movements, or religious activism, 4) the practice of translating religious texts, and 5) European philosophy. These discourses replicate, even when resisting, colonial formations of South Asian subjectivities around subject formations based upon assumptions of self-conscious being -an idea central to secular forms of speculative and analytic philosophy. See the Introduction of Mandair's *Religion and the Spectre of the West*.

Transcendentalizing concepts through translation and deployment of a communication model based on representation and mediation helps constitute a distinctly bounded identity for Sikhs through Nānak's religious experience in janamsākhīs. Mandair's study shows that a mediated, or deontological notion of language enters the Sikh tradition through the colonial encounter to understand or normalize Sikhs using the category of religion.

By recognizing that retaining oppositional structures of religious identity, even in order to apophatically deny the existence of these identities, only further serves to entrench and retain these problematic categories I take my cue from Farina Mir's study, *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Panjāb* (2010).<sup>51</sup> This study presents a way to engage historical literary material while not privileging a religious perspective on the part of historical producers and consumers of literary texts. This book examines how a vibrant plural literary tradition continued to provide social meaning for Panjābī speakers throughout the colonial period. In doing so, it contests the notion that coloniality was all pervasive and irreparably disrupted the social fabric of Panjāb.<sup>52</sup>

Mir analyzes *qissā* poetry through the idea of a Panjābī Language Formation (PLF)—a discourse in which individuals who produced, circulated, performed, and consumed Panjābī literary texts shared a set of assumptions and practices. Theoretically this sphere was open to anyone within the linguistic community but belonging was secured by active participation; the threshold of inclusion was not class, caste, religion, or gender, and it comprised both reading and listening publics.<sup>53</sup> During the colonial period, *qissās* were the site for constructing, contesting, and articulating an ulterior notion of community unrelated to the political reifications of religious

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<sup>51</sup> Mir, *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab*.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. p.19 & 24

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. pp. 6 & 17

identity associated with the onset of sanguine and divisive communalism during the 1920s in Panjāb. Mir argues effectively how Sikhs attempt to claim Panjābī as exclusive to their religious identity. Texts from the Sikh tradition such as the *janamsākhi* were foreclosed from the PLF by being appropriated or coopted for politico-historical ends, despite sharing themes and motifs important to the *qissā* genre.

Mandair's work demonstrates that deontological language is central to notions of universal humanity based upon presuppositions or idealizations of a self-conscious thinking agent. However, the preferentiality given to self-conscious being means that language as such loses its status and rather comes to signify a conduit for communication of meaning between individuals who share or are possessed by a commonly assumed consciousness of self. It is central to my argument that by appropriating these significations through uses of the transcendentalized concepts, Sikhs imperceptibly shed an epistemological framework that inheres in central Sikh texts like the SGGS and *sākhi*-based literature like *janamsākhi*s.

By following Oberoi's and Mir's works regarding the shift in how Sikhs, and other people in South Asia, enunciated their identities, as well as Mandair's focus on the adoption of deontologized language in both discourse about Sikhs and Sikh experience, I explore the possibility of reversing these effects by engaging texts like the *janamsākhi*s. A central contention of my work is that we must read the language of *sabd* and *sākhi* intertextually, and with attention to language as ontologized, in order to productively re-examine the *janamsākhi*s with an eye toward Nānak's non-oppositional thought.

## 0.4 Chapter Summaries

The first chapter allows me to focus on the janamsākhī and distinguish it from my multiple uses of the term *sākhī* by closely reading passages from the manuscripts and the SGGS that mention the term *sākhī*. This chapter closes with a discussion of the nature of Sikh textuality, its uses in praxis, and the notion of *jotījoti samaonā*, which aids our understanding of how manuscripts like the janamsākhī were conceived of and engaged with. I argue it is used throughout the tradition to signify the transformation of the human by recitative use of *sabd*—at times even marking this transformation via the move from Sikh to Gurū. This becoming is an aspect of ontological language, marked by the *sabd-nām* nexus, that occurs through recitative speech.

The second chapter analyzes oral history interviews to address contemporary practices for producing and performing *kathā* and its systematized performance, known as *kathā dī parpātī*. I briefly discuss the training that traditional exponents receive, followed by an overview of the development of *kathā* during Gurū Gobind Singh’s lifetime. I then outline three different types of *kathā*: missionizing (*pracār*), historical (*itihās*), and ineffable (*akath-kathā*). I focus particularly on *akath-kathā* as a performative system that gives witness (*gavāh*) to *sabds* in the SGGS, noting that *sākhīs* were early examples of *kathā*. These examples, once established, were incorporated into the repertoire of many exponents who would deploy *sabds* in the anecdotes creatively to develop individualized interpretations. The legitimacy of a *sākhī* was assessed by the efficacy of transformational use within the *sangat*.

Chapter Three turns to tracing the advent of a modern network of interpretation by examining the prevalence of two manuscripts, BL Mss Panjābī B6 and BL Mss Panjābī B41, in creating a longstanding diametric opposition between two types of janamsākhīs known popularly

as the Purātan and Bālā, respectively. This distinction demarcates critical historicism from tradition and forms notions of the Sikh archive. I examine the roles of John Malcolm, Henry Colebrooke, and John Leyden in establishing janamsākhī manuscripts as authoritative. Their foundational use of these manuscripts has influenced the creation of separate Purātan and Bālā janamsākhī traditions—a division that continues to influence readings of janamsākhīs for Sikh reformists of the colonial period, as well as secular scholars both within and outside of Panjāb. I suggest that disaggregating this division is beneficial in discovering non-oppositional networks of interpretation emplotted by exponents of Nānak’s teaching.

In the fourth chapter, the positivistic reading of modern analysis of janamsākhīs turns to survey translation strategies from the nineteenth century through today. Beginning with John Malcolm’s *Sketch of the Sikhs* (1812), the first major Western study of Sikh tradition and history, I show how Malcolm’s implied dialogue with a Sikh native informant informs his translational choices and interpretations of *sākhīs*. In Malcolm’s translations, we can see echoes of places in which straightforward questions about the meaning of particular ideas or words were answered via the telling of *sākhīs* as a form of expansive *kathā*. Thus, when Malcolm questioned Sikhs about Nānak, we can read this moment intertextually in comparison with extant manuscript recensions to determine the prevalence of certain *sākhīs* that described Nānak as a teacher common to both Hindus and Muslims as well as those that highlighted a critique of religious identity through these same signifiers (“Hindū” and “Muslim”). While I read these *sākhīs* as elaborations on Nānak’s refusal of the discourse of identity in preference for a philosophy of Oneness, Malcolm refers to these *sākhīs* to portray Sikhism as a syncretic amalgamation of Hinduism and Islam.

I examine newly rediscovered commentaries and secondary texts Trumpp commissioned as an example of a moment where a literal, grammatical understanding of language meets one rooted non-oppositional writing. Trumpp's translations of the *Ādi Granth* as an early moment wherein the living language of janamsākhīs is transcendentalized for informational purposes, making them sources for the life of Nānak. Trumpp used janamsākhī translations to contextualize the teachings of the Sikh religion as well as the writings in the SGGS. This reveals a continuing strategy for reading and translating janamsākhīs. Translations by W.H. McLeod and Nikki Guninder Kaur Singh deploy a translation strategy of applying messianic notions to describe Nānak rerouting notions of Oneness and non-oppositionality.

In the final chapter of the dissertation these new insights are used to reconsider the janamsākhī manuscripts as *kathā* that uses a living language about Oneness to propound an ethics of non-oppositional being. This chapter explores how *sākhīs* employ a multitude of tropes and genres to produce a referential future through the phenomenal act of reading or reciting. Reading janamsākhī as a type of *kathā*, and *kathā* as a type of translation, I take up the centrality of *sabd* as well as the repeat occurrences of a critique of religious identity through the signifiers "Hindu" and "Muslim" to interpret some of the *sākhīs* that elaborate upon Nānak's philosophy of Oneness and non-oppositional being. I do so by reading janamsākhīs from the Sultānpur narrative sequence to highlight motifs challenging religious identification by focussing on the ephemerality of human bodies. The temporality of Nānak's body is obfuscated in favor of an allegorical structure that produces non-oppositional being using ontological, or living, language as the basis for identity and difference. Examples from the Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib are shown to form interpretive epicenters in singular *sākhīs*, which contextually situate, translate, and open *sabd* to networks of non-oppositional interpretation as a site for transformative action.

## Chapter I

### Non-Oppositional Textuality: Approaching the Janamsākhī through Oneness of Being

In this chapter, I consider the janamsākhī and the *Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib* as central for thinking about the early modern archive produced by Sikh exponents. The granth's provides a paradigm for using ontological language, a language whose being is outside of human being. Recreating this ontical language was vital for the form of non-oppositional textuality that janamsākhīs present. Non-oppositional texts attempt to hold together identity and difference through a system of Oneness. The janamsākhī creatively deploys both Nānak's persona and his writings as the earliest examples of such texts. By focusing on their structural elements and using central ideas from the SGGS, I suggest that the transformative nature of *sākhī* can be seen in a range of texts produced by these exponents.

To help engage this network, I discuss definitions and translations of the term janamsākhī, followed by an overview of major janamsākhī manuscripts and other important texts written by early modern exponents. The most common narratives within janamsākhī are discussed to argue that we view *sākhīs* as a genre deployed within a wide variety of texts. Moreover, I suggest it may be possible to consider *sākhī* as a form of textuality that thrived until the mid-twentieth century. The changes and continuities in this network assists exploring ontical relationships between language and individuals, creator and creation, *sikh* and *gurū* (*murīd* and *pīr*), as well as *sabd* and *nām*. These relationships populate the circuit of references found in

janamsākhīs. We also see this circuit in key part of Sikh praxis, as with *nām-simran*. In the final section, I show how the figuration within these references relies upon the notion of *jotījoti samaonā*, the transfer of essence, as a means of direct transmission of meaning acting as a bridge in communication.

### 1.1 The Janamsākhī: Definitions, Structure, and Interpretation

Within the context of my argument about non-oppositional texts, the word “janamsākhī” has several resonances. Firstly, it describes a genre of literature written by exponents trained at institutions connected to Nānak’s teaching of Oneness. A janamsākhī manuscript uses a stock of anecdotes (*sākhīs*) and applies any number of related verses by Nānak taken from the SGGS. Exponents also borrow or imagine stories within which they embed Nānak’s poetry, such that Nānak recites a verse within the context provided by the anecdote.

The circulation of actual manuscripts was historically limited, as these texts were largely for the personal use of exponents—though later they were also produced for aristocrats. Despite this limited circulation, however, the janamsākhī is widely read, performed, and studied. In this context, the word “janamsākhī” denotes a complete and singular manuscript of compiled narratives, some of which existed as independent texts. This term is applied most commonly to stories where Nānak is the protagonist, but there are more recent examples of its application to other figures revered as holymen, such as Nānak’s eldest son, Srī Cand; Kabīr; and Ravidās.<sup>1</sup> There are instances in the archive of sākhī for other gurūs, bhagats, and other important figures.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Azad-Jalandhari Jang Singh Giani, *Janamsakhi Ate Bani Guru Ravidas Ji* (Amritsar: Waris Shah Foundation, 2013); Nirban Amar Das Ji Sialka, *Janamsakhi Baba Sri Candar Ji Maharaj* (Amritsar: Chatar Singh Jivan Singh Prakashak, 2012); Giani Narain Singh, *Janamsakhi Bhagat Namdev Ji* (Amritsar: Chatar Singh Jivan Singh Prakashak, 2008); *Janamsakhi Bhagat Ravidas Ji* (Amritsar: Chatar Singh Jivan Singh Prakashak, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> For example, the Sikh History Research department at Khālsa College has the following manuscripts: SHR no. 1445. *Sākhī Ajite Randhāva*; SHR no. 1737B. *Sākhīān Bhagatān Kīān*; SHR no. 2333. *Sākhī Daswain Patshāh Ke Jotijot Samāwane kī*; SHR no. 1466. *Sākhī Pothī*; SHR No. 1428. *Sākhīān Bhāī Dādū dīān*. The manuscript



Janamsākhīs are a central genre of Sikh literature because of their wide, multiple uses and their incorporation of verses from the SGGS. These verses are commonly called *bāṇī*—an artful way of composing reflective poetry often replete with Truth claims.<sup>3</sup> Janamsākhīs reflect a practiced articulation using *bāṇī* as a referential system with the potential to align audiences with toward ethical action via Nānak’s ideas about Oneness and non-oppositional writing. An example of such a system of transformative writing and the importance of *bāṇī* for non-oppositional writing in “Anand Sāhib,” a composition by the third Sikh Gurū, Amardās. This composition gives a phenomenological description of attaining equipoise after merging with the true-light or true-gurū.<sup>4</sup> About halfway into the poem, a discussion about language as liberation occurs using the terms *saccī-bāṇī* and *kaccī-bāṇī*: ripe or true-*bāṇī* versus unripe-*bāṇī*. The verse begins by calling upon Sikhs in the following manner:

ਆਵਹੁ ਸਿਖ ਸਤਿਗੁਰੂ ਕੇ ਪਿਆਰਿਹੋ ਗਾਵਹੁ ਸਚੀ ਬਾਣੀ॥ ਬਾਣੀ ਤ ਗਾਵਹੁ ਗੁਰੂ ਕੇਰੀ ਬਾਣੀਆ ਸਿਰਿ ਬਾਣੀ॥...ਪੀਵਹੁ ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤ ਸਦਾ ਰਹਹੁ ਹਰਿ ਰੰਗਿ ਜਪਿਹੁ ਸਾਰਿਗ ਪਾਣੀ॥ ਕਹੈ ਨਾਨਕ ਸਦਾ ਗਾਵਹੁ ਏਹ ਸਚੀ ਬਾਣੀ॥੨੩॥ ਸਤਿਗੁਰੂ ਬਿਨਾ ਹੋਰ ਕਚੀ ਹੈ ਬਾਣੀ॥...ਕਹਦੇ ਕਚੈ ਸੁਣਦੇ ਕਚੈ ਕਚੀ ਆਖਿ ਵਖਾਣੀ॥...ਚਿਤੁ ਜਿਨ ਕਾ ਹਿਰਿ ਲਇਆ ਮਾਇਆ ਬੋਲਣ ਪਏ ਰਵਾਣੀ॥...ਸਬਦ ਰਤਨ ਜਿਤੁ ਮਨ ਲਾਗਾ ਏਹੁ ਹੋਆ ਸਮਾਉ॥ ਸਬਦ ਸੇਤੀ ਮਨੁ ਮਿਲਿਆ ਸਚੈ ਲਾਇਆ ਭਾਉ॥

*āvahu sikh satigurū ke piāriho gāvho saccī bāṇī. bāṇī ta gāvahu gurū kerī bāṇīā siri bāṇī...pīvahu amrit sadā rahau hari rangi japihu sārīgpaṇī. kahaī nānak sadā gāvahu ihu saccī bāṇī. satigurū binā hor kaccī hai bāṇī...kahde kaccāi suṇde kaccāi kaccī ākh vakhāṇī...cittu jin kā hiri laeī mēē bolāṇ pae ravāṇī...sabd rattan jitu man lāgā ehū hoā samāo. sabd setī manu miliā saccāi lāeī bhāo.*

Beloved sikhs, come and sing the true compositions [*bāṇī*] of satigurū. Sing that *bāṇī* sown by the gurū, the penultimate *bāṇī* of *bāṇīs*...Drink the ambrosia and remain forever colored by the hue

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collection at Panjābī University, Patialā houses Mss no. 115051. *Sākhī Srī Guru Arjan Sāhib jī ke Avtār dhāran kī*; Mss no. 115673. *Sākhī Bhāī Lālu jī kī*; Mss no 115778. *Sākhī Gurūān dīān*; Mss no. 115674. *Sākhīān dasvīn pātsāhi dīān*; Mss no. 115454 *Janamsākhī Kabīr jī sākḥ Rāje Nirmoch samet*; Mss no. 115758. *Janamsākhī amar kathā*. The special collection of manuscripts at Gurū Nānak Dev University, Amritsar has Mss no. 9 *Janamsākhī Bhagat Kabīr*; Mss no. 91 ਅ *Sākhī Mahale dūje kī*; Mss 177 ਅ *Sākhī Patashāhī 10*; Mss 636 ਝ *Sākhī Bhāī Sadū Madū*; Mss no 648 *Janamsākhī Sri Swāmī Nāmdev jī*; Mss no. 711 ਗ *Sākhī Gurū Amardās jī*; Mss no. 769 ਙ *Sākhī Gurū Tegh Bahādra jī kī*. These manuscripts suggest that the *sākhī* and *janamsākhī* were interrelated and eventually moved beyond Nānak to include *sākhīs* about other important figures.

<sup>3</sup> *Bāṇī* is described as *tasnīf* of compositional art, it alters quotidian appearances. It can be a commentary, a discourse, or a reflection of a topic.

<sup>4</sup> The opening line of “Anand Sāhib” clearly expresses the goal of the poem, “Mother, I have donned the true-gurū and equipoise is here!!” The original reads: ਅਨੰਦ ਭਇਆ ਮੇਰੀ ਮਾਏ ਸਤਿਗੁਰੂ ਮੈ ਪਾਇਆ॥ See SGGS. P.917

that sustains all. Nānak says, ‘Always sing this true *bāṇī*. Without *satigurū*, all *bāṇī* is unripe...speech, hearing, exclaiming, reflecting are all unripe...Whosoever speaks incessantly has their consciousness lured by illusion...the word (*sabd*) is a jewel that merges with the mind. The meeting of *sabd* and mind in this way leads to attaining True being.<sup>5</sup>

By contrasting the singing of true compositions with singing unripe compositions, Gurū Amardās distinguishes the form and effect of such recitative utterance. The true *bāṇī* has a lasting effect, making the singer radiate the appearance of Truth.<sup>6</sup> However, the twenty-fourth stanza shows that the attainment of this appearance of being is a function of the mind in which the word (*sabd*) gets embedded. The embedding of this word alters unripe, incessant speech into a form of lingual expression reflecting a being in *satigurū*—or, Oneness of Being.

A series of similar associations traverses numerous verses from the SGGS that connects non-oppositional textuality to Nānak’s philosophy of Oneness. This series links the lingual conditions of Oneness of Being using notions of story-telling (*kathā*), testimony (*sākhī*), and Truth (*sacc*).<sup>7</sup> *Kathā* acts as testimonial story-telling using a form of writing in which assertions of subjective voice are tenuous. The performative aspect of *kathā* brings the text further into the ambit of displaying Oneness of Being because the exponent recites this nonsubjective writing. The term “*sākhī*” reflects this language that occurs outside of the speaking or writing subject. *Sākhī* uses the text—in our case the *janamsākhī*—to act as a witness to Oneness of Being while testifying to its attainability through language itself.

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<sup>5</sup> Anand Sāhib. SGGS. p. 920

<sup>6</sup> Truth and Oneness are linked in the *mūl mantar*; *ek angkār satinām* (One make of form, whose name is truth).

<sup>7</sup> Oneness of being in the context of the *Gurū Granth* is a space wherein being enters a relationship with the One. This relationship is at the heart of Nānak’s philosophical oneness because it allows for difference to be understood as aspects of being One. Difference is made non-oppositional by otherness being written through identity. By this, I mean to say that otherness writes over sameness to render them neutral and point the way to Oneness. This is reflected in the *Gurū Granth* in the following selection from the composition, “*mājh kī vār*”: To cross the threshold of True Being, have taken the truth. From within the palace of True Being, call upon truth. Nānak, the truthful are always true may we be mingled with truth.” See Manmohan Singh, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib: English and Panjabi Translation* (Amritsar: Shromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, 1964). pp. 137-150

Non-oppositional textuality testifies to the attainability of non-oppositional being by narrating a witnessing of the true name of Oneness through the term *sākhī*. This use of witness in narration occurs in a composition from the *Sarbloh Granth*. This composition is popularly called *Khālsā Mahaimā*, or “Greatness of the Khālsā.”<sup>8</sup> The opening lines of the composition are as follows:

ਖਾਲਸਾ ਮੇਰੇ ਰੂਪ ਹੈ ਖਾਸ॥ ਖਾਲਸੇ ਮਹਿ ਹੋ ਕਰੋ ਨਿਵਾਸ॥

*khālsā mero rūp hai khās. khālse mahai hau karau nivās.*

*Khālsā* is an aspect particular to me that makes the “I” remain in *khālsā*

The *Khālsā Mahaimā* outlines a definition for the term *khālsā* as a form of freedom based upon emptying or clearing out of form.<sup>9</sup> In the refrain above, *khālsā* is an aspect of being that is non-oppositional. It makes the “I” remain non-objective, making it into a lacuna created by the aspect of emptying particular to *khālsā*. The interdiction between “I” and “me” empties language of the pronominal object to forestall the attributional aspects to “me.” The emptying process of *khālsā* suggests the impermanence of attributive belonging.

The verses in *Khālsā Mahaimā* describe this emptying of form; however, near the end of the composition, the phrase “*jihvā ik*” —the tongue of Oneness—makes recourse to *sākhī*.

*Khālsā* denies the logic of comparative judgment through its perpetual emptying—therefore the

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<sup>8</sup> The *Sarbloh Granth* is a text similar to the *Dasam Granth Sāhib* in two ways: traditional exponents claim that it contains writings of Gurū Gobind Singh and, secondly, these claims are highly contentious in the modern Sikh community. The *Sarbloh Granth* is a manuscript tradition linked to the Buddā Dal, a section of the Khālsā that is lineally connected to Bābā Deep Singh. Bābā Deep Singh was present when Gurū Gobind Singh added the verses (*saloks*) of Gurū Tegh Bahādūr into the *Ādi Granth* at Damdamā Sahbo kī Talwandī in southwestern Panjāb. He participated in the nightly expansions that Gurū Gobind gave of the entire *Granth* while having it written. During the Khālsā period Bābā Deep Singh established a *taksāl*, or institution for learning based upon his interpretations. He is reputed for spending long periods in a subterranean pit (*bhaurā*) where he meditated through *bāṇī* and made copies of the *Gurū Granth*, including ones using the Perso-Arabic script. The composition is popularly used for *kīrtan* today and is found in a book of popular verses called, *Amrit Kīrtan*. I am using the version of *khālsā mahaimā* from *Amrit Kīrtan*, (Amritsar: Khalsa Brothers), p. 291

<sup>9</sup> The word is related to the Arabic root kh-l-s, which signifies emptying, or clearing out. Ironically, of course, the very word that is meant to signify an emptying out of signifiers of identity becomes the utmost signifier of “pure” Sikh identity in the modern sociopolitical use of the word.

tongue of Oneness neither relies upon nor has recourse to positionality.<sup>10</sup> Comparative judgment occurs through establishing a limit or the horizon between things. The word *pār*, or side, is used to state that the *khālsā* does not take a limit, or is boundless. The next stanza describes this change in language as occurring through *sākhī*:

ਸੇਸ ਰਸਨ ਸਾਰਦ ਸੀ ਬੁਧਿ॥ ਤਦਪ ਨ ਉਪਮਾ ਬਰਨਤ ਸੁਧ॥  
ਯਾ ਮੈ ਰੰਚ ਨ ਮਿਥਿਆ ਭਾਖੀ॥ ਪਾਰਭ੍ਰਮੁ ਗੁਰ ਨਾਨਕ ਸਾਖੀ॥

*sesa rasan sārād sī budhi. tadapa na upmā baranat sudh.  
yā mai ranc na mithai bhākhī. pārbrhamu gur nānak sākhī.*

When the Saraswatī like tongue of reasoning ends, then letters are emptied of comparison. Through Nānak-*sākhīs*, the “I” begins merging with the sayings about a reality outside of objective conditions [*pārbrahm*].<sup>11</sup>

The *khālsā*’s tongue of Oneness marks an end, or limit, to the tongue of reasoning. Upon entering the lacuna created by this emptying, the tongue of reason loses its ability for comparative valuation. The emptying is not at the level of grammar or syntax but strikes at the values contained within the letters of the script. Bereft of comparative judgment, a gradual (*ranc*) merging with language begins using the *sākhīs* of Nānak as a conveyance beyond objective conditions. Language becomes a vital external creative thing that the “I” enters if it can cross a threshold barrier of self-emptying.

The word *sākhī* is used in several ways in *janamsākhī* manuscripts, beginning with the literal meaning of “testimony.” However, testimony either refer to a belief in Nānak as a savior or testify to Nānak’s birth (*janam*). It can also denote episode, chapter, or an individual incident or anecdote.<sup>12</sup> I begin thinking about *sākhī* with a phrase from a Panjābī language reference

<sup>10</sup> The verse is as follows:

ਉਪਮਾ ਖਾਲਸਾ ਜਾਤ ਨ ਕਰੀ॥ ਜਿਹਵਾ ਏਕ ਪਾਰ ਨਹਿ ਲਹੀ॥

Khālsā has no essence, it cannot compare. One tongue, it does not take on limits.

<sup>11</sup> “Khālsā Mahaimā,” *Amrit Kirtan*. p. 291

<sup>12</sup> W. H. McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janamsakhis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980). p. 11

work, *Srī Gurū Granth Kosh*, by prominent scholar and author Bhāi Vīr Singh (1872-1957).<sup>13</sup>

This early reference work is unique in that it acknowledges the understanding of language and writing as living and non-oppositional that I put forward here as relevant to the *janamsākhīs*.

Unlike other Panjābī language dictionaries or reference works, Bhāi Vīr Singh arranges the entries not based on the words, but using letter clusters or roots, as in Arabic language dictionaries.

In this work, we find an entry in the letter cluster “ਸ ਚ ਤ ਓ” that says, “Truth without *sākhī* has no further content [*mūl*].”<sup>14</sup> Bhāi Vīr Singh adds to this proverb by stating: “To provide testimony [*shādī*] or give witness [*ugāhī*] without first enacting truthful speech.”<sup>15</sup> Another early twentieth-century reference work, *Mahān Kosh*, by Bhāi Kāhn Singh Nābhā adds to this with another proverb: “Can a witness spin without evidence?”<sup>16</sup> This proverb refers to a system of *karnī-bharnī* that was relevant to the creation of *sākhī* manuscripts. The word *karnī* refers to conduct and practice of truth, *karnī* establishes one’s ability to attain truth. The ability to effectively write a testimony of one’s attainment, a *sākhī*, is a consequence, *bharnī*, of attaining truth. *Sākhī* as a non-oppositional textuality connected to Nānak’s thinking has two meanings.<sup>17</sup> Firstly, it refers to writing as a consequence of attaining the practices and conduct associated

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<sup>13</sup> Bhai Vir Singh, ed. *Shri Guru Granth Kosh Volume 3* (Amritsar: Khalsa Tract Society, 1955).

<sup>14</sup> ॥ਸਚ ਬਿਨ ਸਾਖੀ ਮੂਲ ਨ ਬਾਕੀ॥

*sac bin sākhī mūl na bāqī. Shri Guru Granth Kosh Volume I* (Amritsar: Khalsa Tract Society, 1967). p. 175

<sup>15</sup> ਸਚੀ ਗੱਲ ਜਾਣੇ ਬਿਨਾ ਸ਼ਾਹਦੀ ਭਰਨੀ ਯਾ ਉਗਾਹੀ ਦੇਣੀ।

*sacī gall jāne binā shādī bharnī yā ugāhī denī. Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> ਮੂਲ ਬਿਨਾ ਸਾਖਾ ਕਤ ਆਹੈ?

*mūl binnā sākhā katt āhai?*

See entry, “*mūl*” in Kahn Singh Nabha, *Gurushabada Ratanākara Mahan Kosh* (1960).

<sup>17</sup> My interviews of traditional exponents and practitioners of *kathā* often provided a very similar understanding of *sākhī* and the use of *janamsākhī* in performances of *kathā*. They were seen as textual witnesses (*gavāh*) to the Truth of Oneness of Being articulated through merging in language. See Chapter Two for my discussion on this.

with Oneness. Secondly, it refers to a consequential interpretation of a root text—like the *Gurū Granth*—that enables more writing using the tongue of Oneness.

*Kathā* is a form of telling (*kahnā*) that occurs written in the text but used for recitative speech performed before a *sangat* (gathering). Through *kathā*, the traditional exponent leads the *sangat* through the consequences (*bharnī*) of experiencing the Oneness of being, or those of their practicing Nānak’s teachings. In a composition by Nānak in Rāg Bilāval, we find a description of an experience of emptying and realization of the limitless possibilities of the friend.<sup>18</sup>

Confounded about how to write of such an experience, Nānak states, “With which speech might I say, when by saying “me,” the unsayable cannot be elaborated? I describe the moment of your arrival, like a crushed seed that gives oils of expansion.”<sup>19</sup> The desired testimony will not form unless the “me” is crushed like a seed to bring forth the oils. This is a specific form of expansion about the ineffable qualities of the One that pertains to saying the unsayable (*akath-kathā*).<sup>20</sup> For this *akath-kathā* to occur, the seed (or covering) needs to be destroyed. Nānak’s reference to the removal of oils is a statement about the expandability of *akath-kathā*, arising from its referential

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<sup>18</sup> ਰਾਗ ਬਿਲਾਵਲੁ॥ ਮਹਲ ੧॥ ਚਉਪਦੇ ਘਰ ੧॥  
ਜੋ ਕਿਛੁ ਹੋਆ ਸਭੁ ਕਿਛੁ ਤੁਝ ਤੇ ਤੇਰੀ ਸਭ ਅਸਨਾਈ॥  
ਤੇਰਾ ਅੰਤ ਨ ਜਾਣਾ ਮੇਰੇ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਮੈ ਅੰਧਲ ਕਿਆ ਚੁਤਰਾਈ॥੨॥

*jo kich hoā sabhu tujhu*  
*te terī sabh asanāī. terā ant na jāṇā mere sahib mai andhal kiā*  
*caturāī. (2)*  
All that happened, all of it is upon you, it is all yours my all-knowing friend. Not knowing your limits, my master, I am blind with what awareness. (2)

See Rāg Bilāval Mahalā 1. Singh. pp. 795-796

<sup>19</sup> ਕਿਆ ਹਉ ਕਥੀ ਕਥੇ ਕਥਿ ਮੈ ਅਕਥ ਨ ਕਥਨਾ ਜਾਈ॥  
*kiā hao kathī kathe kathi mai akath na kathanā jāī.*  
ibid.

<sup>20</sup> In a composition called “*anand sāhib*” by the third Sikh Gurū, a group of holymen are called upon to create stories about the unsayable (*akath*). Gurū Amar Dās leaves aside their embodiment to allow for light (*gur*) to radiate through their use of artful language (*bāṇī*). This type of *kathā* embellishes or enriches the experience of Oneness of Being; it does not try to represent it through language. Ibid. pp.917-922

nature within the practice of recitative speech. Listening to *akath-kathā* gives rise to a state of equipoise required to begin the emptying (*khālsā*).<sup>21</sup>

Writing *sākhī* and *janamsākhī* are personal engagements with philosophical Oneness in exponents' attempts to project an image of non-oppositional being that is tied to an epistemology derived from the SGGS. The learning and achievement of non-oppositional being by any author-exponent presides in the writing of any manuscript recension, acting as a limit to its interpretability. The phenomenon of reciting and hearing *sabd* while reading a text was advocated by Nānak while at Sultānpur. *Sākhīs* provide a mirror to the self by using that same structure while using someone else's action as testaments to the efficacy of this practice.<sup>22</sup> This mirror does not use the other to produce a self but returns the self to the larger flow of consciousness to create a submissive non-oppositionality or Oneness of being. The incorporation of new strands strengthens and expands the network of interpretation by using Oneness of Being as a lingual structure. The epistemic associations of *sākhī* and *bāṇī* pierces the uppermost limits of such a structure.

Individual *sākhīs* from a *janamsākhī* manuscript could be employed in dynamic contexts and occasions. They were commonly used in *sangats* as a part of the *kathā* that followed the singing of hymns or *kīrtan*; *kathā* uses story-telling to expand implicit meanings of the verses performed in *kīrtan*. The use of *janamsākhī* as *kathā* represents a literary style and epistemology reflecting Nānak's teachings. I refer to this as the "referential aspect" of *janamsākhī* narratives:

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<sup>21</sup> For instance, "The dust was taken away by listening to *kathā* of the One. Attaining great clarity, endlessly at peace." Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> I am thinking about the manner in which the verbs "to hear" (*suṇīe*) and "to sing" (*gāvīe*) are used in Nānak's seminal composition *japjī sāhib*, how these are consistently described across *janamsākhīs* as operative within gatherings held at Nānak's residence in Sultanpur while he was in his twenties, and they way modern practices rely on these two notions.

the way that a lingual condition activated through “Oneness of being” transgresses its textual boundary to have ontological ramifications for the audience through performance.<sup>23</sup>

## 1.2 Janamsākhī Narrative Sequences

There are four narrative sequences that mirror historic periodizations of Nānak’s life; however, instead of thinking within a strict temporalization of events, I use these sequences to think about the janamsākhī as a form of non-oppositional textuality. I have enumerated these sequences in the following way: (1) prophetic birth sequence; (2) Sultānpur mortification sequence; (3) discourses on sur-religious identity sequence; and (4) embodying death sequence. In a single janamsākhī manuscript recension these four narrative sequences contain variations that express an interpretive diversity and individuality created by using the interpretation theory called *kathā dī parpātī*.<sup>24</sup> By reinterpreting these sequences, we can focus on how language and meaning are mobilized to produce a diverse, and expansive interpretation using the epistemic base of the SGGS. In what follows, I will highlight some aspects of these sequences referring to the B6 manuscript.

The prophetic birth sequence in the B6 manuscript does not feature the *janampatrī* oracle characteristic of the Bālā recensions. However, the text includes mention of celestial beings in the Divine court praising the newborn Nānak and anticipating his birth. The *sākhī* then moves to accounts of Nānak’s childhood, including a dialogue with a Pandit who taught Nānak at the age of five.<sup>25</sup> This dialogue includes the use of an acrostic composition, “*Paṭṭī Likhī*,” and a

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976). pp.19-20

<sup>24</sup> For a description of *kathā dī parpātī* see Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

<sup>25</sup> Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier: 1204-1760*, ed. Barbara D. Metcalf, vol. 17, *Comparative Studies on Muslim Societies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). ff. 2b-11a



discussion about the nature and value of different types of knowledge.<sup>26</sup> The Pandit favors practical knowledge, whereas Nānak says that privileging such types of knowledge is misguided, or *bāda*. Nānak is restless and unmotivated while he studies with the Pandit.

During this same period, Rāi Bullār recognizes Nānak's greatness. An agricultural trope pervades some of the *sākhīs*, such as a dialogue with Kālū (Nānak's father) about reaping different harvests and the decimation of another villager's field.<sup>27</sup> As Nānak approaches adolescence, his family increasingly recognizes that he is disinclined toward worldly endeavor, beginning to think he is a *dīwānā*, or madman. The sequence closes with the family calling a doctor, Nānak tells that the Pandit that no salve or medication will cure his ailment.<sup>28</sup> The *janamsākhī* particularly emphasizes the instances of wonderment that occurred during Nānak's childhood; these variations and the selection of different *sabds* within the anecdotes reflects alternate points of engagement by different exponents.

Nānak's employment, his life in Sultānpur, a routine including a communal kitchen, singing, and listening to a discourse conducted with a community of practitioners, Nānak's submersion in the Vaīn, a discourse with Daulat Khān's Qāzī followed by *namāz* at the mosque are all elements of the Sultānpur sequence. Although there are internal variations in the content of these narratives, all elements are mentioned consistently across manuscript recensions.

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<sup>26</sup> Singh. pp.432-434.

<sup>27</sup> Kenneth E. Bryant, *Poems to the Child-God: Structures and Strategies in the Poetry of Surdas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). ff. 14a-17b

<sup>28</sup> The question of whether and in what manner Nānak was remarkable or simply suffering a mysterious, undiagnosed illness is a repetitive motif in the *janamsākhī* genre. It is used creatively to foreshadow and build a kind of narrative tension that leads to the pivotal moment where Nānak questions the existence or relational mutuality of Hindu and Muslim. This aspect of almost every *janamsākhī* appears to be central, but is minimized in modern accounts in preference for the historical aspects of the genre

Nānak advocates a sur-religious identity at Sultānpur.<sup>29</sup> In adolescence, Nānak was perpetually perplexed (*hairān*) and idle.<sup>30</sup> His brother-in-law, Jai Rām, requesting that he come to Sultānpur. Notable parts of this sequence include Nānak's meeting with and employment by Daulat Khān Lodī, the local ruler of Sultānpur at the time; the Vaīn Parvesh narrative, where Nānak disappears into the Vaīn River;<sup>31</sup> and his dialogue with a Qāzī after being called to the Khān's court for potentially blasphemous words.



**Figure 1.1 The Author at the Delhi Gate at the Fort of Sultānpur Lodī**

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<sup>29</sup> Sultanpur was a major economic, governmental, and intellectual center during the Lodī Dynasty. See J.S. Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History* (Chandigarh: Publication Bureau Panjab University, 1969); Harbans Singh, *Guru Nanak and Origins of the Sikh Faith* (Bombay; New York: Asia Pub. House, 1969); Kirpal Singh, *Janamsakhi Parampara* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1969).

<sup>30</sup> ਨਾਨਕ ਹੈਰਾਨੁ ਰਹਦਾ ਹੈ॥ਕਮੁ ਕਾਜੁ ਕਿਛੁ ਨਹੀ ਕਰਦਾ॥ "Mss Panjābī B6, Janamsākhi," (British Library, London).ff. 26a

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. ff. 22b-28a

Sultānpur is also the site where Nānak is first clearly described incorporating a regular pattern of meditative practice upon the name, or *nām-simran*, into his lifestyle and teachings. During this period, his repute increased, and a small gathering developed around his home, where he maintained a communal kitchen or *langar*. Nānak regularly hosted musicians for singing his hymns and those of seminal *faqīrs* or *bhagats* like Bābā Farīd, Kabīr, and Nāmdev. Eventually, Nānak’s practice resulted in a direct conscious breakthrough or realization of Oneness (*ektā* or *wahādā*) as an active truth presiding over the realm of existence—marked by his disappearance into the Vaīn River and eventual reappearance three days later. After a period of silence following his reappearance, Nānak began repeatedly shouting the phrase “*Nā ko Hindū nā koī Mussalmān*” — “There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim.”<sup>32</sup>

The last section of the Sultānpur sequence, Nānak is called to Daulat Khān’s court because his statement had caused the townspeople to become unsettled. After proving that he had committed no heresy with this phrase, Nānak prays with the Khān and Qāzī; while they pray, the Khān and Qāzī are being distracted by their own thoughts during the prayer. Nānak informs them that their prayers would not be received because of this.<sup>33</sup> The sequence serves to resolve the Qāzī’s *hairānī* (wonderment) regarding Nānak’s statement negating Hindu and Muslim identity. The cognitive break following Nānak’s reemergence from the River Vaīn also compels Nānak to begin his travels.

However, we find variations in the extent to which various *janamsākhī* authors elaborate upon his submersion in the river beyond Nānak’s disappearance and reappearance. Furthermore, the auspices under which the interrogation by the Qāzī occurs differ between the *Purātan* and the

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<sup>32</sup> For my reading of the significance of this moment in the *janamsākhī* narratives for Nānak’s philosophy of Oneness and the positing of non-oppositional being, see Chapter five of this dissertation.

<sup>33</sup> "Mss Panjābī B6, *Janamsākhī*." ff. 28a-34a

Bālā janamsākhīs. This difference is also reflected in differing selections of verses from the SGGS to accompany the Sultānpur sequence. Individual expression on the part of the authors can be delineated through these variations; although most scholars of janamsākhī have removed or ignored these variations to create a leveled historical narrative, I argue that this process excises unique, individual interpretive perspectives.<sup>34</sup>

The standardized modern janamsākhī contains four separate journeys undertaken by Nānak before he settles at Kartārpur; the B6 includes five journeys, called *udāsīs*. This term has been the cause of debate about the janamsākhī's consistency in representing Nānak. *Udāsī* can mean a state of sadness, or reclusiveness, which stands in contradistinction with Nānak's teachings of social engagement. Based upon the itinerary of his journeys, scholars have interpreted these sequences as including visits to major pilgrimage centers. However, my oral history interviews (see Chapter 2) revealed that *sākhīs* were produced to be used as proof (*gavāhī*) of the *sabd*. As such, *sākhīs* and *kathā* were meant to retain a proximity with *sabds* from SGGS above all other textures.

As such, we can arrive at a different understanding of *udāsīs* using this centrality of the *sabd* as a backdrop. As Nānak completes his audience with the Divine, he is told to establish his way (*panth*), to repeat *nām*, and to implore others to do so. He is told to return to the world, remaining untouched by it (*nirlep rehnā*).<sup>35</sup> This form of existence, then, does not concern social activism or religious reform but relates to existing in the word.<sup>36</sup> *Udāsī* is the furtherance of the

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<sup>34</sup> For a more detailed discussion about considering the differences between janamsākhī recensions as the accrual of individual perspectives or readings of verses from the Sṛī Gurū Granth Sāhib, see Chapter three of this dissertation.

<sup>35</sup> The themes of remaining untouched by the world (*māyā*) in order to merge with the word is a theme in the SGGS. See "māyā" in Kanh Singh Nabha, *Gurumata Māratandā* (1962).

<sup>36</sup> For a contemporary expression of Nānak as a social activist, a theme that marks an evolution from earlier iterations of Nānak as a religious reformer see: Kamala E. Nayar and Jaswinder Singh Sandhu, *The Socially Involved Renunciate: Guru Nanak's Discourse to the Nāth Yogis*, oberoī vols. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

dictum Nānak received after disappearing into the Vaīn River; it stands for not only his travels but also his state of attainment as his existence in the world marks being in the world without being touched by it. After his submersion in the river, then, Nānak enters a mode of existence that is in the world but is not of the world; he not only does *udāsī*, but he is an *udāsī*.<sup>37</sup>

Although it is not my intent to describe any of the *udāsīs* in detail, I will provide a general outline of the first and longest *udāsīs* to convey a sense of the narrative movement in the B6 manuscript. The first *udāsī* does not start immediately following Nānak’s departure from Sultānpur; there are four anecdotes before its beginning. Mardānā, Nānak’s companion and rebeck player, goes to a village of Uppal khatrīs.<sup>38</sup> They had been traveling through jungles when Nānak notices Mardānā’s hunger. After Nānak sends Mardānā to a village where Uppal khatrīs live, Mardānā receives many gifts and provisions—but Nānak insists that Mardānā put aside all that he was given to him.<sup>39</sup>

After they leave this village, the pair meets Sajjan Thagg, a dacoit in the garb of a mendicant. After Nānak stays with him for one night, Sajjan forsakes his lifestyle and gives away his ill-gotten wealth. Nānak then establishes the first *dharamsālā*, or hospice, at Sajjan’s residence. Nānak also meets the *pīr* of Panipat, Sheikh Sharaf, and Sultān Ibrāhīm Beg in Delhi before beginning the first *udāsī*.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> This is also related to the Udāsī sect of Sikhism. When Nānak returns to Talwandī from the first *udāsī*, he has a conversation with his parents. His mother implores him to remain in Talwandī, to return to his family. Nānak responds by saying, “I am still *udās* [*asīn aje udās hān*].” This statement uses the copula to express a state of being and not a journey Nānak is undertaking. See Bhai Vir Singh, *Puratan Janamsakhi Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji* (New Delhi: Bhai Vir Singh Sahit Sadan, 2004). p.105

<sup>38</sup> "Mss Panjābī B6, Janamsākhi." ff. 34b-37a

<sup>39</sup> After they leave this village, the B6 includes one of the earliest uses of the word “Sikh”:  
ਇਹੁ ਜੋ ਕੋਈ ਤੇਰੇ ਨਾਉ ਦਾ ਸਦਕਾ ਮਨੰਦਾ ਹੈ ਅਤੇ ਸਿਖ ਦੇ ਮੁਹਿ ਪਾਵਦਾ ਹੈ, ਕਿਛੁ ਤੈਨੂੰ ਭੀ ਪਹੁੰਚਦਾ ਹੈ ਓਸਦਾ ਭਾਉ...

*ihu jo koī tere nāo dā sadkā manndā hai ate sikh dai muhai pāvdā hai kich tainū bhī pahauncdā hai osdā bhāo...*  
When someone follows the way of your name and places some [food] in the mouth of a Sikh, do you also receive sustenance?

See: *ibid.* ff.36a

<sup>40</sup> The *sākhī* with Sheikh Sharaf in the B6 bears strong similarity with the discourse with Walī Kandhārī discussed in the introduction of this dissertation.

The remaining four *udāsīs* incorporate a similar mix of chance encounters with religious men, historical figures, and fictional characters. Gurū Nānak is always accompanied on his journey by disciples.<sup>41</sup> Gurū Nānak travels to significant centers of learning in Panjāb, such as Multān and Pākṣattan. He also travels to Kashmir, Bengal, and Sri Lank, and to major pilgrimage sites like Benares, Mecca, and Medīna. Some of Nānak's interlocutors include Sheikh Farīd, his successor Sheikh Ibrahīm, Mīān Mithā, Bahāuddīn Zakāriyā, Kabīr, and Nizāmuddīn Auliyā. He also encounters with demons and a personification of Kali Yuga, as well as repeated meetings with Gorakh Nāth and other legendary Siddhās. In each of these meetings, Nānak recites at least one *sabd* in the course of the *sākhī*. However, each *sākhī* also focuses upon Gurū Nānak's appearance as well as whether he is a Hindu or a Muslim.<sup>42</sup> This repeated questioning of appearance and demand to self-identify are connected to Nānak's statement that there can be neither Hindus nor Muslims. Analyzing these themes in early *sākhīs* elucidates the Sikh apophatic position on religious identity. This position is central to Nānak's philosophy of non-oppositional being.

There are several narrative cues used to introduce new *sākhīs* or mark significant elements of the narrative. The phrase *ravdā rehā* ("continued forward"), and *jāe nīklā* ("departed from a place") are used to mark changes of location. These phrases are also often accompanied by the refrain *vāhegurū*, or *sākhī hor challī* ("Another *sākhī* is starting").

These internal divisions found in the manuscripts do not always synchronize with the event-based divisions of edited *sākhīs*. For instance, in Bhāi Vīr Singh's edited Purātan

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<sup>41</sup> Nānak was accompanied by Saddo Gheo on the second *udāsī*, Hasū Luhār and Sīhā Chīmbā on the third *udāsī*. "Mss Panjābī B6, Janamsākhī." ff. 146b and 178a.

<sup>42</sup> At the beginning of each *udāsī*, a description of Nānak's appearance is given. Dialogues with Sheikh Sharaf and the Nāth Siddhās include questions about Nānak's idiosyncratic sartorial dress. After Nānak re-emerges from the Vāin river and is called to court by Daulat Khan, he is also described as dressing himself in the garb of a faqīr. See *ibid*.

janamsākhī, *sākhī* 12 and *sākhī* 13 represent the Uppal Khatrīs and the meeting with Sajjan Thagg, respectively. However, in the B6 manuscript, the narrative wherein Mardānā asks Nānak about whether he gets sustenance from the food eaten by his Sikhs is marked in the beginning and end as though it were an entirely separate *sākhī*.<sup>43</sup> It also contains within it a separate instance of Nānak reciting a *sabd* to help answer the question Mardānā has asked.

*Sākhīs* also commonly end with a given interlocutor acquiescing to Nānak’s perspective. This acquiescence is marked in the text with tropes like performing *salāmat*, *dast poshī*,<sup>44</sup> and bowing or kissing the ground. Another way of signaling this acquiescence includes statements that the interlocutor started practicing *nām tarīqat*—the way of *nām*. Different manuscripts employ alternate motifs and tropes, but each retains internal consistency regarding the use of its indices.

The death sequence includes Nānak’s testing of his Sikh followers to select a successor; his selection of Angad and the latter’s ceremonial succession occur in this sequence. Nānak’s health appears to fail rapidly after Angad’s selection. This sequence includes numerous *sabds* as Nānak slowly fades away and appears to be temporarily revived to deal with questions about the wealth and position of Nānak’s sons in the community. The account of Nānak’s death bears a surreal quality, and various manuscripts differ in their portrayal of his death.

The B6 manuscript contains the challenge posed by Hindus and Muslims over what to do with Nānak’s body. The two groups are told to place flowers under the shroud where Nānak’s

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<sup>43</sup> When they leave the town where the Uppals live, the line “*ūthon ravde rahe*” occurs. After Nānak answers the question by reciting a *sabd* another phrase, “*ūthon challe*” occurs right before Sajjan Thagg’s habitation is introduced. Both “*ūthon ravde rahe*” and “*ūthon challe*” mean to continue on or move on; the placement of these phrases would suggest that these were meant to be separate *sākhīs*—but the lack of a discernible “historical” event likely motivated Bhāi Vīr Singh to omit it from the *sākhīs* enumerated in his edited version of the Purātan janamsākhī. See *ibid.* ff. 36a and 37a

<sup>44</sup> *Dast poshī* means “hiding the hand [in the sleeve],” and is a mark of humility commonly included in Persian texts and miniatures.

body lay; however, after Nānak dies and the shroud is raised, nothing of the body remains. I suggest that the disappearance of Nānak’s body mimics the disappearance enacted during the River Vaīn sequence at Sultānpur, building upon the statement that there are neither Hindus nor Muslims by returning the focus of identity to questions about embodiment and ontological language. Indeed, numerous references to relevant *sabds* from SGGS in the death sequence indicate this focus on embodiment through language.<sup>45</sup>

### 1.3 *Sākhī* as Literary Genre

A common approach to texts from the early Sikh community archive manuscripts into larger groupings to lend greater consistency and representation of the text being discussed. This often involves generalizing texts based upon the scholar’s understandings of shared content, rather than actual titles or enunciations of content that any singular manuscript might contain. This potential archival transgression relates to whether a *janamsākhī* needs to call itself that to be considered a *janamsākhī*. For instance, many manuscripts self-referentially announce themselves as “*sākhīs*”—not *janamsākhīs*. This gap between the text self-reference and the scholarly interventions can be seen in both the popular Bālā manuscripts and the academically favored Purātan manuscripts.

On the other hand, all recensions of the *Giān Ratnāvalī* state in the frame-story that the author Bhāi Manī Singh created a text by reference to this name; however, there are some manuscripts of this work that also feature the word “*janamsākhī*” in the colophon. Thus, it cannot be said with certainty when the term “*janamsākhī*” becomes commonplace. During the late seventeenth and eighteenth-century, an increase in texts featuring Nānak as a protagonist occurs.

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<sup>45</sup> See Chapter 5 for a detailed reading of this sequence.



These texts were referred to using the term “*prakās*”; today, however, texts like the *Sūraj Prakās*, *Mahimāprakās*, and *Nānak Prakās* are more frequently described as late versions of *janamsākhīs*.<sup>46</sup> The *prakās* literature is typically more expansive in scope than the *janamsākhī* and develop later than the *janamsākhīs*, warranting recognition as a separate genre of writing.

This same process occurs with *gurbilas* (epic literature), *rahitnāmās* (codices), and the *janamsākhī* to create divisions that best approximate thematic, theological, and philosophical works. Just as the *Tankhāhnāmā* does not announce itself as a *rahitnāmā*, texts that were earlier known distinctly as *janampatrīs* or *sākhīs* merge to create a larger sample size and prominence of *janamsākhīs* within the Sikh tradition. The *Sau Sākhīān*, *Chaupā Singh Rahitnāmā*, *Gursobhā*, and *Gurbilas* texts reveal a shared prevalence of *sākhī* anecdotes. This sharing of anecdotes across genres, I argue, forms an important allegorical textual mode central to a method developed to engage with the ontological status of SGGS at the level of language; it also demonstrates the importance of the *sākhī* genre beyond the *janamsākhī* and questions of the historical Nānak.<sup>47</sup>

The importance of language and allegory in secondary texts that expounded upon the SGGS also occurs in the poetry of Bhāi Gurdās and Bhāi Nand Lāl. Bhāi Gurdās was active in the inner-circle of the Sikh-Gurūs from the time of the third to the sixth Gurūs and wrote collections using three forms of poetry: the *vār*, the *kabbit*, and the *sawayyā*. Bhāi Gurdās is seen as an advocate or theologian of Nānak’s teachings, and scholars identify the main contribution of

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<sup>46</sup> For a description of the *prakash janamsākhīs* see McLeod.

<sup>47</sup> For more on the broadening of the term “*janamsākhī*” into a super-genre that serves as a catch-all term for almost any form of Sikh textuality, see Chapter 3 of this work.

his writing as the eleventh and a portion of the Thirteenth *vār* in the collection known as *Vārān Bhāī Gurdās*, which briefly refer to Nānak's life.<sup>48</sup>

Bhāī Nand Lāl, on the other hand, was a prolific member of Gurū Gobind's cohort of court poets; the tenth Sikh-Gurū was particularly passionate about producing literature and translations, and as such, retained poets who could write in several languages. However, significant portions of these collections were lost due to the successive battles fought by Gobind Singh. Bhāī Nand Lāl is most famous for the *ghazals* he wrote, which take up devotional themes.

These poetic works are admired and seen as significant; however, their contribution to Sikh Studies has remained minimal—in part because they are composed in Persian. However, this lack of scholarly interest also stems from the fact that Bhāī Nand Lāl's quietist devotional love poetry does not sit well with the dominant narrative of rampant developing militancy and the institutionalization of the Khālsā during Gurū Gobind Singh's life. Indeed, similar to the frequently ignored amorous and folkloric parts of the *Dasam Granth*, Bhāī Nand Lāl's presence in the Gurū 's court and the esteem in which he continues to be held complicate this dominant narrative of development and community formation through a turn to violent religion.

These sources present a nuanced and challenging form of textuality grounded in an ontological use of language by early Sikh exponents, where text and word are a living affective materiality with immediate referentiality. They incorporate aspects of composition and performance typical of their period but are increasingly thought of as exclusive categories of text. The persistence of these texts in the archive up until the period of colonial encounter and exchange make it difficult to uphold current hermeneutic ideals without exerting evasive

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<sup>48</sup> Rahuldeep Singh Gill, "Growing the Banyan Tree: Early Sikh Tradition in the Works of Bhai Gurdas Bhalla" (Dissertation, University of California, 2009). and *Drinking from Love's Cup: Surrender and Sacrifice in the Vārs of Bhai Gurdas Bhalla*, Aar Religion in Translation (New York, NY, United States of America: Oxford University Press, 2017).

metaphysical force upon the texts. Studies of important texts from the Sikh archive following partition tend to deal with textual nuances within individual manuscripts and between texts in a reductive way.<sup>49</sup>

I suggest that the *janamsākhī* is best analyzed intertextually with the sources mentioned above. Embedding inter-textual references would have facilitated a truly dialogic approach to interpretation when any Sikh was initiated into the knowledge practices emanating from the teachings of the Gurūs located in the SGGS. Student and master could deploy and examine the *sākhīs* to facilitate the cognitive transformation required to grasp the philosophy of Oneness propounded by Gurū Nānak while actively passing on an awareness of the method of approaching *sabd* through *sākhī*. I also advocate for expanding our focus beyond these writings into fragmented and lesser known archival spaces. This expansion promises to shed light upon popular debates, issues, and stakes that the Sikh tradition had in sociocultural problems that were part of the public sphere during Gurū Nānak's time and beyond.

#### **1.4 *Nām-Simran*: Nānak's Teaching of Recitative Speech and Praxis**

Throughout his life, Nānak dedicated himself to *nām-simran*, or meditation on *satnām* (typically translated as the "True Name" or "Divine Name") through which God becomes the constant companion of the practitioner. Given Nānak's emphasis on this practice, his teachings have been considered distinct from the three classical South Asian *mārgs*: *giān mārg*, or path through knowing or knowledge; *karam mārg*, the path through action; and *bhaktī mārg*, the path of devotion.<sup>50</sup> Nānak is considered to have founded an independent *mārg* called the *nām-mārg*.

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<sup>49</sup> See Chapter 3 of this dissertation for a discussion.

<sup>50</sup> Krishna Sharma has recently contested the notion of *bhakti* as a reformist movement. He suggests that *bhakti* is used as an umbrella term to cover aspects of religious phenomenon that do not fit neatly within categories of Hinduism, Sikhism, and Islam. Nānak and Kabīr are given as examples complicating the use of *bhakti* as a concept

This *mārg* is defined by the practice of *nām-simran*, which makes God a constant companion as opposed to a deity.<sup>51</sup> *Nām-simran* as a catch-all concept that differentiates Sikhism from Islam's strict monotheistic ideals, belief in the Prophet, orthopraxy, and sanctity of the Qur'ān.<sup>52</sup>

However, I argue that we understand *nām-simran* as referring simply to the remembrance of the name(s). It marks a departure from claims of *shrutī*, or divinely revealed texts, as was typical of ideas of divine speech represented in Brahmanical contexts regarding texts such as the Vedās. Early colonial texts describe how most Sikhs had no reverence for revealed texts like the Vedās. Thus, up until very recently, there was at the very least a blurring of the distance between divine speech and quotidian speech with the use of *sabds* in *simran*. Indeed, *simran* challenges the very distance articulated through the binary distinction of a gap between creation and creator.

For my non-oppositional construal of Sikh textual practices, *nām-simran* indexes a practice of nominal remembrance—remembrance of that which exists in name only or can be

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to capture the subcontinent's devotional traditions. While they are often given as examples of nirgunā bhaktās, he argues that their writings complicate simple division between sāguna and nirguna bhaktī. Krishna Sharma, *Bhakti and the Bhakti Movement: A New Perspective: A Study in the History of Ideas* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1987). A reply to Sharma's work reveals how the connection between native informancy and knowledge about the devotional tradition becomes a mechanism to stave off scholarly critique; the recourse is that bhaktī's formulation was in part derived through dialogue with proponents. John Stratton Hawley and Centre for South Asian Studies, *The Bhakti Movement--from Where? Since When*, Occasional Publication ;10 (New Delhi: India International Centre, 2009). A recent study by David Chidester describes how the use of native informancy was part of a colonial method of knowledge production in which the colonized largely provided raw data from which metropolitan scholars theorized the category of religion. He complicates this by describing how dissenting colonized voices tried to embrace colonial forms of knowledge production to create their own theories about religion. David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*, Studies in Religion and Culture (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996); *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014). Arvind-pal S. Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Harjot Singh Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>51</sup> Hari Ram Gupta, *History of the Sikhs Vol. 1 the Sikh Gurus, 1469-1708* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2008). pp. 75-76

<sup>52</sup> This emphasis facilitates differentiation of practices based upon ideologies of religious difference rather than reflecting historical reality as there are certain practices within Islam, Sikhism, and Hinduism as practices in South Asia during the early modern period that overlap. The connections with Hindu devotional traditions are more readily made, especially in connection with nirguna bhaktī and the Sant tradition. Connections to sectarian, or *tarīqat*, forms of Islam are less willingly made. See "Sikhism different from other reform movements" and "Did Gurū Nānak found a new religion?" in Chapter 5 of *ibid.* pp.92-94; 102-103

accessed solely through the name taken as the material of the Real. Thought of in this way, *nām-simran* is grounded within *sabds* from SGGS in three ways: (1) an emptying of the self; (2) return to language; and (3) return to a cosmology of singular non-oppositional creation. These aspects are at the center of Nānak’s ideas of Oneness (*ektā* or *wahādā*). They form an aperture outside of formalistic Islamic, Hindu, Yogic tradition through which early texts like the *janamsākhīs* are reflections of Nānak non-oppositional teachings.

In the construal of Nānak as the founder of the *nām-mārg*, his teachings become subsumed within the *bhakti* (devotional) movement as part of the *nirguna*, or attributeless, school of *bhaktī*. This portrayal partly stems from a common reference to his birth as a “Hindu,” linking the Sikh tradition to Hinduism and, by extension, antagonism to Islam. On the other hand, accounts of Nānak’s life prevalent amongst Muslim communities attached to the Sikh tradition state that Nānak studied *ma’rifat* (intuitive knowledge) and received *ijāzat* (permission) to establish a distinct path.<sup>53</sup>

Indeed, many *janamsākhīs* and other early Sikh texts treat Nānak without preference for the term “Gurū,” often using monikers that include a wide range of Hindū and Islamic idioms of address, such as Bābā Nānak, Nānak Shāh, Bābā Nānak Shāh, Nānak Faqīr, or various other combinations.<sup>54</sup> Alongside a host of other terms, like *zuhdī*, *darvesh*, *nirankārī*, *zāhar bhagat*,

<sup>53</sup> Ṭabāṭabā’ī Ghulām Ḥusayn Khān, *A Translation of the Sēir Mutaqharin or, View of Modern Times, Being an History of India, from the Year 1118 to the Year 1195, ... Of the Hidjrah, ... The Whole Written in Persian by Seid-Gholam-Hosseini-Khan*, Siyar Al-Muta’akhhirin. English (Calcutta: printed by James White, 1789); Khvajah Sayyid Muhammad ‘Abdullah and احسينى خواجه سيد محمد عبدالله ابن عبده الحسن, *But Shikan Guru Nanak* (Lāhaur

لاهور: Dārulislām Majlis al-Ḥikmat al-‘Abūdiyyah

2, 001) (001دارالسلام مجلس الحكمة العبوديه, 2); Sayyid Afzal Haidar, *Farīd, Nānak, Bullhā, Vāris* (Islāmābād: Dost Publīkeshanz, 2003). These traditions are acknowledged in colonial accounts by Malcolm and Cunningham only to be discredited as biased by the fervent hatred between Muslims and Sikhs. John Malcolm, *Sketch of the Sikhs; a Singular Nation, Who Inhabit the Provinces of the Penjab, Situated between the Rivers Jumna and Indus* (London: [J.] Murray, 1812); Joseph Davey Cunningham, *A History of the Sikhs, from the Origin of the Nation to the Battles of the Sutlej* (London: J. Murray, 1849).

<sup>54</sup> For instance, in the quintessential nineteenth century history of the Khalsa, *Sri Gurū Panth Prakāsh*, the author relates a conversation with Captain Murray who was stationed at Ludhiana about the Khālsā Rāj. Murray wants to know how the Singhs, or Khālsā Sikhs, became rulers and he asks who legitimated their kingdom (*patishāh*). Rattan

*qutab sirdār*, and *diwānā*, the robustness of terminology in the early modern texts reveals a difference in articulation compared to contemporary sanctifications of Nānak as Gurū.<sup>55</sup> This diversity reflects a deep respect for Nānak that disappears with the onset of modernity; it also points to Nānak’s philosophy of non-oppositionality in this refusal to remain within consistent categories of identification.

The Sikh community’s own claim that Nānak had no direct living master can be contextualized within the system of *ma’rifat* prevalent in Panjāb during Nānak’s lifetime; similar

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Singh Bhangū responds that their rule is enabled by the true king (*shāhai sacai*). Murray then asks, “Who is the true king?” Bhagu replies by saying Nānak is the True King. Upon hearing this unexpected answer Murray incredulously asks, “Nānak, the faqīr? What can he know about being a king?” Bhangū says, “He is the King of kings (*shāhin ko shah*), ruler of both the heavens and the world. He has turned many kings into faqīrs and faqīrs into pīrs, all the while remaining indifferent to the trappings of kingship. Because of this, Nānak is *shāhin shah*...”

ਦੋਹਰਾ: ਤੋਂ ਮਾਲੀ ਨੈ ਹਮ ਕਹਯੋ ਇਤਨੀ ਬਾਤ ਬਤਾਹੁ। ਸਿੰਘਨ ਪਾਯੋ ਰਾਜ ਕਿਮ ਐ ਦੀਨੋ ਕਿਨ ਪਤਿਸਾਹੁ।੩੩।

ਚੋਪਈ: ਤਿਸੈ ਬਾਤ ਮੈਂ ਐਸੇ ਕਹੀ। ਸਿੰਘਨ ਪਤਿਸਾਹੀ ਸਾਹਿ ਸਚੈ ਦਈ। ਮਰੀ ਕਹਯੋ ਸਾਹ ਸਚੇ ਕੋਇ। ਅਸਾ ਕਹਯੋ ਸਾਹ ਨਾਨਕ ਜੋਇ।੩੪। ਮਰੀ ਕਹਯੋ ਭਯੋ ਨਾਨਕ ਫਕੀਰ। ਉਨ ਸਾਹੀ ਕੀ ਕਿਆ ਤਤਬੀਰ। ਹਮੈ ਕਹਯੋ ਵਹਿ ਸਾਹਿਨ ਕੋ ਸਾਹ। ਦੀਨ ਦੁਨੀ ਸਚੇ ਪਤਿਸਾਹਿ।੩੫। ਕਈ ਸਾਹ ਤਿਨ ਕੀਯੋ ਫਕੀਰ। ਕਈ ਪਕੀਰ ਕਰ ਦੀਨੇ ਪੀਰ। ਰਹਯੋ ਆਪ ਹੁਇ ਬੇਪਰਵਾਹ। ਯੋ ਨਾਨਕ ਭਯੋ ਸਾਹਿਨ ਸਾਹ।੩੬।...

See: Rattan Singh Bhangu and Balwant Singh Dhillon, *Srī Gur Pantha Prakāsha*, Sri Gur Panth Prakash (Ammritasara: Singha Bradaraza, 2004).

<sup>55</sup> Nānak is called *qutab sirdār*, *nānak nirankārī*, *gawth* (*gaus*) in a janamsākhī from the 1770s by Sant Dās Chibbar. Being called the qutab is significant not only by placing Nānak within a certain existential context and specific thought traditions, Nānak is placed at the highest place in the spiritual hierarchy of his time. It also relates directly to questions about the nature of Nānak’s existence and his birth in the world. This is because the location of the qutab is said to reside with God, while the presence of the qutab in the world reveals God’s presence in creation. The qutab also unifies people across division, all beings submit to the qutab. Other historical figures who were given the title qutab include Al-Hallāj (857-952 AD) and Al-Shādhillī (1196-1258 AD). The Shādhillīyya came to understand the concept of qutab as operating outside of religious affiliation, Shādhillī searched for the qutab during his lifetime and enumerated fifteen characteristics of the qutab. The *gawth*, or helper, is a manifestation of a supramundane light which qutab refers to. Ali Hujwiri (d. 1072) conceptualized the qutab through his discussion of the celestial court in his work, *Kashf Al-majhub*. The janamsākhī birth accounts has all celestial beings come to praise Nānak. The Bedi family’s Pandit names Kalu Bedi’s child, *Nānak Nirankārī*. The naming sākhī, or janampatrī, has undertones of the qutab principle. The Pandit states that Nānak will be a teacher to all and that both Hindus and Muslims will submit to him. The Chibbar Brahmans were intimately associated with the court of Gurū Gobind Singh, another prominent eighteenth century work is a rahitnama by Chaupa Singh. Sant Das Chibar and ed. Singh, Gurdev, *Janamsakhi Sri Gur Nanak Shah Ki* (Patiala: Publication Bureau Panjabi University, 1985). p.23, 41, 256; Bhai Gurdas, ed. *Varan Gian Ratanavali* (Amritsar: Shromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, 1998); Singh, *Puratan Janamsakhi Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji*; Surindar Singh Kohli, ed. *Janamsakhi Bhai Bala* (Chandigar: Punjab University Publication Bureau, 1975).

W. H. McLeod, *The Chaupa Singh Rahit-Nama* (Dunedin, New Zealand: University of Otago Press, 1987); *Sikhs of the Khalsa: A History of the Khalsa Rahit* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003). pp. 93-95; ‘Alī ibn ‘Usmān Hujvīrī and Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, *The Kashf Al-Majhub: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism*, Kashf Al-Mahjūb.English (Lahore: Islamic Book Foundation, 1976); Alexander Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Ahmet T. Karamustafa and Inc ebrary, *Sufism the Formative Period*, New Edinburgh Islamic Surveys (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*, Visions of Reality (New York: Paragon House, 1994).

ascriptions are given to the patron saint of Lahore, Dātā ‘Alī Hujwīrī, as an individual for whom no singular lineal descent can be determined.<sup>56</sup> Contextualizing Nānak within early modern trajectories of thought in Panjāb enables us to move beyond notions of caste, class, and religious hierarchy associated with either geography or birth.

From a theological perspective, the SGGS is typically described as a linear text whose theology is articulated in the opening salvos in two compositions written by Nānak: the *mūl mantar* and *japjī sāhib*.<sup>57</sup> The *mūl mantar*, analyzed above, gives Nānak’s basic creedal statement. All definition of Sikh beliefs center upon it, and exegetical commentaries focus on parsing it. The preponderance of commentaries on the *mūl mantar* reflects that the language of its composition is not self-explanatory. Indeed, the *japjī sāhib* builds on the core theological principles elucidated in the *mūl mantar*; *japjī sāhib* is often thought of as an exegetical text that clarifies the theological principles of Oneness given in the *mūl mantar*.<sup>58</sup>

Furthermore, the dominant narrative of Sikhism enumerates five evil impulses, called the *panj dhūt*, outlined by the Gurūs: lust (*kām*), wrath (*krodh*), covetousness (*lobh*), attachment (*moh*), and pride (*hankār*).<sup>59</sup> These sinful impulses divide the individual from his or her divinely given route to salvation. Nānak taught Sikhs about salvation through becoming a *jīvan muktī*, or one who attains spiritual liberation during one’s lifetime. This salvific response occurs through repetition of *sabd*.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Hujwīrī and Nicholson.

<sup>57</sup> W.H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968). pp.148-149

<sup>58</sup> Based largely upon readings of *mūl mantar*; *japjī sāhib*, Nānak’s teachings are thought within the dominant narrative about Sikhism to be monotheistic expressions of the unity of God. Within this conception of Sikh theology, the Divine is a personal, eternal sovereign, with attributes like formlessness, ineffability, and immanence. The Divine responds through grace to disciples who submit to the word (*sabd*) as a mediating principle of communication; this submission signifies the disciple’s cultivation of love. Creation arises out of primeval chaos; having put creation in motion, God then watches and cares for the created beings. Furthermore, human creative activity reflects the creative aspect of godliness. Ibid. p. 164

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. pp.177-189

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 177-178; Gupta. pp.75-76

The common understanding of Sikh philosophy suggests that for the individual to overcome humanity's existence in duality, Nānak advocated attaining a faithful and loving demeanor through *sabd* recitation. Within this framework, Nānak's practice of *nām-simran* focuses this devotion towards salvation, and unregenerate humans are transformed through this practice by reciting *sabd*.<sup>61</sup> The practice of *nām-mārg* results in pious love. This love purifies, illuminates, and unites the devotee with God. This perspective relies on a principle of unity, or the possibility of unification with God—the experience of which culminates in purification and illumination. The notion of *nām-mārg* would, therefore, rely upon a prior binary separation between human and god, to attain unity. The dominant reading of Nānak's *nām-mārg*, therefore, construes this unity of essence as a singular Oneness and humanity, raising questions about divinity about illuminated pure existential embodiment—or, in other words, the godliness of the Gurūs.<sup>62</sup> In this reading, Nānak's teachings create a sense of predestination and fatalism which are conducive to governance by conflating belief in Sikh-Gurūs with submission to Oneness.

In other words, the dominant understanding of Sikh religion suggests that *nām-simran* leads to a mimetic experience of divine speech that enables immediate gnostic understanding of the SGGS. The binary mechanism of experiential divinization linked to Nānak's praxis and doxa. For example, repetition of *sabd* from SGGS (*nām-simran*), including *mul mantra* and *japjī sāhib*, are connected through a conceptual gloss when translating these texts and practices. The gloss moves the content of meaning away from *smrna*, or *simran*, as “remembering,” instead signifying a prayerful repetition. Instead of *nām* as name, *nām* becomes a synonym for *sabd* – repetition of *sabds* written by the Sikh-Gurūs found in the authoritative scripture, SGGS, and the word.

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<sup>61</sup> . pp.81-85; McLeod. pp.191-203

<sup>62</sup> Gupta; McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janamsakhis*.



Turning to the *mūl mantar* here provides a useful example. The *mūl mantar* is often thought of as a creedal or theological statement about Nānak’s monotheism: *ik angkār satinām kartā purkh*. The phrase is rendered in English by the authoritative modern translator of Manmohan Singh as follows: “There is but one God. True is His Name, creative His personality and immortal His form. He is without fear, sans enmity, unborn, and self-illuminated. By the Guru’s grace (He is obtained). Embrace His meditation.”<sup>63</sup>

However, I provide an alternate translation for the phrase that moves away from this theological reading and toward the conditions for Oneness: *ik angkār. satinām. kartā purkh*.<sup>64</sup> This phrase can be translated as describing a cosmology for the language of Oneness: the One (*ik*) became (*kār*) differentiated (*ang*). Its name (*nām*) is truth (*sati*). Humans (*purkh*) create (*kartā*). The *mūl mantar* concludes with a statement that places agency with radiance or brilliance, *gur prasādi*.<sup>65</sup>

Against theological construals of the *mūl mantar*, I suggest instead that *gur prasād* is a description of how the One moves from name to human creative acts in a manner consistent with the ability of radiance to pierce through things. Rather than focusing on salvific readings of this phrase, my reading positions us to understand the non-oppositional textuality represented by the *janamsākhīs* because this shift takes *prasād* as happening by the properties of radiance: the One pierces through its object, which contains differentiated attributes using properties describing

<sup>63</sup> The *mūl mantar* is as follows: *ੴ ਸਤਿਨਾਮੁ ਕਰਤਾ ਪੁਰਖੁ ਨਿਰਭਉ ਨਿਰਵੈਰੁ ਅਕਾਲ ਮੂਰਤਿ ਅਜੂਨੀ ਸੈਭੰ ਗੁਰ ਪ੍ਰਸਾਦਿ॥ ਜਪੁ॥* For recent discussion of its importance see: Mandair; McLeod; Jodh Singh, *Guru Nanak Lectures*, Guru Nanak Lectures, 1970 (Madras: University of Madras, 1969); Singh.

<sup>64</sup> I articulate this turn away from theology because the *mūl mantar* is often thought of as the hermeneutic core of the *Gurū Granth Sahib*. According to the the *Granth* is an elaboration of the meanings found in the *mūl mantar*. This gives the *Granth* an internal hermeneutic where verses explain other verses. This parallels the notion of *tawīl* of the Qur’ān where there is thought to be an internally consistent way to interpret the text. Interpreting using external means to elaborate, or *tafsīr*, is thought to be less difficult than *tawīl*. The non-oppositional form of the *janamsākhīs* and other non-oppositional texts may parallel how *tafsīr* incorporates *hadīth* narratives to explain Qur’ānic verses.

<sup>65</sup> For definition of *gur* as light that strike through darkness see entry “gur” in *Kosh*. Bhai Vir Singh, ed. *Shri Guru Granth Kosh Volume 2* (Amritsar: Khalsa Tract Society, 1954); Nabha.

radiations of Truth.<sup>66</sup> Achieving this form of brilliance allows for a text to move within three times (*trai kāl*)—the past, the present, and the future. The attribute of radiance allows for non-oppositional textuality to be recognizable.

### 1.5 *Jotījoti Samaonā*: Oneness of Being amongst Gurūs, Sikhs, and *Sabd*

An informatic perspective in Sikh Studies approaches to janamsākhī struggles to account for chronological in-mixing, where actual events or writings by a later Gurū are attributed to Nānak and narrativized in janamsākhīs. For instance, historically, the invention of the *manjī* system is accredited to Gurū Amar Dās; however, the janamsākhīs attribute the *manjī* system’s creation to Nānak during his sojourns. Alternatively, as another example, the janamsākhīs sometimes feature *sabds* written by later Gurūs in anecdotes narrated as occurring during the life of Nānak, leading modern scholars to consider these as errors as opposed to indexes of the implicit empirical backdrop of ideas like *jotījoti samaonā*.<sup>67</sup>

Early Sikh texts emphasize the essential continuity from one Gurū to the next as well as focusing on the fundamental transformation of being through the Gurū-Sikh relation.<sup>68</sup> There was a concerted effort made in pursuing this line of thought, giving rise to a developed epistemological framework and the use of specific lingual/textual conditions for writing texts to

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<sup>66</sup> A *paurī*, or explanatory verse, from “*mājh kī vār*” in the *Gurū Granth* describes this radiance in the following manner: “Whosoever experiences self-loss, through the True’s words their faces radiate upon the master’s threshold.” See Singh, pp. 137-150

<sup>67</sup> The introduction of Bhai Vir Singh’s, *Puratan Janamsakhi*, describes his editing protocol including removing apocryphal texts to appendices, and correcting mistaken uses of verses from SGGS. This mistakes are not only considered errors in copying down the verses but also extends to incorrect attribution of verses written by later Gurū to Nānak. Singh, *Puratan Janamsakhi Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji*. Most modern critical editions of janamsakhis continue with these editing protocols. For more examples of this editing protocol see Jasabir Singh Sābara, *Giāna Ratanāwalī: Janamasākhī Srī Gurū Nānaka Dewa Jī: Sampādana Ate Pāṭha-Ālocana* (Amritsar: Gurū Nānaka Adhiaina Wibhāga, Gurū Nānaka Dewa Yūnīwarasiṭī, 1993); Kirpal Singh, ed. *Janamsakhi Shiri Guru Nanak Dev Ji*, vol. I (Amritsar: Khalsa College, 1962); Piar Singh, ed. *Janamsakhi Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji [Mul Path India Office (London) Di Hath-Likhat Panj. B40 Ton India Office Library Ate Records De Director Di Agiya Nal Chapiya Gaiya]* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak University, 1974).

<sup>68</sup> For example see Gurdas.

fructify the method of thought propounded by Nānak. Given the rivalry and competition in the early modern Sikh tradition, conceptualizing and mechanizing succession was important to the vitality of the nascent community. As such, texts praising the Gurū lineage often incorporate concepts for how succession occurred that are not fully considered by modern scholars.

The *janamsākhī* manuscripts not only highlight continuity but also assist in elucidating how Gurū Nānak was understood in the early tradition. Understanding Nānak's position as Gurū will also demonstrate that the seeming innovations in the community put forward by later Gurūs are not unique. A notion called *jotījoti samaonā* is central to the lineal system of descent in the Sikh tradition; it refers to a merging that transmits a flame—such as using one candle to light another. The practices and writings of Gurū Nānak were implicitly understood as grounded in this transformative paradigm—sometimes referenced using the alchemical notion of transforming mundane metals to gold, called *pāras honā*.<sup>69</sup> I suggest that *jotījoti samaonā* describes the transfiguration of an ontological notion of language propounded by Nānak into a non-oppositional system of thought and a manner of practice.

*Jotījoti samaonā* describes not only the continuity between Gurūs but also the possibility for Sikhs to attain cognitive equality with the Gurūs. A clearer idea of Nānak's significance for early exponents as well as an awareness of how ideas propounding this singularity was expressed through language is essential in understanding *janamsākhī* textuality and interpretation theory.

The concept of the *joti* is mentioned in verses in the SGGS, such as in Gurū Amardās's composition, "Anand Sāhib." In this composition, mentioned briefly above, Gurū Amardās

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<sup>69</sup> See *pehlī vār* in *ibid.* There are also translations into Gurmukhī script of *Kimmi assa'dat* by Ghazali that are titled *Pārasbhāg*. A manuscript of *Pārasbhāg* housed at Gurū Nānak Dev University, Amritsar begins with a *sākhī* depicting a discussion between Nānak and Bābe Lālji. See Joseph Schaller, "Sanskritization, Caste Uplift and Social Dissidence in the Sant Ravidas Panth," in *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community, Identity, and Political Action*, ed. David N. Lorenzen, Suny Series in Religious Studies (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995).

explains how to attain the bliss that arises from the practices that Nānak propounded. Achieving this bliss is described as the hallmark for attaining the true light (*satgurū*) by singing the *sabd* in equipoise until it takes hold of consciousness.<sup>70</sup> The notion of *joti* is mentioned in the thirty-third stanza of this composition, where the body is said to be infused with *joti* by the Creator:

॥ਏ ਸਰੀਰਾ ਮੇਰਿਆ ਹਰਿ ਤੁਮ ਮਹਿ ਜੋਤਿ ਰਖੀ ਤਾ ਤੂ ਜਗ ਮਹਿ ਆਇਆ॥ ਹਰਿ ਜੋਤਿ ਰਖੀ ਤੁਧੁ ਵਿਚਿ ਤਾ ਤੂ ਜਗ ਮਹਿ ਆਇਆ॥ ਹਰਿ ਆਪੇ ਮਾਤਾ ਆਪੇ ਪਿਤਾ ਜਿਨਿ ਉਪਾਇ ਜਗਤੁ ਦਖਾਇਆ॥ ਗੁਰ ਪਰਸਾਦੀ ਬੁਝਿਆ ਤਾ ਚਲਤੁ ਹੋਆ ਚਲਤ ਨਦਰੀ ਆਇਆ॥ ਕਹੇ ਨਾਨਕ ਸ੍ਰਿਸਟਿ ਕਾ ਮੂਲਿ ਰਚਿਆ ਜੋਤਿ ਰਾਖੀ ਤਾ ਤੂ ਜਗ ਮਹਿ ਆਇਆ॥੩੩॥ ...ਗੁਰਪਰਸਾਦੀ ਹਰਿ ਮੰਨਿ ਵਸਿਆ ਪੂਰਬਿ ਲਿਖਿਆ ਪਾਇਆ॥ ਕਹੈ ਨਾਨਕੁ ਏਹੁ ਸਰੀਰੁ ਪਰਵਾਣੁ ਹੋਆ ਜਿਨਿ ਸਤਿਗੁਰ ਸਿਉ ਚਿਤੁ ਲਾਇਆ॥੩੫॥

*e sarīrā meriā hari tum mhai joti rakhī tā tū jag mai āeā. hari joti rakhī tudhu vici tā tū jag mai āeā. hari āpe mātā āpe pitā jini upāe jagatu dakhāeā. gur parsādī bujhiā tā calatu hoā calat nadarī āeā. kahe nānak srisati kā mūli raciā joti rākhī tā tū jag mahai āeā. (33) ...gurparsādī hari manni vasiā pūrabi likhiā pāeā. kahai nānaku ihu sarīru parvān hoā jinni satigur sio citu lāeā. (35)*

O body of mine, the All has placed within you the light so that you would awaken. The All placed light within you so that you would come to the world. That radiance which has shown to you the world, it is what gives rise to you; it is your mother and father together. You attained awareness of the compassionate gift of the self-formed, then through acting your behavior became apparent. By this compassionate gift, the All innervates your mind to place the complete writ within it. Nānak states, this body becomes acceptable for those who engage in such thinking.<sup>71</sup>

This *sabd* states that the *joti* is placed in the body before birth, and that understanding of it is also attained through the Creator. This truth can be recognized in the change in the manner of action on the part of the individual who has attained the knowledge of *joti*, marking the attainment of writing through which the Creator (the All) innervated the mind. Awareness of the *joti* is a possibility that begins before birth.

Another *sabd* that addresses the notion of *joti* comes from verses in Nānak’s composition “Ārtī,” which is recited in the nightly litany known as *kīrtan sohailā*. These verses describe the world as divided over how to praise the Creator most effectively, with the various practices only

<sup>70</sup> The opening stanzas begin with such a description: ਅਨੰਦੁ ਭਇਆ ਮੇਰੀ ਮਾਏ ਸਤਿਗੁਰੂ ਮੈ ਪਾਇਆ॥ ਸਤਿਗੁਰੂ ਤ ਪਾਇਆ ਸਹਜ ਸੇਤੀ ਮਨਿ ਵਜੀਆ ਵਾਧਾਈਆ॥ਰਾਗ ਰਤਨ ਪਰਵਾਰ ਪਰੀਆ ਸਬਦੇ ਗਾਵਣ ਆਇਆ॥ ਸਬਦੇ ਤ ਗਾਵਹੁ ਹਰੀ ਕੇਰਾ ਮਨਿ ਜਿਨੀ ਵਸਾਇਆ॥ ਕਹੈ ਨਾਨਕੁ ਅਨੰਦੁ ਹੋਆ ਸਤਿਗੁਰੂ ਮੈ ਪਾਇਆ॥੧॥

<sup>71</sup> See “Anand Sāhib,” Singh Manmohan, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* (Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbhandhak Committee, 1996). pp. 917-922

furthering those divisions. Despite this, the unstruck sound continues to beat on the rhythmic *bherī* drum. The idea of light, or *joti*, inhering all counterpoises a practice of division:

॥ਰਾਗ ਧਨਾਸਰੀ ਮਹਲਾ ੧॥ਕੈਸੀ ਆਰਤੀ ਹੋਇ॥ ਭਵ ਖੰਡਨਾ ਤੇਰੀ ਆਰਤੀ॥ ਅਨਹਤਾ ਸਬਦ ਵਾਜੰਤ ਭੇਰੀ॥...ਸਭ ਮਹਿ ਜੋਤਿ ਜੋਤਿ ਹੈ ਸੋਇ॥ਤਿਸਦੈ ਚਾਨਣਿ ਸਭ ਮਹਿ ਚਾਨਣ ਹੋਇ॥ ਗੁਰਸਾਖੀ ਜੋਤਿ ਪਰਗਟ ਹੋਇ॥ ਜੋ ਤਿਸ ਭਾਵੈ ਸੁ ਆਰਤੀ ਹੋਇ॥੩॥

*rāg dhanāsarī mahallā 1. kaisī ārtī hoe. bhav khandanā terī ārtī. anahatā sabd vājant bherī...sabh mai joti joti hai soe. tisdai cānani sabh mai cānan hoe. gursākhi joti pargat hoe. jo tis bhavai su āratī hoe. (3)*

How is *ārtī* to be performed when the world has been toppled and divided by your *ārtī*? The *sabd* rings out through the *bherī*-drum without it being struck...In all is that light of light; through its brilliance all become radiant. Its reflection reflects in all. Gur-witnessing manifests Light. *Ārtī* may be performed by someone whose being is in this state.<sup>72</sup>

Attaining *joti* signifies a change in human being, a change whose enactment is *ārtī*.<sup>73</sup> However, for this state to be achieved, disciples (*sikhs*) must witness an individual (*gurū*) whose exertions have led to the realization of *joti*. The words *gur-sākhī* are used to refer to this necessity—i.e. *sākhī*, or witness, of a *gurū* who has realized the transformation of consciousness in language. *Joti* is not a principle of interiority but arises when the word (*sabd*) establishes itself in mind by an igniting of the *joti* through the recitation of the language of *sākhī*.<sup>74</sup>

Verses that praise the Gurū lineage highlight Nānak’s importance by stating that he is one who realized the connection between *joti* and the Creator (*hari*). Nānak is understood as not only

<sup>72</sup> Singh.

<sup>73</sup> *ārtī* is a ritual performed in praise of a deity. It involves the use of a plate holding several burning *dīvās*, incense, and other offerings. It can be interpreted as a gesture of appeasement through praise, this appeasement is described by Gurū Nānak as something which requires division, antagonism, and violence. Bhāi Vir Singh, a prominent twentieth century Singh Sabha Reformer, has noted that Dhannā Bhagat, a fifteenth century Vaisnav bhaktā, describes the performance of *ārtī* as ritual prospicience -a projection forward -of an invented notion of self. *ārtī* gives birth and perpetuates the self through its performance. Gurū Nānak highlights this criticism by raising the question of whether it is possible to perform an *ārtī* through which true appeasement can occur. Bhai Vir Singh states, “ਜੋ ਆਪ ਘੜਕੇ ਵਡਿਆਈ ਜਨਾਉਣ ਲਈ ਵਰਤਿਆ” See Singh, *Shri Guru Granth Kosh Volume I*. p. 75

<sup>74</sup> One of the last lines in Bhai Gurdas’ twenty-fourth *vār* further associates the Gurū with *sabd*. ਗੁਰ ਮੂਰਤਿ ਗੁਰ ਸਬਦ ਹੈ ਸਾਧਸੰਗਤਿ ਵਿਚਿ ਪਰਗਟੀ ਆਇਆ॥

*gur mūrati gur sabd hai sadhsangati vici pargatī āeā.*  
The Gurū’s existence is the Gurū’s *sabd*.

*Sabd* and *joti* are connected through their signification when describing Nānak and his successors. The place where this is made clear is within the *sadhsangat*, or gathering of the accomplished. See Gurdas.

immersed in knowledge of the Creator but also as the one who ignited the wick of *joti* through his exertions. Nānak’s body transformed through this igniting, and the true light was embodied by the *joti* in his body merging, or touching, the primordial *joti* of creation. Bhāi Gurdās’s *pehlī* (first) *vār* states:

ਜੋਤੀ ਜੋਤਿ ਮਿਲਾਇ ਕੈ ਸਤਿਗੁਰ ਨਾਨਕ ਰੂਪ ਵਟਾਇਆ॥

*jotī jotī milāe kai satigur nanak rūp vatāeā.*

Having made light mingle with light Nānak and *satigurū* intertwined their form.<sup>75</sup>

The intertwining of form and light between Nānak and the Creator is what lends legitimacy to his teachings. The proof (*gursākhī*) of this intertwining exists in the actions that Nānak undertook during his lifetime. The temporality of these enactments is what leads the accreditation of Nānak being a *zāhir bhagat*—one who is simultaneously manifestation and manifestor of *joti* (light).<sup>76</sup>

The importance of Nānak selecting a successor for his fledgling community important aspect of the tradition for exponents. For instance, the B41 manuscript differentiates Nānak from earlier *bhagats* like Kabīr by stating that the latter did not take disciples (*sikhs*). Kabīr abides in a state of pure interiority through which he attained residence in the Divine Court:

ਤਾ ਗੁਰੁ ਨਾਨਕ ਕਹਿਆ ਭਾਈ ਬਾਲਾ ਕੰਬੀਰ ਭਗਤ ਜੋ ਪੂਰਨ ਭਗਤ ਹੋਇਆ ਸੋ ਇਸ ਵਾਸਤੇ ਕੰਬੀਰ ਸਿਖ ਕੋਈ ਨਾ ਕੀਤਾ॥  
ਅਤੇ ਕਿਸੇ ਰਾਜ ਦੀ ਬਾਛਨਾ ਨ ਕੀਤੀ॥ ਅਤੇ ਕਿਸੇ ਸੰਗਤ ਦੀ ਉਪਮਾ ਨਾ ਲੀਤੀ॥ ਇਸ ਵਾਸਤੇ ਦਰਿ ਰਹੇ...॥

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> The twenty-fourth *vār* by Bhai Gurdās indicates this by equating Nānak as a manifestation (*ākār*) of light (*deo*) of the unmanifest (*nirankār*):

ਨਿਰੰਕਾਰ ਨਾਨਕ ਦੇਉ ਨਿਰੰਕਾਰ ਆਕਾਰ ਬਣਾਇਆ॥

*nirankār nanak deo nirankār ākār banāeā.*

In his twenty-eight *vār*, a similar connection is made stating the Nānak’s light (*deo*) is a beacon of *nirankār*:

ਸਤਿਗੁਰੁ ਨਾਨਕ ਦੇਉ ਹੈ ਪਰਮੇਸਰੁ ਸੋਈ॥

*nirankār nanak deao nirankār ākār banāeā.*

The use of *deo* in these verses reflects a strategic use of words in the early Sikh tradition that have meaning in more than one lingual tradition -*deva* or *divas* as significations of light merge with *deha* or body. The light of Nānak and the body of Nānak can, therefore, be expressed using one word while adding to the indistinguishability of these two aspects of Nānak.

Ibid.

*tān gurū nānak kahiya bhāi bālā kabīr bhagat jo pūran bhagat hoeyā so es vāste kabīr sikh na koī kītā ate kise rāj dī bachnā nā kītī ate kise sangat dī upmā nā lītī es vaste darī rahe...*

Then Gurū Nānak said, “Bhai Bala, Bhagat Kabīr was a true *bhagat*, for he did not take disciples (*sikhs*), he did not rely on any rule (*rājā*), and he was not beholden to the company of others (*sangat*). For these reasons, he remained there...<sup>77</sup>

The joining of essences from between Nānak and Lehnā marks the process of succession through the term *jotījoti samāonā*. The transformation of Sikh to Gurū and the passing on of the teachings, practices, and lingual conditions that Nānak rekindled marks the association of succession with *jotījoti samāonā*. The succession of Gurūs occurs by attaining a non-oppositional embodiment, a form of manifesting the unmanifest in the body by recitations of the word.

The notion of *jotījoti samaonā* also helps us understand the Gurūs as a successive lineage that promoted a consistent understanding of language as ontological and being as ideally non-oppositional. Scholarship on Sikh history commonly suggests that the maintenance of succession within the Sodhī clan from the Gurūship of Gurū Arjan onward is thought to adopt or emulate paradigms of Kingship on the subcontinent.<sup>78</sup> However, this claim gives primacy to kinship over merit or attainment and diminishes the fact that the sons of the current Gurū were initiated Sikhs

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<sup>77</sup> "Mss Panjābī B41, Janamsākhī Pancami Pothi Likhi Pairhe Mokhe," (British Library, London). f. 252b

<sup>78</sup> Some examples include, Louis E. Fenech, *The Darbar of the Sikh Gurus: The Court of God in the World of Men* (New Delhi ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); *The Sikh Zafar-Nāmah of Guru Gobind Singh: A Discursive Blade in the Heart of the Mughal Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); J. S. Grewal and Press Cambridge University, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, New Cambridge History of India ;Ii, 3 (Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Gupta; McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janamsakhis*; "The Origins of the Sikh Tradition," in *The Sikhs: History, Religion, and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); Robin Rinehart, *Debating the Dasam Granth*, Aar Religion in Translation (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Arvind-pal Singh Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Guides for the Perplexed (London ; New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

who entered the community not by birth but through a ritual accepting of the Gurū. However, *sākhīs* often portray a more complicated picture, where testing was central to succession.<sup>79</sup>

For instance, Lehnā was chosen to succeed Nānak after the Gurū tested the humility of the entire Sikh community.<sup>80</sup> The use of testing or assessing the actions of the Sikhs to determine putative successors did not change with later Gurūs. For example, Gurū Arjan's selection followed from Prithī Mal and Māhādev's refusal to attend a wedding at Lahore, despite each being asked to attend in an official capacity in Gurū Rāmdās's stead. Arjan readily accepted and wrote three praiseful poems for his father while in Lahore, which Gurū Rāmdās was prevented from seeing because of the deceit of Prithī Mal, his eldest son. However, the letters were later discovered, which eventually led to Arjan's selection as Gurū.<sup>81</sup> As another example, Gobind Rāi (who became the tenth Gurū, Gurū Gobind Singh) would beseech his father, Gurū Tegh Bahādur (the ninth Gurū), to lay down his life in resisting forceful religious conversion—an anecdote often used to express Gobind's acceptability as successor.

Although it is dependent on texts like *Vārān Bhāi Gurdās*, the idea of a fissure in the *panth* that begins with the rise of the Sodhī lineage from Gurū Arjan onward stands in contradistinction with these ideas from early Sikh texts.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, the notion of *jotījoti samaonā*

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<sup>79</sup> Bhai Gurdas marks the significance of testing Sikhs as well as selection of Gurū being determined by the passing of tests in his numerous descriptions of the Gurū lineage in the writings. The term he uses for selection by successfully passing tests is, *parcā-parcāēā*. I have included praiseful genealogies of the Gurū lineage in the appendices. In modern commentaries, the term *parhā-parcāēā* use the framework of devotional religious to associate it with requisite pious love necessary for devotion to the Gurū. However, this is complicated when examining Bhai Gurdas alongside *sākhī* accounts of testing Sikhs. See Gurdas.

<sup>80</sup> Although the extent of these test varies between recensions there is consistency in marking succession through Nānak testing his Sikhs.

<sup>81</sup> See Pashaura Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan: History, Memory, and Biography in the Sikh Tradition* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>82</sup> The changes felt by the community during Gurū Hargobind's tenure are said to be expressed in twenty-sixth vār which is a vār describing the hypocrisies of Gurūs by comparing them to the truthful Gurūs. In this vār, the twenty-second paurhī marks a shift from describing the truthful Gurūs to examining false Gurūs. A recent iteration of this can be read in Hardip Singh Syan, "Sectarian Works," in *Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, ed. Pashaura Singh and L. Fenech (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). p.173 Between paurhīs 31 and 33 there is a discussion of rulers and rival claimants who were attempting to disrupt the path created by Nānak. The twenty-sixth vār does not directly



and the use of spiritual tests in selecting successors signified that no point of differentiation existed between the Gurūs: they were effectively the same light or flame being brought together and passed from one body to another. This continuity and stability acted as a vital source of inspiration as the community grew. *Jotījot samaonā* is a relational mechanism that maintains difference within singularity—it retains the multiple within the limits of oneness.

For example, Sikh texts frequently describe Gurū Hargobind (the sixth Gurū) as a continuation of the transformative possibilities of Nānak's teachings. Gurū Arjan (the fifth Gurū) is described as passing the flame to Hargobind. This relationality was also relevant to the transformative relationship between Gurū and Sikh—as when Gurū Angad tells the *sangat* that Gurū Nānak and Bhāī Bālā were indistinguishable from one another and that they embodied the simultaneity of Gurū and Sikh in one connected entity.<sup>83</sup> The idea of *jotījoti samaonā*, therefore, did not only signify the continuity of the *sangat* through a lineage of Gurū; rather than limiting this transformation to the context of successor Gurūs, this notion signifies a possibility of attainment open to all Sikhs through Nānak's teaching.

Used in the context of succession, however, *jotījoti samaonā* implies that we must consider all subsequent Gurūs as a continuation of the primordial *joti* in all creation that Nānak rekindled. The movement of the *joti* as temporal but not strictly historical was thought to be expressed effectively through narrative non-oppositionality expressed using ontical language. Thus, *joti* continues to abide not only with the human Gurūs that ended with Gurū Gobind Singh

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mention Hargobind, and a reference to him in the context of more general discussion of effective and ineffective systems of thought does not lend itself to the discussion. There are ample direct mentions of Hargobind and a play on duality and singularity inherent in his name through pronouncing it as govind (attainment of artful writing, or *bānī*) and gobind (protector, shepherd) in genealogical *paurhīs* by Bhai Gurdas. The reading of a fissure based upon adopting militaristic ideals does not sync with the sources but appears to be derived from assumption about political or even revolutionary deployment of religious sentiment. They are anachronistic reflections of later issues within the Sikh community. See appendices for examples of Gurū Hargobind in the Gurū genealogies.

<sup>83</sup> ਤਾ ਗੁਰੂ ਅੰਗਦ ਆਖਿਆ ਭਾਈ ਸਿਖੇ ਭਾਈ ਬਾਲਾ ਅਤੇ ਗੁਰੂ ਨਾਨਕ ਵਿਚਿ ਭੇਦ ਕੋਈ ਨਾ ਆਹਾ॥ ਏਹੋ ਗੁਰੂ ਅਤੇ ਸਿਖਾ ਦਾ ਭੇਦ ਆਹਾ॥ "Mss Panjābī B41, Janamsākhī Pancami Pothi Likhi Pairhe Mokhe."f. 253 a

but also within the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* because *joti* is first and foremost a word in language – the human referent is not a necessity.

## 1.6 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of common narrative sequences, tropes, and philosophical themes found in the *janamsākhī*. It is a central conceit in this dissertation that *janamsākhī* used a form of narrative, structure, and textuality that was an extension of Nānak's philosophy as found in the SGGS – they were to act as grafts extending the network of ontical language used by exponents of Oneness. I have aimed to demonstrate how both the *janamsākhī* and the SGGS are fundamentally concerned with enabling a transformation toward non-oppositional being on the part of the reader-disciple via a form of decentered, ontological language. Recognizing the ontological nature of language in these works allows us to access new modes of interpretation for *janamsākhīs* and other Sikh texts.

In the next chapter, I present an analysis of my oral history interviews with traditional exponents. These interviews further elucidate the relationships between ontical language, the performative system of interpretation called *kathā dī parpāṭī*, and the *janamsākhīs*. They also highlight that the attainment of this language is not connected with a religious sense of Sikh identity but is something which occurs outside of such typologies.

## Chapter II

### *Kathā, Janamsākhī, and Speaking Outside the Self*

Although they vary in size and number of accounts and at times have a varying chronology, *janamsākhīs*, as we have seen, generally feature similar themes and structural elements in their portrayals of Nānak. Can we begin with this structural and thematic synchronicity to critically approach the text? For such studies to go beyond perfunctory analyses, we must begin by understanding texts like the *janamsākhī* via an epistemological project. I have described how Attar Singh Bhadour recognized *sākhī* compendiums as singular works reflecting the attainment of an individual. The connection of *janamsākhīs* to a system of learning and a means of knowledge production remains unexplored in English-language studies exist on this subject, and only one major work exists in Panjābi.<sup>1</sup> This latter work focuses on different traditions of interpreting the SGGS rather than a system of practice that produced knowledge. Furthermore, no readily available manuscripts present a pedagogical approach to Nānak's teachings.

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<sup>1</sup> Taran Singh's study on the exegetical lineages's in the Sikh tradition is the closest approximation of a study on the knowledge production mechanisms of early Sikhism. One of the benefits of Taran Singh's study is that it includes European studies on the Sikhs as a distinct exegetical tradition. However, the division of exegetes as representing distinct traditions does not necessarily reflect the distinctions, interrelations, and growth of forms of exegesis as a historical process. Taran Singh, *Gurbani Dian Viakhia Prnalian* (Patiala: Publication Bureau Panjabi University, 1988).

There are three concurrent issues that have prevented interpreting janamsākhīs through textual content. First, until very recently, scholars have experienced difficulty in gaining access to texts that were largely the purview of exponents who required initiation into the order before the textual study. Second, even where scholars could take or procure texts, they were still confounded by questions of how language was brought to meaning, such that the text's meaning remained inaccessible. Third, scholars did not have regular access to exponents; exponents were often reluctant interlocutors, but even when engaged, their assumptions were incongruent with the types of questions they were asked, leading to misperceptions of incommunicability or deception. Today, these tensions between secular scholars and traditional exponents continue: centers of Sikh learning have remained outside the scope of secular scholars of the Sikh religion largely due to their perception of exponents as theological ideologues. The results of these difficulties form the basis of my line of argument about the development of the Sikh archive and the patterns of translation of these texts, explored in Chapters Three and Four.

However, in contrast to the dearth of information about these traditional exponents and their knowledge practices in the current secular scholarship on janamsākhīs, I acknowledge and interrogate their modes of learning and transmission of knowledge as it pertains to a non-oppositional ethos. Given the paucity of source material on the subject, I embarked upon oral history interviews by visiting current centers of learning. In this chapter, I turn to some basic questions, which, as a result of the difficulties enumerated above, remain largely unanswered within the existing scholarship on janamsākhī: How were these texts produced and where were they circulated? What types of knowledge practices informed the janamsākhīs? What were the conditions of their production? How were they used and where did they circulate? Is it possible

to determine a more elaborate framework for *sākhīs* than that provided by the frames of syncretic religion and identity?

As I have argued, *sākhīs* are used to explain the SGGs using a nongrammatical interpretation theory and practice called *kathā*, which means “a telling.”<sup>2</sup> The term refers to the oral relation of religious themes by trained exponents and carries associations of an analytical interpretation, similar to words like *ākhiā*, *biān*, *kehnā*, *vicār*, and *viākhiā*. *Sākhīs* do not connect easily to a theological soteriology used for preaching because this type of writing presumes *kathā* will be the mode of exposition. *Sākhīs*, therefore, rely upon anecdotal story-telling; modern ideas of communicating an understanding of a topic or theme are difficult to locate as such. However, understanding *kathā* as a form of *kahānī* (story) or *vārtā* (sung epic), or as a preaching or missionizing that is called *pracār* by the contemporary community, is commonplace in the modern lived-tradition.

However, I suggest that a distinct form of *kathā* inheres in the janamsākhī archive that does not often find an equivalent in today’s *pracār* or *kahānī*. This impossible or ineffable *kathā* signals the idea of *akath-kathā* (“unsayable saying”)—something that connects to the transformative ontology of humanity. The directionality of this form of tale-telling employs personified characters but points away from a focus on embodiment. In archival form, *kathā* shows a critical skepticism toward language and knowledge production techniques conducive to

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<sup>2</sup> Words that are derived from *kathā* include *kathanī* (narrative with claims and statements), *kathi* (to tell), and *kathāvai*, as well as forms derived from the noun *kathā* including *kathāgi*, *kathām*, and *kathānhār* (relateable). In some ways, *kathā* might be equated to a *kahānī* or *vārtā*—that is to say, a story or prose account. However, these genres are in many ways distinct, with *kahānī* representing a generic term for a story, and *vārtā* referring to an evental account meant to be sung. Kahn Singh Nabha, *Gurushabada Ratanākara Mahan Kosh* (1960); Kanh Singh Nabha, *Gurumata Māratandā* (1962); Kahn Singh Nabha, *Gurumata Prabhākara, Arthāta, Sikkha Dharama De Niyamāṃ Dā Prakāshaka Ara Awidyā Andhakāra Wināshaka Sūrya*, Gurumata Prabhākara (Ammritasara: Bhā. Catara Singha Jīwana Singha, 2005); Bhai Vir Singh, ed. *Shri Guru Granth Kosh Volume 2* (Amritsar: Khalsa Tract Society, 1954).

the formation of religious identity and instead, focuses on *sabd gurbānī* and active writing.<sup>3</sup>

Exploring the connections between *kathā* and *sākhīs* enables us to acknowledge that the written text of the (janam)sākhī often precedes the oral enunciation of *kathā*.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter turns to these oral history interviews to explore the network of associations and connections between *sākhī*—which here I propose to understand as acts of witnessing—and *kathā*, an account of that witnessing. These interviews are central to understanding (janam)sākhīs as works explicating the SGGS. I was particularly interested in how *sākhīs* were incorporated into the knowledge practices at prominent centers of learning, or *ṭaksāls*, that trained future *granthīs*. Exploring the process of exponents’ training helps me show how *sākhī* compendiums like the janamsākhī individuals’ unique expansion of *sabd*: just as *kathā* relies upon the individual interpretative skills of any given exponent, janamsākhīs, too, represent the individual interpretations of unique authors engaging creatively with the SGGS.

I begin this chapter by describing my travel itinerary and giving the names of people, I interviewed. After that, I describe something my interlocutors referred to as *kathā dī parpātī*, or the system of *kathā*, which I describe using compositional and performative aspects. This system acts as the creative driver for writing *sākhī* texts for use in *sangats*. From here I move on to discuss some of the histories of knowledge practices and institutions, starting with the establishment of *ṭaksāls* at Sābo dī Talwandī and Amritsar in the early eighteenth-century.

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<sup>3</sup> Kathā as telling of stories is not unique to the Sikh tradition. In South Asia, many religious traditions routinely employ story and fable to motivate belief. These are often associated with notions of *līlā*, or play, and *kahānī*, or a spoken tale. Phillip Lutgendorf’s work has shown the use of performative rehearsal of Ramlila as a type of *kathā*. Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsidas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). Wendy Doniger’s work on Vaishnav mythos is reflective of the broader mechanism of telling fables to reveal things that escape discipline. Wendy Doniger, *Other Peoples’ Myths: The Cave of Echoes* (New York : London: Macmillan ; Collier Macmillan, 1988). An understanding of *kathā* within the Sikh tradition presents future avenues of comparative analysis.

<sup>4</sup> Kartar Singh Duggal’s story, “Karāmāt” discussed in the introduction of this dissertation is an example showing how popular oral *sākhī* act as a form of *kathā* distinct from the written manuscript compilations of *sākhīs* in the earlier manuscript record.

Based on my interviews, travels, and recordings of *kathā*, I discuss three contemporary forms of *kathā* that were suggested by my interlocutors. Firstly, *pracārak kathā*, or theological (or missionizing) exegesis, which is heavily indebted to the political doctrine of threat and a loose soteriology based upon belief in the Gurūs. Next is *itihāsak kathā*, or historical exegesis, which connects to premises of historically affected consciousness to facilitate an exclusive Sikh identity formation based on the lives of the Gurūs. Lastly, *akath-kathā*, the untellable telling, a form of *kathā* increasingly rare today, which relies heavily upon the *sākhī* paradigm to expand upon the sabds from *Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib*.

This chapter concludes by suggesting that *akath-kathā* most closely mirrors the *janamsākhī* in structure and productively plays upon the dissonance created by questions about who Gurū Nānak was, what he represented, and how (or from whom) he learned to disavow religious identity to enable a unique form of knowledge production. This analysis will enable a return to not only the *janamsākhī* but to the *sākhī* literature in general; it also shows how Sikhs exponents spoke, and in some cases still speak, the *Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib* through a nongrammatical hermeneutics using *akath-kathā* as a form of decentered speech.

## 2.1 Oral History of Sikh Knowledge Practices & Production

Reading *janamsākhī* colophons while researching for my Master's thesis had revealed to me that historically, new recensions were often created at the behest of the *sangat*. Representatives from the *sangat* approached well-reputed individuals to use their knowledge to create a *janamsākhī* that reflected their learning. The colophon signals the completion of a text and includes a reference to the work completed; the *janamsākhīs* most often include a self-reference marking the text as “*sākhī*.” The colophon may also include a date of

completion, the name of the writer, and the instance that marked the recension's creation. Far more regularly, however, the colophon featured an exhortation to read and study the text with learned exponents. The colophons connect the *janamsākhī* to individual writings of intellectuals steeped in a system of learning related to the Sikh Gurūs.

My focus in this project was to conduct interviews to ascertain the relationship between *kathā*, regarding composition and performance, and *sākhīs*. Oral history was an amenable approach given its use in a wide variety of fields to access a history of events or the memories of the past from groups of people that remain unacknowledged by typical historiography.

Despite these biases in the current scholarship, however, individuals establishing or emerging from these institutions have been at the center of large movements in Sikh history. I decided to limit this early phase of research to institutions that were most immediately relevant to the modern lived-tradition as represented across Panjāb. I interviewed exponents from three separate centers (*derās*) whose students typically populate *gurdwārās* as *granthīs* and *giānīs*: Satto kī Gallī, Bhinder Kalān (or Bhindrān), and Mehtā Chowk. The actual distinction between these institutions is somewhat opaque, as students move organically between them to seek the expertise they require; nevertheless, each *derā* represents the place where a student would receive the foundation of his training before moving on to other sites of learning. Several individual exponents influenced my research as well. This oral history project was idiosyncratic in that it represents groups that are central to Sikh knowledge practices and the impacts the partition of the subcontinent had on the availability of networks that enabled creation and interpretation of texts.

I asked traditional exponents based at major contemporary teaching institutions, or



*ṭaksāls*, about three main questions: 1) How was *kathā* meaningful in the system of knowledge production as well as performance in a *sangat*? 2) How does *kathā* relate to the creation and deployment of *sākhīs*? 3) How does *kathā* differ from *viākhīā* and *parcār*—two terms often taken in general speech to also denote exegesis?

By asking this last question, I was interested in determining whether *viākhīā* and *parcār* were different in their more recent accretions. This question also came about because of the centrality of *simran*, *kīrtan*, and *kathā* within Sikh practice, whereas *parcār* and *viākhīā* lack this same depth and resonance at the level of praxis. For instance, while gathering to hear a *kathā* over the course of several days from a trained exponent was a serious happening, it is not uncommon to have most of a *sangat* rise and depart at the onset of *parcār*—especially after the musical performance of *kīrtan*. Was the difference related to the *sākhīs*?

Between late April and early July of 2013, I set out to remote reaches of both rural Panjāb and the intertwining *gallīs* of precolonial cities to interview an assortment of *bābās*, *giānīs*, *kathāvācaks*, and *kīrtaniyās* (whom I collectively refer to throughout this dissertation as “exponents”). These included the *mukhīs*, or heads, of the *ḍerās* above and *ṭaksāls*. The current heads of these institutions are Giānī Makkhan Singh Satto kī Gallīwale, Giānī Mohan Singh Bhindar Kalān, and Bābā Harnām Singh Mehtā. I also had opportunities to interview students or *sevādārs* in the *ṭaksāl* including Harminder Singh Goldie Satto Gallī and Rāgī Singh Satto Gallī; Jaspreet Singh Bhindrān and Sewādār Singh at Bhinder Kalān; and Gursevak Singh Kathāvācak Mehta and Rajasthānī Singh Mehtā at Mehtā Chowk.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Dates of interviews: 10 June, 13th and 14th June at Mehta; 10th, 12th, and 13th Bhāī Manī Singh; 20th, 24th, 27th June Bhindar Kalan

I also interviewed two prominent *kīrtan* exponents, *kīrtaniyās*, Bhāi Baldeep Singh and Bābā Gurcharan Singh at Delhi.<sup>6</sup> Both Bhāi Baldeep Singh and Bābā Gurcharan Singh are esteemed *kīrtan* exponents linked to the tradition of singing *kīrtan* by Bhāi Jāvala Singh (1872-1952) located in the *ḍerā* at village Sekhvā. This tradition relies on the exposition of *kīrtan* by Gurū Gobind Singh.

*Sabd-kīrtan-kathā* formed a critical nexus about the *sākhīs* during my interviews. My goal was to access these exponents' memories of the system of learning in which they were engaged while also prompting them to consider how and why their practice was distinctly narrower than the learning of earlier generations of exponents. Therefore, I sought their contemporary experience of events and the living memory of previous masters of *kathā* performance.

My dialogues with these exponents included five main questions: 1) What is *kathā*? 2) How is it related to *kīrtan* and *sabd*? 3) What did they understand by *janamsākhī* and *sākhī*? 4) How were *sākhīs* related to *kathā*? 5) What is *kathā* compared to *pracār* (preaching) and *viākhīā*? The first two questions were meant to establish how the interviewees understood the relationship between these notions regarding practice and performance. I could then ask if *kathā* and *sākhīs* were related in the way that they were taught to do *kathā*. The answer was often connected to distinguishing *kathā* as distinct from *pracār* or *viākhīā*.

While conducting these interviews, it became apparent that the contemporary notion of *kathā* associated with preaching or giving a type of sermon reflected an uninterrupted tradition beginning at Damdamā Sāhib, while also reflecting a notion adapted to historical contingencies

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<sup>6</sup> I spoke with Bhai Baldeep Singh regularly for several months while conducting archival work in Delhi. My research was a regular focus of discussion and I benefitted greatly from his generosity and breadth of knowledge. However, I did have occasion to record our conversations specifically on 11th May, 20th April, 19th June. I interviewed Bābā Gurcharan Singh on 13th April and 20th April, 2013

like colonialism and the modern instrumentalization of religion. This missionizing *kathā* has come to the forefront during the latter half of the twentieth century. My interviewees often describe it as egocentric speech. It was not considered to reflect the ontological language need to create a favorable *kathā* – a form of decentered speech extending from *sabds* of SGGS.

## 2.2 Damdamā Sāhib: *Kathā* as Knowledge Practice

This section outlines early knowledge practices as well as the more recent memories of my interlocutors in centers of Sikh learning. These interviews show the sophistication and intellectual engagement needed to produce *janamsākhīs* and their *sākhī* literature. Exponents were aware of not only aesthetic theories but critical engaged dominant schools of thought as well as their peers. They helped develop a distinct epistemology for Oneness in Panjābī and later Braj. Many were also familiar with Persian, Braj, Arabic, and Sanskrit. They interspersed these in their texts and translated seminal works into Panjābī.

In January of 1706 at a small remove from Sābo kī Talwandī and in proximity to the area's sole source of water, Gurū Gobind Singh—the tenth and final human Gurū—erected a large dais from which the contemporary site of Damdāmā Sāhib takes its name. This site is thought of as a place of respite for the Gurū, who stopped after successive and calamitous battles with the Mughal army in 1704 and 1705.<sup>7</sup>

During his residence of just over a year in the region, Gurū Gobind Singh engaged in

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<sup>7</sup> These battles include the siege of Anandpur Fort in late 1704, a battle on the banks of the Sara river in early 1705, and another at Chamkaur following quickly thereafter. The Gurū and his army were scattered and wandered itinerantly between areas that were loyal to the Gurūs, often residing with prominent Sikhs in remote areas. The Gurūs whereabouts were eventually discovered in late 1705, the Battle of Muktsar was fought in an area known as Khidrān. This region was renamed Muktsar by Ranjit Singh in the nineteenth-century and it is from here that Gurū Gobind Singh left for Sabo ki Talwandi. Hari Ram Gupta, *History of the Sikhs, Volume One: The Sikh Gurus, 1469-1708* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1973; repr., 1984); Trilochan Singh, *A Brief Life Sketch of Guru Gobind Singh* (Delhi: Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, 1968).

several significant projects, including the second major attempt to test Sikhs' commitment to him by imploring them to join his Khālsā. Secondly, the Gurū Granth Sāhib's contemporary contents and structure were shaped at Damdamā Sāhib. Lastly, while incorporating the changes to the SGGS, Gurū Gobind Singh gave an exhaustive *kathā*, or explanation, of the entire granth to a group of loyal Sikhs. For these reasons, Damdamā Sāhib represents a central site for contemporary Sikh memory. During my visit in 2013, the prominence given to loyalty to the Gurū, the creation of the contemporary SGGS, and to an authoritative explanation of the granth to coincide with its latest iteration is written on signage at Damdamā Sāhib.

Damdamā Sāhib marks a contingent moment for reinvigorating the Sikh textual landscape by reopening and expanding the tradition's central text. Gurū Gobind Singh incorporated Gurū Tegh Bahādur's *saloks* into the Ādi Granth and possibly added one of his own.<sup>8</sup> He also adapted the notation system of the rāgs, making it difficult for rival claimants to alter the scripture. However, one of the costs of evading the Mughal forces had been the loss of the Gurū's library and supplies. A site for the manufacturing of paper and reed pens was created, where today the contemporary Gurdwārā Likhansar sits. Bhāi Manī Singh acted as amanuensis for the project, while Bābā Deep Singh ensured a steady supply of paper and pens. Over a period of nine months, nine days, nine hours and nine minutes, the Gurū sat with Bhāi Manī Singh and Bābā Deep Singh reciting the Gurū Granth line by line after completing the morning litany and *nam-simran*. They concluded writing just before the evening prayer.

The reopening of the scripture can be thought of as a strategic move on the part of the

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<sup>8</sup> While contemporary print editions do not clearly distinguish this salok as written by Gurū Gobind Singh, there are extant manuscripts which show it as being the tenth gurū's by using the demarcation, 'mahalla 10'. This salok comes near the end of Gurū Tegh Bahadur's saloks -salok 54, in *Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib*, page 1429: ਬਲੁ ਹੋਆ ਬੰਧਨ ਛੁਟੇ ਸਭ ਕਿਛੁ ਹੋਤ ਉਪਾਇ॥ ਨਾਨਕ ਸਭ ਕਿਛੁ ਤੁਮਰੈ ਰਾਬ ਮੈ ਤੁਮ ਹੀ ਹੋਤ ਸਹਾਇ॥੫੪॥

*Through strength, the shackles have broken, all exists through exertion. Nānak states, all is in your hands and exists by leaning upon you.*

last Gurū, who by this point may well have been trying to stem the increasing factionalism within the panth. By the nineteenth-century, there were increasing concerns about possible usages of Nānak's *takhallus* by rival claimants to legitimize their writings during the Gurū Period: rivals tried to claim their writings were authentic works by Gurū Nānak and not simply uses of his nom de plume. Secondary texts like the *janamsākhī* were coopted to obscure or ambiguate the teachings of Gurū Nānak.<sup>9</sup> Popular accounts recount that Gurū Gobind Singh, out of necessity, recited the entire Ādi Granth from memory due to his inability to acquire the Ādi Granth manuscript from Dhīr Māl.<sup>10</sup>

The forty-eight Singhs who attended the Gurū's *kathā* are said to have greatly improved their understanding of the Gurū's teachings from listening to Gobind Singh's *kathā* and are remembered as *brhamgiānīs*. Bhāi Manī Singh was instructed to take a group of Singhs to Amritsar to establish a *taksāl*, or institution, at Harmandar Sāhib to perpetuate the Gurū's *kathā*. Bābā Deep Singh remained at Damdamā Sāhib, where he also continued to perpetuate the tradition of *kathā* while making copies of the new granth and engaging in solitary meditation through *nām-simran* (meditation/recitative mention of names for Oneness). Even today, this historic site retains several copies of the *granth*s prepared by Bābā Deep Singh, including one in the Perso-Arabic script. Manī Singh was a knowledgeable intellectual and *gurmukh* who retook

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<sup>9</sup> This was a concern amongst intellectuals in the Panjāb region from as early as the eleventh-century when Dātā Alī Hujwīrī complained about two of his earlier writings being stolen and circulated under the name of a different author. This indicates that the idea of authorless texts representing a pious ideal in South Asia are over-stated. Moreover, questions about retaining a sense of authorship was not only significant to the Sikh tradition but was a more general phenomenon in the region from well before the Gurū Period. 'Alī ibn 'Uṣmān Hujvīrī, *Kashf Al-Mahjūb* (1957).

<sup>10</sup> The Gurū may have made attempts at collecting the older renditions of the Granth that were circulating, and as such could have had some of these versions with him to compare the differences—not altogether dissimilar from the process which Gurū Arjan is said to have undertaken when writing the original Ādi Granth. Whether Gurū Gobind Singh examined some or all of the extant editions of the Gurū Granth available at the time, and whatever he may have seen in terms of differences in the versions, the tradition typically recounts that the Gurū recited the entire Gurū Granth from memory as a reflection of the factionalism and fetishizing of relics during the late Gurū Period.

the Harmandar Sahib complex and established a site to train students to perpetuate the Damdamā *kathā*.<sup>11</sup>

The remaining witnesses of the Gurū's *kathā* roamed across the network of *sangats* in and beyond Panjāb perpetuating this *kathā*.<sup>12</sup> Sikhs came to the sites established by these *jathās*, and, after getting initiated to the Khalsa, engaged in a curriculum that began with memorizing the SGGS, learning important exegetical works, and familiarizing themselves with the performative style of expanding *gurbānī* with the sequential use of *kīrtan* and *kathā*. They also trained in martial arts and guerilla tactics. Upon completion of their training, these Singhs were sent out in small mobile contingents (*jathās*) to participate at the local *sangat* level.

Some of the system of training inaugurated during this period continues today. During my research in 2013, I spoke to two *kathāvācaks*, Harminder Singh Goldie and Bhāi Rāgī Singh, at Satto Kī Gallī near Amritsar; they related changes taking place that affected *derās*' and *taksāls*' ability to remain functional and fecund. Similarly, several of the resident students and *sevādārs* at the *taksāl* at Bhindrān related to me how, beginning in the late 1970s, Bābā Mohan started reducing the number of students in residence. I was told that from hundreds the number had been reduced to only a smattering of loyal *sevādārs* (performers of *sevā*, or service). They discussed the political violence that swept through Panjāb during those same decades.

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<sup>11</sup> The *Giānratnāvalī*, discussed in the previous chapter, attributes Manī Singh as its author; this unique work intertextually combines the *sākhīs* about Nānak with *sabds* from the SGGS, while also commenting upon portions from Bhāi Gurdas's first and eleventh *vārs*, which refer to Nānak. This work led to the expansion of *sākhīs* and new commentaries on secondary authors like Bhāi Gurdas. Jasbir Singh Sabara, *Giana Ratanawali: Janamasākhī Srī Gurū Nānaka Dewa Jī: Sampādana Ate Pāṭha-Ālocana* (Amritasara: Gurū Nānaka Adhiaina Wībhāga, Gurū Nānaka Dewa Yūnīwarasiṭī, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> Their travel created a migratory pattern that took about a year to move through: from the deccan through the Northwestern parts of South Asia, eastward through the Kangrā Hills and Kashmīr, through Assam toward Bengal. On the return trajectory, this route moved through Delhi, Agra, Hyderabad, and Madras eventually returning to Nanded in Maharashtra. The *taksāls* at Damdamā Sāhib and Harmandar Sāhib became primary institutions for learning and producing literature following the earlier attempts by Gurū Gobind Singh in his courts at Paonta and Anandpur. Other institutions were also established on this model, such as the college (*taksāl*) at Patna that Charles Wilkins visited.

However, Bābā Mohan himself stated it differently: he told me that the way that knowledge was passed down had changed and that as a result, people were increasingly distanced from the sources of their beginnings (*vidiā badal gāi purātan vidiā hor sī lok muddh ton dūr hor gae*). He explained that the *purātan vidiā* (old learning) developed via a deep reading and interpretive mechanism that favored multiplicity while retaining oneness through that multiplicity. There were some caretakers of this method, which included Udāsīs and Nirmalās, who is today seen as heterodox. Knowledge of several languages, including training in classical languages like Sanskrit and Arabic; knowledge of philosophy, other religious texts, and traditions; and training in martial arts, formerly cultivated at places like these *derās*, had waned within about a generation. This only made more dramatic the changes occurring in how knowledge practices were passed down: the singularity of meaning propounded in modern *kathā* was connected to the policing of hermeneutic practices by newer institutions.

This change, then, reduced and simplified the meaning of *sabd*. Bhāi Baldeep Singh and Bhāi Gurcharan, the prominent *kīrtaniyās* mentioned previously, explained witnessing a similar reduction with *kīrtan*. Bhāi Gurcharan told me that places like Sekhvā and Giṛwiṛī gave broad training in all the arts expounded by the Sikh Gurūs; it was not uncommon to have *kīrtaniyās* who were also excellent *kathāvācaks*. Sekhvā and Giṛwiṛī were both prominent places for traditional learning practices of *kīrtan*, *kathā*, and a battery of textual knowledge to enhance both art forms.<sup>13</sup>

Alongside Bhāi Javālā Singh, the Nirmalas at the Sekhvā *derā* produced Giānī Badan Singh, who was selected to write one of the earliest complete commentaries of the SGGS, largely understood as a response to Trumpp’s attempt in 1877. Giānī Badan Singh had

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<sup>13</sup> Interview Bhāi Gurcharan Singh also see Javala Singh in Harbans Singh, *The Encyclopaedia of Sikhism* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1992).

completed a draft by 1883, but it took two decades of editing by a committee of other prominent exponents before the work was published.<sup>14</sup> Sekhvā and Gīrwīrī are amongst important sites in villages or on the outskirts of large urban centers where an assortment of intellectuals trained in a variety of modes of knowledge, all deeply immersed in readings of SGGS. These places formed respites for the itinerant modes of teaching, singing, and expounding that became sedentary in the modern period.

The simplification and movement away from these beginnings can be seen in discussions regarding the contemporary experience of students at *ṭaksāls*. Bhāi Manī Singh's *ṭaksāl* was a case in point: Rāgī Singh recounted how the *ṭaksāl*, which was originally located within the Harmandar Sāhib complex, moved to Satto Kī Gallī shortly after the consolidation of the Sikh religious organization under the SGPC. Once the *ṭaksāl* moved, numbers initially remained high, but the families that had consistently attended gradually diminished. Harminder Singh Goldie also mentioned this change, describing how it had affected the teaching aspect of the *ṭaksāl*: at the time of my visit, there were only around fifty students who lived at the *ṭaksāl*. Harminder Singh was unwilling to discuss the impact of the Gurdwārā Act of 1925 while being recorded, but we did discuss the changes off the record; the status of the *ṭaksāl* was complicated by its association with political machinations after Operation Blue Star.

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<sup>14</sup> Arvind Singh Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Harjot Singh Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994); Singh.





Figure 2.1 Interviewing Harminder Singh Goldie at Bhāi Manī *Taksāl*, Satto Kī Gallī

Teaching at the *taksāl* began with the *gurmukhī* alphabet and pronunciation, referred to as the *muharnī*. The foundation of all teaching was undoubtedly the SGGS—just as Bhāi Baldeep Singh had also mentioned about training in *kīrtan*. As Gursevak Singh Mehtā described, the *shuddh santhya*, or correct teaching, began with the *nitnem bānī*, which are *sabds* that form the daily litany or practice of *nām-simran*. Students then learned a *gūṭkā* called *Panj Granthīs*, which include five important *sabds*: *jappī*, *so dar*, *so purakh*, *āsā dī vār*, and *anand sāhib*.<sup>15</sup> After the *Panj Granthīs*, students progress to another two collections of *sabd* called *baī vārān* and *bhagat bānī*. The entire process of learning took about two years.

Only after this immersion in *sabd* were students directed to learn other texts like the

<sup>15</sup> See Panj Granthī entry in Singh.

*Dasam Granth; Sarbloh Granth; Gur Pratāp Sūraj Granth* and *Nānak Prakāsh* by Bhāi Santokh Singh; and the works of Bhāi Gurdas. *Kathā* is taught as it is practiced. Students who are keen to learn the *kathā* will take out a *pothī* of the SGGS and follow the *kathā* in conjunction with the *sabd*, reciting along with familiar sections. Harminder Singh explained that the teaching included reading the *pothi* out loud in the presence of the exponent of *kathā*, or *mukhī* (*nāl dī nāl parhnā te nāl dī nāl santhiā hundī jāndī hai*). The *kathā* taught was a version of that given by Gurū Gobind Singh at Damdamā Sāhib.

*Sākhīs* and *janamsākhī* are an integral part of this learning: they provide the student with an instance when the *sabd* was spoken, and often include why it was said, to whom, and where. This contextual information also forms a large part of the structure of any *janamsākhī*. More than representing a historical moment—although the text may also function historically—the *janamsākhī* mimics the successful utterance of *akath-kathā*—the unsayable saying—that Gurū Nānak had initially provided.

The *janamsākhī* represents a testimony to the possible success of this attempt, or *yatan*. This attempt is not ours but is removed from the self through its achievement in the story of an Other—hence the value placed on the third-person narration of events in the *janamsākhīs*. As Gursevak Singh expressed it, “*Kathā* is for those beginning on the way. Life is made human through *kathā*; *kathā* is the essence of *sabd*” (*kathā jo rāh vic shurū ne insān de jīvan kathā sun ke bandā hai...kathā sabd ras hai*). Learning the *sabd* is learning *kathā*, and the essence of this learning consists of a dialogic mode of being human that is dislocated from the self in the *sākhī*'s testimony.

### 2.3 *Kathā dī Parpātī*: Composition and Performance of *Kathā*

The system of *kathā* re-established by Gurū Gobind Singh in 1706 consisted of itinerant, armed bands who, having heard the Gurū give *kathā* as his amanuenses recorded the Sri Gurū Granth Sāhib, were dispersed to local *sangats* to provide corrective discourses (*sudhār/svār*).<sup>16</sup> This dispersal happened during a contingent moment of divisiveness. These itinerant Khālsā *jathās* remained with a *sangat* for a brief period before moving on to other locales. However, there is nothing in the existing historical accounts from this period tells us what the Gurū's *kathā* was in term of form or function. Due to difficulties faced by secular scholars and colonial administrators in accessing traditional exponents, *kathā dī parpātī* remains unknown outside of the exponents using it. In what follows, I present the results of my oral history interviews regarding the system of learning and knowledge that underlies *kathā* performance.<sup>17</sup>

#### **Composition**

In order to perform a highly effective *kathā*, the *kathāvācak* should incorporate five separate elements into the creation of a *kathā*: 1) the *uthānikā*, or the situatedness of the hymn; 2) the *sabdārtha*, also called the *sabd bhāvā* or the meaning of individual words from the *sabd*; 3) the *parmān*, or references, supporting statements, assertions, and examples; 4) the *drishtānt*, or similes and metaphors; and 5) the *samūchā bhāv*, or the comprehensive meaning inherent in the *sabd*.<sup>18</sup> Together, these elements create an effective performance as well as a lucid account of the *sabd* to be expanded. These elements are integrated imperceptibly into a

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<sup>16</sup> Explain with examples from the Chaupa Singh rahitnama; Gursevak Singh also mentions *jathā tuṭṭke caldī si*.

<sup>17</sup> This section represents original research that does not appear elsewhere in the existing scholarly literature. Because this research remains largely unexplored and represents an initial foray into the field of *kathā* performance, the information given below provides merely an overview. Future research could include more in-depth engagement with this material, especially through specific examples to illustrate each point; that level of specificity is unfortunately outside the scope of the present dissertation.

<sup>18</sup> This was described to me by Bhāī Nishān Singh Nāmdhārī at his residence.

*kathā* without the awareness of most members of the Sikh *sangat*, except for those familiar with the learning provided at these institutions. Furthermore, the elements need not proceed from one another in any teleological order but need only revolve around and elaborate the *sabd*, which must always remain at the center of the *kathā*. When any one of these elements is insufficiently incorporated into the *kathā*, the *kathāvācak*'s ability to increase his listeners' awareness of the *sabd*'s meaning diminishes drastically. Together, these elements provide the basic armature for the creation of any *kathā*.

The *uthānikā* and the *parmān* together enable the *kathāvācak* to develop a backdrop or context that, in most instances, is familiar to the members of the Sikh *sangat*. The *kīrtan* also provides a context by creating a certain atmosphere (*mahaul*). By building their comments upon a familiar base, *kathāvācaks* enhance the *sangat*'s degree of understanding, even for those members largely unfamiliar with *sabd gurbānī*. Often the *kathāvācak* weaves the *uthānikā* and the *parmān* together. By supporting one another, they provide the foundations for the audience's understanding of a *sabd*.

Providing what we have called the situatedness of the *sabd*, the *uthānikā* refers to the issue or matter to which the *kathāvācak* understands the *sabd* to be related—or to which they feel the *sabd* speaks most directly. It can also refer to the *kathāvācak*'s situatedness through recognizing his own geopolitical and sociocultural position in the present, which he deploys to more effectively enhance the *sabd*.

The *parmān*, on the other hand, are drawn mainly from a host of pre-existing anecdotes or tales, which could broadly be understood as historic and folkloric. At their most basic level, they include stories that developed within the tradition regarding the individual *gurūs*, beginning with Gurū Nānak and ending with Gurū Gobind Singh. However, they also

encompass a whole host of stories regarding virtuous acts (*sākhī* or *shādā*) conducted by prominent members of Sikh *sangats* or those initiates who had achieved great learning or attained the innermost circle of the Gurū's court. These stories can include actual acts of martyrdom (*shahīdī*) and may be drawn from historical events. Whatever the source of the example, the creativity of the *kathāvācak* occurs through taking the example as a testament to the notion of Oneness extolled by the Gurūs and then connecting it to the meaning of the *sabd*.

Beyond this, and depending on the *kathāvācak*'s learning and proclivity, the *parmān* can cut across a vast terrain of religious, philosophical, and poetic literature, including the Vedas, the Qur'ān, and the Torah, as well as the Upanishads, the Purānās, the poetry of prominent *faqīrs*, and even modern short stories or novels. Furthermore, as appropriate circumstances, events, or narratives develop, the *kathāvācak* may also increase the number of event-based *parmāns*. The judicious and appropriate selection of *parmān* is essential to an effective *kathā*, while the active selection of these examples remains within the sovereign purview of the *kathāvācak*; this act of selection is largely predicated upon the responsibility and wisdom of the *kathāvācak*, as political and sociocultural reverberations can proceed from the promulgation of meanings within a *sabd* during *kathā*.

Depth and breadth of knowledge regarding which literature or which historical or personal life events can apply to a particular *sabd* from the SGGS directly bears upon how the *kathāvācak* situates his *kathā*. Using this knowledge, the *kathāvācak* imagines scenarios regarding when, how, and to whom the *sabd* was stated. These acts of discernment may give rise to articulations that appear as narrative events but are not necessarily meant to represent history—rather, these events facilitate the explanation of a *sabd* in the absence of established

antecedents. Creative inventing of *parmān* can include imagining the circumstances wherein the *sabd* came to the Gurū, for what purpose it may have been stated, and under what conditions it came to be expressed. The greater engagement with imagination through which the *kathāvācak* arrives at the *parmān*, the greater his store of resources for creating effective *kathā*.

The *parmān* most clearly establishes the connection between (janam)sākhīs and *kathā*: the imaginative creation of a context for *sabd* allows for a hermeneutic approach to the SGGS via narrative. Just as the success of any given *kathā* relies on the knowledge and skill of the *kathāvācak* in illustrating the *sabd*, each sākhī compilation, as Bhadour has suggested, also represents the individual attempt of its author to interpret the SGGS uniquely through the imagined context and philosophical allusions established therein.<sup>19</sup>

To return to the relationship between *kathā* and *sabd*, then, the *sabdārtha* is the lexical economy that presents itself within the composition of any *sabd*; as such it represents a system through which words are suffused with meaning, but only temporarily by the *kathāvācak* for the *kathā*. At this level of treatment, the *kathāvācak* delves into possible, multiple, and often equivocal meanings implicit within the *sabd*—this allows the *kathāvācak* to momentarily capture an interpretation to bring forth an expansive reading of the *sabd* while still keeping other plausible interpretations of the *sabd* available. In this way, the *sabdārtha* repeatedly interrogates a *sabd* by asking where meaning is or might be located, to connect to the other aspects of the system of *kathā*. As such, the *sabdārtha* is mainly an exercise in repeated re-investiture of meaning by questioning where meaning could be located within the *sabd*.

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<sup>19</sup> Attar Singh Bhadour, *Sakhee Book, or the Description of Guuru Gobind Singh's Religion and Doctrines* (Benares: Medical Hall Press, 1873); *The Travels of Guru Tegh Bahadur and Gobind Singh Translated from the Original Gurmukhi* (Lahore: Indian Public Opinion Press, 1876).

*Sabdārthā* includes engagement at the level of morphemes and lexemes; its phraseology and syntax; and semantic and semiotic aspects of the hymn. This exercise both creates new meaning and retains old meanings that have been passed down; indeed, the passing on of tradition is understood as providing the seeds of the new invention. Both learning and creation are considered desirable and legitimate. However, when one is disingenuous with the source of his interpretation – as happens on occasion when a claim is made for an invented meaning by using the authority of tradition, or when individuals attempt to create a purely self-willed, or egocentric, hermeneutic exercise out of *sabdic* interpretation—disagreements and rifts occur.

Nonetheless, once trained and given sanction from the head of the *ḍerā* or *ṭaksāl* to perform *kathā*, the *kathāvācak* retains a large degree of autonomy in the creation of his interpretations. *Kathāvācaks* draw upon the equivocality contained within many *sabds* at the nominal, syntactic, and semantic levels. By asking again the question of where to locate meaning within a work—a phrase, a hemistich, a verse—the *kathāvācak* can alter the locus of meaning and exploit another manner of opening meaning from within the *sabd*.<sup>20</sup>

This ability to locate and engage different aspects of meanings within the *sabd* through *sabdārthā* is important for the development and use of the *dristānt*. *Kathā* routinely features similies, metaphor, and analogies. The *dristānt* is meant to be illustrative and to draw upon well-established frames or paradigms in order to draw the listener into the *kathā*; in doing so, it seeks to challenge the host of preconceived ideas that people carry with them into a gathering

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<sup>20</sup> A similar connotation of performance is given by Michael Nijhawan in relation to contemporary Dhāḍī performances. See Virinder Kalra and Michael Nijhawan, "Cultural, Linguistic, and Political Translations: Dhadi 'Urban' Music," *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory* 3, no. 1 (2007); Michael Nijhawan, "From Divine Bliss to Ardent Passion: Exploring Sikh Religious Aesthetics through the Dhadi Genre," *History of Religions* 42, no. 4 (2003); *Dhadi Darbar : Religion, Violence, and the Performance of Sikh History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

of the *sangat* by enabling them to visualize and struggle with the subtle aspects of the *sabd*. An adept *kathāvācak* can facilitate this intellectual and affective engagement in listeners through a simple feeling of awe or wonder.

Through *dristānt*, the *kathāvācak* creates or draws from preexisting similies, metonymies, significations, myths, legends, and symbols to opaquely derive the phenomenal core of a *sabd*, while also putting the ultimate meaning slightly beyond reach. To those more familiar with *kathā*, the *dristānt* are considered perspectival interpretations of single exponents, and thus any phenomenal interpretation put forward is not meant as a total explanation. *Dristānt* typically develops out of the *sabdārtha*; they are meant to relate to a sensual experience of the *kathā*. As they are largely illustrative, they imbricate upon the *uthānikā*. The imbrications affect the manner in which the *kathāvācak* imagines possible ways to situate the *sabd* and develop or nuance the assertions made or examples given through the *parmān*.

These imbrications of the previous four aspects enable me to explain the fifth aspect, *samucābhāv*, or broad oeuvre. In creating the *kathā*, the *kathāvācak* incorporates and intersperses elements in his explication that border on a type of cathartic release that engages the entire consciousness of the *sangat*'s listeners to instigate the mental or cognitive affection necessary to begin an engagement with *gurbānī* found in the SGGS. The *samucābhāv* is the aspect most fully situated in presentness, and it is also least within the grasp of the *kathāvācak*'s artistry.

It is often the case that *bhāv* is discussed in the context of emotions or the emotive routes enabled through the singing of *gurbānī* during the performance of *kīrtan* and as such is limited to the scope of *rāg* and *rasa*. These explanations gloss the notion of imbuing notes,



poetry, or narrative with certain hues of existents implicit in the idea of *rāg* to a simplified notion of emotive release or engagement.<sup>21</sup> If understood as representing an emotive aesthetic, the notion of *bhāv* risks becoming interiorized and then operates within a binary distinction between emotion and reason.

For the *kathāvācak*, the *samucābhāv* is meant to address the larger totality of the *sabd*'s meanings by capitalizing on the *sangat*'s sense of wonder (*vismāḍ*). As such, the *samucābhāv* typically addresses ethical aspects drawn out of an interpretation of the *sabd* and therefore addresses the *sangat*'s concerns regarding conduct. The *samūchābhāv* is an essential component for responsible *kathā* because it arises from the mingling of *sangat* with *sabd* and *kathā*. This giving is meant to stay with members of the *sangat* as they depart, closing the space for the gathering. Through the *samucābhāv*, the *kathāvācak* seeks to challenge the drive toward interiority by providing subtle signals regarding active engagement in living humanely and justly. The individual listener's sensibility—whether over time or instantaneously—gets realigned, guided, and redirected toward increasing an awareness of the principles of *gurbānī* that are focused on the teachings of Oneness.

### ***Kathā dī Parpāṭī (The System of Kathā)***

Sikhs who attend the daily morning service experience the nexus of *gurbānī/sabd*, *kīrtan*, and *kathā*; in this sense, *kathā* is part of living, changing tradition. Indeed, this chapter tracks the changes reflected in today's lived tradition as opposed to the traces discernible from

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<sup>21</sup> The emotive and affective principles of *rāga* may not be reflected in the Sikh tradition as is typically described. The *rāga* is not the only ordering principle of the *Srī Gurū Granth* and it is not necessarily meant to connect listeners to mystic experience. For cautionary notes regarding this see Gurinder Singh Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Pashaura Singh, *The Guru Granth Sahib: Canon, Meaning and Authority* (New Delhi ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

the early modern manuscript tradition. During my oral history interviews, *kathā* was described to me largely in two ways, which differ mostly about how *kathā* is situated in the broader system of Sikh praxis. Before discussing the interviews in more detail, I will here describe the system called *kathā dī parpāṭī*, or “the system of *kathā*.” My description of this system here stems from my interviews with Sikh exponents who receive training and operate in the contemporary institutions of knowledge production that trace their lineage to Gurū Nānak’s time.

*Kathā* is essential to daily praxis. Although often deemphasized in scholarly studies, daily Sikh praxis involves ablutions (*isnān*, or *panj isnānān*), recalling the names (*nām-simran*), reciting a litany of *sabds* (*nitnem*), and listening to *kīrtan* and *kathā*.<sup>22</sup> The first three are typically performed individually, but many are done in groups, whereas *kīrtan* and *kathā* are listened to in the group setting of the *sangat*. From here, the gathered Sikhs prepare and eat a meal together (*langar*). This entire process is repeated from three to five times daily in accordance to the watches (*pehar* or *velā*) of the day. My interviewees repeatedly emphasized that *kathā* and *kīrtan* work together as an elaborate methodical technique for explaining *sabds* from the SGGS; together, they generate in the listener a reflective approach toward the word (*sabd*) through restraint of the self-conscious ego.

When asked to describe what *kathā* was and how it was related to *kīrtan* and *gurbānī*, I was almost invariably told about a metaphorical schema with direct reference from *Srī Gurpratāp Sāraj Granth*, authored by Bhāi Santokh Singh in 1843. In what follows, I give an account of this schematization based on my dialogues with trained *kathāvācaks* at Bhainī Sāhib, Mehtā Chowk, Bhindar Kalān, and the Akāl Takht. The schematization is based on a

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<sup>22</sup> See *kīrtan* entry in Singh.

popular *sākhī* about Gurū Arjan that references the practice of *kathā*—again demonstrating the imbrication of these two genres. In this *sākhī*, a Sikh by the name of Bhāi Bairārhī asked Gurū Arjan once about why it is considered beneficial to daily recite *sabd* (*nitnem*) and listen to *kīrtan* and *kathā* in the *sangat*. He asked what the difference between them was and why it was that they all needed to be done. Gurū Arjan explained each aspect through the use of a metaphor; Bhāi Santokh Singh refers to this explanation, which I summarize as follows.

In the *sākhī*, Gurū Arjan refers to *nitnem* as *āpne khū dī khetī*. In using the idiomatic phrase *āpne khū dī khetī*, farming with the use of one’s will, Bhai Santokh Singh signals the importance of daily recitation. Until quite recently, one of the most effective methods of irrigation in much of Northwestern South Asia was using the Persian Wheel (*rāhat*) which uses an animal, typically oxen or camels, to turn a wheel that carries up water from a well as it rotates. Small buckets attached to the wheel deposit the water in a tank that drains into small passageways for the water to travel toward the fields. In this manner, life-giving water spreads through the fields and nourishes the seedlings.

This proverbial saying reflects an idea of sovereign independence, but the metaphor also reflects the interconnections required for agriculture in Panjāb. At the surface, this metaphor gives the appearance of an independent act of worship or devotion, as a practice for self-development or interior meditation through the *ātmān*. To those familiar with the rhythms of traditional agriculture, however, this proverb describes a system in the villages of sharing and alternating irrigation times from wells that were shared. The *āpnā* (“one’s own”) here is not the person but the time accorded to use the irrigation system; farmers often relied on each other to carry the water and attach their bullox or camels to the well to raise the water. The timing of the irrigation was also crucial, with one of the times often being in the latter watches

of the night or pre-dawn. Given the general unavailability of water, farmers had to vigilantly ensure that they were accorded the most of their allotted time. Thus, a system of interdependence, exertion, and dependence on an effective mechanism to cultivate brings out some of the fullness of this first metaphor, which signals a system of interconnections and reliance in the practice of *nitnem*.<sup>23</sup>

This metaphor also appears in different *sākhīs* where Nānak restores a damaged field, has a discussion with his father about the distinct type of cultivation he has engaged, or when he enters the Ganga and then pours its water to sustain his parched fields.<sup>24</sup> This metaphor about the benefits of *nitnem* uses temporal and material referents to reveal that the efficaciousness of the Sikh system of practice within the *sangat* begins with an individual recitation of the daily litany. Chaupā Singh—author of a nineteenth-century code of comportment for Sikhs called a *rahitnāmā*—describes the need for isolation when reciting *sabd* before entering the *sangat*. The examples of Nānak’s practice of going to the water alone, and his teaching these practices describes this movement from isolation to interaction.<sup>25</sup>

To return to the *sākhī*, then, Gurū Arjan continues by referring to *kīrtan* through the metaphor of a *moledhār varash*, or a deluge of rain. My interviewees described how when such a deluge occurs in the parched plains of the Panjāb; the earth becomes hard and impenetrable so much so that at the onset of a *moledhār varash*, the rainwater simply skims the surface carrying off a layer of sediment along with it. *Kīrtan* involves singing *sabds* from the *Granth Sāhib* that are all cataloged according to a *rāga* structure; these *rāgas* are

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<sup>23</sup> Nitnem refers to the verses that Sikh, especially Khālsā Sikhs, would use for nām-simran. See Arvind-pal Singh Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Guides for the Perplexed (London ; New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); Singh.

<sup>24</sup> Rattan Singh Jaggi, *Dasama Grantha Dā Paurānīka Adhiaina* (1965); Surindar Singh Kohli, ed. *Janamsakhi Bhai Bala* (Chandigar: Punjab University Publication Bureau, 1975).

<sup>25</sup> W. H. McLeod, *The Chaupa Singh Rahit-Nama* (Dunedin, New Zealand: University of Otago Press, 1987).

associated with certain flavors (*rasa*) or emotions (*bhāv*).<sup>26</sup> *Kīrtan* typically is done during gatherings of the *sangat* and in *gurdwārās*, but it is also commonly done in Sikh homes. *Rāga* acts as the emotive and aesthetic carrier of *sabd* and enables the opening of subconscious channels of cognitive activity. This opening allows for conscious receptivity of direct experience.

However, contrary to the common understanding of *rāga*, this mechanism should not be thought of as pure affect. *Kīrtan*, on its own, has the potential to provide a type of intoxicating romanticism that strengthens the self-centering of a person and prevents the direct experience of attributive language. Without adequate preparation through practices like *nitnem*, the deluge of *kīrtan* is immersive to the extent of overwhelming an enrapt listener. In this case, *kīrtan* not only carries the listener away but, like a deluge of monsoon rain, leaves the unsettled surface debris scattered in unpredictable ways.

This metaphor does not suggest that *kīrtan* is superfluous; however, it does suggest that the listener engages in the refined art of focusing on both the expression itself *and* the manner of expression. This form of listening represents an artful engagement that has the potential for higher cognitive engagement by those initiated in *kīrtan*'s aesthetic language of modulating *sabd* through *rāga* and *rasa*. The affectivity of these components can lead to illusory experiences, and narcissistic tendencies in those do not have an appropriate level of preparedness. When such intoxication occurs, *kīrtan* loses its affectivity. For this reason, students learn to sing *kīrtan* as an affective means of referentiality between inner and outer

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<sup>26</sup> Alain Daniélou, *Northern Indian Music* (London: C. Johnson, 1949); Ranjit Singh Gila, *Adi Granth Paintings: Raga-Ragamala & Barah-Maha* (New Delhi: Aravali Books International, 2002); Singha Guranāma, *Sikh Musicology: Sri Guru Granth Sahib and Hymns of the Human Spirit* (New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers, Distributors, 2001); Richard Widdess, *The Rāgas of Early Indian Music: Modes, Melodies and Musical Notations from the Gupta Period to C.1250*, Oxford Monographs on Music (Oxford : New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1995).

linguistic expressions—as the call that begins and ends with the self. Understood in this way, we can re-envision the *moledhār varash* metaphor as signifying a type of cleansing similar to the actual ablutions members of the *sangat* would perform, which, when engaged in with the formation of intentionality toward the experience, can carry away surface level distractions.

However, the tendency to rapture and ecstatic states required a sobering chaser: *kathā*. This sobering *kathā* is akin to a *bundhebāndī varash*, or a gentle, light, enriching drizzle. It nourishes and enriches through its gentle continuity, allowing the drops to penetrate the parched ground gradually; one of my interviewees described it as being able to make the land *zarkhez*, or fruitful. The metaphorical aspects of this alteration of land from parched to fruitful was narrated in the *itihāsak kathā* of Bhāi Dilbhāg Singh at Damdamā Sāhib.

As mentioned above, Gurū Gobind Singh stopped at the present Damdamā site on his return from Anandpur because it was the sole source of water. Gurū Tegh Bahādur had supervised the creation of a *sarovar* close by to ensure that people had access to water. Upon completing the project, he told them that if they maintained the *sarovar*, they would reap continual harvests. The people, however, neglected the tank, and it fell into disrepair. By the time Gurū Gobind Singh came, the land was dry and parched. He re-established the *sarovar* by supervising its cleaning and repair. Having completed this renovation, he exhorted the people to maintain the tank, as it would provide them with a great harvest of whatever crop they planted. Bhāi Dilbhag recounted how since then, the people had maintained the tank, and Sabo kī Talwandī has become renowned for its grapes.

*Kathā* connects the conscious mind and the subconscious by using metaphorical language and creativity. It has the potential to transform conscious awareness of Oneness through the *sabd*. Through careful and perspicacious performance or reception, one can hear

a *sabd* and then intuit the intent through which it was written. Through this perspicacious *kathā*, even those listening to the performance of the *kathāvācak* experience an enhancement in their degree of awareness of the *sabd*; from novitiates to exemplars, all members of the *sangat* can enjoy the *sabd*'s nuances and become motivated to ensconce themselves in the rigor of Sikh praxis.

The totality of this metaphorical schema reveals a broader view of the system that I described earlier as practiced by Nānak as well as his passing on this practice along with the written *sabd*. This schema leads participant practitioners in the Sikh *sangat* toward increased awareness of Oneness by inculcating in them an ever-increasing ability for immersion into *sabd* through *nām*. Through the three-fold mechanism of reciting *nitnem*, listening to *kīrtan*, and then to *kathā*, an immersive metaphorical experience opens consciousness toward receptivity of its metaphorical embodiment—one that is and is not present—through linguistic formations. Ultimately, the goal of these three forms of language and recitative speech is to open the listener to non-oppositional thought, and from there to ethical action toward fellow human beings.

During my discussions with him, Bhāi Gurcharan Singh Rāgī explained that the practice of *nitnem* and *kīrtan* should create a *mahaul*, or atmosphere, increasing the degree of awareness such that at some point and for certain individuals the continual practice would result in permanent knowledge of the nonexistent existence signaled by Oneness. This realization in the listener would not be a cognitive realization, but rather a form of awareness that permeates every action, thereby attesting to the efficacy of the exponent's teaching. When the thought of about *nitnem* and *kīrtan*, the importance of *kathā* lies in its ability to consistently enable the meeting or connecting (*lagan*, or *samelan*) of *sabd gurbānī*. It should

be emphasized that both *kīrtan* and *kathā* be inherently creative and imaginative (*kalpanak*) arts that expand upon *sabd*. Taken together the three aspects engage Sikhs and *sangat* at multiple levels of cognitive linguistic experience thereby immersing them in a living experiential and intellectual terrain of writing/speech.

As an immersive experience, then, *kathā* has two goals: first, to induce a psychosomatic effect amongst the members of the Sikh *sangat* to prepare and enable an increasingly deep understanding of *sabds* from the SGGS. Secondly, to employ *kathā* to complete a kind of feedback loop that makes *nitnem* and *kīrtan* more elucidating for members of the *sangat*. Described in this way, these three complementary forms of praxis integrate to provide a modulated entrance into *sabds* from the SGGS; they build upon the system of preparation that begins with bathing and formulation of intentionality (*isnān*) that allows for an unfolding awakening.

*Kathā* involves using both a central set of core texts as well as a myriad of secondary texts as outgrowths of the exposition given by Gurū Gobind Singh at Damdamā Sāhib; indeed, before even beginning training to become a *kathāvācak*, students were required to demonstrate extensive familiarity with both the SGGS and other texts. Therefore, the performance of *kathā* does not represent a charismatic act or a mystical turn inwards; rather, *kathā* is a learned and systematic method of expanding upon *sabds* from the SGGS. However, given that *kathā* is inherently creative and imaginative, it also includes a stock of infinitely expandable tales and trajectories that only require that the exponent remain within the general sphere of any *sabd*. In this sense, the *kathā* should remain within the scope of the exposition but also lend itself to explaining the technique of living (*jīvan shailī*) by Oneness.

In my interviews at *ḍerā* Bhaini Sāhib, Giānī Nishan Singh and his student Kamāl



Singh explained that the transformative aspects of *kathā* formed crucial parts of the performance.<sup>27</sup> Through the creative and metaphorical use of language, *kathā* has the potential to enable a non-oppositional view of humanity in the world. When properly engaged, any *sabd* can assist in the opening of such a view. Thus, *kathā* is a highly individualistic, intellectual, and stylized endeavor enacted through language and text, and meant to awaken in the receiver a possible form of the human that Nānak exemplified. However, the *kathāvācak* himself does not necessarily exemplify this type of enlightened humanity—rather he operates within his own intellectual and creative limits to evoke a life-altering understanding of *sabd* in his listeners. In this sense, the *sangat* is also subject to the limits of the *kathāvācak*. On the other hand, as we will see in my recounting of my interviews below, talented and traditionally trained *kathāvācaks* can move between “worldly,” commonplace speech, and a style of speaking that represents *akath-kathā*. I now turn to the different types of *kathā* that I encountered during my research.

#### 2.4 *Kathā* as Exegesis in the Twentieth Century

When one enters any modern *gurdwārā* for morning *kathā*, one will find the same thing: a *kīrtan* performance of *āsā dī vār*, followed by the daily *hukam*, or order. For the *hukam*, a *giānī* opens the SGGS to a random page and reads out the first verse of which his eyes happen to fall. This *hukam* is perhaps what colonial soldier-diplomats described as oracular aspects of the *granth*: it determines the central moral lesson for any given day, and remains central to how many Sikhs go about their daily routine. During the morning

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<sup>27</sup> I had started my time at Bhāīnī Sāhib by interviewing Bābā Udai Singh, the leader of the Namdhari, who was trained in *kīrtan*. He told me about the relationship of *kīrtan* and *kathā* but directed me to Bhāī Nishan Singh for more details.

recitation, a *giānī* melodically reads out the *hukam*, followed by a *kathā*, or explication of the verse, given by another person generally in a sobering and drawn out voice. However, this morning *kathā*—at least as I experienced it during my research in Panjāb—differs from the sort of *akath-kathā* that I believe demonstrates a relationship between *sākhīs*, *janamsākhī*, and *kathā*, and more closely resembles the type of missionizing *kathā* that I described in the introduction as formative of my understanding of *kathā* growing up in the diaspora.

### ***Pracār* as Theological *Kathā***

Take, for instance, my experience listening to morning *kathā* during my trip to Damdamā Sāhib in 2013. The *hukamnāmā* of Takht Srī Damdamā Sahib on June 9, 2013, was on *rāg dhanasārī mahalla 5* by Gurū Arjan, but began with *rāg todī mahalla 5*. It was read as follows:

*...satgurū ayo sarān tuhāri. milai sukh nām har sobhā, chintā lahai hamāri. Satnām vāhegurū Sāhib jī... Terā jan rām nām rang jagā. Ālas chijī gayā sabh tān te prītam sīo man lāgā. Rahāo. Jāh jāh pekho tāh nārāyān sagal ghāṭa mein tāgā.*

*Satgurū* comes and yours is the covering, receive the peaceful name, praise the One, thoughts disappear. Your devotee has awoken to the hue of the compassionate name. Laziness disappeared from my body, as the beloved entered my mind. Wherever you search, the lord is there. He abides in every home...<sup>28</sup>

Before turning to explain the *hukamnāmā*, the *kathāvacak*, Bhāi Jagtār Singh, emphasized Damdamā Sāhib’s historical importance as the fourth *takht* of the Khālsā panth (“*Khālsā panth de chauthē mahan takht*”) and its connection to the life of Gurū Gobind Singh. He then explained how the proceedings at the *takht* are conducted by the proper religious code (“*Sāhib jī kī maryāda*”); furthermore, he explained, the *kathā* would proceed in a traditional manner

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<sup>28</sup> *Todī mahalla 5*, Manmohan Singh, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib: English and Panjabi Translation* (Amritsar: Shromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, 1964). p. 713:2.16.47

uninterrupted (*larivār*) from when Gurū Gobind Singh gave his own *kathā* at this site.

Turning to directly address the *sangat*, Bhāi Jagtār Singh asked us to partake in his explanation with great piety (*bhavna*) and faith (*chao*) in understanding the *sabd*. Here, he recited another line from the SGGS: *kalijūg mein kīrtan pardhāna / gurmukhī jappīai lae dhiāna* (in the age of chaos, *kīrtan* presides / the *gurmukh* should be immersed in awareness).<sup>29</sup> In reciting this phrase, Bhāi Jagtār Singh exhorted the *sangat* to listen to the *kathā* attentively.



Figure 2.2 The *Būngā* (Tower) at *Takht Damdamā Sāhib*

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<sup>29</sup> Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib, p. 1075



**Figure 2.3 Takht Damdamā Sāhib in the morning**

Jagtār Singh further prepared the *sangat* by telling us that our sleeping souls should be roused to receive the *kathā* in unity and full effect. He exhorted us all to speak the words *satnām vāhegurū*, praising the one true Name.<sup>30</sup> The small group of individuals collected echoed his words in something between equipoise and slumber. Most of the 35-minute explanation that followed focused on the central line, or *rahaō*, *terā jan rām nām rang jagā. ālas chijī gaeā sabh tān te prītām sio man lāgā*—with especial emphasis on the theme of waking and laziness.

However, Bhāi Jagtār Singh’s *kathā* moved away from the line itself to focus on a psychological or interior intentionality of the lazy (*ālas*) being desirous (*lobhi*) and greedy

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<sup>30</sup> *sabd di vichar naal jurhiye sabd di vicharan di sang pavan ton pehlaan ek vari sarbat sangat suttian birtian nu sabd naal jorh diya hoeyan man di ekaagarta aur rasna di puri takta vaste pyar satikar ucharan karo akho ji, satnam vāhegurū.* (“Link yourself to the exposition of the *sabd*, before getting close to donning the exposition of the *sabd*, for the fullest provision of strength to overcome sleep and connect with the *sabd* with oneness of mind. Speak, satnam vāhegurū!”)

(*lalachi*). All three of these together are brandished by such people to profit, gain, and pilfer to exist and succeed in the world. Such actions are opposed to the actions of those who wake at *amrit-vela*, take initiative (*himmat*), perform their ablutions, and practice *nam-simran*: these people also take *amrit* and join the Khālsā. Bhāi Jagtār Singh's voice quickened and became increasingly emphatic as he explained that we should focus on waking up our consciousness before the day that we no longer wake up.

I left the morning gathering feeling thankful that I had been forced to wake up from discomfort, but unable to shake the question of how this actually explained the *sabd*, or *hukamnāmā*—which begins with the pangs felt by one separated from the giver of breath, describes having consciousness hued as though it were the lord's lotus feet and then explains how the body's *ālas* gives way to the consciousness affected by its lotus hue. Given Bhai Jagtar Singh's opening statements, which emphasized the historical importance of Damdamā Sāhib in establishing the tradition of *kathā* that he claimed to carry on with his own words that day, I was surprised to find something disappointingly familiar to my own experiences with a modern, exhortative, sermonizing style of *kathā*.

However, Jagtār Singh quickly exited the diwan after the *kathā*, and my attempts to flag him down to ask him any clarifying questions were unsuccessful. After milling around the area for half an hour, a single person I recognized as involved in the performance emerged from the *dīwān*. We were told that we would not be able to interview the *giānī* as—ironically, given the sermon just delivered—he had retired to his chambers to sleep, and so would not be available until the afternoon.

He graciously gave us his business card and made to leave, but I motioned to ask him one last question—which part of the *taksāl* compound contained the *dharamsālā* or

school? He met me with a quizzical look and stated that there had not been any actual center of learning here for some time and that the current and past two *kathāvācaks* were trained at Sikh Missionary College.<sup>31</sup> What remained of the actual *taksāl* was located in the *derās* at Bhindar Kalān, Mogā, and Mehtā Chowk.

Thinking back to the morning *kathā*, I now felt that Bhāi Jagtār Singh's assertion that his *kathā* formed part of a living history rang hollow. Ironically, the place where the pre-eminent tradition of *kathā* was initially formed was now essentially inactive. I was struck with the sobering realization of the contrast between performative history and actuality. Though I had undertaken my research of the living tradition of *kathā* fully expecting an appreciable shift and adjustment of the tradition I had studied in early modern texts, I was not prepared for the total absence of this tradition in modern commemorations of the historicity of Sikhism. At this moment, however, I realized that this historicity was linked to colonial and modern historiographic trends that pursue a model of Sikh tradition that cannot accommodate the notion of ontologized language.<sup>32</sup>

### ***Itihās as Historical Kathā***

After the morning *kathā* performed by Bhāi Jagtār Singh, I explored the Damdamā Sāhib compound, which included several historic sites and *gurdwārās*. For instance, I saw the site where Bhāi Dallā had bequeathed horses, rifles, and other munitions to Gurū Gobind Singh. As the signs placed at the site recounted, the Gurū had requested that either Bhāi Dallā or one of his soldiers stand before him to act as a target so that the Gurū could test the

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<sup>31</sup> The Sikh Missionary College's mission statement indicates that it trains Sikh youth in religion, history, and culture of Sikhism.

<sup>32</sup> See Chapter 4 for more on how scholars' assumptions of language as deontologized influences the translation strategies undertaken in prominent academic works on *janamsākhīs*.

accuracy of the rifles. When none came forward, Gurū Gobind Singh asked one of the Singhs to volunteer themselves, at which point Bhāi Dallā was astounded to see several leaping for the opportunity to be a target for the Gurū. The Gurū is said to have fired just over the turbans of his men. Bhāi Dallā asked how the gurū had found men of such mettle; Gurū Gobind Singh replied that the men had the benefit of *amrit* and *khande kī pahaul*, stating that Dallā and his men could experience similar effects if they became initiates and practiced the teachings of Nānak.



Figure 2.4 “Takht Sri Damdamā Sāhib”: A Sign Outlining the Historical Importance of Damdamā Sahib



**Figure 2.5** The site where Bhāi Dallā witnessed several Singhs volunteering to act as targets for Gurū Gobind Singh’s rifle

Moving from sign to sign in the Damdamā Sāhib complex, it became clear that these sites were places where *sākhīs* were written, all of which extol upon the wonder of repeating the name, *sabd*.

Upon learning of my research, they told me how this was the very site where Gurū Gobind Singh re-established the tradition of *kathā* that continues uninterrupted to this day. I was repeatedly told the same *sākhīs* that by now I had read on the signs. With each repetition of the *sākhīs*, I could not help but return to the unsettling *kathā* I had heard this morning, which was less about the *sabd*, and more about the effects of laziness, greed, and desire. The language of exposition I heard this morning formed a marked contrast from that of the *sākhīs* I had been reading in the manuscripts, which also appeared somewhat distinct in narration when compared to the *sākhīs* featured on signs at this historic *gurdwārās*.

As afternoon approached, one of the nihangs escorted my research assistant and me to



the *taksāl*'s deserted offices. As we took a seat in one of the antechambers, my guide departed only to return with one of the administrative staff in tow. Upon approaching us, the Nihang implored the administrator to inquire into the possibility of having an interview with the *kathāvācak*, as we were here for research purposes. Finally, Bhāi Dilbhāg Singh, one of the managers, came forward, and although he was unable to locate the *kathāvācak*, he offered to take us on a personal tour of the entire surrounding area and sites while he provided us with *kathā* along the way.

We began the tour with many of the locations I had already wandered through on my own, which were directly in the larger *takht* compound. With meticulous precision, our tour guide recited the 'historic,' or *itihāsak*, the significance of the site by connecting it to the lives of Gurū Gobind, Gurū Tegh Bahādur, and, although less frequently, Gurū Nānak. Again, the focus here was often on the belief (*shardha*) and reverence (*satikār*) that Sikhs showed to the Gurū. These messages were formulated with a mind to the many Sikhs who conducted religious tours of such sites: belief in the Gurūs, and you will derive benefit in this life and the next. This message did not stray far from McLeod's reading of the *sākhīs* and forms what I argue is an integral part of the modern language of Framed-Sikhism.

As we moved from site to site, I realized that several individuals from the increasing crowds were also intrigued by Dilbhāg Singh's tour. A group of about ten people ultimately joined our tour, including a *jathā* of Sikhs who were there along with one of their own 'bābās.' Every place we stopped, a group of people organically formed around us to hear the *kathā*. I was reminded of my readings of the *janamsākhīs*, where I frequently encountered the phrase, *Bābā faqīr vic behndā majlis kardā*—"The Bābā sat amongst the *faqīrs* to form a gathering."

Bhāi Dilbhāg Singh took us to several sites outside the compound that housed relics given to Gurū Gobind Singh held by prominent families of the areas, including a *shamshīr* with talismanic *ayāts* from the Qur’ān inscribed on it. He also took us to a *gurdwārā* dedicated to Giānī Attar Singh Mastuanā, named Būnga Mastuanā Sāhib, the highlight of which was a large *degh*, or cauldron, made of a composite metal. This *gurdwārā* was also the only site in the Sābo kī Talwandī area where I chanced upon groups of young boys gathered in circles, each with a *gutkā*, or book, containing *sabds*. The boys were being led by adolescents in reciting the *sabds* out loud in unison in a manner that emulated the melodic voice I heard in the morning recitation of the *hukamnāmā*.



**Figure 2.6 Students studying *sabd* at Būnga Mastuanā Sāhib**

Dilbhāg Singh informed us that there was a school in the vicinity, though well away from Damdamī Taksāl, which had been instituted by the *giānīs* to train young Sikhs in *sabd*, *kīrtan*, and *kathā*. The boys were not just reciting the *sabds*, however, but were also dialogically engaged in learning the meanings of the *sabds* from their adolescent teachers.

Dilbhāg Singh explained that when they gained greater proficiency, one of the *gurdwārā*'s *giānīs* would then teach the boys how to perform *kathā*.

Seeing this scene of learning influenced my notion of the overlapping networks of interpretation that inform our understanding of janamsākhīs today: some aspects of the mode of learning and thinking inaugurated by Gurū Nānak continue in *ḍerās* today, and yet their manner of enunciation, articulation, and performance have shifted—adapting to the concerns of the present, while absorbing new forms of knowledge and interpretation introduced during the colonial period. The *itihāsak kathā* at Damdamā Sāhib reiterated how the memory of how Gurū Gobind Singh disseminated his expansion of the SGGS to forty-eight Khālsā Singhs, who then scattered into *jathās* to perpetuate the system of telling; this story is an intimate part of the living history attached to Sikh identity and experience today. Tracing the connections between this living history and its echoes in the janamsākhī manuscript archive forms the basis of the project articulated throughout this dissertation. I now turn to the manner in which Gurū Nānak's philosophy of Oneness and non-oppositionality finds expression in a continuing form of *kathā* performance, called *akath-kathā*; this form of *kathā* most closely echoes the language use and knowledge system put forth in the janamsākhī archive.

### ***Akath-Kathā as Ineffable Kathā***

I started a long conversation with Bhāi Baldeep Singh, prominent performer of *kīrtan*, at his home in Delhi on the afternoon of April 20, 2013. We sat together in his living room just in front of the veranda, the birds chirping quietly as the sun came through the open doors. On the floor lay an assembly of traditional instruments covered in protective cloth. Through his Ānād Foundation, Bhāi Baldeep Singh has almost singlehandedly helped to reassert traditional

modes of performing *kīrtan*, including the use of traditional instruments like the *tāūs*.



**Figure 2.7** Bhāi Baldeep playing the *tāūs*



**Figure 2.8** Bhāi Baldeep explaining *kīrtan*

Given Bhāi Baldeep’s knowledge of traditions that, until his intervention, had largely moved largely into the memory of past exponents, I was interested to learn his opinion on how the tradition had changed. My questions were simple: What is *kathā*, and how is it related to *kīrtan*? Bhāi Baldeep answered as follows:

*dekho...kathā jehre karde ne main unhā nū puchiyā ki kīrtan kī hai? Oh kahn lagge, jī assīn tān kathā karde ai satho kathā bāre pucho. Kīrtan tān tusīn jānde ho. Mainu kehnde hunde... so us hisāb mutābak us nazariye mutābak main tān kallā rāg do chār jāndān hovegā thorhe bahute tāl thorhī bahute jāndā hān, te tusīn mainu svāl ajj puchde ho ki kathā kī hai? Eh svāl merā vī udhon hundā sī, kathā kī hai, te main svāl eh vī paondā sī ki kathā te kīrtan ‘c farak kī hai kyonke bānī sārī kathā. kathā kehde? akath dī—jo kathiyā nahīn jā sakdā oh kathā dā yatan hai.*

Look—I asked those who do *kathā*, what is *kīrtan*? They replied, “We are performers of *kathā*; ask us about *kathā*. *Kīrtan*, you are already familiar with.” They used to answer me in this way... So, tallying things up in that manner, from such a perspective, it is likely that I only know a few raags, that I am more or less familiar with several tunes—and today you are asking me what *kathā* is?

I also used to ask this question, what is *kīrtan*? And, I would also further it by asking, what is the difference between *kīrtan* and *kathā*? Because all the *bānī* is *kathā*. So *kathā* of what? It is *kathā* of the *akath*—it is the attempt to state that which cannot be stated.

After going on like this for over an hour later, Bhai Baldeep finally told me, “So, this conversation I am having with you about *kathā* is simultaneously doing *kathā*” (*so jo main tuhāde nāl gall kar rahān hān kathā bāre tuhāde nāl kathā kar hi rahiyā hān*).

This conversation was part of an ongoing dialogue that I had entered with Bhāi Baldeep since a chance meeting at Cafe Coffee Day opposite of Gurū Nānak Dev University, Amritsar in December of 2012, while I was doing archival work in the manuscript collections held there. That very day, he unexpectedly took me to Sultānpur Lodī, where Gurū Nānak was employed by Daulat Khān Lodī. We spent time in the *qilā*, or fort, where Daulat Khān would have been alongside his *qāzī* and Gurū Nānak. We stood before the *masjid* where Gurū Nānak was invited to perform Friday prayers (*jummah namāz*) alongside Daulat Khān after his emergence from the Vaīn River. Several months later, we sat at Bhāi Sāhib’s house, where he had invited me to stay with his family—located in the posh neighborhood of

Nizāmuddīn East, not far from the tomb of Humāyūn, and in walking distance of a *gurdwārā* dedicated to a site that Gurū Gobind Singh once visited.



**Figure 2.9** The mosque at Sultānpur

Whenever my dialogues with Bhāi Baldeep began in earnest, the conversation would move between story, explanation, metaphor, and singing. Bhāi Baldeep described *kathā* and *kīrtan* as alternate ways of thinking about *bānī* (i.e. *sabd*)—both of which required practitioners to think it first, then live it, and then attempt to breathe life in to for others:

*Sūrān te akkharān dā bojh piyā te sūrān dā rūp badal gayā aur sūrān 'c laphrez ho ke akkharān dā vī badal... likhe hoe akkharān nū jagā denā aur jān denā, phūk denī akkhar nū kīrtan te kathā.*

Musical notes, upon which letters are brought to bear, alter the form of the notes, and when words are placed in musical notation, the letters also change... To awaken written letters and let them live, to give breath to letters—there are *kīrtan* and *kathā*.

This process entails first living the *bānī* as a happening (*vāparnā*): effective *kathā* will arrive through an order of happening to give testimony to the *bānī*. Bhāi Baldeep likened this process to having medicine administered or being given jaggery (*gurh*)—such that after these elements are absorbed by the body (*vāparnā*), one can speak *kathā*. Bhāi Baldeep explained

through this metaphor that *kathā* and *kīrtan* are applications—not theoretical “book-learning” (*kitābī gyān*); the *sabd*, or first *kathā*, is already an application (*amal*), and it is on this way that happening occurs (*Nānak rahbar ban jāye*).

As Bhāi Baldeep explained it, *bāṇī* is *kathā*—*akath-kathā*—that is sung as *kīrtan*. This was the point of non-differentiation that Bhāi Baldeep had made in the comments above: *kīrtan* and *kathā* both begin in *bāṇī*, so they are one. To further his point, he immediately sang a *salok* from *gurbānī*: *santan kāi sunniyat prabh kī bāt kathā kīrtan anand mangal duni pur rahi dinas ar rāt* (“Listen to the sovereign discourses of sants; the entire world abides in joyful bliss through *kathā-kīrtan*”). He followed this singing with an example, or *parmān*, from the *janamsākhī*: Sajjan Thag was turned in an instant (*ek nimakh, chotte jīhe pall ‘c*) from a depraved individual (*zāhil nar*) to a divine being (*devtā*) through hearing Nānak sing. This example illuminated an aspect of my own attempt to re-engage with *sākhī* and *janamsākhī* texts, as Bhai Baldeep’s *meta-kathā* focused on an act of singing and its importance to the interpretation of *bāṇī*, as opposed to the predominant mode of viewing these texts historically and biographically.

*Kathā* represents an individual’s attempt at momentarily expressing the inexpressible (*akath nū ek chīn yān pal lae kath laiye kāi laiye*); Bhāi Baldeep likened it to the string that attaches the body to the soul while having the mind pierced through by the name. He performed this metaphor by singing the example of a *kathā* between Rāmdev and Tarlochan (*kathā nāmdeo sunhū tilochan*) in “*bāṇī nāmdeo jō kī ramkalī ghar 1.*”<sup>33</sup> This *sabd* uses three different metaphors for “separation with attentiveness”: (1) A child flying a kite that bears the image of a doll; (2) A young girl who fills a pitcher, then turns to play with her friends; (3)

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<sup>33</sup> Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib, Singh., 972-974

The mother-child bond that presides attentively even in absence. In all three instances, the individual enters into play or exertion in the world while retaining their mind's focus on being attached to somewhere or something from which they are separated. The link is retained through the name that cuts through thinking.

This example returned me to something that Bhāi Baldeep Singh said early in the dialogue: “The *bāñī* is all *kathā*... thinking *kathā*... *kathā*, not through speaking [discoursing] but singing and melodic expression” (*bāñī sārī kathā ...chintan karnī...kaī ke nahīn gavāhe ke kathā*). There was a consonance between Bhāi Baldeep Singh and Bābā Mohan Singh Bhindarī in their explanations of *kathā* as an artful, allegoric appearing, beginning in *gurbāñī*.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the meaning, judgment, and example in the *kathā* can occur strictly through the SGGS—something called *nirol kathā*, considered the highest possible form of *kathā*, where the *sākhī* is the *bāñī*.

In an allegorical structure, the word bears a resemblance to something unrepresentable - something which cannot appear or manifest itself in language or art directly. The gap between the thing presented in the word and its resemblance to that which cannot manifest in language creates a tensional structure that enables an appearance of the unmanifest in the word, phrase, image, etc.<sup>35</sup> In this way, the unmanifest can pierce through different spaces and times. Texts that use this allegorical structure, recitative speech emanating from such texts, and listening to

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<sup>34</sup> I am here referring to the phenomenological structure of allegory, the concomitant appearance of one thing in another. This harkens to the use of word, phraseology, images, or figures where a cohabitation of narrative or artistic space and time occurs. Art and narrative share a similar use of allegory in not being an empirical space but rather a space or opening that is delivered through perceiving the plurality of what might appear within a singular word, phrase, image, etc. The phenomenological structure of allegory defies logical constraints of metaphysical structures of meaning wherein the “meaning” is the product of transcendentalizing the signifier -where the tangible is transcended by a idealized mediated meaning. Allegories go beyond meaningful through transcendence but by remaining within their structure. The language of allegory is therefore unmetaphysical. Brenda Machosky, *Structures of Appearing: Allegory and the Work of Literature* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013). pp.1-2

<sup>35</sup> This gap is not reducible to the relation between concepts nor the relationship that exists between thought and an object given to it. Ibid. p.12



recitative speech exist within themselves while pointing to the structure of language used to perceive an appearing. This structure is outside subjective experience, and texts using it are artistic, open-ended expressions of the inexpressible. The perception of an appearing creates a circuit wherein the poet might embed a reference to the unmanifest that carries itself to the auditor through resemblance to create a possible continuity of perception. The event of appearing, however, remains new and abides in the present.<sup>36</sup> Such a phenomenalization of artful language (*bāṇī*) by the Sikh-Gurus and their exponents, I suggest, uses an allegorical structure networked through the *Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib*, *sākhī* texts -like *janamsākhīs* -and expansive *kathā* in a completely self-referential way. This structure attempts to further appearances of an unsubjective, nonoppositional ontology of the human by pointing to a cosmology wherein the Creator is severed and indifferent from creation. Allegory is the structure through which it can, however, be perceived through attributive resemblances.

### **2.5 *Akatha-Kathā*: Speaking Outside of the Self**

Significantly, my interview with Gursevak Singh Mehtā—an important *kathāvācak* at Mehtā Chowk near Farīdkot—helped differentiate between *kathā* and *parcār*, which are used synonymously in common parlance. Even though these two words are often used interchangeably, my interlocutors made clear that the two terms differ substantially. *Kathā*, unlike *parcār*, is “for us and not of us”; for this reason, *sākhīs* and *janamsākhīs* are central to *kathā*, but not *parcār*. *Kathā*, unlike *parcār*, is related to the *sabd vāparna* (happening of *sabd*, both for and through the self) that was necessary before *sabd vācna* or (the speaking or expansion of *sabd*).

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid. pp. 15 and 20

This difference suggests that the term *parcār* is likely a modern coinage that coincides with the structural changes in Sikh sacred physical and textual space associated with the Gurdwārā Reform Movement (1920-25). These structural changes mark changes to the institutional and linguistic interpellation enacted in *sangats* during and after colonialism, which I explored in my interpretation of Kartar Singh Duggal’s “Karāmāt” in the Introduction.

With reference to *kathā dī parpātī*, Gursevak Singh Mehtā poignantly expressed the distinction between these terms by referring to the self as a source for *parcār*:

*Dekho parcār jerhā hundā oh apnā hundā thīk ai jī parcār hundā kissī ek chīz nū ek chīz nāl lāī karke...[pause] jiddān...jistarhān hun apān parcār kardiyān ki nashiyān dī sevā nahīn karnā topic lai liyā thīk ai jī gurbānī dī ek pangktī lai lae us te apān apānī viākhiā kartī thīk ai jī parcār es nū aundā. Apān apānī drishtant lā sakde ān lokān dī viyū rakh sakde ān kucch vī rakh sakde ān. Thīk ai jī? Eh hundā parcār karnā.*

Look at it this way, *parcār* is your own. *Thīk ai jī?* (Right?) *Parcār* is, taking one thing to place with another thing...like...take it to mean that while we are doing *parcār*, you shouldn’t do obeisance to intoxicants. We’ve taken a topic. *Thīk ai jī?* We took one line from *gurbānī*, and we’ve done our own commentary on it. *Thīk ai jī?* That’s *parcār*. We can attach our perspective, the views of worldly people, and we can ourselves put anything there. *Thīk ai jī?* That is doing *parcār*.

As Gursevak Mehtā puts it, during *parcār*, there is nothing required of the commentator outside of a use of the conscious mind. It is a purely intellectual engagement of attaching things together to attach ourselves to those things through the commentary, which signals the arrival of *apanī* or the self. Note here that there is not “religious” discussion going on in his explanation. His does not talk for instance about *ātmān* (soul), *karma* (duty), *parmātmān* (God), etc. *Parcār* is a form of language use that can be described as *āpo apnī karnī*—the self-doing for the self (in the name of others). For Gursevak Singh, the difference between *parcār* and *kathā* is related to constructing the self in association to objects: word-things (*pangktī*) and effect-things (*nashā*).

Gursevak Singh compares *kathā* and *parcār* using examples to round out the meaning; having established the meaning *parcār*, as stated above, Gursevak turns to *kathā*, saying:

*Oh gurbānī de dāeyāre adhār'c hundī ai matlabh jo us pangktī nū pakrhiā nā tusīn us pangktī de arth ton bāhr nahīn jā sakde jis sabd de andar tusīn ghum rahio nā tusīn oh...oh sabd de adhār ton bāhr nahīn jā sakde bas tusīn uthe hi rahna unhi kū jagā te tusīn oh...matlabh tusīn jo gurbānī kai rahī ai nā bas tusīn us hī de arth khol kar ke sākhiān rāhīn sokhe kar kar ke sarotiā nū jīrhe sunan vāle unhā nū sapsht karne ai tusīn apnā kuch nahīn aid kar sakde thīk ai jī eh gall hundī ai kathā.*

That [*kathā*] is occurring through remaining within the illustrative circumference of *gurbānī*. Meaning that line [from *gurbānī*] which has been grasped, *na*? You cannot go outside of the line of its value. That *sabd* around which you are circling, *na*? That circling... you cannot move outside of that *sabd*'s illustrativeness, you are only to remain there upon just that place, you are to... meaning what *gurbānī* is saying through you, *na*? You just have to stay only within this meaning, having opened it using *sākhi*s to gradually make it absorbable to the *sarotiya* or those who listen, clearing the ground. You are to add nothing of yourself. Okay? This thing—that's *kathā*.

The truth conditions of *kathā*, its aboutness, are the value of entering the space of *gurbānī*—the living through of the written. The *kathāvācak* needs to be able to disassociate his conscious mind from the truth condition inhering in the place or clearing established by that written line of *gurbānī*.

In *kathā*, in the matter of *kathā*, *gurbānī* cannot be taken and placed upon other things to build structures of conscious, mindful fancy—rather, the self must be disinterred and thrown into the body of *sabd* speaking itself; it is the “you” who must be pushed out or left at that threshold space for immersion into *gurbānī*. This is where recitation becomes important: recitation represents the moment of sitting at the threshold or the bank of a river, before submersion in language and the abjection of the self: a twin function of speaking someone else's writing. There is the boundedness to the *sabd* that the *kathāvācak* can circle to express its meaning or value. This is an illustrative or imaginal process, occurring through the language of *gurbānī* into which the *kathāvācak* has been thrown. Upon entering that space within which he must abide, the task of opening or clearing (*kholnā* or *sipasht karnā*) is that

which occurs through the *kathāvācak*.

*Sākhīs*—both janamsākhīs and general *sākhīs*—are important here as the testimony of a witness. When we listen—and therefore bear witness—to *kathā*, we engage in the work of clearing to live *gurbāṇī*, abiding within its domicile. The dialogue just given above occurred in the presence of at least five members of the *ṭaksāl* listening in on us; Gursevak Singh’s refrain, *ṭhīk ai jī*, is not directed just at me, but at those witnessing our dialogue (my question and his answer), and was punctuated with responses of heartfelt agreement. The acts of both doing and describing *kathā* require an audience and are performed in a *sangat*, because of this testimonial function.

Similarly, when I came on an earlier occasion to speak with Bhāī Sāhib Rajasthānī, we mulled about, and chit chatted while a younger Singh went and gathered witnesses. The real conversation—the moment I could capture and record—was not allowed until the gathering had arrived. At this point, Bhāī Sāhib instructed me, “Now start recording” (*tusīn hun record kar lo*).

In this context, both Bhāī Sāhib Rajasthānī and Gursevak Singh Mehtā agreed with each other that *sākhīs* are *gavāh* (witnesses). Gursevak said, “*Sākhī*, that is just a witness, no?” (*sākhī, oh tān gavāh hogī, nā?*). To which Rajasthānī quickly responded in agreement, “Yes, indeed” (*āho jī*). They continued: without a witness to testify to the matter at hand, the matter can never be complete or established (*pūran nahīn hundī*). By opening the matter of value and entering the space of *gurbāṇī*, the *kathāvācak* needs to establish the validity of his speech, insisting that the saying be apophatic and allegoric through neither you nor I.

When, in the quote above, Gursevak Singh mentioned the *sākhīs* using the metaphor of absorbency, regarding their ability to make meaning absorbable, as water soaks into the

earth, he alludes to the metaphor expounded upon above in the notion of *kathā dī parpātī*. With this statement, Gursevak Singh evokes Bhāi Santokh’s *Srī Gur Sūraj Pratāp Granth*—an authoritative text with which all of my interlocutors were familiar because of their training—and a massive compilation of *sākhī* from the gurū period, including *sākhīs* of a witness by prominent Sikhs. There is a layering aspect of this proving that begins with a hailing—a smile or glances through performance to a listening (receptive) audience that marks the disinterring of self through employing *sākhī*. In this hailing, the *kathāvācak* conveys the idea that “It is not my testimony, for that ‘my’ cannot enter here; it is rather the received testimony.” By doing so, the *kathāvācak* indexes that this *kathā* is a fecund arrival that will be passed to its listeners precisely because it is not his own.

Having explained the matter of *kathā*, then, Gursevak Singh returned to compare it once more to *parcār*:

*Parcār matlabh tusīn apnā aid kar sakde ’o apnā viyū hor siyānīyān de viyū kuch vī gurbānī dī ek pangktī nū mukh rakh ke jiddān nashiyān dī sevā nahīn karnī gurbānī kī farmān kardī ai ek pangktī lā ’tī age tusīn apnā parcār kītā thīk ai māharājā? [Rajasthānī: “Bilkul.”] Te ushī tarhān amrit chaknā vāste rahitnāme ton apān sunāte te māharāj de bachān thīk ai jī ki satgur de bachān eh ne phir apān apānī age vīākhiā kītī ki amrit kyon shakanā chāhidā kis tarhān nahīn eh apnā parcār hoeyā es nū hī parcār kahidā.*

*Thīk ai jī parcār vakhrī hundī kathā vakhrī. kathā hundī ai satgurān de sabdān dī kathā jo satgurān de sabd likhe ne jo gurbānī hai us de artha nu kholnā gurmat anusār thīk ai jī gurmat anusār kyon ke kaī hunde ne apnī marjī dā arth kholde jo āvde mann ’c aondī oh oh nahīn kathā hundī pāi oh tān apnā parcār ho gayā gurbānī dī ek pangktī lāi addhā ghanā lage rahe kadde udhron gall chakk ke mārī kadde udhron dā chak ke mārī oh nahīn koī gall hundī. kathā hundī ai sabd de dāeyre vic jo satgurān ne ek sabd uchāriā koī vī sabd uchāria us de dāeyre vivh raī kar ke us dāeyre ton bāhr nā jān kar ke gurmat anusār oh sabd nū kholnā sokhiyā kar ke sākhī rāhīn drishtant rahī tānke jīrhe sunan vāle ne oh gurbānī de sidhant nū jānū ho sakān ki eh jīrhā gurbānī dā sabd hai eh ki kaihndā satgurū Sāhib es vic ki hukam karde ai satgurū Sāhib jī kī farmān hai es vic thīk ai jī.*

*Parcār*, meaning, that to which you can add yourself through your view or the views of elders (those wiser than you), anything. Place the line [from *gurbānī*] at the head [of the *parcār*]—such as not paying obeisance to intoxicants. What does *gurbānī* say regarding this topic? Simply attach one line [of *gurbānī*], and from there you can do your *parcār* [the *parcār* of the self can be done]. *Thīk ai jī, māharājā?* [Rajasthānī replies, “Absolutely.”] Then, in that same manner, by taking the topic of initiation through *amrit*, you can cite the injunctions of *māharājās* [the *satgurūs*] from the *rahitnāmas*. *Thīk ai jī?* That these are the injunctions from the *rahitnāmās*, only in order to place our own view ahead [of the *rahitnāmā*] as to why *amrit*

should be taken and under which conditions it should not. This is self-propagation (*apnā parcār*)—this is the very thing called “*parcār*.”

*Thīk ai jī*, so *parcār* is distinct and *kathā* is distinct. *Kathā* happens through the *kathā* of the *sabd* of the *satgurūs*—that is to say, those *sabds* written by *satgurūs*, which is *gurbānī*. To open those *sabds* through *gurmat* [teachings of the Sikh Gurūs found in SGGS] to their value. This is because there are those who evaluate the *sabd* through its opening toward their self-perspective, or that which arises from their own mind (*mann*)—that—that is not the occurrence of *kathā* because it arrives through self-propagation (*parcār*). Take a line of *gurbānī*, spend half an hour on it. Grab a subject from over here and hit it over there, then grab another from here and hit it over there. That is not what this thing is about. *Kathā* happens in the circumference of the *sabd*. That *sabd* which was given to utterance by the *satgurūs*—whichever of these *sabds* was given to utterance. By abiding within their circumference, by not going outside of their circumference, opening that *sabd* through *gurmat*. Making it absorbable through the *sākhīs* through a perspective such that for the listener, the principle of *gurbānī* can become knowable—they can be made aware of the principle of *gurbānī*. That this *sabd* of *gurbānī*, what is it saying? What order (*hukam*) is being stated in the saying of the *sabd* through the *satgurū*? What is the injunction of *satgurū* that is placed in the *sabd*?

Here, Gursevak Singh makes clear that *kathā* occurs through the *kathāvācak*’s body, but not of his mind—rather, it is propagated through the disembodied nature of the written word that contains its ontology. *Gurmat* here signals *matt*, or thinking, that is not the self’s thinking, and therefore is not a language stemming from consciousness, but rather an ontologized language that appears and exists through itself.

Indeed, whenever I spoke to my interlocutors about *kathā*, I noticed a drastic shift in their manner of speaking as they moved between daily speech and describing or performing *kathā*. Their general, conversational speech matched the speech patterns of Modern Standard Panjābī and included frequent reference to the self, or sentences composed with the subject defined as “*main*” (“I”). However, when describing or performing *kathā*, all of my interviewees—whether *kīrtaniyās* or *kathāvācaks*—began speaking in a manner that excluded explicit reference to the self. This grammatical formulation, while difficult to translate directly into English, perhaps most closely resembles passive voice construction, where sentences were emptied of explicit reference to a speaking subject, and were markedly devoid of the use of “I.”

Furthermore, my interviews helped me establish that despite Bhāi Jagtār Singh's claims to carrying on the tradition of *kathā* begun by Gurū Gobind Singh at Damdamā Sāhib, his missionizing sermon should more properly be considered *pracār* and *not kathā*. Although I have included *pracar* as a sub-type of *kathā* given the interchangeability of the two in modern parlance, and the wide prevalence of the former as a form of *kathā* today, my research shows that, rather than a theological, soteriological, and/or "self-help" sermon, *kathā* was a form of exegesis of the SGGS similar to—and at times explicitly related to—the (janam)sākhī. However, the (janam)sākhī's unique status as a witness to the SGGS stems from its status as a written text that precedes the oral enunciation of *kathā*. Both genres, however, explicitly move to speak outside of notions of self and selfhood, representing a form of deontologized language that mirrors Nānak's teachings and the SGGS.

## 2.6 Conclusion

The performance of *kathā* as understood and taught within the tradition occurs under four constraints. First, it is a version of the *kathā* given by Gurū Gobind Singh while he was staying at Sabo kī Talwandī, present day Damdamā Sāhib, which has been passed down from the early 18th century through *ṭaksāls* and *ḍerās*, which formed mobile centers of learning and propagation. Second, *kathā*'s effect (and affect) is lived and not purely cognitive; it creates awareness of a *sabd* being commented upon without recourse to conscious understanding, in the manner of discourse as we understand it today. However, it does not create or purport to create a mystical inner religious experience. Third, the performance of *kathā* engages both the intellectual capacity and learning of the *kathāvācak* as well as his ability to creatively imagine and engage the *sabd*; *kathā* is artful. Finally, the

“happening of *bāṇī*” is a measure of the ability and exertions of the *kathāvācak*—first to have enacted an instant of happening through *bani*, and then through the sanction of that knowledge of happening. The *kathāvācak* remains stringently with a circumambulatory space of greatest proximity to the *sabd*, whose highest degree would be *nirol kathā*, or exposition only through what is explicated.

Taken at the greatest level of generality, then, *kathā* is a form of saying or poetic-telling. However, amongst Sikh exponents at traditional centers of learning, such as *ṭaksāls* or *ḍerās*, *kathā* is seen as not merely being a stock form of folkloric tales or mythopedagogical stories but as intimately connected to the *sabds* of the SGGS. It is a manner of expansion or expounding on the SGGS that is intimately related to witnessing testimony, or proof. It is the textual creation and performative application of the learning of the exponent to enliven the SGGS to meet the demands or needs of a Sikh *sangat*.

The interplay between these facets determines the affectivity or efficaciousness of any *kathā*—indeed, a *kathā* is open to engagement, assessment, and critique. The degree of its affectivity expresses the limit of the imaginal ability and allegorical expressiveness harnessed through the training of the *kathāvācak*. This training begins and ends with the SGGS but had no other limits beyond that—students were encouraged to seek knowledge based on their interest and intellect. The affectivity of *kathā* this comes about through the exponent’s learning and his ability to engage with the concerns of the *sangat* while maintaining the importance and primacy of the *sabd* throughout the explanation. In this sense, *kathā* is the art of applied knowing or thinking. Its articulation is restrained in the contexts of a *sangat* to bringing *gurbāṇī* to life.

*Kathā* opens an approach to writing through a form of witnessing that is not



predicated by authentic origin; *sākhīs* are an application of *kathā dī parpātī*. Examined in this manner, I suggest that we are closer to the ontologized language of the *janamsākhī* texts, which are written to speak a transformative form of non-oppositional thinking and knowledge through a language decentered from the self.

Furthermore, this shift occurs in the space for gathering, *sangat* or *majlis*, that the written word enables. It is an active principle of a living embodied text—or an understanding of the text as living, separate from a speaking conscious body. The structure of *sākhīs*, *janamsākhīs*, *gurbilās*, *prakāsh*, *pothī*, *dasam granth*—and, perhaps above all, the *Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib*, i.e. the *Granth* as a living embodied Gurū—can be analyzed from such a perspective if we consider how to make this archive speak while understanding the structural and institutional changes that imbricate upon our current readings of these important works.