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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

Keywords: Rahuldeep Singh Gill, Sikh Studies, researcher subjectivity, Sikh Academic subjectivity

“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

Harleen Kaur

prabhdeep singh kehal

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Commemorating Rahuldeep Singh Gill's Calling: Translation as Love and Ethical Practice

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Keywords: Rahuldeep Singh Gill, Bhai Gurdas, Sikh Studies

Every translation is an act of interpretation. Rahuldeep Singh Gill's *Drinking from Love's Cup: Surrender and Sacrifice in the Vars of Bhai Gurdas Bhalla*, published by Oxford University Press as part of the American Academy of Religion's "Religion in Translation" series in 2016, represents a significant turning point in English materials available to students and scholars of Sikh texts. Gill was characteristically modest about his goals in his preface to *Drinking from Love's Cup*, claiming that the original language of Bhai Gurdas was too "rich" and "pithy," and that "I have attempted to deliver clean, efficient English renditions of each line and then make adjustments so that the stanzas hold together well—choosing to create readable translations that privilege the historical value of these pieces over aesthetic quality alone" (Gill, 2016, p. xii). Anyone who had the pleasure to hear Rahuldeep Singh Gill discuss his work, knew that, for him, "readable" went beyond simply creating a coherent and accessible English translation. *Drinking from Love's Cup* was not simply a translation, it was also an ambitious attempt at making visible to a larger global audience the multiple layers of historical references, proverbs, polemical discourses, spiritual counsel, and community making that became visible once a particular set of verses was translated and contextualized with early modern Punjab's complex pasts. Since many of these are multivalent, scholars can and do come to different conclusions about the interpretation and contexts of many of these verses, but Gill's work stands out as an original and bold interpretation for many reasons.

From his own experience reading and teaching Sikh and Punjabi texts, Gill knew that the more formal, often stiff, English of many of the translations did little to convey the pleasure of reading such works in the original. For many non-expert readers these also did not convey the dense matrix of literary and cultural allusions contained in the works. He was particularly concerned about the growing number of readers in the global Sikh diaspora for whom the archaic

language of many important texts was difficult to comprehend and who were often unaware of the complex allusions and metaphors in the original texts. He spoke to these points repeatedly in conference presentations and more recently with his new project on translating Guru Nanak's *bani*. Gill was always transparent and enthusiastic about what he saw as his vocation; in one of his last essays, "The Call of Death and the Depth of Our Callings: The Quality of Vocational Discernment," Gill's (2018) own words captured his love for his work and the commitment he brought to it:

As someone who has the ability to do this work, to speak on behalf of his community, and to write academic works, I also have a responsibility to do these things. I have a responsibility to my students because of the career I chose. As a scholar of Sikh literature, I know that my work itself brings a singular kind of joy. Sharing it with my children, and perhaps sharing it with students and the world's English-speaking readers, provides me with great hope. It is certainly a joy to share the thoughts of a too-little-known sixteenth-century poet, who birthed a major world religion, and who saw life as a preparation for death (Gill, 2018, p. 80).

Sadly, Gill would not be able to finish his new project on Guru Nanak, but his other works beautifully illustrate the degree to which these words influenced Gill's choices as a translator and scholar. His attention to the broader range of meanings and connotations of seemingly simple words and phrases is illustrated over and over again in *Drinking from Love's Cup: Surrender and Sacrifice in the Vars of Bhai Gurdas Bhalla*. The title was based on Gill's focus throughout the book on the imagery of "love's cup," or "*piram piala*," which appears frequently in Bhai Gurdas' poetry. The same imagery is also alluded to frequently in other Sikh texts, and similar imagery that also references the intoxication of divine love are also found in Persian poetry and Sufi texts (Gill, 2016, p. 48-49). Gill made a persuasive case that the deep focus on the imagery of love and martyrdom in Bhai Gurdas' compositions was designed to comfort and provide succor to Sikhs at a very difficult time in their history. At the time Gill was writing, many scholars still believed that Bhai Gurdas, as a close contemporary of the Fifth Guru, Arjan Dev (d. 1606 CE), had composed much of his work during the sixteenth century. Following the noted historian J. S. Grewal's very different perspective on the dating issue, Gill's close reading of the *vars* of Bhai Gurdas offered considerable evidence that not only were many of the *vars* written after the Fifth Guru's

martyrdom, but also that they were written to explicitly protect the interests of the Sixth Guru, Hargobind. Further, the polemical tone of many of the *vars* were designed to combat the claims of various sectarian groups that had sprung up around this time (Gill, 2016, p. 12, 55).

Although the dating issues cannot be proven conclusively as many of the surviving manuscripts of Bhai Gurdas' works are undated (Singh, 2017), Gill's argument is one worth engaging with, even if overstated. For one, at the time of Guru Hargobind's imprisonment, the Sixth Guru was still very young, in his mid-teens, and the Sikh community had already undergone the trauma of the Fifth Guru's arrest and execution just four years earlier ("Guru Hargobind"). As Gill points out and most reviewers concurred, Bhai Gurdas was by this time considerably older, well-educated in the norms of Sikh ethical thought, and a respected elder in the community.² For the older Bhai Gurdas to attempt to rally the community around the young Sixth Guru makes sense. While scholars are right to note that there is not much surviving evidence to prove that Bhai Gurdas' works were circulated widely in the community or had much impact, certainly, by the eighteenth century, his works had come to be highly regarded by Sikhs of that time and several later texts appear to revisit the key portions of anecdotes about Gurdas and demonstrate awareness of his works (Fenech, 2017).³

This later circulation and legacy of Bhai Gurdas' work is not the primary focus *Drinking from Love's Cup*, but scholars rightly point to the importance of the eighteenth-century manuscript record and particularly the circulation of later manuscripts of Bhai Gurdas' *vars* as important facets for understanding the central role that Bhai Gurdas came to hold in Sikh practice for understanding and explaining Sikh ethical thoughts. From my own experience of writing about the eighteenth century, it would make perfect sense for Sikhs in this time period to look to Bhai Gurdas' meditations on martyrdom and justice with renewed interest (Dhavan, 2011). The themes that Gill finds prominent in Bhai Gurdas' compositions are also ones that resonate with the texts of the eighteenth century that center sacrifice, heroism, and justice.

² See reviews by Pashaura Singh and Louis Fenech cited below.

³ Pashaura Singh is right to note the importance of the unfinished work of studying Bhai Gurdas' corpus in a systematic manner.

Gill's interpretive methodology in *Drinking from Love's Cup* also was innovative for the translations available at this time. Following the trends set by scholars such as Allison Busch, Imre Banga, Louis Fenech, and Anne Murphy, he chose to place Punjabi and Braj in a wider trans-regional cultural context. His study of Bhai Gurdas placed Gurdas' *vars* not just within a Sikh context alone, but argued for Gurdas' engagement with contemporary literary practices in Braj and Persian to understand the metaphors and allegories that enriched Gurdas' language and which would have been familiar to his audience. This meant that Gill had to create a delicate balance in his own translation practice, making clear the polemical aspects of Gurdas' rhetorical flourishes, but also situating them in the shared cultural terrain that was the site of this contestation over truths.

For Gill, only a close and attentive study of word and meaning could capture the full force of Gurdas' method. Thus, Gill began by first demonstrating why the metaphor of martyrdom as drinking from "love's cup," was central to the message Gurdas wished to convey. As Gill noted, the metaphor of "love's cup," which occurs only twice in the Guru Granth Sahib, appears over fifty times in Bhai Gurdas' *vars* (2016, p. 65). The trope was powerful, and in Gill's translation and interpretation, it also was able to "mobilize defiance and resistance through a clarified and exclusivist Sikh orthopraxy" (2016, p. 66). At times elements very familiar to the readers of courtly and erotic Persian poetry appear transformed in Gurdas' active reshaping of word and meaning. Here is Gill's translation of *Var II*, in which Guru Hargobind is portrayed as both Emperor and cup-bearer (*saqi*) with Sikhs gathered in his court:

In such royal soirées [majlas], it is difficult to drink from love's copious cup,

But when he himself becomes the cupbearer [saqi], he serves pure joy from his own ecstatic goblet:

Those who drink, walk in the sway of loving devotion, drunk beyond awareness, yet fully aware. Adoring his devotees, he fills their treasuries. (2016, p. 1)

In Gill's interpretation of Gurdas, it was this precisely open quality of the Sikh court that distinguished it from that of their rivals. The "emperor" or Guru was not overly concerned about status, he attended to his court's needs. It was, as Gill noted, also a court defined by humility and service for Bhai Gurdas, one in which

the practice of touching each other's feet, and the ritual of *charan amrit*, were well established. Gurdas pithily encapsulates this as "*rana rank barabari*" in Gill's translation, "parity of prince and pauper" (p. 58). In other words, rival courts, including those of the Mughals, might have offered worldly pomp and riches, but in reality they magnified human egos and selfishness. In Gill's interpretation of Bhai Gurdas, the willingness of devoted Sikhs to embrace self-sacrifice and martyrdom ensured the well-being of the community, and their collective humility and care of each other ensured their spiritual success.

Gills' obvious love of metaphor as meaning was also visible in the book cover selected for the book, which was a somewhat audacious choice. The cover featured the jade drinking cup of Jahangir, the same Mughal Emperor who had ordered the arrest and execution of Fifth Guru, Arjan Dev. I had the opportunity to ask him about this several years after the book was published and he laughed and shared that this was "a long story." While the marketing team was keen on this image, he made his peace with it as well, since it set up the trope of the rival emperors to which Bhai Gurdas had devoted many of his verses. He reminded me that this parallel construction of questioning the identity of the "True Emperor" was one that resurfaced in many different time periods for Sikhs, as they had at the time Nanak composed his *Babarvani* and would later in the seventeenth and eighteenth century itself. He also wanted readers to reflect on the interlinked cultural inheritance of Punjabi, one often rejected at the time he was writing the book, a time of rampant islamophobia.

As I reflected back on this conversation working on this essay, I came across other passages in the book that may explain why Gill felt the cover would help readers read more deeply and thoughtfully. His reading of Bhai Gurdas very concretely centered the view that Gurdas believed Sikh practices and the court of Guru Hargobind to be the right path to spiritual success. However, Gill also notes Gurdas' regret about the lack of mutual respect among humankind (p. 58) and his conciliatory approach to the question of religious differences in other verses (p. 92).

This kind of thoughtful soul-searching and reflection defined Rahuldeep Singh Gill's life as a scholar and as an activist. He was keenly aware of the privileges of academic life, and the sharp critiques such privilege provoked. As many of the

other essays in this volume make clear, Rahuldeep's life was committed to seeking justice and inspired by his understanding of *Sikhi*. He was remarkably clear-sighted in his self-reflection of how he was both inspired to a calling by Guru Nanak's words, and yet also sobered by the everyday challenge of making ethical choices within a social structure that made this very difficult:

This speaks to me as an American who benefits from devastating imbalances in the global power structure. It speaks to me as an immigrant whose parents brought him here to enjoy a life in which the slanted power structure allows abundant fruit to roll down to us. I do not live in a fair world, and many times over I am the beneficiary of that unfairness—even if I am not myself the hunter for flesh. I exist as part of a world that feasts on death and calls it life. (Gill, 2018, p. 67)

For Gill, part of the work of reclaiming a more just order, reclaiming silenced voices, and reclaiming joy was to bring his scholarly work into alignment with the social advocacy he undertook. Thus, we should not be surprised that this is also an ethical perspective that influenced his approach to translation. *Drinking Love's Cup* is both translation and interpretation, a vivid and intimate reading of Bhai Gurdas which helps readers appreciate both the trauma which the Sikh community endured in Bhai Gurdas' lifetime and also understand its resilience in the time that followed. I would like to end with Rahuldeep's own meditation on how he viewed his vocation as a scholar and his own human mortality: "vocation is the heroic act of defying the impending horizon of death by committing oneself to a meaningful life, (Gill, 2018, p. 65). As a scholar, parent, colleague, and human being, Rahuldeep Singh Gill certainly succeeded in bringing meaning to his own life, and his scholarly work is a living testimony to the hard work of making lives meaningful in both past times and our own.

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Rahuldeep Singh Gill and Sikh Studies: A Reflection⁴

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Keywords: Rahuldeep Singh Gill, Bhai Gurdas, Sikh Studies, community ethics

Introduction

This paper aims to summarize and evaluate the contributions of Rahuldeep Singh Gill to the field of Sikh Studies and to acquaint new readers with these contributions. In some respects, Rahuldeep Gill occupied a unique position in the field. As I will argue, he was not only an accomplished, significant scholar of key aspects of Sikh history, but also a perceptive analyst and fearless commentator on the role of religion and religious diversity in contemporary society. I will argue that these two facets of Rahuldeep's career had an integral connection and that this combination represents an important role model for other scholars in the field of Sikh Studies.

The rest of this piece is organized as follows. In the next section, I will examine Rahuldeep's book, *Drinking from Love's Cup: Surrender and Sacrifice in the Vars of Bhai Gurdas Bhalla* (Gill, 2017) and outline its specific contributions to our knowledge of Bhai Gurdas's work and of facets of the history of the Sikh community of his time. In the following section, I discuss Rahuldeep's doctoral dissertation, *Growing the Banyan Tree: Early Sikh Tradition in the Works of Bhai Gurdas Bhalla* (Gill, 2009), as well as his chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies* (Gill, 2014), both of which provide broader insights into the early Sikh tradition based on a detailed consideration of the entire range of Bhai Gurdas's work. The fourth section discusses some of Rahuldeep's commentaries and shorter written pieces and recorded lectures on diversity and pluralism in contemporary societal contexts and connects these to his historical analysis and more conventional scholarly work. The final section concludes by offering some analysis regarding the scholarly reception of Rahuldeep's work, in Sikh Studies and beyond, and some possible lessons that can be drawn from his academic career.

⁴ I am grateful to the editors of the symposium, Harleen Kaur and prabhdeep kehal, for very useful comments that led to significant improvements in this paper.

Drinking from Love's Cup

The Sikh tradition emerged in northwest India, from the teachings of Nanak (1469-1539 CE). He was followed by nine human successors who all used the signature Nanak and were considered to carry his spirit or *jyot* (literally, "light"). All these ten individuals are considered by Sikhs to be their Guru(s), or spiritual guide(s). The fifth Guru, Arjan, created a canonical text which, with some subsequent additions, is now recognized as the carrier of the same spirit – the Guru Granth Sahib. Arjan completed this project in 1604 CE, but was executed by Mughal authorities just two years later. This event was followed by a major schism in the community, with Arjan's older brother claiming the title of Guru in competition with Arjan's son. Decades of growth and prosperity for the Sikh community were followed by well over a century of struggle for survival in the face of threats from the imperial authorities and other power centers in the region.

Gurdas Bhalla was a relative of Guru Nanak's second successor, Guru Amar Das and of Guru Arjan by marriage. He was born in the middle of the 16th century CE (Gill, 2009, p. 44), probably a decade or more before Guru Arjan. He was very close to Guru Arjan, and is acknowledged as the scribe of the canonical 1604 manuscript. He remained an important figure in the Sikh community for decades, until his passing sometime between 1629 and 1637 (Gill, 2009, p. 239). His stature in the community was recognized with the honorific "Bhai" (literally, "brother"), and he was a prolific writer, producing about 1500 stanzas, using two verse forms – *vars*, or ballads, with multiple stanzas in each – and shorter *kabitts*, which are quatrains.

Bhai Gurdas has received considerable attention from Sikh writers, going back to the 18th century, and increasingly in the Sikh reform movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In the late 20th century, Gurdas became an important source for scholars operating within the Western academy. This period has also seen increased critical examination of Sikh history and traditions, not always with satisfactory outcomes in terms of scholarship (N. Singh, 2022). What Rahuldeep Gill achieved in his book (Gill, 2017) was important in two very different dimensions.

First, Rahuldeep provided a careful re-examination of the dating of Gurdas's *vars*, as well as a persuasive reinterpretation of their meaning as a body of work. In particular, Rahuldeep argues that the *vars* post-date the execution of Guru Arjan, and that they take a particular stance on the Sikh community in this period of uncertainty and turmoil. Gurdas is seen as recognizing and giving meaning to the sacrifice of Guru Arjan, and the suffering of the Sikh community. He is fiercely loyal to Arjan's son, Hargobind, as the rightful claimant to the mantle of Guru, and justifies Hargobind's militant response to imperial oppression. In doing so, Gurdas is speaking to the Sikh community, which is looking for guidance in a time of threat and uncertainty. In all of this, Rahuldeep advances traditional as well as modern scholarship, providing a more consistent and coherent picture of this juncture in Sikh history than anyone before him. Understanding this period through an accurate rendering of Gurdas's verses, which Rahuldeep accomplishes quite effectively (Shackle, 2017; Dhavan, 2020; Fenech, 2020), provides a firmer foundation for comprehending the following century of the community's struggle and its evolution. This is why the book is so important for those engaged in studying the Sikhs.

Second, the book (Gill, 2017) provides new translations of 13 of Gurdas's 40 *vars*. The dating, ordering and interpretation of these verses are all important for the historical understanding of the Sikh community and its traditions, but the translations have merit from a completely different perspective. Shackle (2017), one of the foremost linguistic experts of this period and region,⁵ finds the translations to be "more elegant than most of those which have appeared in earlier versions". Dhavan (2020), herself the author of a major history of the Sikh community in the 18th century (Dhavan, 2011) says that "they offer at present the most mellifluous English rendering of the work of this important Sikh scholar and poet" [p. 83].⁶

⁵ In particular, Shackle (1983) remains a seminal reference for the linguistic components of the content of the Guru Granth Sahib.

⁶ The untimely loss of Rahuldeep Gill as a translator of Sikh poetry will have other sad consequences for Sikhs and for scholars. Most recently, Rahuldeep was engaged in an ambitious project of making a fresh translation of all of Guru Nanak's verses. He shared with this author his new rendering of the Guru Granth Sahib's beginning composition, the *Japji*, which is considered foundational to the faith and has been translated numerous times, though with varying felicity of meaning (N. Singh, 2018). It was easily the most beautiful translation of the *Japji* that I had ever read, and one can only hope that it will become publicly available one day.

Growing the Banyan Tree

Both Rahuldeep's book (Gill, 2017) and his handbook chapter (Gill, 2014) provide compelling accounts of Gurdas as a consistent and loyal champion of the Sikh community, and of Guru Arjan and Guru Hargobind as the community's spiritual guides in the face of imperial oppression and fierce competition from Arjan's older brother and his lineage. Both works draw heavily on, but add to, Rahuldeep's doctoral dissertation (Gill, 2009). But there is much more in the dissertation that deserves to be highlighted. In normal circumstances, one would wait for a scholar to continue developing material from the dissertation for publication, before discussing those ideas in formal academic interchanges. But here, the circumstances require a different approach.

Gill (2009) provides a careful analysis of Gurdas's entire corpus, including the *kabitts* as well as the *vars*, and, as a result, posits a significantly more comprehensive perspective on the work, its motivations, and its implications. Gurdas emerges from this analysis as much more than an exegete or commentator on the spiritual message of the Sikh sacred text. Instead, he is a recorder of the Sikh community's evolution, a guide for how the core teachings of the Sikh Gurus can be embodied in Sikh practice, and a champion for a distinctive Sikh identity that is exclusive in terms of rejecting the rituals and practices of Hindus and Muslims, but inclusive in its pragmatic approach to being a Sikh. Of course, this pragmatism does not compromise on the Sikh spiritual and ethical message, and it is this balance that Rahuldeep brings out in his fine-grained analysis. Gurdas's perspective on the evolution of the Sikh community is captured in his metaphor of the growing banyan tree, which is adopted in the title of Gill (2009).

It is impossible to summarize such an extensive and significant analysis in a short piece, but both academics and others can engage directly with the material, which is publicly available. One hopes that fresh intellectual engagement with the full range of Rahuldeep's work on Gurdas will provide new understandings of his role at a pivotal point in Sikh history, as well as greater appreciation for Rahuldeep's careful and balanced scholarship. In this piece, I simply outline some of the key points in the analysis in Gill (2009).

With respect to early Sikh beliefs, and Gurdas's perspectives, Rahuldeep (Gill, 2009, p. 82) provides a clear, well-structured analysis, "we probe the major beliefs of the tradition that emerge from Gurdas's writings. These are organized according to four distinct, yet overlapping, themes. First, we discuss how Gurdas conceives of the Deity. Second, third, and fourth, we investigate Gurdas's 'three shelters': Guru, *sangat* (congregation), and *bāṇī* (holy word)." The question of the extent of influence that these writings had on the Sikh community of the time is a separate one, but what emerges clearly from Rahuldeep's analysis of Gurdas is that, contrary to what has become almost the conventional wisdom in Sikh Studies,⁷ there is an early consciousness of a distinct Sikh identity, and an attempt to define and promulgate it beyond the more metaphysical message of the Sikh Gurus themselves.⁸

Rahuldeep's analysis goes on to consider Gurdas's elucidation of early Sikh ethics in detail. Again, he provides a scholarly account that challenges currently popular academic claims. As he puts it (Gill, 2009, p. 119), "when I refer to Gurdas's ethics, I mean those parts of his corpus dedicated to proper conduct for Sikh religious practitioners. Broadly speaking, the term *rahit* also connotes the idea of conduct-oriented injunctions. *Rahit* is a term that, today, is associated with the Sikh tradition from the eighteenth century onwards....Close readings of Gurdas's works, however, significantly challenge this understanding of Sikh self-perception in the early seventeenth century, and show that *rahit* was part and parcel of Gurdas's discussion of the good life."

Readers are referred to Gill (2009) for a detailed consideration of Gurdas's ethical perspectives,⁹ but a couple of broader issues are worth highlighting. First, there is a clear integration between worship practices and ethical ideals (Gill, 2009, p. 130), "In the Sikh congregation kirtan and discussion brings the four castes into one, and in this oneness the practitioner achieves a state of focus where his mind

⁷ The best-known example of this is Oberoi (1994). See also Patton (2019) and N. Singh (2022) for different perspectives on the strength of that particular historical narrative, independent of the implications of Rahuldeep's work on Gurdas.

⁸ Of course, the Gurus' writings also contain practical ethical guidance and commentary on social inequities and injustices, so Gurdas is building on a clear base, as Rahuldeep brings out at numerous points by discussing how Gurdas uses concepts and phrases from the Sikh sacred text.

⁹ Scholars will also find it illuminating to compare the analysis in Gill (2009) with a consideration of Sikh ethics as framed by an analytical philosopher, but based on evidence from the Guru Granth Sahib rather than from Gurdas's writings (K. Singh, 2021).

does not wander elsewhere.”¹⁰ Second, on the subject of gender, which is an increasingly important concern for the community and its scholars, Rahuldeep is unsparing in pointing out the limitations in a contemporary context of Gurdas’s views on the topic (Gill, 2009, p. 133, fn 9), “Unlike what can be said for the aims of the Sikh founder, women’s empowerment does not seem to be high on Gurdas’s agenda.” This is consistent with Rahuldeep’s overall scholarly stance, which is carefully documented, avoids loose statements, and is free of hagiographical bias. Gurdas emerges from the analysis as an important Sikh thinker, a theorist as well as a chronicler and commentator, but also as a human being with his own individual limitations.

Engaging the Future, Remembering the Past

Rahuldeep stood out in the field of Sikh Studies because he regularly engaged with contemporary social issues, not just for the Sikh community, but much more broadly. To some extent, this would have been a natural consequence of his academic position in a Christian institution, one which was not defined by the boundaries of Sikh Studies or even South Asian Studies. Rahuldeep emerged quite quickly as a significant contributor to inter-faith conversations within and beyond academic settings. One can even hypothesize that this aspect of Rahuldeep’s contribution to scholarship (combining the theoretical and the practical) was his own version of growing the banyan tree – his range of intellectual and social contributions being very much in the mold of Bhai Gurdas.

Two academic contributions by Rahuldeep in the context of inter-faith engagement are noteworthy. Gill (2015) was part of a project on “memory and hope,” sponsored by the Elijah Interfaith Institute, a non-profit based in Israel and the US,¹¹ being one of six contributors from the world’s religious traditions.¹² The editor of the collection (Goshen-Gottstein, 2015) provides the rationale for the

¹⁰ The significance of Sikh kirtan and congregational worship and the connection to ethical principles are analyzed in depth in Kaur (2019, 2021).

¹¹ Rahuldeep is still listed on the Institute website (<https://elijah-interfaith.org/about-elijah/our-scholars/religions-of-india>) as one of five scholars of the Sikh tradition, and the only one based in US academia. This further illustrates his unique position, and one can hope that someone with similar expertise and insight into Sikhism will replace him.

¹² The other traditions represented were (in alphabetical order) Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism. One would expect all of them to be part of the list, but Sikhism’s position might be somewhat more tenuous.

project (p. 2), “As heirs to traditions, we receive not only their finest spiritual teachings, but also the residue of resentment, hatred, and negative view of the other, born of the religious hostility of yesteryear.” Rahuldeep addresses this challenge from the perspective of the Sikh prayer, *Ardas*, which plays a vital role in worship services, and foregrounds memories of the community’s experience, positive and painful, but concludes with an emphatic wish for the welfare of all. As Goshen-Gottstein summarizes (p. 18), “Rahuldeep Singh Gill's essay offers what may be considered an integrated theory of memory, that provides a means of transcending the inbuilt limitations of memory, thereby holding the key to transformation and purification of memory.”

The second noteworthy piece by Rahuldeep in the realm of inter-faith engagement is a deep and poignant meditation on death and fearlessness in the face of death, used to discuss vocational exploration and discernment, and vocation as a “calling” (Gill, 2018). This piece uses Rahuldeep’s own translations of Guru Nanak’s verses to elucidate the Sikh perspective on these issues, bringing his historical and linguistic expertise to bear on this topic. He also shares his own personal experiences, and addresses much of his message to students, a message of benevolence, community and love in the face of injustice, trauma and death.

Going beyond the academic arena, as a public intellectual, Rahuldeep made two kinds of contributions. One set pertains to the Sikh community, and how its history and traditions can inform approaches to contemporary challenges, for Sikhs as well as for society more broadly. In this group, there are some written pieces, but the bulk of these contributions is in the form of presentations and conversations that were recorded. Another set of contributions is broader in scope, not explicitly rooted in Sikh tradition, but bringing some of its insights and sensibilities to bear on issues of diversity and pluralism in the world at large.

Many of these contributions are available through a site that honors Rahuldeep by aggregating various links to recordings and writings, https://linktr.ee/rahuldeep_singh, and individual references or discussion will not be provided in the current piece – readers are urged to explore these at leisure. The recordings, in particular, provide a valuable complement to Rahuldeep’s

detailed, densely footnoted, core academic work,¹³ and they also provide examples of his humor, compassion and plain speaking, aspects of his humanistic scholarly perspective that printed academic pieces cannot capture. As an example, the title of this section is that of a 2013 webinar for the Sikh Research Institute, in which Rahuldeep begins with Bhai Gurdas, and the precepts of Sikh ethical practice, and goes on to provide a powerful reflection on contemporary Sikh service organizations, the scope for interfaith cooperation, and responding to challenges such as hate crimes, including those that involve minorities pitted against one another.

In a different starting point to the broader issues of division and discrimination, Rahuldeep reviewed Ta-Nehisi Coates's 2017 book, *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy*, for the Los Angeles Review of Books, reflecting on the black-American experience (see Black Threads in the Civic Quilt in the aggregator site). In an article that is not on the aggregator site (Gill, 2015a), Rahuldeep uses the occasion of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day to reflect on the role of religion in bringing people together rather than dividing them.¹⁴ Here he weaves in a Sikh example, that of the Khalsa Peace Corps, founded in 2009 to help feed the homeless in Los Angeles.¹⁵ Sikh experience also plays a role in Rahuldeep's lucid analysis of the weakness of India's democracy (Gill, 2014a). This op-ed piece in the *Los Angeles Times* was written in June 2014, not long after the current Hindu nationalist government had risen to power, but the discussion highlights the more general problems of India's institutions of state power, which affected Sikhs in India even under "secular" Congress governments.

Conclusion

When asked to provide a blurb for Rahuldeep's book, I called it "very important," and said that "his work will change Sikh Studies." That was as much hope as it was prediction on my part, but this paper provides an opportunity to explicate my statement and to take stock. What struck me about Rahuldeep's book was its

¹³ One podcast on the site is specifically a discussion of Rahuldeep's 2017 book, and provides an accessible introduction for those who might not wish to wade through pages of print.

¹⁴ King's speeches, including the one he delivered the day before he was assassinated, are also part of the reflections and analysis in Gill (2018).

¹⁵ The organization name and the story behind it (<https://www.shareameal.net/copy-of-about-1>) are illustrative of those aspects of Sikh ethos that Rahuldeep studied and embodied, namely, universal benevolence and practical engagement to that end.

combination of scholarship, aesthetics and boldness. Some of the same considerations can be found in a couple of favorable reviews by prominent scholars (Shackle, 2017; Dhavan, 2020), who acknowledge the careful scholarship, the merits of the translations, and the novelty of its arguments. It is far too early to assess the long run impact of this book, since academia is inherently conservative and relies on intellectual precedent and authority in ways that are often nonobvious. Rahuldeep's evaluation of the trajectory of the Sikh community and the distinctiveness of the message and tradition is somewhat out of sync with what might be termed conventional wisdom in the Western academy, though much less so than with the assessment of the most accomplished historian of the tradition (Grewal, 1994). In some respects, the intellectual basis for my blurb can be found more strongly in Rahuldeep's dissertation, as was discussed earlier in this paper.

But the potential of Rahuldeep's work and his example to influence Sikh Studies is greater than the book and the dissertation combined. Throughout his academic work and his praxis, Rahuldeep displayed an unapologetic dedication to discovering, learning and sharing about the Sikh tradition. This encompassed its history, the beauty of its texts, and its social commitments. This kind of example and influence goes beyond citation counts or peer-group accolades. This dedication can be seen in the manner in which Rahuldeep's own knowledge and understanding of the Sikh tradition – including Bhai Gurdas, of course, but also the foundational compositions of Guru Nanak – informed his academic work in inter-faith settings. The visibility this brought to the Sikh faith tradition was also part of Rahuldeep's contribution to Sikh Studies.

Rahuldeep was greatly motivated by problems of injustice and inequality, which are all around us. He combined scholarship and community engagement to address these issues. But academia is also subject to the same phenomena, even if in attenuated or less visible forms. With universities very much in mind, Talal Asad (2011, p. 292) wrote, "while the freedom to criticize is represented as being at once a right and a duty of the modern individual, its truth-producing capacity remains subject to disciplinary criteria, and its material conditions of existence (laboratories, buildings, research funds, publishing houses, computers, tenure) are provided and watched over by corporate and state power".

Structural inequalities of this nature will never disappear, but one can recognize them and work to overcome them. Any reflection on the work of Rahuldeep can draw inspiration from his boldness and commitment. Indeed, new scholarship is emerging that embodies a more confident and forthright engagement with the Sikh tradition, in historical as well as contemporary contexts. This work may not be directly influenced by Rahuldeep's own contributions and his approach to engaged scholarship, but one can easily draw parallels. Some examples that come to mind readily are Judge and Brar (2017), Kaur and Kehal (2020), and Judge (2022): there are no doubt other pieces that would be equally apt to mention. In this manner, Sikh Studies is changing, for the better, in my view.

Finally, Rahuldeep was always conscious of his debt to scholars on whose work he built, and he was generous in acknowledging intellectual antecedents (indeed, he was as ready with praise for strong scholarship as he was with questions when it was lacking). His greatest praise was for the foremost scholar of Sikh history and tradition, Jagtar Singh Grewal, who was also recently lost to this world. In the acknowledgements in his book, Rahuldeep notes that it was Grewal who told him, "have a look at Gurdas." One can now repeat this recommendation, but add to it: "Have a look at Gurdas – and have a look at Rahuldeep too."

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Mover of Energies

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Keywords: Rahuldeep Singh Gill, community ethics, interfaith, pedagogy

The first time I encountered Rahuldeep was at an academic interfaith conference hosted by California Lutheran University in collaboration with Interfaith America (formerly known as the Interfaith Youth Core). He was speaking on a panel focused on energizing college campuses with curricular and cocurricular programming that fosters interfaith engagement. The only thing I remember from any speaker that day was something Rahuldeep passionately proclaimed. He preached the idea of making the everyday commitment to “radical experimentation” when it comes to building bridges across religious difference. His spirit of radical experimentation in pushing the boundaries, trying new approaches, and welcoming others into the process, continues to guide much of what I professionally strive for today. Rahuldeep enthusiastically articulated this commitment in his own life and energetically modeled it in his relationships, teaching, scholarship, and professional duties.

In his undergraduate course syllabi, Rahuldeep described his teaching style as a “mover of energies” rather than a lecturer. A few years after my first introduction to Rahuldeep at California Lutheran University, I had the pleasure of hosting him on my own campus in Minnesota to speak to both our undergraduates and staff about engaging our university’s mission to foster religious inclusiveness. His presence that day was intense, warm, inspiring, and most certainly a mover of energies, as he challenged students, staff, and faculty to personally reflect on their values in conversation with the institutional mission. I have no doubt that Rahuldeep’s energy inspired and moved others to identify and recognize their own energies that day. His energy continues to reverberate throughout ours to this day.

In my course syllabi, Rahuldeep is the only person I quote. Every semester, on the first day of class, my students and I read his words together as we set out to co-form our classroom into a resilient space. Rahuldeep preached,

Resilient places are safe enough for students to feel brave in. ... Resilient places are not places where bad things do not happen or where significant contentious issues are not discussed in sometimes terrible ways that people will regret. They are locations that host those experiences, as well as the experiences of healing and the discussion and dialogue to revisit the most contentious fights in ways that are transformative.¹⁶

Rahuldeep continues to guide my students and me as we strive for the values he championed and lived so beautifully.

The last time I saw Rahuldeep was at an intimate interfaith pedagogy workshop in Chicago. The first thing Rahuldeep said to me was, "How are the kids?" A smile struck across my face, for Rahuldeep was speaking my language. He beat me to it. I was about to ask him the same thing. Rahuldeep and I had earlier discerned that our children were of similar ages, as we shared in the challenges and joys of fatherhood. Rahuldeep didn't first ask about my work, research, publications, teaching, or any of the usual academic stuff. He went straight to the heart by asking about family.

Rahuldeep Singh Gill's energy will forever be in my life, on my syllabi, and in my academic, professional, and personal orientation. We are blessed to have had him touch our lives.

¹⁶ Rahuldeep Singh Gill, "From Safe Spaces to Resilient Places: A Role for Interfaith Cooperation in Contentious Times," *Journal of College and Character*, vol. 8, no. 3 (2017): 206.

The Construction of Dangerous Boundaries¹⁷

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Keywords: Rahuldeep Singh Gill, Bhai Gurdas, Sikh Studies, Janam Sakhi

“In these times of such unabated contention, is *bravery* the most useful place to end up?”

-Rahuldeep Singh Gill¹⁸

Questioning the logic of bravery and safety, Rahuldeep Singh Gill asked us to consider danger. The problem with ‘safe spaces,’ Gill writes, is that the logic of safety “implies that participants in ‘safe’ space will not be exposed to any level of danger.”¹⁹ And yet there *is* danger. In the face of such danger, one could say, as some have, that we need brave spaces rather than safe ones. Yet the exposure to danger is not to be combated by bravery as the platitude “in the face of danger, one must be brave” would have it.²⁰ Instead Gill insisted that “bravery is certainly not what is lacking and cannot be the final destination for our work” precisely because bravery, too, is marked by danger.²¹ How is the integrity of safety and indeed bravery called into question by the “dangerous supplement”?²² How do we, Gill inquires, absorb “the dangers of bravery?”²³ This is an especially important inquiry when, as Gil Anidjar writes, “you could say that danger befalls us regardless of whatever agency [or bravery] we still believe in. Danger cannot be beaten. We might prevail, sure, even grow stronger for a while. But that is because danger must be fought, or else escaped, and first of all encountered. Fight or flight, but also — lose.”²⁴ Fighting or fleeing, how do we grapple with our loss to danger?

¹⁷ I would like to thank Harleen Kaur, prabhdeep singh kehal, and Zunaira Komal for comments and suggestions.

¹⁸ Rahuldeep Singh Gill, “From Safe Spaces to Resilient Places: A Role for Interfaith Cooperation in Contentious Times,” *Journal of College and Character* 18 no. 3 (2017): 203.

¹⁹ Gill, “From Safe Spaces to Resilient Places,” 203.

²⁰ The relation between bravery and danger is a longstanding one. To take one early example, The Iliad states, “The brave meets danger, and the coward flies.” *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Alexander Pope (London: H.G. Bohn, 1863).

²¹ Gill, “From Safe Spaces to Resilient Places,” 204.

²² Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1997).

²³ Gill, “From Safe Spaces to Resilient Places,” 205.

²⁴ Gil Anidjar, “That Great Mother of Danger,” *Critical Times*, forthcoming.

The encounter with danger is, we must remember, localized and “narrowed down by taboo,” writes Franz Steiner.²⁵ There are, Steiner continues, “social pressures” that regulate danger so that it remains localized: confined to those dangerous—and also brave—spaces. Steiner focuses on two social functions of taboo, one of which is the classification of the dangerous transgression and the other “the institutional localization of danger, both by the specification of the dangerous and by the protection of society endangered, and hence, dangerous persons.”²⁶ For Gill, however, we must question the logic of inclusion and exclusion, inside and outside, brave and dangerous, that comes to localize danger. “Is this the best we can hope for? Are we to keep just enough distance to not prick each other? That cannot be our highest aspiration” claims Gill.²⁷ Learning from Gill’s capacious enquiries, I, too, want to ask about danger, bravery, safety, historiography, and the university. I turn to Gill’s writings on Bhai Gurdas and the question of boundaries to highlight the importance of Gill’s historiographical intervention. I then turn to the university as an institution—the site in which these debates about boundaries proliferate. I want to argue that Gill was especially attuned to the question of danger and the social participation within it. He wanted us to grapple with our necessarily dangerous condition.

Bhai Gurdas, Gill argues, “was a charged and activated writer with a radical vision of Sikh history in the face of persecution and martyrdom who sang of a triumphant Sikh future.”²⁸ To engage with the Sikh tradition, Gill continues, one must engage the work of Bhai Gurdas. To engage in this work could be an act of renewal—“an expanding banyan tree”—rather than a mimetic or mandated reproduction.²⁹ As Gill writes, “more important than rule-following is the intention and attitude that one brings to one’s action.”³⁰ Still, Bhai Gurdas imparts a lesson about the Sikh community: it is a community that is “self-sufficient” but also, in its renewal, never just given, never just a reproduction. Gill thus holds together what appear to be two contradictory premises: (1) renewal in which causality is disrupted and (2) causality as internal to the tradition.³¹ For historians,

²⁵ Franz Steiner, *Taboo* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, [1956] 1967), 146-7.

²⁶ Steiner, *Taboo*, 147.

²⁷ Rahuldeep Singh Gill, "Grinding for the Common Good and Getting Roasted," *Intersections* No. 42, Article 7 (2014): 20.

²⁸ Rahuldeep Singh Gill, “The Work of Bhai Gurdas” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, ed. by Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 152.

²⁹ Gill, “The Work of Bhai Gurdas,” 153.

³⁰ Gill, “The Work of Bhai Gurdas,” 153.

³¹ The question of causality—such as miracles—is tied to the question of God’s self-sufficiency. To give one example, Thomas Aquinas wrote, “So, a thing that has a completely hidden cause is

this contradiction can present a problem. Yet, if we think within the tradition, as Gill asserts, our very notions of identity and contradiction might be called into question.³²

Sikh philosophers have noted this aspect of the Sikh tradition that Gill so aptly captures about the work of Bhai Gurdas, namely that “the community continues the divine revelation: the Guru is the manifestation of an invisible seed (*nirankar ekanker*) and the Sikhs are the fruits from that tree.”³³ As Piara Singh Padam writes, “though one truth is explained through different representations and logics (*nirupan*) [that construct different panths], it remains a singular truth.”³⁴ Padam goes on to describe, using naturalistic metaphors, how this singularity manifests itself: as a large tree that creates conditions such as seeds, shade, and roots that necessarily produce new and different thoughts and traditions through remaining within its scope.³⁵ In a similarly evocative language, this is what the Sikh philosopher Jagdish Singh calls *mauldi nischitta*,³⁶ which translates as a resistance to stabilization through perpetually divergent, yet ultimately unified, rhythms. Or, more simply, “blooming certainty” from *maulna* (blossom, blooming) and *nischit* (definite, fixed, certain).

Here Gill makes an important contribution to a debate that has engulfed Sikh Studies—a debate with no end—the debate about the construction of religious boundaries. Gill makes a strong argument. Boundaries are not constructed in the colonial period. Instead, Gill writes, “In all his poems, Gurdas helped the mainstream Sikh Panth delimit its boundaries, and today no other interpreter of the Sikh religion matches his impact on Sikh life.”³⁷ The boundaries were

wondrous in an unqualified way, and this the name, miracle, suggests; namely, what is of itself filled admirable wonder, not simply in relation to one person or another. Now, absolutely speaking, the cause hidden from every man is God.” Thomas Aquinas in Katharine Park and Lorraine Daston, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 122. You could not have a cause that did not emanate from God and the laws of nature.

³² See Joan Dayan, *History, Haiti and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 33. Also see Mana Kia, *Persianate Selves Memories of Place and Origin Before Nationalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

³³ Gill, “The Work of Bhai Gurdas,” 152.

³⁴ Piara Singh Padam, *Sikh Sampradavali* (Patiala: Kalgidhar Kalam Foundation, 2000), 7. Translation is mine. I discuss this in depth in “There is No Colonial Relationship: Antagonism, Sikhism, and South Asian Studies,” in *History & Theory* 57, no. 2: 193-215

³⁵ Padam, *Sikh Sampradavali*, 12.

³⁶ Jagdish Singh, quoted in Jaswinder Singh, “‘Shabad’ de Vyakhya-Gyan di Anubhav-Pargāsi Jugti (Ek Onkar de Sandarbh Vich)” in *National Seminar on Socio-Spiritual Concerns of Religion: March 9–10, 2015*, ed. Paramvir Singh and Jaspreet Kaur Sandhu (Patiala: Punjabi University, 2015), 112.

³⁷ Rahuldeep Singh Gill, *Drinking From Love’s Cup: Surrender and Sacrifice in the Vārs of Bhai Gurdas Bhalla* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 4.

delimited, Gill contends, through contrasts. Bhai Gurdas's writings "set Sikhs in contrast to the Vaishnava, Shakta, and Shaiva traditions via their strict, anti-iconic monotheism" and, more broadly, "he speaks of various Indian religious practices pejoratively, dismissing them as *tantar-mantar*."³⁸ In so doing, Bhai Gurdas, Gill insists repeatedly, "helped Sikhs delimit their boundaries."³⁹ If the questions of boundaries animated Bhai Gurdas's work in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, then scholars cannot locate the late nineteenth century as critical for the construction of boundaries. Indeed, Gill traces a longer genealogy of exegesis from Bhai Gurdas to Kahn Singh Nabha (1861-1938) to Bhai Jodh Singh (1882-1981) that challenges contemporary scholarly periodizations of the Sikh tradition that locate an epistemological break in the late 19th Century.⁴⁰ In rethinking periodization, Gill centers a difficult question that has troubled postcolonial scholars for years: "Where do you begin from and how?"⁴¹

While working through periodization, Gill asks us to consider the continuity within a tradition, but also how traditions relate to each other. These relations between traditions, however, are not necessarily a mark of continuity such as the continuity of an Indic context—a broader regional context—in which the Sikh tradition can be enveloped amongst others. When writing about Guru Nanak, to take another example, Gill said, "We could easily misread the inversion that these excerpts speak of as a mainstream 'Indic' view of Kaliyug. But Baba Nanak was no typical thinker, and he did not merely ascribe to the prevalent thought of his day."⁴² Instead, for Gill, *Sikhi* is an undoing of that very context. We learn from Gill's translations of Bhai Gurdas that:

since the Sikh tradition's inception, other religions no longer boast power and authority. The religious practices of others are like stars in the dark night, and the Guru is the sun making the stars vanish, a roaring lion making the deer take cover, and a royal hawk challenging little birds of duality and polytheism (Var 5:12).⁴³

The problem-space, to use David Scott's framing, was no longer as such. The "horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes)" disappeared as the questions and the answers the questions heralded lost

³⁸ Gill, "The Work of Bhai Gurdas," 154.

³⁹ Gill, "The Work of Bhai Gurdas," 156.

⁴⁰ Gill, *Drinking From Love's Cup*, 2-3.

⁴¹ Fadi Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Bonds of Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), xv.

⁴² Rahuldeep Singh Gill, "Guru Nanak And This American Moment," *Chardi Kala Foundation*, September 11, 2013. <http://www.chardikalaa.com/?p=877>.

⁴³ Gill, "The Work of Bhai Gurdas," 154.

their meaning with Guru Nanak.⁴⁴ The very integrity of a problem-space, of a context, became a problem.

Gill wants to consider how polemics is tied to the failure of a problem-space. What are such polemics between traditions? How is there an undoing in polemics? And why does the problem-space fail? The concrete historical answer is this: the dangers that emerge in other traditions—egoism [*haumai*]⁴⁵—are unfastened through the self-effacement of the Gurmukh (pious Sikh).⁴⁵ For Bhai Gurdas and Gill, the Gurmukh unravels the very possibilities inhered in a problem-space by effacing themselves. Narration becomes dislocated as the self dissipates. As Bhai Gurdas has it in Gill's exquisite translation, "The Sikh should be like a dead man (*murdā hoi murīd*), remain engrossed in the shabad (the experience of the divine word), and continue to reflect on it even if trampled underfoot; the heavens will shower grace on him (9.22)."⁴⁶ We learn from Gill that this self-effacement offers an antidote to the danger of egoism emergent within other forms of life that define the former problem-space. As Gill contends: "The practices of other religions are rooted in egoism (Var 38:7), but the experience of worshipping with the Gurmukhs is the antidote to this poison (Var 38:16)."⁴⁷

And yet though it is egoism [I am-ness] that emerges as a danger, the self is difficult to escape as is narration. The question is: What does one do when danger is not located in an "out there," but within? How can the self itself become taboo? Can one escape the poison of the self? To limit the danger within, can one just proclaim oneself a Gurmukh? But, in so doing, one would uphold that very self and, therefore, danger. The dangers persist since self-effacement turns out to be an impossibility. One remains exposed to the dangers, the poison, of egotism, which, Gill teaches us, Bhai Gurdas recognizes in his self-deprecating acknowledgements of his own self—a self he cannot escape as a bard, as a narrator. This is especially true, Gill asserts, when Bhai Gurdas recognizes that the effects of his polemics against other traditions reify the very ego that should wither. "The confessing or self-deprecating stanzas seem to function as an apology for the harshness of the polemics, painting the polemicist as the worst offender of all" writes Gill.⁴⁸ The polemicist cannot efface themselves and, therefore, are marked by egoism and, in

⁴⁴ David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 4.

⁴⁵ I borrow this translation from Rahuldeep Gill.

⁴⁶ Gill, *Drinking From Love's Cup*, 57.

⁴⁷ Gill, "The Work of Bhai Gurdas," 155.

⁴⁸ Gill, *Drinking From Love's Cup*, 37.

turn, danger. There cannot be danger outside the tradition without there also being danger within.

To engage in polemics which delimit and construct boundaries is a dangerous activity since it reasserts egoism, the “I am-ness”, of the poet. The self and egoism return in demarcating a tradition against another. As the tradition from the outside comes to supplement the tradition that one inhabits then you have both (1) the reassertion of a singular tradition from the locus of the polemicist as that which is outside adds to the plentitude of the tradition one inhabits and, yet, (2) the other tradition becomes necessary for self-definition demonstrating one’s own tradition’s insufficiency.⁴⁹ The other tradition emerges as an adjunct: adding and substituting for what was thought integrative on its own in the polemics. Polemics, therefore, both reify *and* question the integrity of self and boundaries. Bhai Gurdas indeed interrogates the self, his own alongside others; he questions its integrity.

This line of questioning is evident when the poet sings of bravery. Take the example of genre, the vār. For Christopher Shackle and Arvind Mandair, “While the traditional vār composed by the minstrels deals with the battles of tribal chiefs and praise of their bravery, Guru Nanak converted the form to the very different purpose of hymning the greatness of God and the divine organization of the world”⁵⁰ Or, as Gill explains, drawing on Piara Singh Padam, one “characteristic of vārs is that they describe war, and include stories about bravery or the accounts of battle,” which also become the container from which to understand sacrifice of the self as well as martyrdom in the Sikh tradition more broadly.⁵¹ Although it valorizes bravery against egoism, the genre of the vār also upholds the poet and his dangerous activity in praising bravery. Therefore, Bhai Gurdas concludes that, as a bard who sings of bravery, “there is no greater ingrate than himself, no greater slanderer. Though people call him ‘disciple’ (murīd, a synonym for dās in the name Gurdas) he does not understand the Guru’s shabad.”⁵² In Bhai Gurdas’s polemics and in his vārs, the ego has returned. To sing of bravery also brings forth the dangerous poet as the self appears and disappears in the very genre. There is no localization of danger that neatly divides between an inner and outer as the poet must question the logic of bravery even while singing of it in the vār.

⁴⁹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 145.

⁵⁰ Arvind Mandair and Christopher Shackle cited in Gill, *Drinking From Love’s Cup*, 42.

⁵¹ Gill, *Drinking From Love’s Cup*, 45.

⁵² Gill, *Drinking From Love’s Cup*, 16.

There is a question here of historiography in Sikh Studies—a question that Gill dwelled upon in his talk entitled “Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition.”⁵³ He situates that “controversial book” by Harjot Oberoi—*The Construction of Religious Boundaries*—in its own, and his own, history. Gill tells us he “struggled with this book as an undergrad.” He “defended the book even though [he] disagreed with it.”⁵⁴ He defended the book even to those he respected. Still, he understood their important question: “Who speaks for us?” and “Who speaks for the tradition?”⁵⁵ In his own self-deprecating answer, Gill emphasizes he has not navigated these tensions particularly well.⁵⁶ By showing, however, how the question of boundaries and their delimitation is a question of danger (following, of course, a wide traversed field), Gill demonstrates how *The Construction of Religious Boundaries* was always already the construction of a dangerous situation. Where was danger located? Who was considered dangerous? And, even more importantly, Gill asks us to consider how Bhai Gurdas himself centered these questions. Bhai Gurdas understood how polemics created a dangerous situation by upholding the self and its identity.

It is the latter remarks Gill makes that require attention; how is this dangerous situation constructed? Summarizing *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, Gill stated that Oberoi was asking a question of Sikh identity and Oberoi’s answer to his own question was, in Gill’s short summary, “not much.”⁵⁷ Though hyperbolic, there is truth in Gill’s assessment. In the book, for example, Oberoi writes, “The category, ‘Sikh’, was still flexible, problematic, and substantially empty [and] a long historical intervention was needed before it was saturated with signs, icons, and narratives, and made fairly rigid by the early decades of the twentieth century”⁵⁸ There is “not much” there. Oberoi does, however, concede ground, particularly to our bard, to Bhai Gurdas. Oberoi writes that:

⁵³ It is an understatement to say that this historiography is vast. Cynthia Keppley Mahmood situates Oberoi’s work more broadly in *Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogues With Sikh Militants* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996). For a recent analysis of the controversy, see Laurie Patton, *Who Owns Religion?: Scholars and Their Publics in the Late Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019). Nirvikar Singh has situated Patton’s work in Sikh Studies more broadly. Nirvikar Singh, “Who Owns Religion? Scholars, Sikhs and Squaring the Circle,” Working Paper, University of California, Santa Cruz, September 2022.

⁵⁴ Rahuldeep Singh Gill, “Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition,” YouTube, uploaded by the Institute for South Asia Studies (ISAS) at the University of California, Berkeley, November 14, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HR5k-cw44nI>.

⁵⁵ Gill, “Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition.”

⁵⁶ Gill, “Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition.”

⁵⁷ Gill, “Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition.”

⁵⁸ Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 53.

Bhai Gurdas is not completely unaware of boundaries. Frequently in his verse he labours the point that Muslims are missing the correct path, and Hindus are caught in the snare of empty rituals and social inequalities. The solution for him is the Sikh way of life, a distinctive third path to human problems, and the ideal man is a gursikh, a follower of the Sikh gurus and their doctrines. These are not merely metaphysical differences but suggest a new idiom, a separate community of believers, and the reworking of the social order.⁵⁹

For Oberoi, however, Bhai Gurdas does not teach us much about the Sikh community because “having said all this, it must be stated categorically that the Sikhs were still in the process of evolution and growth. There was still critical space at the centre and periphery of the community that had not been appropriated and shaded in the colours of a dominant ideology.”⁶⁰ But we also see, in Gill’s work, that the solution for Bhai Gurdas was not just a Sikh way of life as Oberoi has it—the distinction that marks the Sikh community—but also self-effacement. We have a paradox: the Sikh form of life requires an annulling of one’s location in that form of life. It is an aporia that emerges from within the Sikh tradition, as theorized by Bhai Gurdas, rather than one that awaits scholarly discovery. And, importantly, it is a theorization that defies the desire to find and locate both identity and heterogeneity within the Sikh tradition.⁶¹

In Oberoi’s argument, however, it was, in fact, no longer the self that was dangerous. There was no self-deprecation of the bard who engages in polemics. Instead, with the passage of time, certain Sikhs were dangerous because they impinged upon the “ontology of the self” of the writer. It was no longer the case that danger appeared and reappeared as the self, in its recitations and arguments, came and went. Instead, in scholarship, danger became localized in the community against scholarship and the gentlemanly practices that come to define the production of truth.⁶² One must be amenable to persuasion through these

⁵⁹ Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, 51.

⁶⁰ Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, 53.

⁶¹ Oberoi gives his argument as such: “In grappling with these issues I proposed that historically there had never been a monolithic Sikh discourse and that Sikh tradition had been constantly reformulated. In the absence of a centralized church and religious hierarchy, there existed a heterogeneity in religious beliefs, rituals, and lifestyles. Most Sikhs moved in and out of multiple identities grounded in local, regional, religious and secular loyalties. Consequently, religious identities were highly blurred and several competing definitions of who constituted a Sikh were possible” (198). See Harjot Oberoi, “What Has a Whale Got to Do With It? A Tale of Pogroms and Biblical Allegories,” *Sikh Religion, Culture and Ethnicity*, eds. Christopher Shackle, Gurharpal Singh and Arvind-pal Singh Mandair (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁶² For gentlemanly practices, see Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

practices and “trustworthy sources.”⁶³ But when the community came to assess Oberoi’s work, they “were not persuaded by [Oberoi’s] historicist account.”⁶⁴ Now the danger was that Oberoi’s “individual self was totally overlooked and misrepresented” since Oberoi did not conform, he writes, “to the Sikh community, or at least in the form of a good/proper/ authentic/militant Sikh.”⁶⁵ It was a case, now, of a brave and rational scholar standing up to a dangerous community.

Polemics, then, is no longer a dangerous activity that leads to a certain reification of the self as Gill shows in Bhai Gurdas’s work. Instead, danger comes to lie with Sikhs who do not understand historicist arguments; there is a construction of a dangerous community. The dangerous community mirrors the state itself. Oberoi writes:

Although each of these communities in their normative universe regularly invokes the discourse of collective rights, moral justice, and ethical action, yet - not unlike the state they despise in cultural practices - these communities regularly collude in suppressing rights, disrupting lives, stigmatizing bodies, and inflicting pain.⁶⁶

Here, one could pause and ask, after Anidjar, “But which image, which minority, does the state want? Which does it choose?”⁶⁷ The state narrows down and localizes danger by marking taboos. As Steiner writes, “Taboo gives notice that danger lies not in the whole situation, but only in certain specified actions concerning it.”⁶⁸ As we saw earlier, though taboo classifies and identifies transgressions, there is also, “the institutional localization of danger” which seeks to protect society from dangerous individuals and, now, also communalized communities.⁶⁹ For Oberoi, the dangerous persons and communities are not tied to state power, but instead are those with “absolutist rhetoric.”⁷⁰ Danger is localized in a particular rhetoric. To Oberoi, the danger was localized amongst both Hindu *and* Sikh, both, to borrow from sociological analysis, state and non-state actors.

⁶³ Shapin, *A Social History of Truth*, 21.

⁶⁴ Oberoi, “What Has a Whale Got to Do With It?,” 200.

⁶⁵ Oberoi, “What Has a Whale Got to Do With It?,” 200.

⁶⁶ Oberoi, “What Has a Whale Got to Do With It?,” 204.

Oberoi places the polemics against his book in conjunction with the state’s targeted attacks against Sikhs in 1984. There was danger, then, too, since the state was demarcating dangerous individuals. And, in that danger, Oberoi writes, “To be out on the road in the middle of the night was even more dangerous than being at home” (204). What we learn from Gill and Bhai Gurdas, however, is that home and world are both dangerous.

⁶⁷ Gil Anidjar, “Legal Age,” *The Immanent Frame*, February 16, 2016. <https://tif.ssrc.org/2016/02/16/legal-age>.

⁶⁸ Steiner, *Taboo*, 147.

⁶⁹ Steiner, *Taboo*, 147.

⁷⁰ Oberoi, “What Has a Whale Got to Do With It?,” 194.

And the danger of this rhetoric lay in subverting a previously non-contradictory society—a society in which identity was formerly unimportant and, therefore, not dangerous.⁷¹

If we work within Oberoi's argument, to be brave is to stand against "absolutist rhetoric" that "commodifies" a "diverse population" into a "religious minority."⁷² The safety of one's home—a home that includes the self and identity—then comes under *attack* by a dangerous and unpersuadable rhetoric that comes from elsewhere—the colonized mind as the argument tends to go. As Oberoi laments: "Henceforth, I was not going to be read for my own moral ontology. A theological vocabulary and ethnic paranoia that I had always disfavoured was permanently attached to my identity, for I had been commodified as a Sikh and inserted into a new exchange of (human) goods."⁷³ What is in question is not the state and its violence but the "state of the soul." Indeed, to trace a genealogy of the social sciences and the production of knowledge requires we consider how a persuasive polemic came to require a commitment to God in the West. "The authentic Christian gentleman was reminded of the verbal commitments he had made to God...legitimate reputation in gentlemanly society could not be secured if one was seen to break one's holy vows."⁷⁴ Identity becomes a crucial resource in making credible knowledge in the social sciences,⁷⁵ rather than an impediment that emerges within polemics in the Sikh tradition as we learn from Gill.

Gill's historiographical intervention should be clear: to engage in polemics about boundaries and their construction is to bring danger within rather than locate it somewhere else. Danger cannot be localized into a community outside, preserving one's own moral ontology tied to a Christian notion of selfhood. Instead, danger is and must be absorbed [*absorbere* is "to swallow up, devour,"] to follow Gill. To be absorbed, however, also means that the danger cannot be located in Oberoi and his book. Gill recognized this point and, thus, took the danger within. Remember

⁷¹ As Oberoi writes, "I had grown up in a milieu where there was simply no contradiction between being Sikh and being Indian" (191). See Oberoi, *What Has a Whale Got to Do With It?*

⁷² The use of the passive voice here in Oberoi's writing does quite a bit of conceptual work as it places Sikhs on par with the Indian State. "A semantic unit - the Sikhs - *had been* unleashed through organized violence that rapidly gathered in a new collectivity and vocabulary, for manipulation and control, for intimidation and violence, imperiously ignoring historical descriptions; innumerable contemporary alignments; substantive internal differences; and the question of individual biographies. I allude here to a diverse population being violently commodified into a religious minority" (194-5). See Oberoi, *What Has a Whale Got to Do With It?*

⁷³ Oberoi, *What Has a Whale Got to Do With It?*, 195.

⁷⁴ Shapin, *A Social History of Truth*, 82.

⁷⁵ Shapin, *A Social History of Truth*, 66 and 177.

what he tells us: He defended the book even when he disagreed with it.⁷⁶ He defended it against those who castigated it and had not even read it. He stood up for a book he disagreed with against those he respected within the tradition.⁷⁷ In other words, Oberoi could not become, for Gill, an antagonist to which one responded with hostility; this would be a polemic that would reintroduce egoism by reifying inside and outside, bravery and danger. Instead, Gill wanted us to consider how one cannot escape danger; there is danger. To escape it, by locating danger solely in Oberoi, would be to construct the very boundaries that produce the problems in the first place: a clear home and self without the self-deprecation of *nimrata* (loweredness). To make Oberoi dangerous then would be to mark danger as against bravery rather than that which contaminates bravery. It would be to deny, as Gill says, *begumpura*, since egoism would create a dangerous outside—such as Oberoi—that never was as such.⁷⁸

We know the rise of the dangerous individual is imbricated in the rise of institutions to manage them: the asylum is but one example. And, today, Anidjar writes, “as a society as a ‘public culture of danger,’ we do very much expect to be protected from it and from its, presumably collateral, carriers. We loudly clamor (those among us whose voice can be heard, that is) for protection, for safety and security.”⁷⁹ The university is, of course, an institution, tied to the language of biology.⁸⁰ As Jacques Derrida asks: “How are we to explain that the biological or organicist metaphor...so often serve to describe institutions, the institution of the university in particular, and this just as much on the side of those who defend that institution as those who attack it.”⁸¹ The question is about reproduction, Derrida clarifies. For those who want to preserve and defend, “the necessity of the program and of reproduction is a condition of life, a condition of development and of production” whereas for those who want to attack and destroy the institution, “the program and reproduction are bearers of death” in that there is a “rigidifying the living being in death.”⁸² It is a question of the state, we know, since it is the state which “whispers in your ear through its educational apparatuses, which are

⁷⁶ Gill, “Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition.”

⁷⁷ Gill, “Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition.”

⁷⁸ Gill, “Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition.”

⁷⁹ Gil Anidjar, “That Great Mother of Danger,” *Critical Times*, forthcoming.

⁸⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Life Death*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

⁸¹ Derrida, *Life Death*, 7.

⁸² Derrida, *Life Death*, 7-8.

in fact acoustic or acroamatic apparatuses.”⁸³ Again, reproduction comes to the fore through a certain kind of listening.

Yet reproduction does not abide by the easy oppositions such as life against death even though we imagine reproduction as a simple endeavor: as if there could be pure and replicable models. Natality becomes tied to the joys of reproduction. In this reproductive celebration, we could construct a fable of, to use Derrida’s example, “*the* bacterium [la *bactérie*] as pure and purely a-sexual re-productibility.”⁸⁴ It would allow for the isolation of one model that is reproduced; it “would allow one to use with confidence a binary of dialectical logic, that is, that would facilitate the mastery of certain programs that are impervious, in the end, to the supplement, or in which the supplement itself is incorporated into the program.”⁸⁵ Danger, then, would be eliminated with purification, as *the* Sikh emerges as a reproducible object without contaminations, without mutations. Those dangers could be cordoned off to secure reproduction.

For Gill, one could not purify community or study in such a manner because one had to expose oneself to danger; one could try to escape it, but danger remains. To make his argument, Gill draws upon the Janam Sakhis. He writes:

In the Puratan Janam Sakhi, Baba Nanak is constantly inverting Mardana’s expectations. In their travels, after they are turned away from a particular village where they have been paid no attention, Baba Ji and Mardana travel to a town where they are very well regarded, all their needs are met, and the townsfolk are attentive to their message. Baba shocks Mardana by seemingly cursing the whole town by saying, “May this place be uprooted and destroyed.” You could imagine Mardana’s shock. “Some justice you’re advocating here, Babaji. We just came from a place that paid us no heed. Arriving at this caring place, you’re cursing it?” Baba’s wisdom has a perfect opening now: “If these townsfolk are forced to scatter,” he explains, “they will take their good ways with them. Let those other folks stay put.”⁸⁶

The goal could not be mere reproduction, mere replication, which would be a mark of egoism. In this egoism, the self becomes protected, replicated as “the Good” across time. Gill argued instead that there must be contamination. The goal must be to absorb danger by scattering *into* danger itself rather than cordoning

⁸³ Derrida, *Life Death*, 48. Also see Roderick Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2012), 15.

⁸⁴ Derrida, *Life Death*, 112.

⁸⁵ Derrida, *Life Death*, 112.

⁸⁶ Gill, “Guru Nanak And This American Moment.”

from it. There must be scattering. “Otherwise, who is there to blame when we return to our homes and abodes unchanged, unaltered, uninspired? Those, indeed, would be dark days,” Gill concludes.⁸⁷ The home must scatter as must the self.

When asking about danger, Gill also wondered about the university and reproduction. To continue with his talk, “Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition,” the end goal for Sikhs, Gill argues, cannot be to reproduce the institution, and it certainly was not the end, Gill contends, for Guru Nanak. Yet Gill remarked that Sikhs enter the university to represent themselves, to enter the game of reproduction, so as to say Sikhs have made it: to reproduce themselves in the institution and, therefore, reproduce the institution itself. *The Sikh* emerges as a representable and fortified object. In this endeavor, the university, Gill said, is “a trap because once you enter that discourse and see it as supreme, then it’s playing you.”⁸⁸ To reproduce the university becomes a problem since then one is reproducing the program of the university and the tradition is lost. The university provides a certain mimesis of a pre-determined program. “Critical formations are vulnerable to becoming disciplinary apparatuses” that then enter through our ear to produce consensus as Roderick Ferguson has written.⁸⁹ To use Gill’s example: universities are themselves implicated, and reproduce the logics of slavery, Jim Crow, and dispossession. Sikh Studies is no exception.⁹⁰ It is a study for and by, Gill says, “rich, Sikh men.”⁹¹ This reproduces the Brahmanical society that was subject to Guru Nanak’s critique. Sikh Studies then would reproduce a Brahmanical society in which “there are rules to follow in that system; rules upon rules. Only certain segments of society – male society, that is – can participate.”⁹² If this is the case, the Gill asks: “Is Guru Nanak, then, to be found in the institution? Is it best done in the Ivory Tower? Where should Sikh Studies happen?”⁹³

Gill knew these dangers of the program intimately as he became dangerous in his local institution at Cal Lutheran. “Donors may call,” Gill wrote, “in to endowment offices to complain that the Religion Department is full of non-Lutherans, or that interfaith understanding is watering down a proper Christian ethos.”⁹⁴ But not just phone calls. His office was ransacked in 2019. When returning from a speaking engagement, he found “his office in the Soiland Humanities Building in

⁸⁷ Gill, “Guru Nanak And This American Moment.”

⁸⁸ Gill, “Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition.”

⁸⁹ Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things*, 18.

⁹⁰ Gill, “Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition.”

⁹¹ Gill, “Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition.”

⁹² Gill, “Guru Nanak And This American Moment.”

⁹³ Gill, “Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition.”

⁹⁴ Gill, “Grinding for the Common Good and Getting Roasted,” 19.

a state of disarray—a lamp on the floor, a chair misplaced, a note on his wall and a book left open.”⁹⁵ Sikhs are marked as dangerous subjects as we learned in Oberoi’s demarcations. As Gill explained, “Sikhs are a thousand times more likely to suffer hate crimes than the typical U.S. citizen, and at least nine Sikh Americans have been killed in hate violence since 2001.”⁹⁶ Gill had these experiences. “Growing up in America and having experienced enough trauma, teasing, bullying, and even hatred for my own turban, I wonder how I can subject my bright-eyed baby boy to future difficulty.”⁹⁷ This marking of Sikhs as dangerous individuals had consequences in fixing Sikhs as specimens; Gill remarked: “The whole thing immobilized me for a long time—I have been frozen.”⁹⁸

Yet Gill did not remain frozen. Instead, Gill argued one has to be both institutional and anti-institutional.⁹⁹ He asked for a dynamism that was—similar to Ferguson—not tied to “minority affirmation to rebuttress institutional power,” but a practice that did not “yield to the institutionalized systems of dominant legibility, valorization and recognition—that they can create themselves in ways the institutions did not intend”¹⁰⁰ What we might need are what Gill calls flipped institutions. As he writes, “The world is not flipped, and maybe our institutions need flipping. Maybe by attending to Baba Nanak’s message, we realize that our core institution needs flipping.”¹⁰¹ How does one flip the institution? For Gill, it would be by not reproducing a program. It would be to refuse to institutionalize Sikh Studies. This refusal was necessary because study itself was a danger.

But again, we cannot merely say that Gill was a brave scholar who stood up to danger in how he construed the objects he studied and the vantage points he centered. As we know from Mimi Thi Nguyen “there is no particular reason to assume that the minor object is always an aperture for disruption; it does not and

⁹⁵ Isabella Breda, “‘Inconclusive Evidence’ One Year After Professor’s Office was Vandalized,” *The Echo*, March 23, 2020. <https://cluecho.com/13260/news/inconclusive-evidence-one-year-after-professors-office-is-vandalized/>

⁹⁶ Upali Sraman, Rahuldeep Singh Gill, and Varun Soni, “Understanding Buddhist, Sikh, and Hindu Students on Camps, in *Educating About Religious Diversity and Interfaith Engagement: A Handbook to Student Affairs*, eds. Kathleen M. Goodman, Mary Ellen Giess and Eboo Patel (Stylus Publishing, LLC, 2019), 281.

⁹⁷ Rahuldeep Singh Gill, “Finding a Way Forward,” *Patheos* August 14, 2012. patheos.com/articles/finding-way-forward-rahuldeep-gill-08-14-2012

⁹⁸ Breda, “‘Inconclusive Evidence.’”

⁹⁹ Gill, “Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition.”

¹⁰⁰ Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things*, 178-179.

¹⁰¹ Gill, “Guru Nanak And This American Moment.”

cannot deliver transgression at every turn.”¹⁰² Transgression is not merely located in the correct scholarly posture or drawn from the transgressive object they investigate. That is why Gill argues *we should not trust what Gill himself says*.¹⁰³ We should not reproduce what Gill teaches. We must not trust him, he said, because study must be under threat; there is “no subjective, objective dichotomy; we are in it.”¹⁰⁴ We are in the dangerous situation when we study—a dangerous situation Gill embodied.

“Ultimately,” Rahuldeep Singh Gill wrote, “we will all leave this broken world through our own deaths; but until then, how are we to face the world?”¹⁰⁵ We must, Gill insisted, participate in the world. We must be exposed to danger; we must encounter it as Gill always did: without the promise of replication and reproduction of a program. The goal, Gill taught us, was not to be brave and protect one’s self and community, creating, to give one example, safe spaces. Instead, one must be exposed to danger; it must be taken within. In taking dangers within to disrupt reproduction, conclusions are rendered difficult. They might even appear abrupt—no longer following a programmatic logic we are accustomed to; the relation to a reproductive time goes astray. The conclusion escapes as dangerous supplements proliferate, challenging the integrity of what we took for granted: boundaries, study, and life. There are, however, returns and repetitions. Gill told us that he came to Bhai Gurdas when J.S. Grewal gave him direction; “Have a look at Gurdas,” Grewal said.¹⁰⁶ At a time when it appears we experienced an abrupt and sudden conclusion, a possible end, that leaves us in despair, we must remember that one day, someone will advise, as Nirvikar Singh already has, “Have a look at Rahuldeep.”¹⁰⁷

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¹⁰² Mimi Thi Nguyen, “Getting Over Ourselves,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 25, no. 2 (2022): 348.

¹⁰³ Gill, “Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition.”

¹⁰⁴ Gill, “Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition.”

¹⁰⁵ Rahuldeep Singh Gill, “The Call of Death and the Depth of Our Callings: The Quality of Vocational Discernment” in *Hearing vocation Differently : Meaning, Purpose, and Identity in the Multi-Faith Academy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 67.

¹⁰⁶ Gill, *Drinking From Love’s Cup*, x.

¹⁰⁷ Nirvikar Singh, “Rahuldeep Singh Gill and Sikh Studies: A Reflection,” *Sikh Research Journal*. Forthcoming.

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