Chapter 5

THE ISSUE OF IDENTITY

The issue of identity gained importance in the last decades of the nineteenth century, when numbers began to count, in argumentation as well as in census reports, strengthening democratic assumptions without even the semblance of a democratic system. Since 1877, the Arya Samaj had been carrying out reform work among the Hindus in the Punjab as were the Singh Sabhas to bring about reform in Sikhism. Swami Dayanand’s *Satyarth Prakash* advocated a strong argument against Christianity and Islam than against Puranic Hinduism and Sikhism. However, after the split in the Samaj in 1893-1894, the ‘militant’ Aryas in particular waged a war in print against Christians, Muslims, Sikhs and the traditional Hindus. The ‘Arya’ consciousness was being transformed into ‘Hindu’ consciousness. This led to a corresponding awareness in the Sikh community as the Aryas argued that the Sikhs had no separate identity of their own and were to be included in the Hindus. This was not acceptable to the Sikhs as the community had become reform oriented and politically aware, thinking that without a distinct identity and its acknowledgement by others, the Sikh community would be subsumed by the larger Hindu community and suffer politically, economically, socially and in the field of religion.

The British policy of maintaining a ‘balance’ between the various communities encouraged competition between them for jobs, funds for education of their respective communities and other such community related work. Communal consciousness was not confined to the Hindus or Aryas and Sikhs. Muslims too began to form associations like the Anjuman-i-Islamia and *Anjuman-i-Himayat-i-Islam* to carry on reform work, propagate education and look after the general interests of the Muslims in the province. Closely connected with the issue of numbers was thus the issue of identity of the
religious communities of the Punjab in which their very existence was perceived to be at stake. To make the issue of identity more important in the first and second decades of the twentieth century the idea of Hindu Muslim separation was given constitutional and political recognition in the Punjab and the rest of the country while the Sikhs got nothing. The political situation along with the Sikh-Arya confrontation sharpened the issue of Sikh identity. The death of Dyal Singh Majithia in 1898 made the question of Sikh identity a legal issue especially when the court ruled that he was a Hindu. A new urgency was imparted to the Sikh-Arya debate on the identity of the Sikhs.

The present chapter is divided into three sections. The first section deals with our understanding of the identity of the Sikhs as depicted in the Guru period till the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Our endeavor is to ascertain the status of the distinct identity of the Sikhs in this period so as to be able to make a meaningful analysis of the issue of Sikh identity in the colonial period. It may therefore be useful to analyze the views and self-image of the Sikh Gurus, the early Sikh society and early Sikh writers. The second section takes up the issue of Sikh identity in the colonial period and the steps taken by the Singh Sabhaities to assert the distinct identity of the Sikh community and distinctive rites and ceremonies, including the rahit evolved and reinforced by the Singh Sabha reformers in their bid to foster the distinct identity of the Sikh community. The third section sums up the chapter and briefly analyses some recent views on the subject of Sikh identity.

It is apparent from the writings of Guru Nanak that he does not quote any authority or source outside God for his religious views. At the end of every verse uttered by him is placed his name, Nanak indicating that he declines to accept any authority except that of the Almighty. At several places, he affirms that he is 'an unemployed minstrel in the service of God' (Ham dhadi bekaar
"kaare laya). ‘O Lalo, I express what the Lord conveys me to speak’ (Jaisi mein ave khasam ki bani taisa kare gyan ve lalo.). ‘I have no voice of my own; all that I have said, is his command’ (Aapo bol na janda mein keha sab hukam aao jiyo) Guru Nanak tells the Sikhs, ‘consider the Bani of the Satguru the word of Truth. O Sikhs, it is the Lord who makes me convey it.\(^2\) (Satgur ki bani sach hai gursikho har karta aap muho kadai). Guru Nanak severely criticized the prevalent religions of the times making it clear that he does not have any affinity with any one of them. He repeatedly showed his intention of establishing his own path outside the prevalent religions of the time.\(^3\) This he made clear also by appointing Guru Angad to succeed him.

Guru Angad continued to speak in the same vein and acknowledged Guru Nanak as ‘the transmitter of spiritual light stronger than that of hundreds of moons and thousands of suns’\(^4\). The Guru also stressed the importance of langar to establish the casteless character of the new society over which he was presiding. By doing so his followers were separated from ‘others’.

Guru Amar Das, also called himself Nanak and organized an order of preachers to propagate the new faith. For recording his writings, like his two predecessors he abandoned the Sanskrit language and adopted the language of the people, using the gurmukhi alphabet developed by Guru Nanak and Guru Angad. Thus Guru Amar Das, added more elements of the separateness of the Sikhs. Guru Amar Das took yet another step towards setting up the independence of the Sikh religion he established pilgrim centres other than the Hindu and Muslim ones as gathering points for the new faith. He gave clear instructions to his followers to make no secret of their faith and to openly acknowledge Guru Nanak alone as their spiritual guide.\(^5\) Before his death, he appointed Guru Ram Das to succeed him as an organizer and spiritual guide for the new faith. Guru Ram Das established the central shrine of Sikhism in Amritsar besides testifying to the distinct character of his faith in his writings.

His successor, Guru Arjan, placed the seal of distinctiveness on the new faith by collecting together the verses written by his predecessors and by
adding his own to the volume now known as the eternal Guru of the Sikhs. Bhai Gurdas, a contemporary of Guru Arjan, and Guru Hargobind, states that Guru Nanak ‘established the distinctive character of his path with ‘God’s word’. The Guru’s message became the basis of a distinct casteless society with on the amalgamation of all castes into a single whole.

The popular level, the janam-sakhis reveal a consciousness of distinction. In the Puratan Janamsakhi the Guru is shown as claiming direct divine sanction for his mission. On the basis of internal evidence, it is deduced to have been written during Guru Hargobind’s time which makes it one of the earliest sources claiming a separate identity of the Sikhs. In mid-seventeenth century the distinct identity of the Sikhs is proclaimed in the Dabistan-i-Mazahib. The words tabqa, ta’ifa, giroh, jama’at, firqa, or panth are used by him to identify the people who subscribe to a certain set of doctrines. In his view in each of the category discussed by him possessed a distinct identity of its own. In its second part in the twelfth section he deals with the religious principles and practices of people of India other than those treated in the first eleven sections. Here he takes up the category of Nanak-Panthis also known as gursikhs. The traits of the Nanak-Panthis noted by him distinguishes them from all other people treated in the book, including Hindus and Muslim. The Sikhs did not make any distinction between Guru Nanak and his successors, regarding them all as one. If a Sikh did not regard Guru Arjan (the fifth mahal) exactly as Guru Nanak (the first mahal), he was treated as an unbeliever (kafr). Every Sikh was regarded as the Sikh of Guru Nanak, and why the Panth was called the Nanak Panth. He is of the view that the Sikh belief in transmigration distinguished them from Muslims, and the Sikh insistence on the unity of God distinguished them from the Hindus. ‘Mobad’ ‘encountered’ the Sikhs in 1643-1644. According to him the ‘Guru-Sikhs do not believe in images or idol-temples, or count the avtars for anything. None of the austerities and customary forms of worship of the Hindus have any currency. He notices the presence of the Sikhs in many cities in the inhabited region.
One of the earliest reference to Sikh identity by a contemporary of the tenth Guru is Sainapat's *Gur Sobha*. He records the reaction of the Khatris and Brahmans of Delhi to the creation of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh. "They closed shops and struck work protesting against the strict abandoning of age old rituals of Hinduism by the Guru’s Khalsa. They said they would not let the Khalsa carry on their business so as to make it financially difficult for them. This would make them give up their new Singh identity. They protested and petitioned the Mughal authority against the new fangled practices."

He is considered an authoritative voice on the Sikh code of conduct. In a *Rahitnama* attributed to Bhai Nand Lal the Sikhs are distinguished from the Hindus by upholding the new religious practices. From Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh all Gurus are one, and should be recognized as such. ‘Gurgaddi’ is given to the Granth and the Panth creating a distinct personality. The Sikhs are told not to worship Goddess. Four *varnas* are not to be upheld. Every religion must be sacrificed for the Guru’s path.

In the mid-eighteenth century *Gurbilas Patshahi* 10 by Koer Singh gives a picture of the life and times of Guru Gobind Singh. Koer Singh was associated with Bhai Mani Singh. In his understanding, one of the main objectives of the new *pahul* ceremony was to establish a casteless society. The distinctiveness of the Sikh faith is further depicted in his statement that both Hindus and Muslims are acceptable as Khalsa, provided they abjured previous beliefs. He also refers to the Granth and Panth as Guru Granth and Guru Panth.

The *Mahima Prakash* of Sarup Das Bhalla, written in 1776, gives a connected account of the Guru period. According to the evidence of this work, the decision to distinguish the Sikhs from the Hindus had been taken early. Guru Amar Das created the stepwell at Goindwal to counter the influence of the Ganges. When Guru Amar Das visited Hardwar he was exempted from the payment of pilgrimage tax which every Hindu had to pay. This shows the existence of a distinct identity of the Sikhs from early times and ‘others’ knew and acknowledged its existence.
During the period of Sikh rule, the Sikhs were seen as a distinct community. Writing in 1849, Cunningham expressed the view that the Sikhs were not numerous but their strength was to be estimated by their religious fervour. In religious faith and worldly aspirations the Sikhs were wholly different from other Indians and they were bound together by a community of inward sentiment and of outward object unknown elsewhere. According to Bhai Santokh Singh, who completed his work in 1841, Guru Gobind Singh had created the order of the Khalsa to make the Sikhs distinct so that they could be recognised as different from others even in gathering of Hindus and Muslims.

After the annexation of the Punjab a considerable volume of literature continued to appear on the Sikhs. Now the emphasis was on the contemporary Sikhs and how to rule them effectively than on the Sikh past. Trumpp's work (1877) commissioned by the India Office was the first to appear and since he was not familiar with the language of the Adi Granth his monumental work on the Granth was hopelessly inadequate. Trumpp placed Guru Nanak not only with the medieval reformers but also with the Hindu thinkers in general. Macauliffe reflected the views and attitudes of the Sikh scholars of his day who were generally associated with the Singh Sabha Movement. He supported a distinct Sikh identity, saw Sikhism as a totally independent world religion, advocated Punjabi as the official language of the province and held the view that Guru Gobind Singh was opposed to the worship of gods and goddesses, demons and spirits and that the Guru had vested Guruship in the Granth and the Panth. Trumpp and Macauliffe represented two opposing views on Sikh identity - one as part of the larger milieu and the other as a distinct group of people with their own identity.

Till the mid-nineteenth century there was no serious dissent on the distinctiveness and independence of the Sikh religion. The Skih Gurus gave a separate identity to their followers which was acknowledged by others. After the founding of the Khalsa at the end of the seventeenth century, Singh identity was considered the ideal Sikh identity though the Sahajdharis were
accepted as a part of the Panth of Guru Nanak. The Sikh writers of the pre-colonial period upheld the idea of distinctive identity. The distinctness of the Sikhs was also obvious to some of the Europeans writers in early nineteenth century. The identity and distinctiveness of the Sikh religion and the Sikh community were taken for granted by the Nirankaris and Namdharis prior to the annexation of the Punjab by the British.

II

In the early decades of colonial rule in the Punjab, the distinct identity of the Khalsa Singhs was taken for granted but for the purpose of census they were bracketed with Hindus. The Report on the Administration of the Punjab for 1849-1850 and 1850-1851 places the Sikhs in the Hindu category. The earliest British Census Report published in 1855 classifies the population of the province as Hindus and Muslims, with the Sikhs included among the Hindus. The census report of 1868 identifies the Sikhs separately, mentioning no criterion of identification. Even for the census of 1881, the Sikh was not defined. Ibbetson was clear, however, that the Sikhs were either Nanaki Sikhs who followed the tenets of Guru Nanak and called themselves Hindus or the Govindi Sikhs who followed Guru Gobind Singh and were the ones referred to when the word ‘Sikh’ was used. He further clarifies that the more educated of Guru Nanak’s followers returned themselves as Hindus though were aware that they were Sikhs. The Nanakpanthis were equated with Sahajdharis. In the census of 1891, the enumerators were instructed to return as Sikhs only those who wore long hair and did not smoke, while others even if they claimed to be Sikhs were to be entered as Hindus. The general assumption is made explicit here: the Sikh was equated with the Singh. In the census report of 1901, the same instructions were followed though Rose reports that this rule was objected to in nearly every district in which Sikhs in any number existed and Rose was frequently asked how the ‘mona’ Sikhs (those who cut their hair) be recorded. It was only in 1911 that the Sikhs were given the right to record themselves as they wanted without having to
toe the official line. This decision was highly significant because it showed that a large number of Sahajdharis were keen to be returned as ‘Sikhs’ and not as ‘Hindus’.

However, this did not put an end to the debate about Sikh identity. The Hinduised priests in charge of the Gurdwaras, including the main Sikh shrine at Amritsar, began to consider Sikhism as a sect within Hinduism. Baba Khem Singh Bedi, a member of the old religious aristocracy who was patronized by the British, was among the first to declare that Sikhs were Hindus. He was joined in this by the rulers of Faridkot and Patiala who were keen to maintain the status quo. It was argued that Sikhism was like a wing within a large inn called Hinduism. ‘It shared the same foundation and courtyard but had its own separate rooms and terraces.’ The book ‘Sikh Hindu Hain’ made a case for the inclusion of the Sikhs in the Hindu fold.

This book was written in response to Bhai Kahn Singh’s ‘Ham Hindu Nahin’ which was the most popular tract on the subject in the early decades of the twentieth century. He had written it in 1898 when communitarian consciousness was gaining ground among an increasing number of people in the Punjab, as in the rest of the country. Bhai Kahn Singh was of the view that though some Sikhs believed that the Sikhs were ‘Hindu’ they did so due to ignorance of Sikh scriptures and Sikh history accepting the interpretation of the Sikh tradition put forward by parties which were inimical towards Sikhism. ‘Such self-interested parties were anxious to see the Sikhs merged with the Hindu ‘nation’ (qaum). Bhai Kahn Singh leaves no doubt that the Hindus who insisted that Sikhs were 'Hindu' were not the Arya Samajists so much as the Sanatanists. He argued that a distinctive Sikh identity was not a new thing. The authorities he invokes in support of his thesis are nearly all pre-colonial. His exposition of Sikh identity was meant to show its political implication as much as its independence. The equation of the Sikh Panth with the ‘Sikh qaum’ made the Sikhs a political community and Sikh politics for him came to be based on Sikh identity. In response to the question whether or not the Sikhs were Hindu and whether or not it was politic on the part of the Sikhs to
insist that they must be treated as a separate people, he holds: 'No progress (unati) is possible without becoming independent (swatantar). To be a branch (shakh) of another qaum, is to remain in 'slavery' (ghulami), and such subordination involved all kinds of depression.'25

Singh Sabha leaders began to treat Singh identity as the preferable Sikh identity due to its greater visibility and also because they were closer to the Sikh tradition of the eighteenth century in which Singh identity was the preferable Sikh identity.26 The formal aims of the Singh Sabha however were to restore Sikhism to its pristine purity, edit and publish historical and religious books, propagate current knowledge, use Punjabi as a medium and start magazines and newspapers in Punjabi, reform the apostates and bring back into the Sikh fold, and to interest the highly placed Englishmen and ensure their association with the educational programme of the Sikhs. Besides, the association also aimed at cultivating loyalty to the Crown.27 It is clear that the Singh Sabha reformers intended to underline the distinct identity of the Sikhs without any friction with the colonial rulers, but in direct confrontation with the Hindus, specially the Sanatanists. The debate that Sikhs were Hindus had become acrimonious after the foundation of the Chief Khalsa Diwan in 1902. It was no longer a social or a cultural issue. Its political implication were becoming clear to both the sides.

The Singh Sabha reformers were not unaware of the political implications of their socio-religious programme. They realized that if the Sikh community was to progress and have some say in the future it had to assert its independence from the Hindu community. The Sikh community at this point of time had to assert its distinct identity in order to make social, economic and political progress under the changed circumstances of colonial rule when other communities were also aiming at the same goals.

Education of the Sikh community was seen as essential for the purpose of reform. The Sikh reformers felt the need for Khalsa institutions for a proper orientation of the Sikh community. They welcomed English education, western sciences and technology, but the idea of Christian
instruction in missionary schools and the absence of religious instruction in government institutions was not liked by them. The ‘Hinduized’ atmosphere of the D.A.V. institutions was also a problem. They wanted to teach Sikh tenets and Sikh history to their boys and girls as well as western science and literature. This Anglo-Sikh system of education was an important plank of reform, and it promoted Sikh identity.28

The Khalsa College founded at Amritsar in 1892. had the official support. The British administrators wanted to promote centre of ‘denominational culture’ in keeping with their effort to maintain a balance between all communities.29 The moderate Sikh leadership itself was keen to groom the Khalsa College into a centre of ‘denomination culture’. Malik Mohan Singh, a member of the Chief Khalsa Diwan, said that the Khalsa institutions were to produce loyalist and obedient subjects of the British Sarkar.30 In addition to making the Sikhs aware of their distinctiveness, the Khalsa College soon became the leading educational institution of the Sikhs.

Equally significant from the point of view of the dissemination of ideas in accordance of the reform required in Sikhism was the Kanya Maha Vidyalaya founded at Ferozepore by Bhai Takht Singh in 1892. It was run without any grant from the government and without any fees from the girls. This was followed by girls’ schools at Lahore, Amritsar, Rawalpindi and Ropar. The education of women was an important part of the reform agenda of the Singh Sabha. It was argued that unless the women got education based on Sikh tenets the family could not progress. The Sikh Educational Conference provided opportunities to women to play a part in the ‘unfolding drama of the Sikh social and political arena’.31 With a view to educating the Sikh community and at the same time bringing in reform and an awareness of the distinct identity of the Sikhs High Schools were established not only in cities but also in small towns like Damdama Sahib and new towns like Lyallpur. A college was established at Gujranwala before 1920 when the number of Sikh educational institutions was more than three scores.32
To meet the challenge of ‘Hinduized’ atmosphere and ‘western evangelization’, the Sikh Educational Conference was founded in 1908. It resolved to promote Sikh religion, history, Punjabi language and literature. The conference served several functions. Its meetings brought together thousands of Sikhs who discussed educational issues along with related problems such as the spread of Punjabi. Resolutions and speeches often dealt with broad themes of history, tradition, the need for change, new approaches to the family. The conference became virtually a symbolic gathering of Sikhs who shared a common commitment and view of the world.

For the purpose of making the Sikh public and the students aware of their actual heritage and unique identity the reconstruction of history could also be seen in the textbooks provided by the Sikh Educational Conference for the Khalsa schools. Along with the study of Sikh religion and history these textbooks included historical accounts, for instance, of the Hindu-Muslim relations till the first battle of Panipat (1526), and of the Mughal-Sikh relations. To further transform the values and attitudes of the Sikh students studying in Khalsa institutions and thereby taking them a few steps nearer the Sikh ideal, and also influencing the Sikh public, the Sikh superintendents of the boarding houses were asked to ensure that the Sikh students observed the Sikh symbols and rituals, and did not indulge in irreligious activities. In this connection, the Conference passed a resolution asking the government to prohibit juvenile smoking and drinking in boarding houses. In accordance with the policy initiated by the Chief Khalsa Diwan, the Sikh educational institutions during this period became not only dispensers of education, but they also served as strongholds of Sikhism wherever they were established. Even the Singh Sabhas which were organized for propagating reform could not compete in popularity with schools. The study of religious texts comprising the life account of the Sikh Gurus, the sakhis and janamsakhis and selected compositions of the Guru Granth Sahib was included in the curriculum. Along with modern education the Khalsa institutions emphasized the study of Sikh
history and Punjabi language and Gurmukhi script in order to make the Sikhs aware of their heritage and its uniqueness. Stress was laid on the memorization of the religious compositions of the Sikh Gurus. Subsequently, a department for the propagation of Sikh religion and its study was also established in the Khalsa College, Amritsar. This was in addition to the work of Parcharak Vidyalaya (Missionary College) started at Tarn Taran in 1908. The reformers agenda of educating the Sikh youth by making them aware of their heritage and fostering an attitude of distinctiveness from the other communities was carried forward by the founding of Gurdwaras in the campuses of some schools and colleges. Here Sikh identity was reinforced by the daily of recitation of Gurbani, *akhand paths* and religious discourses by learned scholars. Special arrangements were also made to celebrate the birthdays and martyrdoms of the Sikh Gurus. These occasions served the purpose of providing a forum for the propagation of the religious activities of the Sikh organizations. They also helped to bring to the notice of the students researches on Sikh history thereby reconstructing Sikh history in a balanced and unbiased manner. All these educational activities contributed to the re-creation of a distinct identity of the Sikhs.  

By the opening decades of the twentieth century, the Singh reformers and the Arya Samajists were fighting not only on the issue of religious identity but over the linguistic issue as well. Differences in language and script came to be progressively associated with differences in religion, deepening communal consciousness and its appeal. The Singh Sabha reformers like the Brahmos and the Aryas, were opposed to the use of Urdu as a medium of education and administration. Unlike them, however, they argued strongly that the school education should be based on ‘the language of the people’.

The use of Punjabi language and the Gurmukhi script began to be emphasized by the reformers to further accentuate the independence of Sikh religion. They brought to the notice of the Sikh public the importance of Gurmukhi as the language adopted by the Sikh Gurus to spread their message. The Singh Sabha of Lahore had organized a Punjabi Pracharni
Sabha as early as 1882. In the same year, Bhai Jawahar Singh and his colleagues formed a deputation and submitted the memorial to the Education Commission. The memorial emphasized the physical, mental and moral degeneracy of the Sikhs due to the neglect of Gurmukhi and appealed the Commission to promote the Punjabi language in Gurmukhi script.36

The Oriental scholar G.W. Leitner was probably the first official to underline the relevance of the Gurmukhi language and literature and the urgency of maintaining ‘Gurmukhi schools’. ‘Etymologically and historically’, he tried to identify Gurmukhi with the Sikh Gurus. He founded the Anjuman-i-Panjab (1865) which was responsible for translating many important English books into Punjabi,37 Punjabi was introduced as a subject in the Oriental College at Lahore in 1877.

The purpose of the maintenance of a distinct identity could not be met without having a distinct language to support it. The growth of the Punjabi language was only possible if it was used in writing by the Sikh public. By the end of the nineteenth century, scholars of the ‘Gurmukhi language’ were producing literature on Sikh religion and history. Giani Gian Singh had published his Panth Prakash in 1880, followed by his Tawarikh Guru Khalsa in 1892. The Sikh leaders founded a large number of printing presses and periodicals, popularizing Punjabi. Prominent among them were the Wazir Hind Press, the Khalsa Tract Society and the Khalsa Samachar by Bhai Vir Singh. Mohan Singh Vaid wrote in Gurmukhi and Braj Bhasha and contributed articles to the Khalsa Samachar. Two organizations, the Panjab Parchar Ratnawali and the Punjabi Parchar Book Agency, were started by him in Lahore in 1900. In 1906 he founded Dukh Nivaran, a monthly periodical whose publication continued till 1920.38

These scholars, the press and institutions made passionate appeals to all Punjabis, not only to Sikhs, to rise above the prejudices of religion and caste and own their mother tongue. The most valuable service they performed was the enrichment of the language by the publication of an assortment of articles, essays and stories dealing with socio-religious or historical issues
and also with the contemporary problems in the field of science, education, technology and politics, thus encouraging new writings. They also requested the government to make Punjabi language a medium of instruction at least at the primary level.\textsuperscript{39} However, Punjabi teaching remained confined to Sikh institutions and lost ground perhaps due to having no importance for government jobs.\textsuperscript{40}

The purpose of the delineation of the separate identity of the Sikh religion and Sikh community was carried forward by the interpretation of religious and semi-religious Sikh scriptures and the reconstruction of Sikh historical past. This helped to establish the distinctiveness of the Sikh community in the minds of the Sikhs themselves and the ‘others’. Historical writing on the Sikhs had been started by European writers for their purposes. Their interpretation was not always acceptable to the educated Sikhs. They entered the field to present Sikh history from their own perspective,

Hoping not only to fight against false propaganda but also to bring to the Sikh people a balanced history showcasing their independent identity of the Sikh religion and people. The issue of Sikh identity could not be handled independently of a meaningful reconstruction of Sikh history to back it up, nor could an adequate understanding of Sikh past be attempted without an in-depth impartial study.

This writing of history was not a new process. The Gurbilas tradition extended well into the nineteenth century. The works of Bhai Santokh Singh and Ratan Singh Bhangu, both of which appeared in the 1840s, and Bhangu's \textit{Panth Prakash} proclaimed the distinctive nature of the Khalsa identity and claimed that this was the identity which Guru Gobind Singh had intended his followers to adopt. Gian Singh's \textit{Panth Prakash} and his \textit{Tawarikh Guru Khalsa} can be regarded as examples of the sustained predominance of Khalsa identity.\textsuperscript{41}

in the late nineteenth century, Giani Gian Singh expressed concern over the fact that historical literature was written by non-Sikh writers who neither comprehended nor appreciated the emergence of the 'Panth Khalsa'
and its achievements. He wrote two dozen books on the Sikh Gurus, ‘Khalsa Panth’ and the historical places of the Sikhs, the best known of these being the *Panth Prakash* and the *Tawarikh Guru Khalsa*. Both these books glorified Sikh religion and history. The works of other prominent writers like Bhai Vir Singh, Bhai Kahn Singh, Bhagat Lakshman Singh and Karam Singh ‘historian’ played a prominent role in establishing a distinct identity of the Sikhs and ensuring that a correct and sympathetic interpretation of Sikh history and religion was made available to Sikh society. They tried to differentiate and refute the ideas that Sikhs were somehow connected to Hindus or shared common ground with them. Bhai Vir Singh and the Khalsa Tract Society produced a large number of tracts dealing with the life accounts of the Sikh Gurus, Sikh martyrs and the Sikh struggle for political power. During this period, the Society did not publish anything placing Sikhs and Sikhism within the fold of Hinduism.

Bhai Kahn Singh was the most prominent scholar of the Singh Sabha Movement. He wrote among other things, against the anti-Sikh propaganda of the Arya Samaj. His important writings on Sikh religion, history and literature are ‘Ham Hindu Nahin’, *Guruchhand Diwaker, Gurushabad Alankar, Guru Shabad Ratnakar : Mahan Kosh and Chandi Di Var Steek*. He was keen to correct or reject all such notions that did not accord well with the ideas of the *Adi Granth* thereby establishing the separate socio-religious and cultural identity of the Sikhs. His *Ham Hindu Nahin* is considered one of the best expositions of Sikh identity which according to him made the Sikhs a political community.

Another important scholar of the Singh Sabha Movement was Bhagat Lakshman Singh, a staunch protagonist of ‘Sikh Hindu Nahin’ thesis. He was the first biographer of Guru Gobind Singh. His work was remarkable for its rational and humanistic approach to the life of the Guru. He wrote several articles and launched *The Khalsa*, an English periodical, to encounter the anti-Sikh propaganda of the Arya Samajists. He also wrote several books and booklets dealing with Sikh history.
The Sikh characters in Bhai Vir Singh’s novels are Sikhs committed to their faith, free from evils and devoted to the cause of the Panth. He wrote three novels: *Sundri* (1894); *Bijay Singh* (1899) and *Satwant Kaur* (1900), in the milieu of the eighteenth century when the Khalsa was engaged in a life and death struggle with the Mughals and Afghans. In the preface to the eleventh edition of *Bijay Singh*, Bhai Vir Singh clarified that ‘the lives led by the Sikhs in the times goneby can reform, inspire and elevate the degrading condition of the Sikhs’.46

Another scholar of the Singh Sabha was Karam Singh ‘historian’. His important works are *Baba Banda Bahadur, Shrimati Bibi Hamam Kaur* and *Maharaja Ala Singh*. He published a work entitled *Kattik-Ke-Vaisakh*, in order to clearly separate Sikh history from Hinduised legacy. In this he argued that Guru Nanak was born in Vaisakh (April) and not Kattik (November). The book is a critique of the *Bala Janam sakh*, the source of the Kattik date.47

The encounters of the Singhs with the contingents of the Mughals and Afghans stressed the heroic tradition of the Sikhs. The Singhs were honest, valiant, courteous and dedicated to the cause of the Panth, both in the battlefield and in their day to day life. On the other hand, the soldiers and sardars and amirs of the contemporary rulers were corrupt, coward and disloyal. They remained under the dread of the Singhs and avoided straight fight. The Sikh rulers and sardars were projected as the ‘ideal Sikhs’. Another recurrent theme was of an ideological conflict between the Gurus and the contemporary rulers. The former were the upholders of righteousness whereas the latter personified tyranny and fanaticism.48

Martyrdom was a part of the Sikh tradition prior to the rise of the Singh Sabha in 1873. It was made an integral feature of the Tat Khalsa interpretation of Sikh tradition. According to Fenech, Ditt Singh was the first to ‘recognize the rhetorical potential which martyrdom possessed’. It was utilized by the Singh Sabha reformers to lay emphasis on sacrifice and martyrdom. Ditt Singh, for example alluded to the sacrifices made in defense of the Sikh Panth in both his *Khalsa Akhbar* articles and his ‘martyrologies’ and tried to persuade Sikhs to act in a way similar to that of past Sikh martyrs, maintaining
that it was altruistic Sikh warriors of this nature who were required to save the present day Panth from a variety of evils. The *Khalsa Advocate* and the *Khalsa Samachar* regularly appealed to the Sikh sense of selfless sacrifice so that the present social and political position of the Panth may be dramatically improved.49

Thus, we can see that by making a study of the past, these scholars and writers were influencing Sikh public opinion. They not only reinforced their separate identity, but also gave Sikh society the the ideal type of Singh characters which an ordinary person could relate to Sikh history. A people who had forgotten their past were given a heritage they could be proud of and want to emulate. By writing stories and giving accounts of the ideological conflict between the Gurus and the contemporary rulers, these writers made the Sikh society aware of the existing condition and conscious of the problems facing their community like that of identity.

To reinforce the independent entity of the Sikh religion and the Sikh people the Singh Sabha reformers realized the importance of a set of distinctive rites and ceremonies. For this purpose they began the process of evolving and underlining characteristic rites and ceremonies as far removed from Hindu tradition as possible. The Nirankaris had initiated this quest for a separate religious identity for the Sikhs, rejecting those rites and rituals which were against the spirit of the *Adi-Granth* and evolving others according to the spirit of the Sikh scriptures. The Namdharis carried on this practice, reviving Khalsa traditions in the process. Carrying on the work of the Namdharis and Nirankaris, the Singh reformers made serious efforts to define Sikh religion in terms of ‘monotheism’ and to modify and clarify its rahit in the late nineteenth century.

The rahit relates primarily to the Sikh way of life and its emphasis is therefore on Sikh beliefs and practices. It also laid down norms for the Sikh social order. In the trying circumstances of the twentieth century, the rahit was also defined in terms of contemporary political relevance.50 Bhai Kahn Singh’s rahit asked the Sikhs to follow the rules and regulations of the *jatethebandi* and eliminate groupism and factionalism in the Panth. His rahit likened dissenters
to the Minas, Masands, Dhirmalias and Ram Rais, the traditional enemies of
the Panth. He even exhorts the Sikhs to socially shun these dissenters. His
rahit advised the Sikhs to be namak halal, loyal to the Crown as it could be
influential in their progress. Bhai Vir Singh emphasized the same code. The
context however was different. With references to raitnamas composed by
the scholars like Bhai Chaupa Singh, he prescribed ‘moral bindings’ on the
Sikhs to settle their mutual feuds harmoniously in Gurdwaras and to refrain
from the denigration of the fellow-Sikhs and scheming against one another.

The process of defining the Sikh rituals and customs and rahit created
complicated problems. The issues related to the inclusion or non-inclusion of
the Sehajdhari Sikhs, collations and exegesis of the Adi-Granth further
accentuated the problem. The controversy over the Anand Marriage Bill
underlined the urgency of the standardization of the principles of Gurmuryada
and its acceptability by the Sikhs. It was finally published under the title
Gurmat Parkash Bhag Sanskar. It was meant for all the Sikhs who believed
and worshipped the Guru Granth Sahib as the embodiment of ten Gurus.

As the Singh Sabha reformers responded to Arya attacks by
emphasizing their distinctive religious identity, removal of Hindu practices and
refuting the Hindu caste system they increasingly came into direct
confrontation with temple authorities and shrine functionaries. Pressure was
built up on these keepers of faith to sever all links with Hinduism by breaking
free of Hindu practices in Sikh religion. In 1905 all idols were removed from
the shrines’ precincts. Low castes began to be admitted to religious worship in
Sikh shrines. With increasing political gains in sight the Arya attack on
Sikhism attained a new fervour early in the twentieth century and was
expressed in the public ritual of re-conversion. They began in 1900 to convert
low-caste Sikhs en masse forcing the Singh Sabha reformers to distinguish
themselves even more sharply by refuting the Hindu caste principle. In 1909
at Jullundur, one hundred low caste men were formally accepted into
Sikhism.

The Singh Sabha reformers tried to raise and mobilize public opinion to
get acceptance for new ceremonies. Such Bills as the one on Anand Marriage
made into an Act so as the clearly delineate Sikh ceremonies and rites from those of other communities, thus emphasizing their distinctiveness legally. To further this purpose, help was sought by the Singh Sabha reformers from members of the ruling families like Yuvraj Ripudaman Singh who was representing the Sikhs in the Imperial Council. To establish the validity of distinct Sikh rituals and remove the legal objections raised by the judicial officials in the civil suits, Ripudaman Singh, Maharaja of Nabha, on behalf of the Sikhs, presented a draft of Anand marriage in the Punjab Council on October 30, 1909. It was meant to give legal recognition to the Sikh ceremony of marriage. This bill was opposed by Arya Samajists, Granthis, Pujaris, Mahants and Sants of Amritsar on behalf of the Golden Temple and other temples connected with it. Opposition also came from Maya Singh and some Sikhs of Lahore. The support of the Nirankaris, who were basically Sehajdharis, proved crucial in a tussle between the conservative Sikhs and Singh reformers. This bill finally became an Act on October 22, 1909 despite all opposition.

Thus we can see that in the ongoing battle to ensure an independent and distinct place for the Sikh religion help was received from unlikely quarters. The confrontation with the Aryas and their propaganda not only gave the Sikhs a platform to put forward their view point but also helped the ‘Sikhs clarify, refine and delimit their own religious identity’. This brought about not only consciousness of their distinct identity, but also transformed the attitudes of the Sikhs towards other communities bringing communitarian consciousness into play.

The instruments of the raj like the census operations also played an important part in engendering a consciousness of distinct identity among the Sikhs. In 1891 two thirds of the Sikhs believed they constituted a separate religion, and among these, not only were the expected Singh’s but also a large Sahajdhari minority, comprising nearly 40% of them. The Sikh population was almost evenly divided between Singh’s and Sahajdharis. Census reports accurately show the results of the efforts of the Singh Sabha reformers though incentives for government jobs and conversions were also
to account for a small percentage of the increase. The numbers of the Sikhs increased from less than 2 millions in 1881 to over 4 millions in 1931 with an increase in the proportion of Keshdhari Sikhs in the Sikh population, who increased from less than 70 to more than 90 in less than half a century.\textsuperscript{58}

III

It can be seen that although concerns for the reform of Sikh religion were being voiced even before the annexation of the Punjab by the British, the announcement of four Sikh student's intention to convert to Christianity at Amritsar in 1873 served as a wake up call for the Sikh community. This communitarian consciousness received a boost when the Christian missionaries gained two high profile converts from the Sikh community – Maharaja Dalip Singh and Kanwar Harnam Singh. The Sikhs first formed the Amritsar Singh Sabha in 1873 and later the Lahore Singh Sabha in 1879. Then for twenty years, six Singh Sabhas on the average were added every year.

If we look at the figures from 1834 to 1886, the total number of converts by the Punjab and North India Missions was 347 with just 23 Sikhs, 116 Muslims and 208 Hindus respectively.\textsuperscript{59} The rate of conversion was not alarming but the Sikhs became increasingly aware of the danger that could befall the community.

In their quest for establishing a distinct identity of the Sikhs and of the Singh Sabha reformers came into increasing contact with the Arya Samaj and the other reform movement in the Punjab. The relationship between the Singh Sabha reformers and the Arya Samaj ranged from cooperation to confrontation at different periods of time. Arya and Sikh reformers cooperated in the re-conversion of Indian Muslims and Christians until the mid 1890's. They were both trying to bring reform into their respective religions. Despite Swami Dayanand's negative view of Sikhism in the \textit{Satyarth Prakash}, several eminent Sikhs had
Illustration 10
A Sikh Officer in the British Indian Army
joined the Arya Samaj. A decisive break came in 1888 when the Arya ‘firebrands’ mounted a ‘thoughtless attack’ on the Sikh Gurus. Bhai Jawahar Singh and Bhai Ditt Singh Giani felt obliged to leave the Arya Samaj and to join the Singh Sabha reformers. More than a threat from Islam and Christianity, the Singh reformers felt a threat from the Arya Samaj. It moved them to develop a distinctive religious identity as far removed from Hinduism – and the Arya Samaj – as possible.60

Therefore the first decades of the twentieth century witnessed an upsurge of Sikh journalism and the volumes of tracts and pamphlets expressing the social and religious concerns of the Singh reformers increased sharply. Apart from the general appeals for return to the teachings of the Gurus, there were arguments against idol worship, observance of fasts, notion of auspicious and inauspicious, the practice of shradhs, the celebration of Holi and other ‘Hindu’ elements of belief and ritual.61

The concern for the establishment of the separate identity of the Sikhs and reform in Sikh religion and society was reflected in the reconstruction of the history of the Sikhs, the introduction of the Khalsa institutions and the Anglo-Sikh education, the propagation of distinct ceremonies like the Anand Marriage, the evolving of a meaningful rahit, the increase in journalistic activity and above all a direct reiteration of the distinct identity of the Sikhs. There were those Sikhs too who believed that the Sikhs were Hindu and they represented an additional problem. However by the 1930’s, the census reports noted that not only were the Sikhs not returning castes and sects in large numbers but also the number of Keshdharis in the Sikh community had increased to around 82 per cent. The reason cited was the activity by the Singh Sabha reformers.

Richard G. Fox is of the opinion that ‘those who labeled themselves “Sikh” in the nineteenth century embraced no single cultural meaning, religious identity, or social practice; rather an amalgam of what later reformers made into separate Hindu and Sikh cultural principles prevailed’. He argued further that, the ‘major activity was precisely to define that tradition, to fix those cultural meanings, and to exclude all other versions of Sikh identity as
uncanonical. Fox put forth the view that Singh identity was created by the British and appropriated later by the reformers to serve their own purpose.\textsuperscript{62}

McLeod does not agree with Fox. He is of the view that 'It was Sikh tradition, and specially a Khalsa tradition, which they (reformers) developed and glossed. To suggest that they developed a new tradition is false. Equally it is false to claim that their treatment of it can be described as a simple purging of alien excrescence or the restoration of a corrupted original. The Khalsa of the Singh Sabha reformers was both old and new'. The work of evolving distinct Sikh rites was carried forward by the Singh Sabha reformers. As in the case of history writing, it was realized by these reformers that unless they clarified, modified or rejected popular traditions in existence in the Sikh society, they could not hope to portray their religion as independent, or their identity as distinct from that of other religions. In view of the concentrated attack by the Aryas a need was felt to define inherited traditions in whatever way that seemed appropriate. According to McLeod 'the chosen method of defense involved educational influence and use of available technology. He further says that these reformers 'began to produce definitions and to shape systems in the light of ideals and modes of thinking acquired from western literature and education'.\textsuperscript{63}

Harjot Oberoi is of the view that the 'Tat Khalsa' managed to overshadow the 'Sanatanists', 'through a series of innovations, purges and negations'. They 'endowed Sikhs with their own texts, histories, symbols, festivities, ritual calendar, sacred space, life-cycle rituals, in short a meaningful universe, separate and radically different from other religious traditions. Sikhs could now confidently lay claim to being an exclusive pan-local religious community'. This according to him represented a 'rupture' that clearly distinguished 'modern Sikhism not only from the Sanatan tradition but also from the earlier Sikh tradition including the Khalsa'.\textsuperscript{64}

J.S. Grewal underlines that objective realities and subjective self-image are intermeshed in a consciousness of distinct identity in relation to others in any given historical situation. As the product of these variables, identity cannot be a static or 'fixed' entity. Nor can there be objective uniformity or

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‘homogeneity’ among all the members of a community identified as distinct from others. Neither fluidity nor diversity, thus, invalidates distinct identity.

The objective realities of the Sikh Panth and the self-image of the Sikhs from the days of Guru Nanak to the present day have not remained the same, but the consciousness of distinction from the others around has remained constant. Nor did ‘others’ try to argue that Sikhs were ‘Hindu’ or ‘Muslim’, till we come to the late nineteenth century. Sikh identity gets recognized even in the self-contradictory statement that ‘the Sikhs are Hindu’. If anything, this statement shows that Sikh identity was not only distinct from but also older than the emerging consciousness of ‘Hindu’ identity. This debated became important when Sikh identity in the late nineteenth century began to have political implications for Sikhs and the ‘others’.65

NOTES

1. Discussed in detail in the chapter on Political Attitudes

2. Guru Granth Sahib, pp. 308, 722, 763, (ref. 2)


5. Ibid.,


8. For an English translation of the portion dealing with the Nanak Panthjis in the Dabistan, see J.S. Grewal and Irfan Habib (eds.), Sikh


The sources that Bhai Kahn Singh cites are the *Adi Granth* which was compiled in 1604-05, the works of Bhai Gurdas written mostly in the early decades of the seventeenth century, the compositions of Guru Gobind Singh and others in the *Dasam Granth* which were written mostly before the end of the seventeenth century, the works of Bhai Nand Lal as a contemporary of Guru Gobind Singh, the *Gursobha* which was written a few years after Guru Gobind Singh’s death, the *Rahitnamas* which were composed largely in the eighteenth century, the *Gurbilas Patshahi Das* which was written towards the end of the century, and the works of Bhai Santokh Singh which were composed in the early nineteenth century. At a few places, the evidence of *Janamsakhis*, which were compiled in the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth century, is also invoked.
25. Ibid., p. 124.


42. For details, see Bhagat Singh, *Gyani Gian Singh*, Patiala: Punjabi University, 1978, pp. 1-9. *Panth Prakash* was completed in 1867 and published in 1880. It deals with the life account of the ten Gurus, emergence of Dal Khalsa and establishment of the Sikh misls. The account also highlights the struggles and sacrifices of the Khalsa. The *Twarikh Guru Khalsa* is in five parts: (a) the early account of the Sikh Gurus, (b) Shamsher Khalsa, (c) Raj Khalsa, (d) Sardar Khalsa, and (e) Panth Khalsa. The first three parts were published in 1891.


44. Grewal, *Historical Perspectives on Sikh Identity*, p. 100.


54. *Gurmat Prakash: Sanskar Bhag*, Amritsar: The Chief Khalsa Diwan, 1915. To meet this problem the Chief Khalsa Diwan set up a committee comprising major Sikh scholars and activists on October 3, 1910. This committee's draft was presented to the conference which was held on April 6, 1913. In this conference, 27 Jathas and 105 scholars participated. A threadbare discussion on the basic principles of Gurmaryada was held and then a draft was prepared. It was approved by another Committee especially constituted by the Chief Khalsa Diwan on May 24, 1914. The approved draft first got the consent of the Executive Committee and then the General Committee of the Chief Khalsa Diwan in 1915.

56. Papers relating to Act VIII of 1909, p. 27.

57. Petitions regarding the Anand Marriage Act, VII of 1909, part I.


