CHAPTER I

Historiographical Issues in Sikh Studies
The various sites in the Sikh movement where identity question operates, start with the nature and status of the life and message of Nanak; its interpretation by the succeeding generations of the Sikhs; institutions, community and the social environment; nature, content and ideological significance of the Adi Granth; militarization, martyrdom and new adherents; the creation, context and purpose of the Khalsa; the Sikh struggle of the eighteenth century and the formation of Sikh principalities; Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Lahore Darbar and the ‘transformation of Sikh movement’; annexation by the British in 1849, the rise of the Singh Sabha movement in the 1870s and its ‘construction’ of modern Sikhism or Tat Khalsa by the turn of century. The selection of any one of these sites simultaneously has to categorise the other sites to account for its sense of historical autonomy through these phases.

The Sikh studies scholarship has a convention of studying Sikh movement without sufficiently taking into account the contemporary socio-historical tendencies, both in Hinduism and Islam. This has resulted in certain avoidable discrepancies and erasures, while strengthening the notion that anti-Muslim element in the Sikh movement is an integral constituent of its discourse. Implicit in this mode of analysis is the general orientation of treating Sikh movement as operating in the vicinity of Hinduism albeit displaying its little-tradition characteristics. Thus the analytical field is constituted in which the Singh Sabha movement articulates the hegemonic discourse of Tat Khalsa and religious boundaries come to be accepted.

Interpretive diversity around Guru Nanak’s message is mentioned but not fully analyzed in terms of its social significance, resulting in numerical explanations of adherents to various interpretative blocs as the deciding factor is determining the relative success of a particular mode. The sustained emphasis on the social composition, for instance, in determining the veracity of the Khalsa-Sehajdhari duality can help in linking up a variegated tradition into a socially significant universe - laden with contests, ambiguities, retreats, fresh departures while reconstituting the institutional memory of Sikhism. This manner of analysis has the possibility to show the way in which low-born but demographically significant and economically resurgent social groups appropriated and wielded a religious ideology not just for the pragmatic purpose of mobility but also for launching their versions of society, morality and notions of justice.
This brief introductory note demonstrates that the vantage-point of identity and ideological self-consciousness provides us the necessary lever to view the Sikh movement and its various phases as structurally linked. This might explain the continual reconstitution of the Sikh tradition with its characteristic selections and omissions as well as its institutional regeneration at each crucial juncture. By focusing on these aspects we can arrive at a nuanced understanding of a historically situated process of identity formation “comprising competing social institutions organized around distinct religious and ideological principles and responsive to continually changing political circumstances and economic pressures”.

Harjot S. Oberoi’s work is the one that exclusively deals with this problem besides having other emphases. The comprehensive way in which he has dealt with his primary sources and the problematic in which he has placed these, easily gives his work a centrality which it richly deserves. Almost every other work, published thereafter has argued his case vis-à-vis Oberoi’s position e.g. J.S. Grewal, W.H. Mcleod, Ian J. Kerr, Brian P. Caton, etc. However none of them has used new sources and most of them have remained within the paradigm of Singh Sabha movement, Khalsa-Sahajdhari duality, folk-popular religion, etc. set by Oberoi.

His book covers the entire period of the Sikh movement from the times of Guru Nanak to the early twentieth century. So in my presentation I would go by the issues and then locate the remaining views around his argument, rather than going by each book individually. The phases are: early Sikh tradition and its ideological underpinnings; early 19th century social conditions; various categories of Sikhs e.g. Khalsa, Sanatan, Udasi, etc.; post-annexation cultural milieu of Punjab and the emergence of Singh Sabha Movement and; reasons for the ‘success’ of Tat-Khalsa and opposition from the popular religion.

1Oberoi, Harjot S.: *The Construction Of Religious Boundaries Culture Identity And Diversity In The Sikh Tradition*, OUP, New Delhi, 1997. pp.xxii+494 and for a general discussion see, Ballantyne, T. *A Reframing of the Sikh Past* in IJPS, “...schematic approach charting the shape of the field with a plurality of analytical positions and their multiple epistemological framework. He discusses the conflicting methodologies deployed.... “To push Sikh Studies towards a more sustained engagement with a broader set of questions that are central to contemporary humanities scholarship,..., a vision grappling with cross-cultural encounters, the power of colonialism and the important forms of cultural traffic that have cut across the borders of the Punjab region and the Indian nation.”

2Grewal, J.S.; *Historical Perspectives On Sikh Identity*; Punjabi University, Patiala, 1997


The two major dichotomies that Oberoi holds up – between Hindus and Sikhs, and between ‘Sanatan (with the folk added on) and the Khalsa appear to be problematic. These two examples are important pieces of the larger narrative Oberoi is attempting to create, focusing on hybridity and pluralism in opposition to a singular and dominating articulation of identity. Oberoi starts with the question as to how a ‘cohesive community of believers’ is formed by focusing on the Singh Sabha Movement (Singh Sabha movement) and by attempting to reconstruct a pre-Tat Khalsa Sikh Identity that challenges the modern understanding of what Sikhism, as an autonomous tradition, is. Oberoi draws on his interests in folk religion and practice and argues that the Sikhs were largely undefined as a group: “In the absence of a centralized Church and an attendant religious hierarchy, heterogeneity in religious beliefs, plurality of rituals, and diversity of lifestyles were freely acknowledged… Far from a single Sikh Identity, multiple identities were there. Boundaries between the ‘great’ and ‘little’ Sikh tradition were highly blurred: several competing definitions of who constituted a Sikh were possible.” With the forming of the Singh Sabhas and the ascendancy of ‘new elites’ in the late-nineteenth century, a great rupture or epistemic shift took place. Two elements are in center of his arguments: folk-popular religion and what Oberoi calls Sanatan Sikhism.

Sanatan offers a rapprochement between the Khalsa and Sahajdhari identities articulated in the eighteenth century and it was the ‘great code’ of Sikhism before the modern period. At a general level the Sanatan episteme provided a world view that was inclusive, diverse and flexible. Tat Khalsa engineered an epistemic shift in the language and experience of being a ‘Sikh’. While most agree that Sikhism was radically redefined in late-nineteenth century, but Oberoi characterizes the pre-modern Sikhism as an alternative to its modern construct.

This presents us two main problems with Oberoi: (i) his data and its interpretation, and (ii) the effectiveness of his approach for understanding both, the folk religion as well as Sikh experience.

About the placing of Sikhism within the rubric of broad Hinduism by highlighting its diffused, undefined nature, Oberoi overlooks the centrality of text...

---

6 Oberoi; op cit.p7
7 ibid;p24-25
8 Murphy, Anne; Allegories Of Difference And Identity; Reflections On Religious Boundaries And Popular Religion, IJPS, pp 53-71
9 ibid; p55.
established quite early in Sikhism—thus reflecting a similar orientation to the book as that of the Middle-Eastern traditions of Judaism and Islam—which is quite different from the otherwise largely parallel Sant and Bhakti traditions of same period. In this way, the nineteenth century constructionist argument regarding ‘people of the book’ debate in Hinduism loses its validity in case of Sikhism.\(^{10}\)

This also shows Oberoi’s eliding of the ideological undercurrent of the earlier Sikh tradition, which is now brought to light by the works of Pashaura Singh\(^ {11}\) and G.S. Mann.\(^ {12}\) Oberoi here follows W.H. Mcleod with respect to early Sikh tradition by imparting it an evolutionary schema\(^ {13}\) and then inflating the Singh Sabha epistemic shift as a fundamental rupture from the earlier ‘diffused’ tradition. Significantly this is the device used by the Institute of Sikh Studies scholars like Daljeet Singh, Kharak Singh, G.S. Dhillon, Gurdev Singh, Gurtej Singh, when they say that Sikhism is a revealed religion and thus interpret every new development or innovation as already ordained in Guru Nanak’s message which impinged upon the social environment\(^ {14}\) and in this one-way traffic of agency over structure, for them the Singh Sabha movement ceases to be a rupture but a revival or reform in order to carry forward the message of Sikhism.\(^ {15}\) The only significant difference is in the period of ‘epistemic rupture’: for Oberoi it is nineteenth century whereas for ISS scholars it is sixteenth century.

The middle ground here is occupied by Pashaura Singh and G.S. Mann who highlight the ideology, institutions and innovations exercised by the early Gurus which epitomize the Guru Granth Sahib along with the interplay of agency and structure. Their work does not extend unto the nineteenth century, but it gives a very different interpretation of early Sikh tradition than Mcleod and Oberoi, etc.

Secondly, Oberoi’s analysis of the formation of Adi Granth in a general context of composing other medieval manuscripts is flawed: first, because medieval manuscript compilations often did reflect sectarian interests, and secondly, because the Adi Granth did this to a larger extent than others, e.g. Kabir featured in Adi Granth, as against in a Rajasthani pothi, feature a Kabir with more positive descriptions of the ultimate

---

\(^{10}\) ibid, p.56

\(^{11}\) Singh, Pashaura; *Guru Granth Sahib, Text Canon And Authority*, OUP, Delhi, 2000

\(^{12}\) Mann, Gurinder S.; *The Geindval Pothis*, OUP, Delhi, 1996

\(^{13}\) Oberoi; op cit. p. 56-76


\(^{15}\) ibid; p.262-265.
vaisnava than the Bijak Kabir which is outspoken. So the manuscript traditions in north India should not be viewed as completely lacking in sectarian interests.\textsuperscript{16}

Evidence from contemporary medieval sources show that there were categories as well as boundaries in the pre-modern period also for instance Dabistan-I-Mazahib mentions such formations during seventeenth century Punjab.\textsuperscript{17} Progressing from medieval period to the nineteenth century, where Oberoi attempts to describe the diverse religious worlds of early-nineteenth century Punjab by bringing in a wide variety of sources and questions the conventional boundaries. However, according to J.S. Grewal, Oberoi appears ‘vague’ and ‘vacuous’ while dealing with Sanatan episteme and Sanatan Sikh in the early-nineteenth century. Firstly, because he is unable to categorise the Sanatani Sikhs from Khalsa Sikhs and Sahajdhari Sikhs, which were regarded as two components of Sikhism. Rather, the only other category that we are left with is the Udasis. Are the Sanatani Sikhs in fact Udasis? Oberoi does not make it clear.\textsuperscript{18}

Secondly, Oberoi states that the eighteenth century Khalsa identity was replaced by Sanatan episteme in the early-nineteenth century, which raised the Dasam Granth to position of the ‘great code’ and its impact was reflected in the works of writers like Koer Singh and Bhai Santokh Singh. However, Oberoi uses their writings quite selectively. For instance Koer Singh's work adheres to essential doctrines of the Khalsa and his other ideas can be treated as marginal. To refer only to what he says about the Puranas or incarnation is to misconstrue his basic position. Oberoi is left with the evidence of Anandghan only, which is an Udasi work.\textsuperscript{19} In fact, Oberoi takes the term ‘Sanatan’ at face value from a public-lecture delivered by Sardar Gulab Singh in 1886 and then traces it backward and says that the Sanatan episteme with its inclusive and ludic dimensions had reconciled the Khalsa/Sahajdhari paradox.\textsuperscript{20}

J.S. Grewal while discussing the Sikh identity issue takes it back to the interpretative diversity about the mission of Guru Nanak (and his successors).\textsuperscript{21} This diversity of interpretations of ‘Sikhism’ is important for him. The splinter groups of the sixteenth- and seventeenth century failed not due to numbers but because their

\begin{footnotesize}
\item[16] Murphy: op cit. p.58-61
\item[17] Grewal, J.S.: op cit. P. 29
\item[18] ibid: p.28-29
\item[21] Ibid: p.31-32
\end{footnotesize}
interpretation of the Sikh movement was relatively restricted. Similarly is the case of Khalsa of the seventeenth century, which also accepted the Sahajdharis as a part and parcel of the Sikh panth, whereas this co-sharing was never sanctioned nor practiced with Udasis or other Nanak-Panthis.22 What Oberoi does is to treat diversity as negation of identity.23 However, J.S. Grewal also falls prey to the logic of numbers and states that Singhs out-numbered other shades.24

After the annexation of Punjab in 1849 when the British undertook far reaching administrative steps; the Punjab agriculture became a part of the capitalist world economy; canal colony settlements were introduced; militarily the North-West frontier became sensitive asking for greater recruitment from Sikhs in Punjab; with the introduction of local government which accommodated mostly the traditional elite and with increasing competition for government jobs among various communities; with the setting up of English – education schools alongwith Christian evangelicalism in active support from the administrators and also with the doctrinal differences with the Arya Samaj - all these were factors which formed the constituents of a new order which was threatening to the Sikh elite during 1849-1857. They could never recover from this assault and settled for a cautious cultural dialogue with the new order. The Raj and Church advanced side by side in the Punjab, and this ‘evangelical entente’ appeared to present a grave threat. Coupled with this was the administratively backed social reform.25

The Amritsar Singh Sabha (ASS) was formed in 1873 as a response of the Sikh landed aristocracy and public figures to the falling status of Sikhs, perceived variously one possible interpretation of their ‘sanatani views can be their notion of consolidating the Sikh community in order to further entrench their status as Sikh elites in Punjab. However, according to Oberoi the leaders of ASS were poorly equipped to face the rapidly changing cultural milieu especially the tool of ‘print culture’. However we contend with this view by showing their continued hold and hegemony over the ‘Sikh’ issues and their persistent harnessing by the Punjab government as a foil to the anti-imperial Akalis during the first half of twentieth century. It is only by silencing the

22 ibid; p.32.
23 ibid; p.32.
24 ibid; p.32.
dimension of colonial authority that Oberoi could succeed in presenting the two formative sabhas as representing two epistemes with disastrous results.

However, the formation of Lahore Singh Sabha (LSS) in 1879 marked a shift in social and material background of the founders and hence the ideological output of the Singh Sabha movement (Singh Sabha movement). Members belonged to the class, which aspired for government jobs they were more familiar with the print culture. Egalitarian ethos and exclusivity of Sikh identity were the main points of disagreement between the two sabhas. However, these egalitarian notions did not extend to lower castes till the opening decades of the twentieth century. In any case both groups addressed the issue of Sikh identity in similar terms of 'Sikh' custom and elimination of non-Sikh elements; what constituted Sikh tradition vis-à-vis demarcated boundaries; everyday expression of Sikh identity in terms of rites of passage; threats pertaining to the panth and its progress; defence of Sikhism; building of the Sikh nation, etc.

Oberoi treats the varying views of both the factions as 'differences in the worldviews', whereas J.S. Grewal says that differences are only of degree and not of kind; Brian P. Caton states that the frequent recourse to the term 'community' while discussing about Sikh identity in Singh Sabha literature glosses over the discrepancies of inclusion and exclusion in terms of status, caste and ideology.

Accounting for the success of Tat Khalsa element, in spite of the opposition from the Sanatanists and peasantry, Oberoi considers the role played by British rule in Punjab, with custom giving way to market relations; British army favouring the Khalsa identity and British civilians equated 'Sikhs' with the Khalsa which further fitted with their view of monolithic religious communities. Oberoi gives prominence to the colonial state and its institutions rather than the Khalsa tradition of the eighteenth century for the emergence of 'modern Sikhism'. Richard G. Fox also highlights the role of colonial state in fashioning Singh identity for the Sikhs. Fox starts with the question that how come rural petty commodity producers acutely aware of their worsening economic situation, joined hands with the urban protestors concerned with gaining control of Sikh

---

26 ibid. p. 180
27 HSO; op.cit. p. 381-397.
28 HSO; ibid. p. 254-257.
29 Grewal, op. cit. p. 66-69
31 Oberoi; op. cit. P. 216-258.
32 Fox, R, G.; The Lions Of Punjab ; Culture In The Making , Berkeley, 1985, p 178
gurudwaras and purifying the Sikh way of life? Fox is emphasizing the Akali movement in 1920s, but he traces this backwards and locates it within the framework of British policies of maximizing the profit and guarding the Indian empire with the help of loyal and so-called ‘martial races’.33 Fox clearly states that the Khalsa identity is totally a handiwork of the British rule and any unification of the Sikhs was achieved during the Akali movement in the first quarter of the twentieth century.34

W.H. Mcleod does not stress too much on the role of colonial rule while he acknowledges the wide-ranging changes brought about by the rulers ranging from technology to mental attitude.35 However, he advocates a ‘historical’ – used for saying evolutionary – approach towards the question of Sikh identity.36 He delineates the differences among the sabhas as their differing understanding of the Sikh legacy in which the LSS won because of their consciousness and their initiative. The Singh Sabha movement, according to the McLeod systematized Sikhism for its propagation. In his evolutionary schema there is considerable space for the Khalsa identity of the eighteenth century.37

Ian J. Kerr goes on to say that the Sikh identity is essentially a function of the state.38 He is heavily dependent on Oberoi for the central argument ‘to investigate the contested, time-specific and emergent cultural dimensions to the Sikh identity as represented and explained by those within and without the Panth.’39 He moves on the familiar territory of co-opting the Sikh elite; military recruitment; local self-government, etc. due to which the state won over the loyalty of the ruled by working out a pattern of interest and identity.40 In his essay, however, he denies any agency to the Sikhs, appears to be state-centric and recognizes the Singh Sabha movement as the only vehicle of Sikh identity.

Brian P. Caton’s well argued piece about English nostalgia and the Punjab context in the late-nineteenth century offers new perceptions about Sikh identity. The English Yeomen ideal which mirrored the Englishness or English nation as inherently

33 ibid; p.126.
34 ibid;p.10,“British rulers, in pursuit of their colonial interests through means dictated by their own beliefs ,foreshadowed the reformed Sikh, or Singh identity , propounded by the Singh Sabhas.”
36 Ibid;p.7-10.
37 Ibid;p.60-70.
39 Ibid;p.147-149.
40 Ibid; p.152-158.
conservative placed squarely in the middle of eligibility to own small areas of land and the possibility of upward social mobility. All these essentialised and naturalistic attributes were foisted upon the Jat-Sikh peasantry.\textsuperscript{41} Brian P. Caton makes a further point by saying that nostalgia for the conservative English yeoman was a powerful tool in the hands of the elites, which could be used by the non-elites also to articulate their desire.\textsuperscript{42} Thus, according to Caton this shows complicity of the ruled in this power relationship. The accessibility of this discourse to Punjab administrators such as John Malcolm in 1812 to George MacMunn in 1920-30, suggests the application of the English rural ideal, as revealed in ethnographies, settlement reports, district gazetteers and memoirs, in comprehending and transforming Punjabi society.\textsuperscript{43}

Caton places the Singh Sabha movement in the complicitous power relation with the British which was self-perpetuating in this case: their status allowed the Sikh elites to successfully define the orthodoxy, and the orthodoxy they defined reified their elite status.\textsuperscript{44} This project was conducted somewhat outside the purvey of British colonial authority. However, because of efforts to maintain social order, the British government permitted the Singh Sabhas to engage in their project, whereas it had crushed the Namdhari and marginalised the Nirankaris.\textsuperscript{45} This act of assent thus assured the movement its success. Incidentally, this raises the question of Oberoi’s silence about Namdhari and Nirankari and other viable identities vis-à-vis the Tat-Khalsa. The British and Sikh agents involved in the process of forming a discourse of Sikh identity in the colonial period produced a rhetoric which sometimes clashed but most often suited the agenda of power maintenance of both groups.\textsuperscript{46} This is easily the most nuanced interpretation of the phenomenon, but silence about the agency or receiving group leaves some space for speculation which is further strengthened by the author’s use of only the secondary sources with Oberoi figuring most frequently. The other sources used are the works created by colonial authorities.

J.S. Grewal in his discussion about the nineteenth century conjuncture goes back in time and starts from the self-consciousness of the Sikhs with their increasing socio-cultural articulation and the ‘demonstrably distinct identity’ of the Singh during the

\textsuperscript{42} ibid;p.192.
\textsuperscript{43} ibid;p.195.
\textsuperscript{44} ibid;p.196-7
\textsuperscript{45} ibid;p.198.
\textsuperscript{46} ibid;p.197.
eighteenth century in relation to non-Singhs among the Sikhs bringing the issue of uniformity to the fore.\(^{47}\) Outsiders underlined the differences of external appearance, at the cost of their common faith and shared panthic life, as two different categories.\(^{48}\) Grewal gives primacy to the Arya Samaj's debate of Hindus and Sikh when the sabha leaders began to treat the Singh identity as the preferred Sikh identity because of its greater visibility.\(^{49}\) Their closeness to eighteenth century Khalsa identity eventually materialised in Bhai Kanh Singh's work in 1898 'Hum Hindu Nahin'. Grewal says that a serious concern for preserving and promoting the Sikh tradition may now appear to be obvious but this dimension has been overlooked in explanations which harp on the 'mundane' interests of a new middle class.

The grey area between the general conditions provided by colonialism and the exclusivist agenda of Punjabi elite has been dealt within the realm of 'discourse', 'epistemes', etc. The material imperative of such constructions is not studied in perspective in these accounts and a tendency to accord paradigmatic status to Oberoi for describing other phenomena like caste, gender, etc. has marginalised alternative attempts. Nazer Singh comes across as an exception to this trend in his attempt to link the emerging colonial discourse evolving contingently while also maintaining a sense of direction about its strategic objectives. Nazer Singh avoids reducing these objectives to either military considerations or the agrarian issues and explicates at length the colonial discourse on socio-cultural domain in Punjab right from the opening years of nineteenth century\(^{50}\). One can discern that some general tendencies and discursive tropes operative in colonial policy were derived from the strategic location of Punjab on the northwestern border. John Malcolm with his 'Sketch of the Sikhs' establishes the fundamental grid to interpret Punjabi history through communal shades reflecting in language, religion, state and polity. One crucial aspect of this method consisted in systematically eroding the legitimacy of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and his kingdom by denying the specific socio-political processes, which were fundamental in establishing as well as consolidating his rule. This ongoing colonial enterprise kept expanding and deepening over time along with adding of new elements culled from the colonial experience in Bengal, Benares, Delhi, etc\(^{51}\). The divisive cultural policies regarding

---


\(^{48}\) Ibid., p.20.

\(^{49}\) Ibid., p.73.

\(^{50}\) Singh, Nazer: *Delhi And Punjab, Essays In History And Historiography*, Sehgal Book Distributors, New Delhi, 1995, pp.154

\(^{51}\) Ibid., p.131.
language and history were racialised in the wake of annexation of Punjab in 1849 and such efforts were lapped up by the emerging as well as the traditional elite of different communities. Nazer Singh emphasises the materiality of this process and joins issue with Paul Brass and others while demonstrating that these elite groups and their reform movements alone should not be considered the carriers of these tendencies but the colonial discourse and its attendant institutional apparatus in the service of its political agenda should be given adequate weight to retrieve the hitherto marginalised questions.

Nazer Singh's analysis of colonial discourse about Punjab history and its cultural formations is nuanced than Oberoi's who gives a generalised account of structural conditions and the transformations wrought in Punjabi society. Oberoi remains focussed on generation of boundaries through the discourse around census operations, elite considerations and the resultant passages to modernity poised against the popular religious practice, which remains for Oberoi a counterweight to colonial modernity. Thus his projections of an 'epistemic rupture' are imperfectly argued by not accounting for those specific cultural policies pursued by the government that provided the essential armature for communitarian consciousness in the late-nineteenth century Punjab. This exercise also takes care of the colonial army-centric approaches to the issue of Sikh identity adopted by Richard G. Fox, Rajit K. Mazumdar and Tan Tai Yong. Some other authors make general points about the colonial discourse on Sikhs but none with as much analytical distinction as displayed by Nazer Singh. However, our case about the changes, advances, mutations in the popular domain remains even more important to provide a counterpoint to the colonial discourse as well as the elite-centric historiography from the vantage point of Sikh identity as a constituent of the emerging contours of Punjabi identity and the role played by Sikhs in this process spread from 1800 to 1930.

McLeod, Oberoi and the Sikh Studies

McLeod's influence on Harjot S. Oberoi is immense. He furthers McLeod's endeavour by foregrounding the category of a "cohesive community" in the overall context of ancient Indian aversion to writing systems hence an emphasis on

52 ibid; p.29-33
53 Oberoi, Harjot S.; The Construction Of Religious Boundaries, Culture Identity And Diversity In The Sikh Tradition. OUP, New Delhi, 1997. p.4
memorizing the canonical texts. However G.S. Mann and Pashaura Singh who show that the Gurus in fact, encouraged writing who were otherwise held in low esteem in India, criticize this assertion made by Oberoi.

For Oberoi the eighteenth century context in Punjab, Bengal and Tamilnadu points to a popular diffusion of the Sufi-Bhakti high culture of the masters e.g. Bachittar Natak, Janamsakhis, 18th century Sikh texts, etc. Also the qissas- having local flavour and exotic content - sit pretty well in this scenario. Rather than contextualizing these episodes in their specific settings he is equating these with the diffused, fuzzy, folksy boundaries, bereft of the heuristic notion of a cohesive community of Hindu, Muslim or Sikh. This failure to situate these cases in their historical contexts in fact essentializes these phenomena under a heuristic category of the 'pre-colonial,' by claiming, "...the religious life of the people, particularly in the pre-colonial period was characterized by a continuum. There was much interpenetration and overlapping of communal identities." The liberties with the scared served as an idiom of resistance for the peasantry. Whereas there is also a danger in valorizing these practices which undermine the prevalence of power by negating the potentiality of transformation into a substantive resistance at the material level.

Hinting at the amorphous nature of the Adi Granth through the interpretative mode Oberoi denies it a pivotal status. However the sheer focus of deriving any interpretation from the Adi Granth points towards its key location and secondly, by analyzing the social background, political attitude, and sectarian concerns of the endeavor one can attempt an analysis of various ideological and social conflicts in the making of a tradition. Oberoi does not develop this line of inquiry any further. Also how does he determine the "amorphous nature of the Adi Granth; by its constitutive practice or by its later interpretation? The editorial principles employed by Guru Arjan have been studied in detail by Pashaura Singh which highlights "doctrinal consistency; the ideal of balanced life; the spirit of optimism; the inclusive ideal and the concern for a distinctive Sikh identity. It seems that the fluid nature of Adi Granth is presumed under the general rubric of pre-colonial. This perfunctory treatment of the early Sikh tradition - closely

---

54 Ibid; p. 7
55 Singh, Pashaura; Guru Granth Sahib, Text Canon And Authority, OUP, Delhi, 2000. Regarding the respect given to scribes see p.18-19.
56 Ibid; op.cit.p.12
57 Ibid; p. 12 and on the essentialisation of pre-colonial' see Sumit Sarkar ,p.77; Richard M. Eaton p.143-150.; Achin Vanaik p.12,95,136(citing Sudipta Kaviraj),174,187.
58 Ibid; p.14-16.
60 Oberoi; op.cit. p.22. (Anne Murphy, Allegories of Difference and Identity and W.R. Pinch. Peasants and Monks In British India, OUP, Delhi 1996)
61 Singh, Pashaura; op.cit. p.50, 62,151-176.
62 Ibid; p. 88-9 and 176.
following Mcleod jumbles up his otherwise significant questions for which he seems to focus on the 'modern' period alone, whereas the constitution and reconstitution of the Sikh identity is a running theme in the Sikh movement itself.

Thus by sharply counterpoising the pre-colonial and colonial concern with identity Oberoi attributes this fact - not to show much concern for establishing distinct religious. boundaries - to the Indic cultural environment and its characteristic ambiguity and fluidity especially regarding religious identities. Whereas we find a seventeenth century chronicler, Mohsin Fani, recording a particularly strong notion of being a Sikh in the mid-seventeenth century Punjab.

Oberoi does not specify the nature of change in the self of Sikhism with the founding of the Khalsa in 1699 and who were those "sections of the Sikh populace" that joined Khalsa ranks. In fact the anti-empire stance and the resultant dynamic imposed upon the Sikhs and new political urgency, dividing the Sikh community into pro- or anti-empire segments with some rebel zamindars, peasants and artisans joining the Khalsa signal the forging of a political vehicle, which was open to any creed to join it through an initiation ceremony. There is a strong willingness to label it as a "moral community" of an elective nature rather than being a hereditary institution.

Thus we are confronted with a notion of community which is an everyday phenomena, contextual, specific and generating its own status quo over time in conjunction with other historical forces in a dialectical manner. In this way we are not freezing the community into any simplistic dichotomy between 'fluid/distinct; pre-colonial/modern; Khalsa/Sehajdhari; etc. rather keeping the analytical space shorn of any heuristic closure in order to account for internal ideological conflicts, social orientations and political motivations within a tradition. Irfan Habib does mention some such observations regarding the jatt entry into Sikhism, its historical juncture; material conditions; comprehension of the message by various constituents, their selections and omissions. However, he does not enquire it in length. Kumkum Sangari attempts the same exercise although by analyzing the nodes of similarity as well as heterogeneity and its social, aesthetic and political content in the various bhakti saint-poets and thus

---

63 Oberoi: op cit; p.24.
64 Habib, I. & Grewal, J.S.: Sikh History from Persian Sources, Tulika, New Delhi, 2001, p.59-84.
67 J.P.S.Uberoi prefers to categorize it as'society for salvation' in his Religion, Civil Society And The State, A Study Of Sikhism, OUP, New Delhi, 1999, p.97and 137.
68 Habib, I: 'The Jatts of Punjab and Sind', in Punjab Past and Present, p.98-100
taking care of the criticism about not giving credence to the synchrony of these phenomena.\textsuperscript{70} W.R. Pinch develops this complex problematique to account for Ramanandi monks and their socio-historical journey carrying ideological, political and social currents within it and being affected by them.\textsuperscript{71} It is not without interest that they all propose structural connections of a fundamental nature to account for the webbed terrain of the Indian society and history, which is otherwise relegated to be a continuum of a pre-colonial variety discussed under the rubric of Indic culture, Sanatandharm', and so on.

Oberoi while referring to the Khalsa transformation insists primarily on the distinct code of conduct and initiation rites, which made subscription to a new set of bodily symbols mandatory.\textsuperscript{72} One assumes that he is looking at the preponderance of the \textit{Rahitnama} literature in the eighteenth century, which according to me remains a circumspect source to affirm the notions of Sikh identity, even in the eighteenth century. Secondly, a semiotic analysis of the initiation rites of Sikhism reveals it to be a 'specific inversion' in relation to the rites of social renunciation established by the medieval mendicant orders that preceded Sikhism.\textsuperscript{73} W.R. Pinch suggests that following such mores of discipline afforded a substantial aura of self-respect especially for those social groups derided as impure.\textsuperscript{74} Following a pure lifestyle as a way of undermining the caste discriminations, that stigmatized low-status populations, also opens up the possibility of treating such symbols, rites, ceremonies as protest against the Sanatan episteme with varnashramadharma as its paradigmatic core.\textsuperscript{75} By treating this phenomena of symbols, initiation ceremony as within the paradigm of varna hierarchy, both Oberoi and Mcleod make a further mistake by reducing the Khalsa rahit to a mark of formal identity with an 'other' in the form of Muslim and again Dasam Granth is the chosen text to prove the point.\textsuperscript{76} Oberoi insists that this was not the case because in Dasam Granth we witness a 'mediating third term of co-existence': in contrast to either cultural borrowing from any source or its presumed opposition, political hostility.\textsuperscript{77} Thus we escape from falling in the dichotomy or as J. P. S. Oberoi would have it, the dualism of social indistinction

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{70} Oberoi, J.P.S.; \textit{Religion Civil Society and the State}. p.143.
\textsuperscript{71} Pinch; op cit.p.2-3, 6-7, and passim.
\textsuperscript{72} Oberoi; op cit, p.24.
\textsuperscript{73} Oberoi, J.P.S.; \textit{Religion, Civil Society and the State}, p.10-11. McLeod however, locates these symbols within the paradigm of 'hill culture'-- emphasising the Devi cult-- impinging upon themilitant jatt character acquired by the Sikh community See his \textit{The Evolution Of Sikh Community}, OUP, New Delhi,p.13. This assertion seems to provide analytical space for Oberoi to forward his argument that Guru Gobind Singh prepared the ground for a fusion of the Khalsa with the Sanatan episteme with Dasam Granth as its fountainhead and hence, the boundaries remained fuzzy.p.24-26,92-105.
\textsuperscript{74} Pinch; op cit. p.39.
\textsuperscript{75} HSO; op cit. p.63.
\textsuperscript{77} Oberoi; op.cit.p.76.
\end{footnotesize}
and 'political' as defined in a narrow militarist sense. In this context, it seems justified
to quote Niharranjan Ray: "One can easily say that his (Guru Gobind's) selection of
Epic and Puranic myths and legends was limited to those alone that were of a fearless
and heroic nature, having a content of heroic struggle and heroism and determination
among his people preparing them to fight against their enemies, the Hindu rajas and the
Mughal imperial authority (emphasis added)."

The overwhelming tone of the passage is to treat the military-political dimension
of the Khalsa in relation to opposition from both the sides. Completely reducing the
temporal aspect to hill culture of Epic and Puranic sans military opposition and conflating
the Mughal opposition with the Muslims as an other 'succeeds' in disorienting or reading
the order of the Khalsa in a unitary manner following the principles of "silence and
negation".

Secondly the idea of a rahit and the acceptance of a particular Rahitnama
injunction are perhaps two different phenomena. Oberoi is silent on this accord rather; he
saturates this line of enquiry by granting the Sanatan episteme the sole authority in this
regard. He foregrounds the emblematic aspect of 5 Ks as reflecting the Sikh identity over
other possible coordinates for instance, the changing social composition of the Khalsa
over time and its ideological expression, contests and ambivalences, etc. Since a
community is to be seen only in visual terms in Oberoi's framework, homogeneity is
ascribed a cardinal status in his presentation. Any deviation from the norm is viewed as an
evidence of denial of self-identity of the Sikhs. Thus a narrative is constructed which
negates substantive issues and prioritises uniformities or homogeneity. Thus he situates
his framework in 'diversity versus uniformity' paradigm with diversity corresponding to
the pre-colonial and uniformity as the overarching criteria for determining (Sikh) identity
is rendered coterminous with modernity setting in through the colonial mode.

The notion of multiple identities should not be made to convey that the elements
underpinning the Sikh self-image were not discernible. Oberoi is treating the notions of
identity as primarily exclusivist as against the pluralist notion. Further while talking
about the Sikh 'great and little tradition' in a vague manner he does not situate Sikhism
as a panth or movement in any of these criteria within the Indic cultural episteme. That is why while accounting for a success of the Singh Sabha project in reconstituting

---

79 HSO, op. cit. p.30-31. On Guru Gobind Singh's battles with hill chiefs and other conflictual processes,
180,128-140.
81 Oberoi; op.cit.p.24-25.
82 Ibid; p.24-25.
Sikhism 'in its own image by presenting an unchanging idiom in a period of flux and thus a new cultural elite aggressively usurped the right to represent other within this singular tradition... under a monolithic, codified and closed culture'. He marginalizes Namdharis; altogether ignores such sects or deras as the Gulabdasis etc., in his work which in turn raises second question regarding the material constraints of being seen to be on the right side of the Raj as a leading factor amongst that very new aggressive cultural elite furthering a sectarian identity in opposition to the sections which were anti-Raj such as the Namdharis, Sardar Ajit Singh in 1907, the Ghadarites, etc. and their notion of an inclusivist ethical Sikh identity. Seen differently this also shows the inability of thinking a model for accounting identity and inclusivity, each possessing a unity. J.P.S. Uberoi calls it the dualism that according to him separates the individual from collective, status from power, fact from value etc., which is to be transcended by "the non-dualism of Indian modernity".

Oberoi argues for a 'series of highly complex ruptures, rapproachments and transitions resulting in the modern Sikh community. "The dramatic political triumph of the Khalsa in the 1750s gave them a vast empire ironically however; the attainment of sovereignty and the process of state formation denied the crystallization of a uniform Sikh identity". Denied it for whom? Did 'they' ever aspire for uniformity? If yes, then why were they unsuccessful? Oberoi disallows any space for probing structural features, their limitations as well as emphases on the process of Sikh identity. Also by taking the eighteenth century as the first instance of rupture and rapprochment, Oberoi denies the pre-Khalsa phase its distinction and self-identity.

While accounting for the early Sikhs as a textual community, Oberoi does not provide any guidance and by looking to answer the social mobility through the peoples' veneration for a written text in an oral context he fails to take hold of any structural factor. His discussion of the Varan by Bhai Gurdas 'best source of understanding early Sikh identity' is frankly superficial. He is looking for a corporeal, communitarian notion of the Sikh identity and does not delve into the notions of Sangat, Dharmasala, bani, unity of Guruship, etc. The ideological underpinnings of these institutions should be brought to light to arrive at more substantive notion of identity. Moreover, Bhai Gurdas's critique of Hindus and Muslims is ideological and social not just on sectarian lines.

---

83 Ibid; p.25  
84 Uberoi, JPS; op.cit. p.150-51.  
85 Oberoi; op.cit. p.47.  
86 Ibid; p.47-8.  
87 Ibid; p.49-50  
88 Ibid; p.50-52, Also see Hans, Surjit; 'A Reconstruction of Sikh History from Sikh Literature. ABS Publishers Jalandhar, p.180-185.  
28
By resorting to a mere listing of various denominations within Sikhism and not exploring their ideology, social composition and political stance to draw a significant inference - he is a fact very much in the empiricist trap.\(^89\) He is oblivious of the socio-ideological thrust of the Bani, which actually establishes the centrality of human being and hence only succeeds in recounting for the 'transformation' of Sikhism in the entry of the Jatts.\(^90\) Further, the inclusion of ('diverse contributors and hetero-textuality') various bhagats, Sufis, bhattis, etc. point towards the pan-Indian aspirations of the fifth Guru, Arjun.\(^91\) By not viewing the phase of quietism and militarism as structurally bound by a series of mediations Oberoi plays up the very dualism which these movements attempted to resolve.\(^92\) While discussing the Brahmins and the Khatris resisting the Khalsa on account of their adherence to the customary cultural codes of their own lineages and castes,\(^93\) he innocently collapses the colossal 'other - the Mughal state. Joining the Khalsa was a moral, political choice not only an esoteric matter. The period under consideration, the early 18th century, was about the anti-empire struggle which constructed boundaries of a very different nature rather than emanating from 'inwardness' as suggested by Oberoi.\(^94\) However, we may state that Khalsa's association with the universality of message of Islam was simultaneously held up along with its 'resistance to the medieval worst of Mughal imperialism in politics, and the system of Muslim bigotry; fanaticism and superiority in society, claiming shariat law as its legitimation.\(^95\) There is a strong inclination in Oberoi to treat the Rahitnamas as constituting the Sikh version of the Hindu/Brahmanical 'high' tradition with caste/varna as its lynchpin.\(^96\) However, he uses only the 'Chaupa Singh Rahitnama'; as his source to mount a critique of Richard G. Fox who based his readings on English or English-language sources such as census reports, administrative reports, army recruitment manuals and so on to further the point that the Khalsa identity was predominantly a colonial state's creation in the late nineteenth century appropriated by the 'urban classes' (FN).

\(^89\) Ibid; p.53-54.
\(^90\) Ibid; p.58.
\(^91\) Singh, Pashaura; op.cit.p.171.
\(^92\) Uberoi; op.cit.p.16.
\(^93\) Uberoi; op. cit, p.62.
\(^94\) Ibid; p.62.
\(^95\) Ibid; op.cit. p.86.
\(^96\) Uberoi; op.cit. p.63. The Rahitnama paradigm consists of the notion of a narrowly defined community as well as ritually sectarian practices being themselves a circumstantial product of subjective thrusts with differing situational perspectives. This tendency was further augmented by the writings of Kesar Singh Chhibber in the latter half of eighteenth century. Political literature of late- nineteenth century – early twentieth century also exists as commentative writings on the scripture with a general desire to explicate ethical virtues out of which all Khalsa traditions were ideally derived. Singh Sabha movement while retaining the communitarian edge, attempts to substitute the rahitanama sentiment with an instrumentalist rationality derived from the colonial modernity by clearing the received tradition of all contradictions. see Nripinder Singh: The Sikh Moral Tradition, Manohar, New Delhi, 1985, p.228.
This particular rahitnama was translated into English by Mcleod which the later scholarship has demonstrated that it was actually written by Kesar Singh Chhibber's clan member\textsuperscript{97} having many ideological similarities with Chhibber's \textit{Bansavalinama} in his emphasis on Hindu mythology. Incidentally, Oberoi records Kesar Singh Chhibber's \textit{Bansavalinama} as anti-theitical to the community of Khalsa.\textsuperscript{98} However, his reading of the indigenous sources is not comprehensive enough. Dislocating the political thrust, ambiguous injunctions, 'apostate' pronouncements, he reads the rahitnama in a unitary manner. Further the internally variegated domain of rahitnama genre, authoring climate and most significantly its reception by the concerned audience must be probed. Similarly his description of the Muslim as 'other' is based on Chaupa Singh's evidence\textsuperscript{99} but there are plenty of sources that do not support this conclusion. Thus he is pushing the authority and status of Rahitnama too far to account for a distinct identity in terms of ritual uniformity and his Khalsa versus the rest of Punjabi society is too neat a division to be acceptable both, empirically and conceptually.\textsuperscript{100}

His treatment of eighteenth century institutions the \textit{misls, gurmata, rakhi, sarbat khalsa} and so on is perfunctory. All these contributed towards the later success of the Khalsa which attracted productive classes presenting a shared space of righteousness, rather than any specific, identity recruits. A careful analysis of these institutions can contribute towards a refined understanding of this phase.\textsuperscript{101} Among the Sehajdharis he includes \textit{Nanak - Panthis} and \textit{Udasis} who symbolized alternative ways of being a Sikh until the Khalsa mode attained hegemony.\textsuperscript{102} Oberoi then focuses entirely on the Udasis and their practices and conflates his conclusions derived from them as applicable to the rest of Sehajdharis.\textsuperscript{103} This issue of Udasis, sehajdharis also demands a closer scrutiny of their social background and their spokesmen who pushes forward the case of gurulineages and other Brahmanical ideas to have attained virtuous position in counseling the Sikh chiefs in their exercise of temporal power. J.P.S. Uberoi will call it the reversion to the (Indian medieval) dualism of status and power which the Khalsa (society for salvation) wished to resolve.\textsuperscript{104} Thus Kesar Singh Chhibber can be said to belong to the medieval structure as against the social project espoused by Khalsa. Similarly, the Udasi practices have a well-defined tradition of monasticism which although normatively followed Sikkism but interpreted it in a Vedantic-Puranic manner. Thus Chhibber along with the udasis and other such efforts shows a distinct similarity.

\textsuperscript{97} Singh, R.J. see Introduction to \textit{'Bansavalinama'} by Kesar Singh Chhibber, GNDU, Amritsar,p.17-19.
\textsuperscript{98} Oberoi; op.cit. p.75
\textsuperscript{99} ibid.p.68
\textsuperscript{100} ibid; p.67
\textsuperscript{101} ibid; p.71-75.
\textsuperscript{102} ibid; p.75-6.
\textsuperscript{103} ibid; p.77-8.
\textsuperscript{104} Uberoi, J.P.S.; op.cit.p.32.
To explain this paradox of duality in the Sikh identity, Oberoi seeks to locate this coexistence of Khalsa and Sehajdhari identities as part of the complex process of state formation which required the support of clans with their pre-existing social hierarchies and Udasis brought the Sikhs and Hindus closer to ward off a potential threat from the Muslims. Thus it was structural to the formation of the Sikh state that 'Hinduisation' would occur which led to the dilution of what may be described as the religious project of the Khalsa. The alliance between the brahmanised Sikh church and the Sikh state sought to segregate the domains of status and power in a highly unequal society and hence, consigning the egalitarian impulse to the realm of the Gurdwara in order to carry out the inegalitarian policies of the state. However, this failure to create 'an absolutely new mode of social organization' with respect to egalitarian aspect by the Sikh Gurus and their disciples is better explained, in my view, by registering the non-transformation of the economy from feudal to other systems. With productive system not sufficiently developed, availability of land was easy and the crafts were meant for domestic consumption - all these factors resulted in the perpetuation of that very system which ensured the grip of Hindu-Brahmanical value system. This productive system was never seriously disturbed, all protestant and non-conformist movements - were found to be impinged by the limits imposed by its overarching value system. Irfan Habib while acknowledging the rise in status of low-caste's through the Sikh movement however mentions that this social mobility was modeled in the shape of the Mughal ruling classes and conditions with the basic elements of the agrarian system remaining unaltered and the infusion of the zamindars along with the religious idiom 'enlarged the scale but weakened the class nature' of such movements. Thus it is in the general conditions that we can talk about for the persistence and continued significance of these lineage-groups in the Sikh polity to account for its impact on the Sikhs. Primacy should be imparted to these unaltered conditions and not just to these cultural mores of clans or biradaris.

We also have to account for the massive grants given to Udasis along with the Sodhis, Bedis, Jogis, Vaishnavas etc. Alongwith this, elevation of guru-lineages as the leaders of the corporate realm in alliance with the state; the Udasi interpretation giving a vedantic turn to the ideais of Gurmat; the inclusion of earlier outcasts e.g.the Dhirmalias, Minas etc. into the panth shows the structural similarities of the conservative sections. However, Pinch draws another very significant conclusion that this check on

---

105 Oberoi; op.cit.p.77-79.
108 Ibid; p.87-8.
109 Ray,N.R;op. cit.p.76-80.
110 Habib, Irfan, 'Essays in Indian History',Tulika ,New Delhi, p.248-249,249.
111 Pinch, W.R. op.cit. p.28.
armed monasticism in order to shape up 'priestly monk unconcerned with worldly power and given over completely to religious contemplation and prayer. was also intimately linked with the rise of caste mores to limit the ideological effects of the low-born's entry into the Vaishnavas. Thus such developments closely parallel the Sikh case which Surjit Hans characterizes as the 'privatisation of Sikhism'. According to Oberoi the Sanatan religious culture had Dasam Granth as its paradigmatic text which mediated their tensions, anxieties and fluidities through the mythic mode, in order to reconcile the Khalsa - Sehajdhari paradox. Its impact on the Sikh consciousness was reflected by the rise of the Gur- Bilas genre and in the domain of exegesis.

The pervasive influence of the Sanatan episteme is evident from doctrinal debates, which reified the same process e.g. the debate about Guru Nanak's position in the religious universe between Bhai Santokh Singh and Sadhu Anandghan. Oberoi is looking for these sources and ignoring other folk-popular sources, which can provide us with interesting contrasts, negotiations and similarities. Incidentally, it has been suggested that Santokh Singh's idea of the Sikh rahit is taken from 'Sau Sakhi' a text which Oberoi characterizes as embodying 'primitive protest' against the Sanatan episteme. Thus, 'there was no escaping the great code as enunciated in the Dasam Granth'. He does not seem interested to probe the internal interpretative variety within the same tradition which carries meaning at various levels. By insisting on the 'bricolage' notion of this episteme he is in fact, flattening it of potentialities which it might be possessing. That is why he is not able to explain the divergence between promoting a Khalsa rahit however in mythically saturated universe. It needs other variables to open the variety of questions, which we tend to look up in this study.

Oberoi views the sanatan religious culture as an extremely rich religious culture encompassing great varieties, 'an assemblage of heterogenous culture materials'. Simultaneously it was primarily a 'priestly' religion, creating its hierarchy with the lay people believing these religious intermediaries as 'gurus' despite being at odds with the normative thrust of the Sikh ideology. Lahore state patronized this 'religious universe of the elites' giving it the aura of 'official religion' lording over massively unequal

112 Pinch, ibid; p.25.
113 Pinch, ibid; p.25-27.
114 Hans, Surjit, 'A Reconstruction...p.44, 45-46.
115 Oberoi; op. cit.p.92-3,98-102.
116 Ibid; p. 102.
117 Ibid. Bansavalinama.191-93.
118 Ibid; p. 191.
119 ibid. p. 192-3.
120 Ibid; p. 137 for bricolage notion of Sanatan episteme.
121 Oberoi, p.70
122 Ibid; p. 137
society. He seems to think that state patronage, religious intermediation enshrined in extremely 'rich' religious culture upholding caste system and generally having a priestly orientation with lay people having affinity with it. This treatment is indeed vague and vacuous with significant silences about the Khalsa sector in this period - which epitomized it, who patronized it, etc. Silencing one stream at the cost of other might give an idea of episteme some respectability; however, it clouds the overall picture. Also, the term Sanatan is anachronistically used. Since the formal education was in the hands of Udasis and Nirmalas, it is highly probable that a priestly, official, elitist kind of religious culture developed. However, was it so shorn of internal conflicts - doctrinal or otherwise - remains to be examined afresh? W.R.Pinch's examination of the debates in the *Ramanandi Sampraday* about whether Ramanuja was a part of their tradition implied deep social concerns, attitude towards caste, etc. By treating these sectarian, scholarly rhetoric as essentially reifying the same sanatan culture one runs the risk of proving a theoretical point at the cost of silencing or negating the evidence.

This endeavour also demands to account for a personalised religion in the early 19th century from an earlier (18th century) notion of a political religion. The Khalsa was to be an elective body, sovereign in both spiritual and temporal realms, having freedom in society and responsibility under the guidance of the divine word (Guru Granth) with all ten gurus as its fixed exemplars. This historical event completed the threefold identification of the godhead as the guru, the word as the guru and the congregation of the disciples as the guru... so producing the archetypal Sikh trinity of Guru, Granth and Panth (the way). Oberoi accounts for the 'subordinate social sector' in the realm of popular culture having its own participatory network, orality, pragmatism and cultural agents and totally marginalized.

Oberoi talks about lack of religious boundaries, inversion of the social order in the popular religion centred around local gods, sacred pirs, Sufis, witchcraft, fares, etc. This culture of the 'subordinate social sector' simultaneously stood harmoniously along with the Sanatan co-religionists. This subverts the major thrust of his presentation by saturating the entire society with the sanatan religious universe with a pronounced focus on maintenance of hierarchy and order, leaving space only for a symbolic protest through the popular religious mode. Moreover, he draws too neat an inventory of differences between the sanatan and popular domains and then fuses them. J.S. Grewal

---

123 ibid; p. 138
126 ibid; p.74.
127 Oberoi; p.138,141-2.
128 Oberoi; op. cit. p. 155-190.
129 Ibid.p. 201-203.
shows that for Oberoi, the Udasis are Sanatan Sikhs and that Khalsa Sikhs have been ignored by him in the early nineteenth century context with murmurs of protest coming solely from 'anonymous' quarters - Gurbilas Chhevin Patshahi and Sau Sakhi - in the textual domains, and by the advent of Nirankaris and Namdharis in actual practice in the mid-nineteenth century. However, according to Oberoi their criticism itself remained within the confines of Sanatan episteme.

Oberoi's treatment of the 'Sau Sakhi' inadvertently drains it of being a meaningful carrier of protest which results from ignoring other information within the same text (in other words, applying the principle of silence - a refined way of saying selective use of the source); not mentioning even the conjecture about the supposed author, Gurbax Singh; and avoiding the big question at all: why to interpolate? Also, the tendency to view the internal diversity or hierarchy only in terms of the Khalsa/Sanatan polarity negates the other plausible divisions in the Panth e.g. between Jatts and Khatris; status of Shahids and the nature of the mission and so on.

On the issue of the omnipresent sanatan episteme, he has built up a non-conflictual, shared scared universe of the elite and the rural folk - materially, the former virtually parasitic over the latter however, their religious orientations are of the same order. This paradoxical reality must have had some real potential for generating alternatives, however hegemonised by the elite but offering resistance in material ways also. The analytical mode of Oberoi and its application in this case overlooks these substantive issues. For instance the social composition of the Kukas as well as the Nirankaris is hardly mentioned. Against the militant call of the former, the latter professed an orthodox, quietist mode of religiosity, which is not fundamentally opposed to their contemporary elite. So where does one place it? What was the logic advanced in their critique to Sanatan and popular varieties? Similarly, the Kukas by conducting the initiation ceremony in villages demonstrate the social space for the Khalsa 'episteme' within the popular domain. In fact, it needs to be said that Khalsa order was not just about taboos and norms of a formal nature which put off rural folk but a formidable vehicle of a very real challenge to social hierarchy, political insensitivity, etc. (euphemistically called sanatan episteme having rich and heterogenous materials) available to the lay people. This aspect in fact shows the close affinity between the popular and the Khalsa ideal. Kukas' anti-idolatry reminds one of 'Dabistan' mentioning the similar attitudes in the mid-seventeenth century, establishes the element of morality.

130 Grewal, J.S.; Historical Perspectives on Sikh Identity, p.28-29.
131 Ibid; p.29.
132 Oberoi; op.cit.p.190-195.
133 Ibid;p. 196.
134 Habib and Grewal; Sikh History from Persian Sources p.66.
and ethical social action amongst the lay followers of religion by the peasantry in the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth centuries. Pinch also shows that the popular domain was not just a symbolic universe rather it had well argued ideas about doctrinal issues and institutional concerns. Our study also shows this reciprocal relationship between the Khalsa and the popular as reflected in the popular sources in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

By keeping the Kuka movement within the ambit of sanatan episteme and labeling it as a 'primitive protest' Oberoi exhausts the potential of the protest movements before the eventual advent of the Singh Sabhas. The entire socio-religious arena is rendered free for them to inscribe it as they please. Politically servile, the Singh Sabha movement is given an uncritical field, by claiming that the 'Tat Khalsa' episteme established the ritually pure domain and thus successfully implanted the social agenda of Sikh elite. It seems imperative to once again mention the fact that, the Kukas articulated anti-British rhetoric while simultaneously arguing for espousing a militant Khalsa ethic among its followers whereas, the Singh Sabhas were pro-Raj and articulated a formal identity for Sikhs in which the ethic was reduced to a very conservatively defined rahit. Also whereas the Kukas were brutally suppressed by the British, the Singh Sabhaite was actually promoted by the colonial state. This also shows that for the Raj, Sikh formal identity was not as important as their political views.

Also the preference for 'var' and 'Chandi Chartra' in the Kuka universe points towards a militant call to arms for the Kukas. Other texts regarding their political ambitions are not discussed by Oberoi which can locate their position within Sikh movement in a nuanced and concrete manner. J.S. Grewal mentions in this context the popularity of the 'Sau Sakhi' and 'Prem-Sumarg' with the Kukas.

Finally, what should one make out of such statement, "...Sanatan Sikh tradition created a cultural reference system akin to that of the carnival". While one is also told in no ambiguous tone about the entrenched caste notions: "Sikhs had no idea of difference between Khalsa and Sahajdhari but a highly developed notion of what to do what low-caste mazhabi and chamar sikhs'. Elsewhere... 'it (Sanatan culture) exemplified the strength, richness and actual state of the nineteenth century Sikh religious tradition.' J.S. Grewal while describing Oberoi's treatment of the early-nineteenth

---

135 Pinch; op.cit. p.94.
136 ibid. p.6, 7, 9.
137 Oberoi; op.cit. p.200.
138 Grewal, J.S.p.142-143.
139 Oberoi; p.256
140 ibid; p.241.
141 ibid;p.256-7.
century period terms it as an understudied period\textsuperscript{142} especially 'his whole hypothesis of Sanatan Sikhism... appears to be vague and vacuous.'\textsuperscript{142}

In my view, the political stance of various phases of the Sikh movement offers a better vantage point of looking at the Sikh identity question. This stance also succeeds in demonstrating the internal dissensions and its attendant cultural expressions that can help us in relating the Sikh identity question to other religious communities in Punjab as well its relation with the 'secular' Punjabi culture.

\textsuperscript{142} Grewal; op. cit. p.28-29.
\textsuperscript{143} ibid; p.29.