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Rahuldeep Singh Gill and Sikh Studies: A Reflection¹

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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.

¹ 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,² 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].³

² In particular, Shackle (1983) remains a seminal reference for the linguistic components of the content of the Guru Granth Sahib.

³ 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).⁴ 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,⁴ 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.⁵

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,⁶ 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 does not

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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).

wander elsewhere.”⁷ 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,⁸ being one of six contributors from the world’s religious traditions.⁹ The editor of the collection (Goshen-Gottstein, 2015) provides the rationale for the project (p. 2),

⁷ The significance of Sikh kirtan and congregational worship and the connection to ethical principles are analyzed in depth in Kaur (2019, 2021).

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.

“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,¹⁰ 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.¹¹ Here he weaves in a Sikh example, that of the Khalsa Peace Corps, founded in 2009 to help feed the homeless in Los Angeles.¹² 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

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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).

¹² 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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