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**Forging a *Piram Piyala* in Sikh Studies:
Meditations on Life, Love, and Scholarship
Editorial Team**

Special Issue on Dr. Rahuldeep Singh Gill

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“We’re talking about the production of knowledge, and knowledge is power. This is high stakes. So let it be under threat, and let people dance, and do the right thing.”

- Dr. Rahuldeep Singh Gill (2019)

As a scholar of Sikh Studies, Dr. Rahuldeep Singh Gill’s pedagogy, speaking, and writing all drew from a source of deep conviction to bring Gurbaani to life through disciplined action towards tangible justice. Completing his worldly journey on December 31st, 2021, Dr. Gill’s impact has been felt across the discipline and beyond. Professor of Religious Studies at California Lutheran University, Director of the University’s Sarah W. Heath Center for Equality and Justice, and active participant in Black Lives Matter’s Los Angeles chapter, Dr. Gill was known to friends, students, and comrades alike for his embodied practice of Sikhi – a practice some called [compassionate action](#). Many have cited this practice as their own inspiration for remaining committed to pursuing justice or scholarship from the lens of Gursikhi Jeevan.

Recounting Dr. Gill’s legacy raises a key question central to his own work: what does it mean to construct a Sikh subjectivity for academic study and/or research in the academy? While many scholars, Dr. Gill included, have reflected upon the apparent disjuncture between academic production in the United States (and Western Academy more broadly) and the pursuit of a life rooted in Gurmat, the reality is that Dr. Gill – and many of us – continue to produce Sikhi-oriented and Sikhi-rooted work within the strictures of the Academy. What are the stakes, desires, and even possibilities of such work when done within such constraints? In a 2019 lecture at University of California (UC), Berkeley, just 2 years before his

passing, Dr. Gill meditated on such concerns in the wake of bearing witness to [sexual harassment and assault](#) in his own doctoral program at UC Santa Barbara. He argues that, beyond each individual reconciling the fact that such harm occurred in Sikh spaces, Sikh Studies bears the pain of great creative loss of those who would study Sikhi from the positions of “*neechaan di neech*”, the lowest of the low, as these same individuals are those most likely to be subject to violence in the Academy. When a Sikh takes part in any institution that has histories of enabling such violence, what is the Sikh-Academic’s role? While professional ethics can give guidance on providing support and protection, Dr. Gill argues that this is not simply a procedural matter, but implicates academics, especially Sikh academics in this case.

But Dr. Gill does not only raise these types of questions in his lecture, he also provides some sketches for paths forward. His common refrain throughout the hour-long lecture and question and answer period, “What would Baba Nanak do?”, was coupled with, “What could Sikh Studies be without the violence of academia?” An inquisitive pairing that requires tracing two distinct historiographies (one of Baba Nanak and one of Sikh Studies) and the Sikh-Academic subjectivities they promote, enable, and constrict. Nonetheless, a pairing that he argued was necessary in order to develop a Sikh Studies that was necessarily disruptive to the existing Western Academy. Such a pairing is not pointless or normative academic theorizing, rather it is an attempt at asking questions of this world through Sikhi. Dr. Gill teaches us the importance of such an intellectual effort for understanding and applying a Sikh politics in the present. Placing Guru Nanak Dev Ji’s time frame alongside events that constructed “modernity” as we understand it today, primarily the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, Dr. Gill pushes us to consider how a Guru who was horrified witnessing one battle of Emperor Babar’s would react to the violence we accept as mundane today. Perhaps by scholars directly engaging this question as a matter of study, which could be in accordance with the pursuit of a life rooted in Gurmat, a Sikh-Academic subjectivity can sprout against the pursuit of a life rooted in the Academy.

If Sikh study is redundant, as Dr. Gill argues, we re-compose his question as, *what can Sikh Studies offer that Gursikhi Jeevan does not already?* What is the utility of producing a *study* of Sikh life and of Sikhi? Scholars have already critiqued the traditional methods and institutions that typically produce knowledge on Sikh life,

like the archive, because they argue these methods and institutions uphold a status quo of power differentials and violence (Brar and Judge, 2021). Dr. Gill himself argues that study is not the end goal, but that knowledge production must always be reconciled through how knowledge production is situated in relation to power. Still, a study of Sikh life and of Sikhi would be incomplete without an orientation towards material and spiritual death; Dr. Gill spoke to this reality frequently in advance of his own passing at the worldly age of 42. His discussion of death was certainly not an accident, but hukam. As hukam, he embodied a commitment to ensuring the study of Sikhi is the disruption of the production of power as it is done through the Academy while also always remaining attuned to the reality that our own bodies doing this disruption will just as quickly become dust. To dance then, perhaps, is to remain keenly aware of life constantly under threat, that precarity is not an abnormal state but simply a constant orientation towards accepting hukam. A Sikh-Academic subjectivity could be rooted in this. To drink from the piram piyala is to walk into the Academy with one's head already resting in front of Guru Sahib, committed to upholding Oneness with complete disregard for the personal prestige that might come from a scholarly life. To do Sikh studies centered on Sikhi is to dance on the blade of dharam – finer than a hair and sharper than a khanda¹ – towards a future torn asunder from the violence of the past and present.

In this special issue, the *Sikh Research Journal (SRJ)* brings together four written reflections commemorating Dr. Gill's contributions to his professional academic fields, grassroots community spaces, and his *sangat* across the globe. These contributions focus on Dr. Gill's book, *Drinking from Love's Cup: Surrender and Sacrifice in the Vars of Bhai Gurdas Bhalla*, other lesser known or yet unpublished works, and on other aspects of Dr. Gill's scholarship, activism, and pedagogy. Through these essays, readers will be introduced to, and encouraged to engage further, Dr. Gill's work in all areas of Sikh and Punjabi Studies, including (but not limited to) culture, heritage, history, language, literature, philosophy, religion, and contemporary societal topics.

¹ See Ang 918 of Sri Guru Granth Sahib ji. Pauri 14, line 4 of Anand Sahib.

The first contribution by Dr. Purnima Dhavan titled “Commemorating Rahuldeep Singh Gill’s Calling: Translation as Love and Ethical Practice”, dives into detail with respect to Dr. Gill’s specific contribution in translating Bhai Gurdas Ji in historical, linguistic, and cultural studies contexts. Dr. Dhavan’s essay is particularly helpful to understand how Dr. Gill’s work on Bhai Gurdas fits within the larger South Asian Studies canon, as well as the ethical and activist considerations of doing translation in scholarly work. Following this is an essay from Dr. Nirvikar Singh, “Rahuldeep Singh Gill and Sikh Studies: A Reflection”, who situates Dr. Gill’s oeuvre within the larger Sikh Studies canon, as well as the work he draws upon. Giving a robust overview of his dissertation, his published book, as well as many other shorter essays, the essay offers readers a rounded introduction to Dr. Gill’s work, as well as the scholarly communities to which it has contributed and still can. The third essay breaks a bit from the content of the first two, in that Dr. Hans S. Gustafson reflects upon the pedagogical lessons he received from Dr. Gill’s approach to the Academy in “Mover of Energies”. Focusing on two anecdotes from his own teaching career, Dr. Gustafson demonstrates how Dr. Gill transformed scholarly possibilities both in and outside of the classroom. We close with a meditation on bravery in academic spaces, à la Dr. Gill’s own work, from Dr. Rajbir Judge in “The Construction of Dangerous Boundaries”. Dr. Judge offers an incredibly generative engagement on how we *do* Sikh Studies, research, and form our own Sikh subjectivities in relation to our embodiments of Sikhi. We hope it will provide readers with fruitful provocation of how to take Dr. Gill’s charges for the discipline, Academy, and our lives, forward.

This humble collection was put together to allow scholars already familiar with Dr. Gill, and those who have yet to learn of him, to celebrate the vast breadth of how he worked beyond and through the boundaries of the Academy, and how he modeled such types of engagement. As you will see, while our contributors do not ask us to replicate Dr. Gill’s work, a deeper engagement with the critical questions Dr. Gill asked of himself and all of us can only create a Sikh Studies that is rooted in Sikhi as praxis, and not in Sikhi as an disembodied object for academic debate.

The Editors

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