

“Extremely Stupid Guidelines”: On The Development of Historical Questions Around Guru Tegh Bahadur’s Martyrdom

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ABSTRACT

In 1675, Mughal authorities beheaded Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Sikh Guru and, today, the martyrdom has become a highly contested historical question within scholarly circles. This article investigates the emergence of the event as a historical question and how the emphasis of historical fact-finding refashioned scholarly approaches to the Sikh tradition in the colonial and postcolonial periods. I end by exploring how the famous Sikh intellectual and politician, Sirdar Kapur Singh (1909-1986), drew upon the Sikh tradition to challenge the very premises of such historiographical framing in his landmark essay, “Who Killed Guru Tegh Bahadur?” and the limits to his challenge. I ask: What do we make of Kapur Singh’s frustration and disgust at the history writing that came to dominate the Sikh tradition? I show how Kapur Singh does not transcend the epistemological constraints of history through a better or more accurate rendition of the past. Instead, he disrupts the historiographical operation in his frustration with history writing and what he calls its “extremely stupid guidelines.”

IN 1675, Mughal authorities beheaded Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621–1675), the ninth Sikh Guru. The execution of the Guru has not been subject to questioning within the protocols of remembrance in the Sikh community. Instead, exegesis (*katha*) and teachings within Sikh institutions of higher learning (*taksals*) highlighted how Guru Tegh Bahadur challenged the policies of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, and how this opposition was met with violence. Within the Sikh tradition, the *Bachitar Natak*, which concludes in 1696, holds particular importance as a near-contemporary chronicle of events, though, by no means, were all interpretations about the martyrdom merely iterative.¹ Yet, in the various interpretations that took shape over time, the event itself is not a matter of historical fact-finding, for both Sikh and non-Sikh chroniclers (Grewal 1976, 82). Importantly, although there were rules to credibility within the Sikh tradition, these rules were not reducible to historical fact-finding (Trouillot 1995; Murphy 2012).² One could say, then, that

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¹ These contestations continue, and I cannot do them justice here. For an important investigation into these interpretations in the Sikh diaspora, see Hothi 2024.

² It is important to note that facts are not given but emerge from a particular theological inheritance. See Daston 1991. Moreover, although universal, rules are hardly uniform. We must therefore pay attention to different rule regimes. See Daston 2022.

there was contestation that did not seek to authenticate or circumscribe the events in relation to their historical period but rather over meaning tied to the protocols of textual transmission, as well as to what constituted an ethical and virtuous life.

Against protocols of remembering and verification, however, nineteenth-century colonial administrators came to view the Sikh tradition as an object of knowledge that could be understood through a historicist posture—a point to diagnose the health of the community. Practices and understandings taught within the Sikh tradition became objects enclosed within a particular historical moment in what Amos Funkenstein calls “contextual reasoning” (Funkenstein 1986, 205; Anidjar 2002, 63; Derrida 2016, 213). In tying events to specific historical moments, it became possible to secure histories of community from outside that form of life. Here, we find a process in which the historicization of Sikhs proceeded to transcend experience as expectation came to govern the past and future—a past now constituted by sources and a future marked by European anticipations. Therefore, an alternative life, a life not lived, came to define the Sikh tradition as expectations were divorced from experiences—a key hallmark of modern temporality (Koselleck 2004). This alternative life was the life of the nation during the colonial period. In short, community began to be tied to historical context and development with the nation constituting the highest point in that process (Duara 1995).

My goal in this article, however, is not to assess the commensurability or incommensurability of understandings of the past nor to determine whether the subcontinent has a historical consciousness—a task that would further the historicist impulse.³ That is to say, I do not historicize the supplanted protocols of remembrance in the Sikh community in order to make them legible, which can, as Harleen Kaur and p. s. kehal argue, further entrench attachments to colonial forms. As they write, “Making *Sikhi* [the Sikh tradition and its teachings] and Sikhs’ distinctiveness legible to a British and European imperial audience became a critical colonial governance tool through the archives, even as Sikhs themselves worked to gain control over their own faith through reform efforts” (Kaur and kehal 2023, 213). In an attempt to reorient these desires and attachments, I do not discover a distinctive Sikh historical consciousness (a refusal that can, alas, further entrench those very desires). Instead, I explore how the past became a distinct and distant object that required cataloging. I do this by working through a famous crisis in Sikh historiography in the late twentieth century, precipitated by the famous intellectual and politician Sirdar Kapur Singh (1909–1986) in his landmark essay, “Who Killed Guru Tegh Bahadur?” (K. Singh 1976).

Rather than focus on Kapur Singh’s intervention into the literature, I explore his frustration at the development of certain historiographical questions and the production of the Sikh tradition as a source. That is, I examine his frustration at how the field developed. Situating one’s findings within the literature is an important disciplinary task. It produces a community of experts that, as Hayden White put it long ago, “set limits on what constitutes a specifically *historical* event” (White 1982, 122). The literature sets the ground for what “passes for educated, common sense”—a common sense that has vigorously been contested with the creation of new literatures and shifting fields in response to colonial mythologies and investments (White 1982, 122; Trouillot 1995, 55; Smith 1999). We all know and commonly hear about the problems of a given field even though these might not enter the published record as “official” interventions; complaints made over dinner, for example.⁴ Often these laments are not tied to giving the

³ There is a large body of literature on the (in)commensurability of historical forms. See especially: Ali 1999; Aquil and Chatterjee 2008; Rao et al. 2001; Guha 2019; Murphy 2017.

⁴ As Charles Hirschkind demonstrates, dinner parties are themselves constituted by norms and behaviors that can limit the passions. But transgressive behaviors that challenge norms are not necessarily opposed to the formation of a community as transgressions can further bind community. For example, inside jokes about “Reviewer Two” are artifacts that can enhance the community and the objects that cohere it. See Hirschkind 2011, 637; and Mulvin 2021, 9.

field a new direction or fixing problems. Consider the frustration expressed in private about the lacuna, limits, and direction of a literature without any clear intervention or possible change, even as one must continue to situate oneself within the field. In these complaints, scholarly agency becomes suspended, bound to the coordinates of what constitutes a “field.”

By tracking Kapur Singh’s frustration, I argue that one common experience of historiography and “the literature” of a field is affective. There is a historiographical frustration, even disgust, that emerges in the requirement to locate one’s findings within a broader field. Yet, this disgust and frustration are barred from appearing within the literature itself because the literature does not simply fix a historical event or object of inquiry; it also sets limits on behaviors and affects (Schaffer 1992; Shapin 1994). The literature thus binds together a scholarly community by creating a shared set of references and behaviors, which always already includes affective and embodied dimensions, even if the passions are internalized in the formation of the bourgeois self (Hirschkind 2011; Mulvin 2021, 19).⁵

This is especially true when we turn to literature on the “religious,” which is constituted by the questioning power of the secular. As Charles Hirschkind has shown, attention to “embodied aptitudes of a secular subject” causes discomfort and hesitation because, as Hirschkind continues, “perhaps the most visceral element of the secular discourses identified by [William] Connolly is their rejection of the visceral dimension itself” (Hirschkind 2011, 636). Rather than a discrete form of practice and embodiment, we learn from Hirschkind that the secular is “a mode of power, one that mobilizes the productive tension between religious and secular to generate new practices through a process of internal self-differentiation” (Hirschkind 2011, 643). Put differently, the secular requires one to constantly question their passionate concerns in order to determine the correct amount of investment in an object of inquiry. Still, even though it is precisely this negative quality, a skepticism, that defines the literature on the “religious,” we cannot separate embodiment from analysis of texts and objects either for ourselves or our interlocutors as affect and embodiment cannot be distinguished from analysis, even if the secular promises otherwise (Hirschkind 2011; Mulvin 2021, 10, 191; Kaur and Kehal 2023, 221).

But what affects are appropriate or apt (Srinivasan 2018, 126)? What happens when affects question references, and therefore the coherence of a community, without being productive and generative of a field, without being invested? I argue that negative affects, such as frustration, in relation to a given field are tied to what Sianne Ngai calls “ugly feelings” (Ngai 2005). These are feelings that ensue from predicaments of suspended or obstructed agency in which the shared references to a fixed object are no longer taken for granted, but neither can the fixed object be escaped (Ngai 2005, 2–3). Ngai describes ugly feelings as “dysphoric or experientially negative in the sense that they evoke pain or displeasure” while also having “socially stigmatizing meanings and values” (Ngai 2005, 11). These are negative affects that look to negate the object to which they are directed (the historiography), “either by denying them or by subjecting them to epistemological skepticism” (Ngai 2005, 11). Indeed, in Kapur Singh’s essay, we do not merely find an alternative understanding of the past or an internalized colonial framework—both of which reproduce the conceits of the human sciences. What we also find is frustration and disgust with the historiography and, to use Kapur Singh’s own words, the “extremely stupid guidelines” that have governed it (K. Singh 1976, 104 III). I focus on the affect that emerges in the text’s frustration with the making of history. What do we make of the frustration and disgust

⁵ I am grateful to Cathleen Chopra-McGowan for recommending Mulvin’s work. I do want to make clear that I am not making an argument about affect in South Asia writ large since excess of emotions—passions—were also valorized. Instead, I want to consider the affective aspects of knowledge production within a scholarly community. For an important argument about emotion and excess in South Asia, see Pernau 2019.

at the history writing that came to dominate the Sikh tradition? Perhaps the laments scholars make about the literature without direction, the epistemological skepticism of these affects not tied to fixing an object or delimiting a field of study, are themselves important reminders of the limits of the work scholars do.

To situate my own inquiry in a broader literature: Dipesh Chakrabarty, Saidiya Hartman, Kirsten Weld, Charles Hirschkind, and countless others have called our attention to the importance of affect and sensibility as people experience what becomes marked as the past (Chakrabarty 2000; Hartman 2007, 2008; Weld 2014; Hirschkind 2020). Chakrabarty has called such histories "affective histories" in which "thought [is] intimately tied to places and to particular forms of life" (Chakrabarty 2000, 18). Yet, such feelings often remain in contradistinction to modern forms of history writing, though available for barter. Hirschkind (2020), for example, traces how the "felt relations" of *andalucismo* offer an alternative to historians who strive to contextualize and make contingent attachments and feelings to a region. In contrast to historians who excavate the past, we rediscover a passionate encounter with the past by upholding felt relations (Hirschkind 2020, 102). In such readings of "felt relations," however, there can appear a difference between the participant in the sensibilities and the historian. A difference emerges between—what becomes—the participant and the critical reader.⁶

Yet, scholars have also cautioned against sharp analytic distinctions, reminding us that the visceral is present at multiple stages, from archiving to the reading of the archive, and, as Zeb Tortorici writes, "from the writing of history to the reading of historiography" (Tortorici 2018, 32; Hartman 2007, 2008; Weld 2014, 161).⁷ From the title of Kapur Singh's essay, we can see that Kapur Singh does not evade the historiographical questions that reigned in the historical frame that came to define the past. Kapur Singh works with hegemonic historiographic practices but also responds viscerally to them—an engagement that does not nullify his response as the critical and noncritical emerge and exist uneasily together in all forms of historical writing. To reiterate: my concern is not to document a historical truth but to understand the parameters through which historical questions were formed and the affective response to the critical literature that emerged from these questions. One must, as Ranajit Guha writes, "understand the ideological character of historiography itself" (R. Guha [1982] 2014, 3). Building on this insight, I argue that one must understand the affective responses to that ideological character in which critique and noncritique are folded together rather than remaining analytically distinct.

I take the experience of frustration to explore how affect disrupted the writing of the past even though there was no clear alternative and Kapur Singh participated in the same frame. By focusing on feeling (following Ngai), I neither reduce frustration to "ressentiment" nor valorize frustration as a therapeutic solution (Ngai 2005, 6). There is no satisfaction in tracing this itinerary of a historiographic question. Still, focusing on frustration might be more prudent than enlarging the cage of context (going from discovery to discovery) or delimiting other forms of habitation (searching for an alternate embodiment of time) (S. Guha 2019, 177). Frustration, instead, might point toward a different form of protest, attuning our concern to "lawless demands," frustration, as Jacques Lacan writes, "concerns something that is desired and is not held to, but rather which is desired without reference to any possibility of satisfaction or acquisition" (Lacan 2020, 29–30).⁸ The same can be written about "irritation." Ngai argues that irritation "lacks an explicit occasion or object" (Ngai 2005, 179). Frustration and irritation

⁶ Derrida challenges these distinctions in his *On The Name* (1995). As Talal Asad notes, this distinction is predicated on a particularly European history. Asad writes, "The rationality of criticism, according to Kant, consists in the fact that the statuses and passions of those involved have nothing to do with judging the truth of an argument" (Asad 1993, 204). The very distinction between critique and noncritique is tied to the formation of the secular as Asad has it.

⁷ Chakrabarty does point to a visceral encounter within historiography by tracing the affective bond between Sarkar and Sardesai (Chakrabarty 2015, 157–62).

⁸ Frustration, for Lacan, is a lack located on the imaginary plane (Lacan 2020, 47).

do not create definitive knowledge or an accurate representation but a suspension of them. Suspended, there appears frustration and irritation within a space without catharsis, without purpose (Ngai 2005, 6). This suspension might be a critical interruption rather than a politics of aggrievement. It might highlight what Amia Srinivasan calls “affective injustice,” which is, as Dylan Mulvin explains, “the injustice of lacking control over one’s working environment or the knowledge infrastructures of one’s discipline, and the felt incapacity to do anything about it” (Srinivasan 2018, 127; Mulvin 2021, 139).

My inquiry begins by exploring arguments about the nature of history and historiography in relation to colonial rule to disclose the ideological ground on which debates around Guru Tegh Bahadur’s martyrdom played out. I argue that in the late nineteenth century, the Sikh tradition became a site onto which to fashion sources that legitimated colonial rule. I make this argument by examining Max Arthur Macauliffe (1838–1913), a British administrator and scholar of the Sikh tradition. I then show how Macauliffe’s interventions demarcated a Sikh historical narrative by looking at how historians of South Asia in the early to mid-twentieth century took up Macauliffe’s insights. A community of interpretation thus developed around the historiographical question “Who Killed Guru Tegh Bahadur?” in which certain limits around sources became marked from Macauliffe onward. Finally, I consider both Kapur Singh’s theorizations and the affect that undergirded these theoretical concerns. My argument is that Kapur Singh did not transcend the epistemological constraints of history through providing a better or more accurate rendition of the past. Instead, he was frustrated by the historiographical operation that continues unabated into the present—a frustration cultivated by a visceral engagement with historiographic assumptions and a suspended ability to change not only the focus of the historiography but the very formation of a historiographic literature around Guru Tegh Bahadur.

THE WRITING OF SIKH HISTORY

How did the execution of Guru Tegh Bahadur become an event to be verified through historical research? There was a broader shift in Europe during the eighteenth century in how history was understood, specifically in relation to experiences of time. As Reinhart Koselleck writes, “One of the conceptual achievements of the philosophy of the Enlightenment was enhancing history into a general concept which became the condition of possible experience and possible expectation” (Koselleck 2004, 194). Specifically, determinations of experience were removed from experience itself, enshrined in a new meaning of the concept of “revolution” now marked by progress for humanity instituted by the “rationally endowed man” (Koselleck 2004, 4, 19). A further change in the nineteenth century was a shift away from the universal history of humanity to particular histories of “men” marked by difference. This refocusing does not mean, however, that reason was discarded, but, as Vanita Seth explains, “reason [was] not an attribute of man qua man but the hard-won consequence of particular histories, races, and cultures” (Seth 2010, 122). Variance, to be sure, was not a matter of chance but situated in a racialized, which was always also a religious, history (Anidjar 2007). And, indeed, colonial administrators measured such differences within the subcontinent by placing them in time—differences that could also be marked between, for example, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs (Cohn 1997, 46).

This change in the nineteenth century indicated the emergence of a new “science” of history that sought to properly map time, articulated by a diverse tradition that we know today as *historicism*. The historicists proclaimed, to follow Ian Hacking’s synthesis, “that social and cultural phenomena are historically determined, and that each period in history has its own values that are not directly applicable to other epochs” (Hacking 2002, 53). According to historicism’s proponents, it is a key step in solving problems: because there are no eternal forms or permanent essences that transcend contexts, the key to understanding particular societies is to understand

specific and immanent circumstances (Beiser 2011, 2). Although historicism centers the particular, history becomes, as Saba Mahmood writes, the "neutral ground over which different discursive traditions meet, obliged to translate their specific life worlds into a commensurate form called 'religion'" (Mahmood 2016, 206). This emergence is tied to secular practice, which produces, as noted above, instability and indeterminacy (Hirschkind 2011; Agrama 2012). Yet, the space in which this questioning occurs is what Mahmood calls "the uniform space of history," in which particular "religions" are forced to confront each other while "equally vulnerable to the questioning power of the secular" (Mahmood 2016, 207). This new science of history required historians to efface themselves—to remove their passions—to produce a uniform space to get at the unvarnished truth by interrogating and questioning new objects: sources. The historian came to reflect the past, which required they stitch together these sources (Koselleck 2004, 130–31). Put differently, to set aside the self, to combat the self, the historian also needed to set aside objects, produce documents, isolate them, and denature them to bring them into a common field; this change signals a broader shift in the history of epistemology (Daston and Galison 2007).

To reflect differences in the histories of humans, there was a need to produce archives. Within this archivization in the colony, Rama Mantena teaches us that

practices of empiricism were elevated through disciplinary protocols such as the sifting of facts, the positing of historical truth, and the production of "sources" as well as through the accompanying set of concerns with the separation of mythic and magical elements from historical facts—elements particularly crucial for the new emergent practices of history. (Mantena 2012, 10)

Documents were then exiled from practice "in order to confer upon them the status of 'abstract' objects of knowledge," to quote Michel de Certeau (1988, 73). In this process, as Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, "there must be in place some abstracting mechanisms that actually abstract—that is to say, remove—documents from the particular relations within which they originate and circulate (family, bureaucracy, religious institutions, etc.). Both the state and the market have historically acted as such abstracting forces" (Chakrabarty 2015, 106). And, with the creation of these abstract objects by the colonial state and market, this archive, this collection, came to signal a "history to be made;" sources came to demarcate the conditions of possibilities in their abstractions. One such condition of possibility was that the "present" becomes a self-enclosed entity as time becomes measured as a series of separated "presents." In this science, a path toward the past must already be opened in a marking of time (Derrida 2016, 212–23).

In archiving and historicizing fever, colonial officials could create Sikh texts as "abstract objects," as sources, to answer questions emanating from the colonial state while becoming removed from the form of life in which they were embedded. Yet, officials could repudiate the loss of embeddedness that occurred in the making of the source; the frustration in this loss was displaced onto historical narrative.⁹ As de Certeau contends, history denies "loss by appropriating to the present the privilege of recapitulating the past as a form of knowledge" (de Certeau 1988, 5). That is to say, though there is a dislocation within the Sikh tradition in the making of sources, history assuages that very loss by handing sources to Sikhs as a past within a narrative form (de Certeau 1988, 136, 156; Spivak 1999, 65). It is not only that a tradition becomes a site to fashion abstract objects of inquiry in a new form of historical reasoning, but also that the object is given back to alleviate that very loss: "Historiography furnishes death with a

⁹ What is missing is not real, as Lacan teaches, but symbolic; a new law has emerged in which the first fixations take place. Frustration is a sign of a discordance, an imaginary detriment. Order emerges from this chaos (Lacan 2020, 58). See Lacan 2020.

representation that, in placing the lack within language, outside of existence, has value of an exorcism against anguish,” insists de Certeau (1988, 101). Tradition becomes an object with a history. In so doing, historiography imposes “a will, a wisdom, and a lesson;” it is a lesson in which the dead of which narrative speaks “become the vocabulary of a task to be undertaken” (de Certeau 1988, 101). Authenticating tradition by tracing a past became more critical than learning and argumentation within a dislocated present.

If so, the goal of scholars cannot merely be to recover the concrete and embedded sources to formulate an accurate history but to consider the production of knowledge itself. The caution against recovery is especially important since the task of historical narrative during the colonial period was tied to the birth of the nation and the emergence of a national subject. The dead, or, let us say, sources, became decipherable marks of an “antecedent cause” of a unified nation (Duara 1995, 4). As Prasenjit Duara writes, “National history secures for the contested and contingent nation the false unity of a self-same, national subjecting evolving through time” (Duara 1995, 4). Colonialism hinged on inculcating this national being within the colonized populations in which history and, therefore, the nation, became a gift dispensed by colonial rule to waiting natives (Chatterjee 1994; Satia 2020, 16).

To give one example, Max Macauliffe, the British administrator in the Indian Civil Service in the late nineteenth century who authored a six-volume study of the Sikhs, proclaimed, “I am not without hope that when the English people become acquainted with the merits of the Sikh religion, they will not willingly let it perish in the great abyss in which so many creeds have been engulfed” (Macauliffe 1905, 27).¹⁰ In Macauliffe’s rendering, Sikhs had accumulated merit since they were the forerunners of the nation-form absent in India; in this sense, they posed a challenge to the stupor of Oriental despotism. The Gurus, Macauliffe explained, sought to “reform and awaken the sleeping nation” (Macauliffe 1909, lxxxviii). “In the Gurus,” Macauliffe observed, “the East shook off the torpor of ages and unburdened itself of the heavy weight of ultra-conservatism which has paralysed the genius and intelligence of its people. Only those who know India by actual experience can adequately appreciate the difficulties the Gurus encountered in their efforts to reform and awaken the sleeping nation” (Macauliffe 1909, lxxxvii–iii). Yet, when writing at the turn of the century, Macauliffe found Sikhs on the precipice of extinction. The force of Macauliffe’s lament about Sikh failure was tied to his hope for a national-becoming that found itself trapped in a bygone age. Macauliffe’s history then becomes a gift that lifts Sikhs out of their stupor and fulfills the original glory of the Sikh Gurus in the birth of the Indian nation—a gift that is always, however, deferred—a question of race (Bracken 1997). The original glory was discovered in the historicization of the Gurus themselves in which history was a project that could lead to the return of a now-delayed national birth.

Macauliffe thus bolstered the life of the Gurus as the kernel of a national form in his representation of the Sikh tradition historically—a historical form that was explicitly tied to race and religion.¹¹ As Macauliffe argued, though India contained many “religions,” they could not be put on the same footing. Instead, he wrote, “some make for loyalty and others for what we may call independence. Some religions appear to require State support, while others have sufficient vitality to dispense with it” (Macauliffe 1909, lv). To determine which “religion” required state intervention, it was essential to determine the correct sources and archives that shed the most light on the nature of each religion. As J. S. Grewal explains, when narrating the life of Guru Nanak, Macauliffe had to authenticate which *Janamsakhi* (life story) was “real” so as to produce a historical narrative about Guru Nanak (Grewal 2011, 270). Grewal writes, “Macauliffe placed the greatest reliance on the one written by Sewa Das in 1588. [For Macauliffe,] It was

¹⁰ This is from a speech Macauliffe gave. In the published *The Sikh Religion* (1909), the sentence is changed from “English people” to “enlightened rulers.”

¹¹ For race and religion, see Anidjar 2007.

not free from 'mythological matter' but it was more 'rational', 'consistent', and 'satisfactory' than any other narrative of Guru Nanak's life" (Grewal 2011, 270). Yet, in producing *Janamsakhis* as sources—as abstract objects—the Sikh tradition became reduced to "a social object, and hence an object for study"; tradition ceased "to be for the *subjects* that which allows them to think or to behave" (de Certeau 1988, 152). Ethical practices and protocols of textual transmission within a tradition—necessarily contentious forms of determining epistemic validity—were then undone (Trouillot 1995, 13–14; Asad 2018, 92–96). Instead, there were now sources to cull isolated facts that promised a history to be made.

The history that was made from these sources foretold a conquest, as we have learned from Ranajit Guha and Rama Mantena (R. Guha 1998, 85–99; Mantena 2012, 32). In their historicization, sources come to prophesize the present, the conquest (R. Guha 1998, 90). There was, Parama Roy shows, an attempt "to establish a precolonial genealogy" in colonial reports (Roy 1998, 45). Sources related to the execution of Guru Tegh Bahadur were critical to foretelling the colonial era as they revealed the impending collapse of the Mughal Empire at the hands of the British, thereby justifying British rule. To quote Macauliffe at length:

A few of the advantages of the Sikh religion to the State may be here enumerated. One day, as Guru Teg Bahadur was in the top story of his prison, the Emperor Aurangzeb thought he saw him looking towards the south in the direction of the Imperial zenana. He was sent for the next day, and charged with this grave breach of Oriental etiquette and propriety. The Guru replied, 'Emperor Aurangzeb, I was on the top story of my prison, but I was not looking at thy private apartments or at thy queens. I was looking in the direction of the Europeans who are coming from beyond the seas to tear down thy *pardas* and destroy thine empire.' Sikh writers state that these words became the battle-cry of the Sikhs in the assault on the mutineers in Dihli (Delhi) in 1857, under General John Nicholson, and that thus the prophecy of the ninth Guru was gloriously fulfilled. (Macauliffe 1909, xviii)

The discovery of this "creation myth"—within what become Sikh sources about Guru Tegh Bahadur and his confrontation with Aurangzeb—came to legitimate the British colonial state.

What do we make of these "sources"? In his chapter on Guru Tegh Bahadur, Macauliffe both cited and critiqued the *Suraj Prakāsh*, a text by Kavi Santokh Singh (1787–1843). As Pashaura Singh has elucidated, even though Macauliffe relied heavily on the *Suraj Prakāsh* to form his narrative of Guru Tegh Bahadur's life, opposition to the Mughals, and martyrdom, he nonetheless found the source unreliable (P. Singh 2006, 55). He even went so far as to accuse Santokh Singh of drug use, which cast suspicion on his assertions and meant that "his statements accordingly cannot often be accepted as even an approach to history" (Macauliffe 1909, lxxvii). Macauliffe arbitrated the truth drawn from dangerous sources in what Pashaura Singh calls "historical-critical methods" (P. Singh 2006, 55). These methods were central for Macauliffe including when he examined the instruction Guru Tegh Bahadur gave in the village of Khar when he critiqued Aurangzeb. Macauliffe translated these instructions as such:

Aurangzeb hath now formed very evil designs and seeketh to destroy the Hindu religion. In the wantonness of his pride he practiseth violence and oppression. His suffering subjects fear for their lives. Wherefore it is now abundantly manifest that his empire and dignity cannot abide but shall gradually perish and that there shall none of his progeny remain even to beat a drum. (Macauliffe V3, 1909, 375)

Macauliffe's footnote to this passage cited the *Suraj Prakāsh*, but, more importantly, Macauliffe wrote, "The Guru's prophecy has been amply fulfilled" (Macauliffe V3, 1909, 375n1). The trials

and execution of Guru Tegh Bahadur came to foretell a colonial history—a history both to be written and already written—tied to the future life of a state and a life already fulfilled in the colonial state’s violent suppression of the 1857 uprising.

After recounting how, as Macauliffe termed them, “Sikh historians” understood the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur, Macauliffe argued that Muslim historical chronicles did not even possess a semblance of historical accuracy. For Macauliffe, much like Sikh sources had to be sifted through with great care, so too did Muslim ones. These included the *Siyyar al-Muta’akharin* by Sayyid Ghulam Husain Tabatabai, written in 1779–1780 (Sen 2017, 104).¹² According to Husain, Guru Tegh Bahadur “aspired to sovereignty” and “began to plunder and to lay waste the whole province of Panjab” alongside Adam Hafiz, a dervish tied to Ahmed Sirhindi (Husain 1832, 112). This was, for Husain, a shift from Sikhs as a religious group to a political one, which triggered (and simultaneously justified) the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb’s intervention against them. Husain wrote, “Sometime after this, Tegh Bahadur suffered death; and his body being cut into four quarters, was exposed at the four gates of the fortress of Gwalior” (Husain 1832, 112–13). The execution then cemented the changes that Tegh Bahadur had helped initiate as Sikhs from this point onward became overtly political. Husain concludes that whereas “hitherto the Sikhs wore only the religious garb, without any kind of arms,” now Guru Gobind Singh Ji created the *Khalsa* and a battle for sovereignty commenced (Husain 1832, 113).

For Macauliffe, the *Siyyar al-Muta’akharin* was incorrect because it did not match Guru Tegh Bahadur’s historical context nor the historical rhythm of Guru Tegh Bahadur’s disposition. As Macauliffe argued, the “circumstances related by the Muhammadan writer are utterly incompatible with the whole tenor of Guru Tegh Bahadur’s life and writings, and cannot be accepted as even an approach to history” (Macauliffe V3, 1909, 392). Yet, Husain’s text, like the *Suraj Prakāsh*, was not interested in historical facts per se but in moral pedagogy. As Sudipta Sen incisively argues, Husain was “not afraid to pass decisive moral judgment on the protagonists of history” because Persian historical chronicles were “suffused with the idea that the study of the past was a salutary exercise in moral pedagogy” (Sen 2017, 108). For example, Husain referred to Banda Bahadur (1670–1716) as an “infernal monster having assembled multitudes of desperate fellows, all as enthusiastic and as blood-thirsty as himself, commenced to ravage the country with unheard of barbarity” (Husain 1832, 114). In Macauliffe, however, there was a shift away from moral conduct to historical fact both in his relation to the *Suraj Prakāsh* and *Siyyar al-Muta’akharin*. Importantly, it was these historical facts, not moral conduct, that legitimated the colonial state.

The prophetic historical narrative that emerged in Macauliffe’s writing, however, was both universal and contingent, as the historian becomes both the subject and object of knowledge—that “enslaved sovereign, observed spectator” as Michel Foucault called it (Foucault [1970] 1994, 312). It is this paradox that belies modern historical writing more broadly. Whereas the *Suraj Prakāsh* and *Siyyar al-Muta’akharin* relay narratives tied to questions of virtue, imparting universal lessons, Macauliffe’s history occupies a stranger place. It is both historically contingent and universal, tracing its fulfillment in the emergence of the colonial state but supported by what became particular and biased facts and forms of evidence that Macauliffe had to sift through and assemble. There was a change, as Peter Harrison argues, from a concern with the knower to a concern with knowledge. In Macauliffe, improvement and progress were no longer tied to individual conduct but “to a common storehouse of knowledge” (Harrison 2015, 124). Rather than conduct in relation to knowledge, discovery becomes central to understanding the past as one simultaneously creates and searches within this storehouse; earlier understandings of the past, by contrast, were iterative. As Dipesh Chakrabarty writes, “I cannot imagine

¹² On Husain, see K. Chatterjee 1998; P. Chatterjee 2012.

historians in pre-British India seeking credit or feeling jealous of each other for being the first to spot an original source" (Chakrabarty 2015, 69).

There was now a distinction between observation and judgment (Sen 2017, 122). The *Suraj Prakāsh* is a source of historical truth for Macauliffe, but it is a form of social scientific truth accessed through a holistic understanding of the text even though the text itself is not "historically accurate" in describing specific events. This view introduces a contingency into the narrative as the source's utility becomes a question of debate. What is the best source from which to write a narrative of Sikh history? The "past" is no longer a given but a matter of intense debate and anxiety, as Macauliffe's own caution against the *Siyyar al-Muta'akharin* belies. This is a broader shift in the nineteenth century as a new form of disagreement arose from the making of contingency. For example, it is a contingency marked by technical practices such as the footnote. The footnote, to continue with the example, signals the particular and provisional use of a source while also verifying what becomes a conditional historical narrative in the emergent public sphere (Grafton 1997, 23). It assumes the public exists as a community of readers that is theoretically, to use Ellen Rooney's term, "amenable to persuasion" in a pluralist discourse (Rooney 1989, 5; Mantena 2012, 181; Chakrabarty 2015, 108). This upholding of persuasion is tied to the collapse of authority, which is, Arendt writes, "in contradistinction to both coercion by force and persuasion through arguments" (Arendt 1968, 93).

Accordingly, this historiographical operation was and is not stable. The source opens up to historically contingent narratives as we saw with Macauliffe, and discovery becomes central to bolster representation of the past in the interrogation of "sources" that can now produce multiple competing narratives. In this shift, Ann Rigney has noted how historical representation functions as a project, not a product, since a narrative is always marked by imperfection (Rigney 2001, 2). Imperfection emerged in the very distinction between past and present as questions about how to properly represent the past—how to bring the past into the present—came to dominate understandings of the past; source criticism is but one example (de Certeau 1988, 140). The past became tied to what becomes a marketplace of ideas in which abstractions flourish as circulation, competition, and exchange take precedence in determining the value of sources (Chakrabarty 2015, 108).

Yet, inquiry into the past is not free-floating, tied to a general production of knowledge, but occurred within specific social relations and disciplinary protocols especially in the cloistered life of the increasingly professionalized discipline of history (Chakrabarty 2015, 6). Promises of harmony in the marketplace and exclusions tied to behaviors made irrational are not opposed. In other words, if "there are laws of the milieu," as de Certeau declares, then chronology is a foremost criterion (de Certeau 1988, 63). One has to produce historical work that can be accredited according to particular protocols—such as gentlemanly behavior or a self-denying ethics or a rhetoric of sincerity—that govern community at the time, otherwise accusations of backwardness or fundamentalism await (Shapin 1994; Koselleck 2004, 254; Hirschkind 2011, 639; Chakrabarty 2015, 33).¹³ The milieu, as we know, "organize[s] a 'police' around the work"—some might call it "peer review"—circumscribing the possibilities of history by placing constraints (de Certeau 1988, 63).

"INDIAN" ANSWERS

Such policing did not only occur in "official" historical narratives sanctioned by the colonial state. "There is no conquest that has only one story to it. It is made up of at least two—one

¹³ There is a long discourse in Sikh studies about fundamentalism when scholarly interpretations are challenged. For one example, see McLeod 1998.

narrated by the conquerors and the other by the conquered,” writes Ranajit Guha (1998, 86). Scholars have documented these narratives of the conquered, noting the alternative possibilities that emerged in how the nation-form would be narrated. Yet, many of these possibilities remained tied to forms of colonial knowledge. As Partha Chatterjee has argued, “to the extent that the genealogy of modern historiography in India is deeply implicated in the encounter with British colonialism, these historical claims of political Hinduism are also a product of the contestations with the forms of colonial knowledge” (Chatterjee 1992, 112). The question, “Who Killed Guru Tegh Bahadur?”—central in foretelling the future of the colonial state—became tied to the project of fortifying an Indian nation-state.

The question became particularly vexed as the division between Islamic and “Indic” interpretations of the rule of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb took root in historical scholarship in the early twentieth century. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has ably analyzed, the prominent Indian historian Jadunath Sarkar (1870–1958) paid singular attention to Aurangzeb while following two methodical obsessions: “his near-fanatic zeal for a positivist idea of ‘fact’ and his spiritual pursuit of a metaphysical idea of ‘truth’ in history” (Chakrabarty 2015, 26). These preoccupations meant that “the search for original and contemporary sources was ultimately in aid of realizing ‘the whole and undistorted truth about the past.’ History must stand, as Sarkar put it, ‘on the solid rock of truth’” (Chakrabarty 2015, 69; S. Guha 2019, 135). For Sarkar, however, truth was tied to “the metaphysics of a certain variety of Hindu nationalism” in which historical methods “were very much a part of the clash between competing forms of patriotism” (Chakrabarty 2015, 149). In this patriotic Hindu truth, Sarkar wrote that Aurangzeb arrested India’s natural progress toward nationhood, precipitating the nation’s decline (Chakrabarty 2015, 74, 193). As Sarkar emphasized, “history when rightly read is a justification of Providence, a revelation of a great purpose fulfilled in time,” and this purpose requires people to learn “to form a compact *nation* with equal rights and opportunities for all” (Sarkar 1962, 450).

Similarly, Sarkar argued that Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh arrested the progress of the Sikh nation by dissolving the spiritual struggle of Guru Nanak into a political struggle—a problem that set in across the subcontinent. “The aims of Nanak were abandoned,” wrote Sarkar, “when his successors in the leadership of the Sikhs set up a temporal dominion for themselves and made military drill take the place of moral self-reform and spiritual growth” (Sarkar 1928, 302).¹⁴ Mughal confrontations with the Sikh Gurus, therefore, were not religious but were tied to “the change in the character of the gurus” who became too concerned with political affairs (Sarkar 1928, 306). The martyrdom of Guru Arjun (1563–1606), the fifth Guru, by the Mughal Emperor Jahangir (1569–1627) was one example of these tensions as Sikhs increasingly became a threat to the Mughal Empire, especially in succession battles. The threat continued with the accession of Guru Hargobind (1595–1644) as the Sikh Guru. He institutionalized Sikh sovereignty with the construction of the Akal Takht, a formal court, in Amritsar, which represented *miri*, worldly authority, which was coupled with *piri*, spiritual authority. Guru Hargobind’s moves soon led to his arrest by the Mughal Emperor Jahangir.

For Sarkar, the tensions between the Sikh Gurus and Mughals could be explained by centering historical change, especially changes in the Guru’s character and context. Sarkar claimed though Guru Hargobind was treated “fairly well” in prison by “the easy and good-natured Jahangir,” eventually “the growing military strength and royal pomp of the guru and his worldly spirit and tastes made a conflict between him and the government of the country [India] inevitable and it broke out after Shah Jahan’s accession” (Sarkar 1928, 310).¹⁵ Political concerns by later Sikh

¹⁴ Sarkar cites a lengthy passage from Rabindranath Tagore’s assessment of the Sikhs to buttress his claim—a passage he translates. For Tagore, Guru Nanak was an exemplar of “spiritual freedom,” which was then defied by Guru Gobind Singh in his pursuit of worldly success.

¹⁵ Sarkar ignores Guru Hargobind’s understanding of *miri-piri* in which *miri-piri* are an antagonistic unity.

gurus, Sarkar argued, resulted in the creation of Sikhism as a separate sect against Guru Nanak's nonsectarian vision. These changes in the Sikh tradition coupled with Aurangzeb's religious persecution led to the explosion of warfare between Sikhs and Mughals in the seventeenth century. In this context, Sarkar concluded, Guru Tegh Bahadur "was cast into prison and called upon to embrace Islam, and on his refusal was tortured for five days and then beheaded on a warrant from the Emperor" (Sarkar 1928, 313). This was an inevitable consequence of the changes wrought by both the Gurus and Aurangzeb that prevented secularization in the subcontinent (Sarkar 1962, 450). The argument was that whereas Guru Nanak had started the subcontinent on the path toward promoting national interests through a nonsectarian religion tied to the private realm, later Gurus championed "parochial and sectarian interests" that stilted progress and, much like Aurangzeb, did not allow Indian nationality to "grow to the full stature of its being" (Sarkar 1962, 450).

Sarkar came to his conclusions through a scientific methodology, deliberating in his footnotes about the veracity of sources. His conclusion: Sikh accounts were not to be trusted and had to be scrupulously avoided in favor of European and Persian texts. For example, when noting how Guru Hargobind challenged the Mughal authorities, leading to several battles, Sarkar argued that the only legitimate source on this topic is the *Dabestān-e Mazāheb* (1645–1658), attributed to Mirzā Zu'l-fiqār Āzarsāsānī, which was contrasted with Sikh accounts.¹⁶ Sarkar footnoted: "The Sikh accounts disguise the guru's defeat, but they can offer no explanation of his flight to the hills if he had been, as they allege, always victorious over the imperialists" (Sarkar 1928, 311n†). Moreover, Sarkar relayed an anecdote from the *Dabestān* about Guru Hargobind wherein a Sikh barter his wife and daughter for a parrot that Guru Hargobind expressed a fondness for, concluding that the changing nature of Guruship during the seventeenth century created "the perversion of moral judgment and ignorance of the relative value of things" (Sarkar 1928, 315).¹⁷ Although itself hardly amenable to modern historicist desires and expectations, the *Dabestān* became a "critical" source for understanding the increasingly political nature of the Sikh Gurus that could be placed in contradistinction to "uncritical" Sikh sources.¹⁸ The reason the *Dabestān* was considered an accurate source (and Sikh accounts were not), however, was because Macauliffe declared it as such. As Sarkar footnotes, "Macauliffe considers this [*Dabestān's*] author's testimony about the Guru as 'of the highest importance'" (Sarkar 1928, 315–16n*).

These historicist methods remained critical in history writing in postcolonial India and are reflected perhaps most famously in Fauja Singh's article "Execution of Guru Tegh Bahadur," published in February 1974 in the *Journal of Sikh Studies*. This article led to an enormous controversy, with Sikh scholars weighing in on Fauja Singh's methodology and conclusions.¹⁹ For Fauja Singh, Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom was a political affair, tied to an agrarian crisis, in

¹⁶ For the *Dabestān*, see Grewal and Habib 2001 and Sheffield 2022. For a contemporary reiteration of this argument, see Hardip Singh Syan, who writes: "Guru Hargobind radically changed this early Sikh dynamic by introducing the concept of 'active' militancy" (Syan 2013, 107).

¹⁷ Sarkar refused to include a second anecdote "for the sake of decency" (Sarkar 1928, 316). Sarkar's plea to decency highlights the moral commitments of a community of interpretation.

¹⁸ I say hardly amenable because, as Sheffield writes: "The *Dabestān* is filled with descriptions of encounters between its author and members of diverse religious groups. The descriptions, often difficult to evaluate, are of religious figures and groups who are not mentioned elsewhere in the early modern Persian textual corpus. A modern reader might wonder what actually transpired in Mūbad's encounters with a follower of the seventh-century Arab rebel prophet Musaylima in seventeenth-century Mashhad or a group of Mazdakites claiming to possess an otherwise unknown scripture of a sixth-century Persian heretic. Such seemingly implausible narratives are mixed freely with first-hand accounts of much better-known figures. Throughout the text, first-person accounts are embedded in broader philosophical and hagiographical narratives, leaving the reader little context to understand what brought Mūbad into contact with the figures he describes" (Sheffield 2022, 983).

¹⁹ The controversy was covered in *The Sikh Review* in January 1976. The issue republished the article and critiques. The prominent engagements were by Trilochan Singh in his "A Historically Untenable Theory" and J. S. Grewal in "Freedom and Responsibility in Historical Scholarship"—both of which are republished in the issue.

which Guru Tegh Bahadur led an armed struggle against Mughal rule (F. Singh 1976a, 32).²⁰ The importance of the agrarian crisis and armed resistance had been missed in earlier accounts, Fauja Singh argued, because Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom was "shrouded in mystery." Its existence in a "state of uncertainty will surely continue," he wrote, "till more authentic evidence has been unearthed enabling us to set at rest all or most of the doubts regarding the matter" (F. Singh 1976a, 28). Though Fauja Singh recognized that the popular explanation of Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom was "based on a firmly rooted and long-standing tradition" that "has come down the centuries," he claimed that contemporary scholars "cannot close our eyes to the many shortcomings and self-contradictions from which the account suffers as an explanation of the violent end of the Guru's life" (F. Singh 1976a, 28). For Fauja Singh, "there was much more behind the execution" than traditional, uncritical explanations had acknowledged.

Fauja Singh contended that the crucial source to investigate the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur was the *Siyyar al-Muta'akharin*. Specifically, he questioned how Husain's work was utilized by earlier scholars, especially Macauliffe. Fauja Singh claimed that centering a peaceful disposition, as Macauliffe did, was not a valid rebuttal to Husain's account, since other evidence, including from Jadunath Sarkar's work, told that Guru Tegh Bahadur did engage in militaristic behavior. Husain's work, therefore, cannot be rejected as a source, especially because, Fauja Singh wrote, "the account of Ghulam Hussain was recorded within less than a century of the event. It was probably based on some earlier account which has escaped our notice so far" (F. Singh 1976a, 31). To properly read the *Siyyar al-Muta'akharin* as a source required an understanding of political economy in the seventeenth century, particularly the crisis in the jagir system, highlighted by the exploitation of *jagirdars* and *zamindars*. As Fauja Singh's argument went, cultivators faced brutal exploitation as *jagirdars* were rotating, not tied to any one place, and "extorting the maximum from the tillers of their soil" while making no improvements to agricultural production (F. Singh 1976a, 32). Importantly, economic exploitation "was common to the peasantry as a whole irrespective of the religious label of individual peasant" (F. Singh 1976a, 32–33).²¹ There were no "communal considerations" (F. Singh 1976a, 33). As the crisis intensified over the course of the seventeenth century, Sikhs gained more numbers among cultivators while increasing the "chances of conflict between the Sikhs and the Government" (F. Singh 1976a, 32). Guru Tegh Bahadur came to lead this conflict that increasingly had a potential military dimension, which Fauja Singh argued could be gleaned from a critical reading of Husain's *Siyyar al-Muta'akharin*.

The martyrdom, therefore, was at root a question of economic oppression, not a question of state power or religion. Writing in postcolonial India, the question of the nation-state's failure to arise historically proved less compelling. Instead, we see an emphasis on social inequalities within a nation. So, although Fauja Singh concurred with Sarkar that Akbar's liberal reign yielded to "Muslim reactionary forces" after Akbar's death in 1605, he insisted "it would be wrong to believe that the intoleration of the Emperor alone was at the bottom of it, because the economic troubles were no less potent a cause of this stir" (F. Singh 1976a, 33). There was then a struggle between Guru Tegh Bahadur and the Mughal forces—a struggle against tyranny. Tyranny was not the result of the Mughals being "foreign invaders" or violating civil rights. Instead, Aurangzeb failed to live up to a sovereign's duties to his peasants. Husain's chronicle was central in reaching this conclusion because it calls attention to the peasant's struggle against tyranny, even if his account of it was "extremely prejudicial and suffers from gross misrepresentation and distortion" (F. Singh 1976b, 184). Despite Husain's flaws, Fauja Singh writes that "a

²⁰ This is a well-known argument; see Habib [1963] 1999.

²¹ In post-partition India, the goal becomes now to create a national unity and a common inheritance in which the peasant (*kisan*) played a critical role. See Siegel 2018.

critical use of the available evidence with us seems to suggest that the Guru's was an effort to raise an armed struggle to be fought in the best tradition of the Sikh movement for a cause, both noble and righteous" (F. Singh 1976b, 184).

The debate around Fauja Singh's article hinged on sources. Fauja Singh's arguments led to inspired debate and denunciations in which scholars demonstrated how he mistranslated the *Siyar al-Muta'akharin* and ignored important evidence that contradicted his argument (T. Singh 1976, 37–40). One of the harshest responses claimed that "the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur has to be studied historically, if historians want to base their study on facts," which, for the critic Trilochan Singh, meant using Aurangzeb's farmans and the *Bachitar Natak* as key sources (T. Singh 1976, 38). In his response, Fauja Singh expressed incredulity at the accusations against his work, listing the sources he utilized and leaving it "to the readers to judge for themselves whether these are important or unimportant sources" (F. Singh 1976b, 184). One must sift through these sources, but what is being sifted is not, Fauja Singh concludes, "something that exists in the air, but has its feet of clay and should always be based on historical data" (F. Singh 1976b, 187).

My goal in this section has not been to provide an exhaustive historical account of how the Sikh Gurus were understood in relation to the Mughal State. Instead, I highlighted a curious distinction that takes hold in the historiography on Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom that continues to influence analyses today: *the importance of a critical assessment of sources that determines facts against an uncritical one*. And it is the critical attention to the validity of sources that is already in service of a particular political imagination grounded in the becoming of the Indian nation-state.²² To give an example, Fauja Singh's article became central to Indian education, as Satish Chandra took Fauja Singh's arguments as canonical in his Class XI textbook, *Medieval India* (1978), published by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). It became the standard account of the period and remains widely in use across the country and beyond. When discussing the history of the subcontinent, Vinay Lal writes about Guru Tegh Bahadur and argues that "the execution of the Guru is not mentioned in contemporary Persian sources, and the Sikh narratives, mistakenly read by some as contemporary sources, dated from the late eighteenth century, or more than a century after the Guru's execution, and rely, it is believed, upon 'the testimony of trustworthy Sikhs'" (Lal 2003, 10). Lal ignores the *Bachitar Natak* in his assessment but can do so because of how the community of scholars created the parameters of the event and authenticated the possible veracity of sources.

Such a historical reading practice, however, did not restrict the Sikh tradition as an object of inquiry. As the historian authenticates the facts within sources, the Sikh tradition becomes an actor—one actor among many within a historical field that includes economic forces and political intrigue. Scholars have, for example, continuously expanded the corpus of sources from new texts to material objects, even discovering new historical forms and protocols of validity (Murphy 2012).²³ But in so doing, debates within a tradition, within a form of life, are rendered injudicious precisely because the tradition cannot be taken for granted (Asad 2020, 403–42). It would do us well to recall that though generating possibilities for persuasion—new actors and sources to be included beckon—the market also institutes a particular type of sociality. One must encounter sources precisely as a stranger—not as an actor, but as an analyst—to be a critical reader of them (Derrida 1995, 3; Povinelli 2011, 156). This critical disposition makes both the source and the historical narrative it buttresses sites for general persuasion in an open market of ideas (Rooney 1989, 5–6). Yet, the line between critique and noncritique, analyst and

²² I am grateful to Randeep Singh Hothi for this formulation.

²³ Although this can be an important project, Milad Odabaei rightly cautions against mere recovery of alternative positions, remaining "skeptical of the capacity of human sciences to transcend their philosophical and epistemological perspectivism and accounts for the epochal (or political-theological) genesis of modern self and society" (Odabaei 2022, 275).

actor, stranger and kin, is a thin one. “Critique and noncritique are surely not identical, but, deep down, they may remain the same,” Derrida tells us (Derrida 1995, 3). For example, the analyst, in our case the historian, participates in and witnesses the very event they wish to analyze—the martyrdom, *shaheedi*, of Guru Tegh Bahadur—even while proclaiming a critical distance.

KAPUR SINGH’S FRUSTRATIONS

In “Who Killed Guru Tegh Bahadur?” Sirdar Kapur Singh responds to Fauja Singh’s article and raises the question of inheritance while engaging the historiography on Guru Tegh Bahadur. Sirdar Kapur Singh is understudied in the Anglophone world even though he engaged both Western and non-Western philosophies and traditions as he was fluent in several languages, including Arabic, Farsi, Punjabi, English, Sanskrit, and Urdu. For example, he produced the first Punjabi translation of the *Dhammapada*. He was educated at Government College, Lahore, and also received his Tripos in Moral Sciences at Cambridge University (G. Singh 2011, 430–31). He then entered the Indian Civil Service and, in 1947, was appointed Deputy Commissioner of Kangra. But he was later dismissed when he protested about how Sikhs were racialized within the bureaucracy as criminals. He eventually was given the honorific title National Professor of Sikhism by the head Sikh temporal authority, the Akal Takht. In 1962, Kapur Singh entered politics and was elected to the Indian parliament and, in 1969, to the Punjab State Legislative Assembly (G. Singh 2011, 430–31). Kapur Singh argued that the Indian state was largely inhospitable to Sikhs, especially as the Punjabi Suba Movement sought to have the Indian nation-state recognize Punjab as an autonomous region on linguistic grounds.

Though intimately engaged in political struggle, Kapur Singh was notorious for his learned commentaries and interpretations in both political and scholarly forums, including on how Sikh historiography was being written. In his response to Fauja Singh, Kapur Singh, too, engaged in the question of correct sources that animates the literature. But rather than find a “true source,” Kapur Singh asked about the very guidelines and framework that govern what become “sources.” After Kapur Singh recounts the details of Guru Tegh Bahadur’s martyrdom, he claims that “all this is described and consistently recorded in detail in the Sikh chronicles, as it is embedded in the Sikh group-memory” (K. Singh 1976, 104I). To Kapur Singh, group-memory was treated by other scholars as illegitimate because of how history was being deployed. Kapur Singh, however, did not outright reject the human sciences such as history. Group-memory and history were not hardened opposites. Instead, Kapur Singh argued that history has “vastly extended the frontiers of and illuminated historical knowledge, cleared it of its obscurantist cobwebs, and has furnished scholars with techniques and insights of interpretational methods that were not generally available earlier and that enable them to make historical studies more objectively and scientifically” (K. Singh 1976, 104II). But new techniques, Kapur Singh wrote, bring “new pitfalls” born of “erroneous assumptions”; history must be limited, as history in itself does not offer redemption or truth, let alone wisdom (K. Singh 1976, 104II).

The writing of Sikh history demonstrated these problems quite vividly according to Kapur Singh. The key was in how interpretation shifted as historical research became hegemonic in the aftermath of a clash between two regimes of historicity. Namely, Kapur Singh distinguished between “auto-interpretation” that occurred within a form of life (kinship sociability in which hierarchy and placement matter), within a discursive tradition borrowing from Talal Asad, and “hetero-interpretation,” in which legitimacy emerges from outside that form of life (stranger sociability) (Asad 1986; Povinelli 2011). A hetero-interpretation, Kapur Singh wrote, is “like a goldsmith trying to test the excellence of a rose-flower by rubbing it against his touchstone” (K. Singh 1976, 104III). And it was attempting to work with hetero-interpretations that created Kapur Singh’s frustration.

Hetero-interpretation took hold in Sikh studies, Kapur Singh claimed, in the work of Jadunath Sarkar and was championed for the following half-century. Kapur Singh castigated Sarkar and, in a visceral response with an irritated tone,²⁴ argued:

Accepted as a trend-setter, in relation to Sikh history, Sarkar has given rise and lent respectability to certain extremely stupid guidelines for his contemporary historiographers that have played havoc not only in the recently reconstructed Sikh history but have thrown the Sikh writers and teachers of History altogether off their balance." (K. Singh 1976, 104III)

Kapur Singh's frustration at Sarkar's "stupid guidelines" and "grotesque frame-work" of hetero-interpretation were tied to (1) the centrality of Persian documents in Sikh History; (2) Sikh memory, oral records, and Gurmukhi records being judged "irrelevant and unreliable" to be used as "secondary and corroborative and supplemental material"; (3) the Gurus being rendered "ordinary" and tested in relation to "official values and judgments" emanating from the state; (4) *Sikhi* itself was losing autonomy and becoming folded into Hinduism; and (5) European writings being taken as the "most reliable and conclusive even they are demonstrably self-stultifying" (K. Singh 1976, 104IV). For Kapur Singh, the guidelines that Sarkar set forth had led to "disastrous consequences for Sikhism and the Sikhs" (K. Singh 1976, 104IV). Therefore, rather than take historical interpretation as a singular objective, within a common community, Kapur Singh fractured interpretation and community, as he showed his irritation with how questions themselves were posed.

Yet, in his response to Fauja Singh, Kapur Singh remained tied to that very community forged by modern history writing and the historiography it produced. The response claims, Derrida writes, "to measure up to the discourse of the other, to situate it, understand it, indeed, circumscribe it by responding thus to the other and before the other" (Derrida 1995, 20). In the response, the line between kin and stranger is again muddled. Kapur Singh could not simply escape the strictures of historiography through a declaration as he too responds to a hetero-interpretation when thinking about sources and his critique—a critique that often folds into noncritique as we saw with his frustration at Sarkar's guidelines. He had to engage in source criticism, for example, using the very framework he termed "stupid" earlier. We can see this in Kapur Singh's examination of Munshi Ghulam Husain's *Siyyar al-Muta'akharin*. Here, Kapur Singh stated that "not much reliability can be placed on the author's statements as they are demonstrably sketchy, grounded in bazar stories current long after the events" (K. Singh 1976, 104V). Kapur Singh used the very parameters of historical research—chronology as a fixed temporality, which then binds witnessing—to demonstrate why the *Siyyar* was not a worthwhile source to understand Guru Tegh Bahadur. Yet, the criticism was not merely about reconstructing the context of Hussain and his *Siyyar al-Muta'akharin* but was also laden with affect in what is an auto-interpretation of the Sikh tradition. Kapur Singh did not examine the sources as a dispassionate observer writing for an inclusive reading community but as someone who had to engage in an operation that had become hegemonic to produce knowledge, leading to frustration. Yet, the reading Kapur Singh provided was necessarily guilty; it was polemical. Kapur Singh wrote, "It is obvious that the writer of these cock and bull stories cannot be regarded any reliable source of information about the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur and also of many other events that he has presumed to record as history" (K. Singh 1976, 104V).

In this irritation, Kapur Singh determined that Fauja Singh accepted the "grotesque frame-work" of historiography emergent from Jadunath Sarkar's hetero-interpretation and the "fictions" of Hussain (K. Singh 1976, 104IV). In so doing, Fauja Singh, Kapur Singh continued,

²⁴ For tone, see Ngai 2005, 28–29 and 39–88.

created “a pretty exciting story of how Guru Tegh Bahadur was, in reality, a pre-Marxian revolutionary espousing the cause of the exploited land-tillers and attempting to organise a Che Guevera-type [sic] premature insurgence in his self-assumed role of a class conscious midwife to revolution” (K. Singh 1976, 104VI). This hetero-interpretation then made Sikh group-memory and Sikhs texts false, a superstructure that rested on a greater truth found in models of historical interpretation imported from the West. The implications of Fauja Singh’s argument were stark since his hetero-interpretation suggested that the *Bachitar Natak* was deceitful in several key passages. In ignoring the tradition in his historical inquiry, Fauja Singh made the *Bachitar Natak* false by searching for a truth outside of the text. Here, Kapur Singh did not engage in an analysis of the *Bachitar Natak* but took the *Bachitar Natak* as a given. The Sikh tradition then simply is at this juncture; it remains unquestioned in Kapur Singh’s essay, even though he understands it is not for others—a discrepant point that produces an obstacle and, therefore, frustration.

Yet, the tradition could not simply “be” either, since it was, in fact, tied to modern history writing. Kapur Singh’s response to Fauja Singh grappled in this problem space in its frustration toward not only the use of sources but also the very notion of using historicity to examine the Sikh tradition.²⁵ Again, this was not a pure distinction between group-memory and historical research as Kapur Singh had to engage with chronology to ask: “Is the consistent Sikh recorded tradition and unbroken group-memory altogether devoid of any historical truth?” (K. Singh 1976, 104VII). Although asking this question and concluding that the group-memory was tied to historical truth, Kapur Singh eventually contended that historical research itself needed to be rethought; its goal could not be persuasion as then there had to be an outside to the tradition. Against the obsession with “the Mughal Persian records which so fascinate and impress our teachers and research scholars of history in particular,” Kapur Singh noted that “modern man’s passion for history is not very old and it is a mistake to regard it as the natural behaviour of every civilised man” (K. Singh 1976, 104X–XI). For Kapur Singh, the recent passion for history as exact truth—“a scientific passion for exhaustive knowledge for all the adventures of mankind”—obscured how the past used to provide exemplary models for ethical conduct (K. Singh 1976, 104XI). The study of the past functioned “to provide models, not to describe and preserve the truth and nothing but the truth” (K. Singh 1976, 104XI). It was thus impossible to find facts in a genre that was not concerned with fact finding, which is why J. S. Grewal argued, “there are factual and logical contradictions which indicate that our chroniclers were not seriously concerned with ‘when’ and ‘where’ and ‘why’” (Grewal 1976, 82). Therefore, hetero-interpretation, for Kapur Singh, reached its limit in its reading practice as context could not be gleaned from the text since the text always exceeded the historical truth in its gift of wisdom.²⁶

It would be remiss to ignore that Kapur Singh was harshly critical of Aurangzeb, tying his reign to the emergence of an oppressive Islamic rule. He called Aurangzeb’s reign “this pregnantly black period of Indian history” and referred to Aurangzeb himself as “the fanatical Aurangzib [sic]” (K. Singh 1976, 104IV). The relationship between Kapur Singh and Islam was, however, variegated and complex, tied to both racial classifications, for example, the Semite, that emerged within the historicizing fervor of the colonial period as well as to a profound respect for Islamic achievements and teachings (K. Singh 1976, 104V). He did, however, undoubtedly take the geographic boundaries of India as a coherent Indic milieu as given (K. Singh 1992). But, importantly, his rejection of Islam was grounded in his arguments that found *Sikhi* to be the exemplary model for an ethical life. Kapur Singh argued for the importance of Sikh thought and praxis, and, in centering an enduring truth of the Sikh tradition, he critiqued Islamic thought.

²⁵ Kapur Singh spends some time thinking about chronology.

²⁶ Kapur Singh makes a similar argument elsewhere. See K. Singh 1992, 30.

Yet, Kapur Singh's rejection did not mean one could not appreciate the work a tradition does. In fact, Kapur Singh argued that Islamic chronicles had to be appreciated as Islamic—rather than guarantors of a historical truth. For Kapur Singh, Muslim chronicles, such as the *Siyyar*, were to be *appreciated* for the work they do in creating exemplary models but were *not* historical facts to understand the Sikh tradition (K. Singh 1976, 104XI). As he wrote: "Their writings are not objective attempts at gathering and grasping, as far as possible, the whole panorama of the past, in all its panoply, but conscious and motivated endeavours to portray the absolute and final validity of a ruling, imperial, and monolithic Muslim society as ordained by Allah and revealed in the Koran" (K. Singh 1976, 104XI). The authors of Muslim chronicles were looking to justify the validity of a sovereign, but not a sovereignty that was conceptually distinct from the religious as a political realm. This justification was not merely an instrumental affair from which we can glean the real hidden political kernel of a historical truth separated from a religious one. Instead, the chronicles remain tied to providing an exemplary model of an ethical life that requires auto-interpretation to build understanding. Perhaps counterintuitively, Kapur Singh called "the Muslim chronicles of Persian records" "excellent" since they do what they are supposed to do within the confines of a tradition (K. Singh 1976, 104XII). These chronicles are not meant to be used, however, to reconstruct a Sikh history. Rather than shed one's placement to think about truth from an Archimedean point, habitation in a tradition is thickened in Kapur Singh's theorization.

For Kapur Singh, then, history was abhorrent since Persian manuscripts emanating from the center come to dictate the life of a tradition in which a tradition was no longer a model of the ethical life but an object to be dissected for historical facts—both Islamic and Sikh texts. For example, with Husain's text becoming the legitimate interpretative frame for Guru Tegh Bahadur, he sarcastically concluded: "Such are the high standards of 'scientific objectivity' that inspire our research scholars of History, particularly, in our Sikh Universities" (K. Singh 1976, 104VI). Yet, the community of interpretation that emerged around historiography and the discipline of history decried any entry of Sikhs into that space as they get labeled fundamentalist or marked by false consciousness—a remnant of an earlier time before objectivity (Koselleck 2004, 254). Fauja Singh himself argued that Kapur Singh's critique of history and the search for truth was misguided because Fauja Singh historicized Kapur Singh. Fauja Singh claimed that Kapur Singh's arguments about the function of the past as a model rather than a truth "may be laudable in a *medieval* society or at the lower level, but at the higher academic level it simply cannot work" (F. Singh 1976b, 197). For Fauja Singh, Kapur Singh's irritation was unfounded and inadequate, directed at an incorrect object.

Kapur Singh had foreseen such a critique by noting how protests against Fauja Singh's "gratuitous and shameful distortion and perversion of the Sikh history and the Sikh doctrine" are brushed aside as "uncalled for, unjustified, subversive of academic freedom, and non-conducive to 'scientific research' in history" (K. Singh 1976, 104VII). Yet, Kapur Singh argued that the ways in which temporal grading became critical to the historian were erroneous. In his later work, he contended: "It is fallacious to argue that chronology is a spiral measure of value. To argue that because ancestor worship precedes polytheism, therefore, polytheism is a superior religious practice to ancestor-worship is a fallacious argument. That one is superior to or more excellent than the other, depends not upon whether its chronological origin is earlier or later" (K. Singh 1992, 27). Notions of progress and civilization—marked in time—came to serve as ready-made critiques when one did not act within the parameters of an interpretive community. Yet, the very logics, practices, and guidelines that governed the scholarly community became unquestioned as a marker of a civilized community: a sign of progress.

In his direct response to Kapur Singh, Fauja Singh expressed astonishment and disappointment at Kapur Singh's language—at his failure to maintain an epistemological decorum (Shapin

1994, 193–242). He concluded: “In the end I wish to express my deep regret over the use of some strong words by Sirdar Kapur Singh. I believe that being a National Professor of Sikhism he should have avoided such expression which do not behoove the elevated position he is holding. Strong words do not always make strong arguments (F. Singh 1976b, 197).” With the rise of the inner private realm of subjectivity, an ethos of restraint required passions be filtered and composed when expressed outwardly (Fisher 2002, 59). Fauja Singh called upon this conduct to create another affect: shame. It was a call for Kapur Singh to recognize himself in relation to others within the scholarly community. Kapur Singh’s response, for Fauja Singh, was inadequate, incommensurate to the responsibility within a circumscribed community with norms of conduct.

The frustration that marked Kapur Singh’s intervention violated the decorum crucial to disagreement within the interpretative community of historians—a community in which gentlemanly behavior between abstract and substitutional individuals matters more than the thick relations within a tradition. Required to work within these confines while rejecting them, Kapur Singh constantly used affect-laden language to denigrate the research of Fauja Singh, that is “stupid guidelines,” “self-spun fictions,” and his liberal use of exclamation points (K. Singh 1976, 104 VI). Frustration, however, revealed that though history at the “higher academic level” was itself not working, there remained *no alternative* since an auto-interpretation remained marred by the fact that it now coexisted with a hetero-interpretation—a fact we see in the essay itself. Once auto-interpretation was named as such, it became conjoined to its opposite; authority was no longer a given. The satisfaction that Kapur Singh tried to find in his distinction between auto-interpretation and hetero-interpretation responds to the very frustrations laid forth by the historical discipline; history is the scene of temptation.²⁷ Yet, the satisfaction Kapur Singh desired in relation to frustration signals a want of the impossible, as auto-interpretation and hetero-interpretation constantly fold together within his essay; auto-interpretation was an impossibility. But the frustration itself signaled a possible future, and it was the risk in the face of the impossible—a risk tied not to the certainty of knowledge, but to the ethical—that makes Kapur Singh’s task admirable.

CONCLUSION

My goal in thinking about passions is not to uphold “feeling” or “affect” as somehow more analytically clarifying than historical arguments. Rather, a focus on affect helps to understand how the stakes of a particular historiographical question—in this case, who killed Guru Tegh Bahadur?—became so critical. Moreover, a focus on affect also helps to *denaturalize* that very question. Of course, such an interrogation is especially important since the history and historiography of Guru Tegh Bahadur remain highly contested and tied to the development of the Indian nation-state: Aurangzeb and Guru Tegh Bahadur’s relationship has become a lightning rod to determine boundaries of inclusion and exclusion of the nation. As Narendra Modi argued during the 400th anniversary of Guru Tegh Bahadur’s birth: “Our country is progressing today because it follows the path that the Gurus have laid for us. Wherever we are, it is because of our freedom fighters who have ensured that democracy can exist in India” (*Hindustan Times*, April 2022).

For Modi, this fight for freedom guards against what some call “Islamic fanaticism.” As Modi continued at the Red Fort, near the site of Gurdwara Sis Ganj Sahib, which commemorates the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur:

²⁷ I am here drawing on Adam Phillips’ discussion of frustration (Phillips 2012, 13).

This holy gurdwara reminds us how great was the sacrifice of Guru Tegh Bahadur ji to protect our great culture. At that time there was a storm of religious fanaticism in the country. India, which considered religion as a matter of philosophy, science and self-reflection, was facing people who had committed violence and atrocities in the name of religion. (*Hindustan Times*, April 2022)

Scholars refute the attempt to create a Hindu *rashtra* in the long durée of time and look to the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur to demonstrate how his execution was not determined by religion but by a political necessity. Such a narrative attempts to rewrite the violent anti-Islamic roots of the Indian nation-state and Modi's revisions (Truschke 2017). For both, however, history alongside the distinction between the political and religious remain essential to defining the nation—a narrowly defined field. Although both Modi's and Truschke's readings of the sources conflict because sources come to provide more and more facts, the sources only "gain their right to existence in light of the field constituted by previously created facts," as Trouillot teaches us (Trouillot 1995, 49). Therefore, the challenges might not be challenges at all, as key distinctions and promises—between the passions and analysis—remain entrenched. History, indeed, for all, remains redemptive even as the facts themselves become contingent. As Gil Anidjar shows us, "Just like the progress of science, the expansion of history—and of history writing—appears unstoppable and salvific" (Anidjar 2015, 521).

Rather than locating the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur in time to produce a historical truth to answer historical problems, Kapur Singh's attempt to engage historiographical questions alongside the resulting affect forces us to contend with different questions, including: What is an ethical relation to the past in the thinking about texts? The question is an impossible one that frustrated Kapur Singh; the past did not provide guarantors of a colonial prophecy or national identity (Ali 1999, 5). Texts were not sources to produce a truth in time that could then be traced to legitimate political forms in the present. Perhaps, in the face of Kapur Singh's frustration, we must grapple with how texts produced within the Sikh and Islamic traditions are not sources of information but require us to sit urgently with much more nettlesome questions: What is a virtuous life? What is justice? What is politics? Yet, one cannot recover nor return to a vernacular understanding, an auto-interpretation, since it too remains marked by hetero-interpretations that produce historical truths. Thus, there is frustration at the "stupid guidelines" that continue to dominate, a frustration that Kapur Singh harvests to undertake the risk of (im) possibly thinking otherwise, refusing scholarly persuasion and the dissection of sources to produce an authoritative historical truth.

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