

The *Birth* of the *Khalsa*

A Feminist Re-Memory
of Sikh Identity

Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh

*The Birth
of the
Khalsa*

SUNY series in Religious Studies
Harold Coward, editor

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In memory of my father, who was also a mother to me

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Introduction

For there is no identity without memory—be it of a person, couple, family, neighborhood, community, tribe, people, nation, globe.

—Catharine Stimpson, “The Future of Memory”

The birth of the Khalsa (from the Arabic *khalis*, meaning “pure”)¹ by Guru Gobind Singh is a pivotal event in the psyche and imagination of the Sikhs. During the Baisakhi festivities of 1699 the guru and his wife prepared *amrit*, and five men from different castes sipped it from the same bowl. Their drink purified them of all mental defilements. Ending centuries of hereditary oppressions of caste, class and profession, the five were born into the egalitarian family of the Khalsa. Over time “Khalsa” and “Sikh” have become synonymous terms, and even though only a minority of Sikhs are formally initiated into the Khalsa order, all Sikh men and women trace their personality, name, religious rites, and prayers—what they do, what they wear, how they identify themselves—to this liberating Baisakhi of 1699.

But the event has been recorded only by men, with the result that its total value is far from recovered, and in fact, the imbalanced memory has imposed a heavy burden on the life of half of the Sikh community. How can its mnemonic effects forge Sikh men into hypermasculine subjects and Sikh women into passive and silent objects of centuries-old cultural burdens? Something is terribly out of joint. This study is my “re-memory” of that moment from a female perspective, which recognizes and reproduces an alternative vision to the conventional androcentric understanding and application. To be sure, Guru Gobind Singh was a man of his times. Living in a patriarchal society, he might not even have been aware of all the liberating implications of his dramatic Baisakhi event. But he set them in motion, and his followers must keep this momentum going. I hope my re-memory will inspire Sikhs to live out the emancipatory praxis birthed by their guru, and open our global society to becoming more receptive of others.

I formally began this project in the living room of our home at the Punjabi University in Patiala, India, in the summer of 1998. In the nineties I traveled from America to India to visit my ailing father as often as I could. I had lost my mother; Dad was the only link with my past, my culture, and my heritage, and I clung to him tightly. Through a paralytic stroke, he had lost the use of his right hand, and he deeply felt the loss of my mother. In his sad, sad state he was delighted to see me and showered upon me the love, warmth, and care that my mother had always shown. During the last years of his life, he was both a father and a mother to me.

Actually, even as a child I remember him being very sensitive and full of love. I'd often see Dad with tears in his eyes—which is very unusual in the patriarchal culture of the Punjab. On weekends, especially in the spring and autumn months, there would be quite a few weddings in our neighborhood. When the time came for the daughter to leave her parents' home, the air would be sonorous with doleful songs. Whatever corner of the house I'd be playing in, Dad would pick me up in his arms and cry out: "I am not going to marry off my daughter." And Granny would reprimand him: "Not marry off your daughter! What inauspicious words!"

In May 1998, I was going to be back with Dad and start my research on Guru Gobind Singh's institution of the Khalsa. The three-hundredth anniversary of the Khalsa's birth was fast approaching, and I wanted to celebrate it by exploring this historic Sikh event. On my way to India, I stopped in London for an invigorating conference at the School of Oriental and African Studies. It was a stimulating time, and I enjoyed being with friends and colleagues. On the plane, however, I felt incredibly empty and sad. As soon as I reached Patiala I knew the reason: friends and relatives had come to meet me in white *dupattas* and tears.

Dad was no more. For months I had been looking forward to finishing my semester in Maine and sitting at his bedside in Patiala to start my project. Now he was lying on ice in a living room filled with friends and family mourning in silence. I wanted to stay as close to him as possible for as long as I could. Major Sahib, whom Dad greatly admired and with whom I had intended to discuss Sikh historical texts, had also come to pay his last visit. With Dad's final departure from our house on the funeral bier, everything—my home, Punjab, India—would also be carried away from me. We were waiting for my brother to arrive from America for the final rites. I wanted to make the most of the last hours with my dad at home. Sleepless for hours, utterly confused, dejected, and lost, I began reading in Dad's "presence" Koer Singh's account of the Khalsa event with Major Sahib.

My father's life had been entirely dedicated to Sikh scholarship, and even during his very last weeks, he immersed himself completely in finishing his four-volume *Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*. Its first volume had been launched

by the president of India during Dad's lifetime; the final was to be launched just a few months after by the prime minister of India, but by then my father had passed away. Dad had started his career as a lecturer in English at the Khalsa College in Amritsar, the premier Sikh institute, where he had received both his undergraduate and graduate degrees. In fact, the college authorities were familiar with his academic potential, and offered him his first academic position even before his exam results were out! Dad had joined the Khalsa College right after completing his secondary education at the Khalsa School in Muktsar. Granny would tell us about how much grandfather wanted Dad to become a doctor, and even had him admitted to the medical school in Jullundur. But Dad was so miserable for those first few days that Grandfather finally had to give in to his wish to attend the Khalsa College. Dad thrived in the creative ferment that permeated this Sikh center in the forties. He was involved in many of its interlinking and vibrant circles, and served as president of the Khalsa College Students Association, editor of the *Darbar*, and president of the Khalsa College Hockey Club.

Later in life he became involved in university administration. With Maharaja Yadindra Singh of Patiala as the president, he served as the member-secretary of the commission that was instrumental in the establishment of the Punjabi University in Patiala. The remote area on the outskirts of the city of Patiala, where he and Bhai Jodh Singh (his revered teacher at the Khalsa College and the first vice-chancellor of the new university) would go for their evening walks, was chosen as the site for the Punjabi University—and it soon became the leading intellectual campus of the Punjab. Though extremely busy with the administrative demands of the growing university, Dad would stay up late at night to keep up with his scholarship, and he wrote many books, including *The Heritage of the Sikhs*, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, and *Guru Gobind Singh* (which was translated into fourteen Indian languages). At the invitation of the United States government, in 1964 he visited universities and research institutes across this country. He was greatly impressed by the American system of education, and published *Higher Education in America*. He spent a most stimulating 1968–69 academic year at the Center for World Religions at Harvard, where he wrote *Guru Nanak and Origins of the Sikh Faith*.

Upon his return from Harvard, Dad became the chair of the first academic department of religious studies in India. Called the Guru Gobind Singh Department of Religious Studies, it was established by the Punjabi University upon the five-hundredth anniversary of Guru Nanak's birth (1969). During his tenure, Dad started the publication of the *Journal of Religious Studies*, and kept up with his prolific scholarship in Sikh history and literature by writing books, contributing articles to leading journals and newspapers, translating Punjabi authors like Bhai Vir Singh, Amrita Pritam, and Ajeet Cour into

English, and editing collections of short stories, essays, and conference papers. He hosted many international conferences and brought distinguished scholars to the Punjabi University to foster understanding and peace among people of different religions and nationalities. He also traveled extensively, lecturing on different facets of Sikhism in Japan, Belgium, Holland, England, and the United States. The series of lectures that he delivered at Berkeley at the invitation of the University of California were published in book form under the title, *The Berkeley Lectures on Sikhism*. He was an active member of the World Conference on Religion and Peace, and he also joined the International Consultation in Search of Non-Violent Alternatives in Derry, Northern Ireland. Through his scholarship, travels, and warmth of personality, he developed many lifelong friendships.

So even when Dad was on his own in his paralytic condition, there was a constant stream of scholars and visitors from far and near who helped him keep his spirits high. There were also celebrations when cabinet ministers, important political leaders, and other dignitaries came to the house to present him with awards, including an honorary doctorate from Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar. Mishraji and Panditji, his two constant attendants, cheerfully greeted all the guests. Professor Harmander Singh Kohli, Sardar Tirath Singh Virji, and Dr. Harjit Singh took care of him as if he were their own father. I will always cherish the love and affection that our community and Sikh scholars have given my father.

The whole community bade him a deeply touching farewell for which, again, I will always be indebted. Father was given an official state funeral complete with a military gun salute. Sikh leaders who sometimes had been vehement political opponents of one another sat together at his funeral listening to the melodious verses from the Guru Granth, the Sikh bible. This was indeed a wonderful tribute to a life dedicated to welcoming people from different political, social, religious, and intellectual perspectives, and promoting, in his own unique way, the unifying impulse of his Sikh faith. Present were the President of the Shromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), Sardar Gurcharan Singh Tohra; the Congress Party member of Parliament Jagmeet Singh Brar; Captain Simran Singh Mann; and Sardar Tarlochan Singh, chairman of the National Commission of Minorities. And sharing my grief for many hours were Bibiji Mrs. Tohra, wife of the president of the SGPC; Biba Puneet Kaur, maharani of Patiala; and Biba Bunt, maharani of Burdwan. The Punjabi University honored him posthumously by prefixing his name, Professor Harbans Singh, to the Department of the Encyclopaedia of Sikhism to which he had totally dedicated himself during the last decades of his life, and he was invested with the Order of the Khalsa during the Khalsa Tercentenary Celebrations in 1999. Beginning my work on the birth of the Khalsa in that tragic hour of

his death was my way of saying good-bye to my beloved dad, and this book is really a tribute to him.

A few days after the cremation, my brother and I visited Anandpur Sahib. We had gone to nearby Kiratpur Sahib to immerse in the river Sutlej the last remnants of my father, including the tiny *kirpan* and *kara* that withstood the crematory flames. Dad's death brought us to the spot where the tenth Sikh guru had given birth to the Khalsa almost three hundred years before. It was at Gurdwara (Sikh place of worship, from *guru*=enlightener and *dwara*=door) Keshgarh that Guru Gobind Singh enjoined his Sikhs to keep the five Ks (*kesha*, long hair; *kangha*, comb; *kara*, steel bracelet; *kirpan*, sword; and *kacha*, drawers) as symbols of their physical identity. Henceforth, they were not to cut their hair, and so the shrine of Keshgarh derives its name from the word *kesha*, meaning "uncut hair."

The memory of that historic event had something magical about it at that particular place and time, because I felt pain and estrangement literally sliding away from me. Instead, a new comfort and life arose. For the first time in days my numb body responded to the environment around me. Here I was at the beautiful white shrine, which I had visited many times before. My personal memories of coming here after the sudden death of my mother, after the birth of my daughter, with my husband, with friends, flashed and fused with communal memories: this was the place where something momentous had begun for us three hundred years ago. My brother and I were standing in Anandpur, the city of bliss (*anand*). This was indeed our birthplace. The white marble dome and pillars of Gurdwara Keshgarh serenely embraced the clear blue skies, while the skies in turn outlined the Shivalik ranges forming a diaphanous halo. In the midst of this panoramic scene Guru Gobind Singh on Baisakhi Day 1699 birthed his Khalsa. He performed a dramatic act in front of a large congregation: he asked for the life of five devotees and acted as if he had killed them. He killed five goats instead, and brought the five devotees back into a stunned gathering. He then recited sacred verses as he churned water in a bowl with his double-edged sword. His wife Mata Jitoji added sugarpuffs to the elixir. These first five who sipped the iron-sweet elixir formed the nucleus of the Khalsa. They discarded their caste, class, creed, and inherited occupations, and entered the new family of the Khalsa.

This study is a personal journey into that moment—a return to my own past. Anybody who tries to study this event soon discovers there is very little documentary evidence from that period. The accounts from Sainapat's *Sri Gur Sobha*, Koer Singh's *Gurbilas Patshahi 10*, and Sukha Singh's *Gurbilas Patshahi 10* that I will be using came from the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. They belong to the genre of *Gurbilas* literature (*guru+bilas*=splendor of the guru), a type of narrative poetry exalting the heroism of the gurus in their fight for justice and equality. The authors are

geared more toward expressing the sentiments and convictions of their contemporaries than providing us with historically accurate details.²

Yet these poetic narratives by Sainapat, Koer Singh, and Sukha Singh do provide a framework to approach the pivotal event that I learned as a child. They have enabled me to explore the event from my personal, cultural, and historical grounding so as to understand the *effect* it continues to have on the Sikh community. I was born in a Sikh household in the Punjab, and my first lessons in Sikh history were, of course, through my family and my community. Even then I could see the *effect* of the event for people—how it has continued to shape their psyches and their actions. This study is not a search for the historical facts of that day. It does not “simulate an objectivity.” I do not claim to be epochal in my scope, for I do not intend to verify empirical evidence or rectify any historical details. I do not judge who is right or wrong in their documentation, nor do I wish to assess the accuracy and authority of contemporary scholars. I am concerned with the responses, beliefs, and attitudes of the people to the basic event, which is deeply etched in Sikh minds and hearts. My fundamental question is: how might we think about it so that it can be even more *effective*—in a positive way for Sikh men *and* women? As the leading Sikh historian, W. H. McLeod, perceptively says, “It matters little whether five volunteers were actually summoned or whether five goats were actually slain. The overriding fact is that in its essential outline the story is firmly believed and that this belief has unquestionably contributed to the subsequent shaping of conventional Sikh attitudes.”³

My primary text consists of the basic event as I remember and as I reread it in the *Gurbilas* literature (analyzed in chapter 2). But there are some other texts I will also take up: the *Bicitra Natak*, which is Guru Gobind Singh’s mythopoetic autobiography (chapter 1); the narrative from the *Puratan Janamsakhi* that describes the first Sikh guru’s revelation (chapter 3); scriptural passages that shape the five Ks (chapter 4); and the set of five hymns that are recited daily by Sikhs (chapter 5). These sources are elemental to Sikh faith and personality, and each provides us with a crucial understanding of the birth of the Khalsa. For just as the *Bicitra Natak* shows the “fetal” Khalsa evolving in Guru Gobind Singh’s consciousness, the *Janamsakhi* account traces the genealogy of the Khalsa to Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism. The scriptural passages highlight the five adornments of the Sikhs, while the five hymns (Jap, Jaap, Swaiyyai, Chaupai, and Anand) unfold their daily nutrition and initiation ritual. These materials are a vital part of the collective Sikh memory, and the currents formed in the subconscious from the genres of autobiography, myth, and sacred poetry flow into our feminist remembrance of Baisakhi 1699. With the exception of the sections that we will be studying from the *Gurbilas* literature, these sources may not explicitly refer to the Khalsa event, but they intersect with that particular point and are

extremely important in disclosing the full effect of Baisakhi 1699. These “texts” that we will study are originally heard while in the laps of mothers and fathers, and their sonorous and emotional impact continues to influence listeners for the rest of their lives. This project therefore literally becomes a “re-memory” of what I personally heard growing up in a typical Sikh home.

For me these texts occupy what Michel Foucault calls the “transdiscursive position.” In his discussion of the relationship between author and text, Foucault goes beyond the narrow sense of the writer as a person to whom the authorship of a text can be legitimately attributed. He says, “[A] person can be the author of much more than a book . . . [he or she can be the author] of a tradition, of a discipline within which new books and authors can proliferate.”⁴ In the Sikh world, Guru Nanak (1469–1539) is the author who birthed a new tradition within which all of his nine successors—from Angad to Gobind Singh—have arisen.⁵ Situated as he was between the Hindus and Muslims of northern India, Nanak experienced and articulated the Divine in a new and different way. He birthed a “Sikh” consciousness—generating new modes of poetry, philosophy, myth, art, and ritual. Guru Nanak is the author of the first Sikh text, called the *Jap*, a hymn in thirty-eight stanzas, which forms the opening of the Guru Granth, the Sikh holy book, and reverberates deeply throughout Sikh thought and action. In fact, Guru Gobind Singh’s *Jaap*, a hymn in 199 verses, flows from Nanak’s *Jap*. Nanak’s *Jap* was recited during the preparation of *amrit* sipped by Guru Gobind Singh’s Khalsa, Nanak’s *Jap* was recited during his divine encounter in the River Bein as our myth recounts, Nanak’s *Jap* is the basic texture of the five symbols worn by Sikh men and women, and Nanak’s *Jap* is recited by Sikhs daily at daybreak. With such transdiscursive texts, as Foucault remarks, “the founding act is on an equal footing with its future transformations: it is merely one among the many modifications that it makes possible.”⁶ The works of the tenth Sikh guru elicit the same emotions from Sikhs, and are on equal footing with the works of Nanak, the founder of the Sikh tradition.

Furthermore, Foucault claims, “The theoretical validity of a statement . . . is based on the structural and intrinsic norms” of its tradition rather than on the actual initiator.⁷ This is very important for our study of these texts. We are interested in the theoretical validity of our textual sources, and not in proofs of authorship. What matters is their structural and intrinsic norms, and the fact that they are celebrated and lived by as a part of the ongoing Sikh tradition. Our materials indeed constitute the quintessence of Sikh philosophical and ethical ideals.

Nietzsche once remarked that the real value of history lies “in raising the popular melody to a universal symbol and showing what a world of depth, power, and beauty exists in it.”⁸ The popular melody in Sikhism is Baisakhi 1699, and the present study is a way of expanding Guru Gobind Singh’s

emancipatory performance in Anandpur to all parts of the globe. In fact, my aspirations go even farther than Nietzsche's dictum: instead of just "showing what a world of depth, power and beauty exists" in the historical Baisakhi, our re-memory is really for all of us to taste so that we may experience the invigorating drink that was sipped from the same bowl by people of different castes and creeds. Sikh scripture characterizes memory as a joyous phenomenon: "[D]elicious is the season when I remember You!" (GG, 97). The guru rejoices in the memory of the Divine, and a Sikh poet finds the same delight in remembering the actions of Mataji. When he describes her adding the sugar-puffs to the *amrit*, he exclaims, "[T]he mind is delighted by hearing her story" (Koer Singh, 9:26).

Unfortunately, the mnemonic resonance of Baisakhi 1699 has not brought much delight for women. The event recorded, recognized, and remembered by men has made them victims of hypermasculine attitudes and practices. Kanwaljit Kaur, a Sikh woman writer, laments that "Sikh history has been written by men only, who either chose to disregard women's contributions or did not think their contributions worthy of note."⁹ The Canadian scholar Doris Jakobsh discusses the role of women in her book *Relocating Gender in Sikh History*. Her verdict is that "The guiding principle in Sikh history with regard to women is silence."¹⁰ Historians are, of course, influenced by their biological, cultural, and religious upbringing. Philosophers of history like Nietzsche, Hegel, and Croce rejected the theory of the "innocent eye" of the objective historian and instead stressed the inventive aspect of the historian's own agency.¹¹ Gadamer is even harsher in his critique: "[H]istorical objectivism resembles statistics, which are such excellent means of propaganda because they let the 'facts' speak and hence simulate an objectivity that in reality depends on the legitimacy of the questions asked."¹²

Rita Gross has even detected a "quadruple androcentrism" coloring much of historical scholarship. As she points out, it is not only the historians who chose to record men's experiences, but also the commentators with their mainstream interpretations, the academics with their interest in the study of male heroes, and contemporary practitioners with their hostility toward feminist scholarship about the tradition who have limited and distorted our perspectives.¹³ In addition, it has suffered long neglect from feminist scholars, who are put off by the absence of female gurus and goddess images in the Sikh tradition. Baisakhi 1699 has been remembered by male elites, and their one-sided construction has had terrible repercussions for half of the Sikh community—which tragically has dwindled to 44 percent of our community in the Punjab because of sex-determination tests and the consequent abortion of female fetuses! Sisters and mothers and grandmothers may narrate the event, but the androcentric consciousness that has fed them "quadruply" has reduced their voices to mere echoes of male dis-

course—devoid of their female accents, devoid of their personal concerns, and devoid of their authenticity.

Parallel to Judith Plaskow's invitation to reshape Jewish memory from a feminist angle, we need to return to Anandpur and "stand again" at Gurdwara Keshgarh to retrieve the power of Guru Gobind Singh's momentous event.¹⁴ We must reexperience it from a feminist perspective, with a woman's re-memory. We must remember not only those who were left out from the critical event, but also all those who are still being left out from its empowering memories. What did the women feel in the Baisakhi congregation when the guru made his call? How do they feel today as they wear the five symbols of the Khalsa? When they drink *amrit* prepared and offered by male hands? When they recite the daily hymns? When they are left out from conducting ceremonies in public? When they are given an entirely different set of expectations, roles, and obligations from their brothers, husbands, and male cousins? When their families and their society send them constant messages that they do not matter?¹⁵ It surely does make a difference for the Sikh community whether the event is remembered by those who wield power, or by the disempowered for whom Guru Gobind Singh launched his action and in whose re-memory Baisakhi 1699 is a moment of human wholeness.

Female lenses become the key interpretative mechanism, and mine were crafted in feminist studies in religion. Over the years, Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and Confucian feminist and womanist scholars have inspired me in my research into my own Sikh tradition. Yet, whatever objections and criticisms I may have of my culture, they are mine; they are not "symptoms of a disease" that I caught studying and teaching in America. Uma Narayan wisely cautions us that in Asian contexts there is a "tendency to cast feminism as an aping of Westernized political agendas." In reality, though, our Third World "feminist consciousness is not a hot-house bloom grown in the alien atmosphere of 'foreign' ideas, but has its roots much closer to home."¹⁶ Feminist scholars—Western, Eastern, West Asian—have deepened my inquiry and honed my sensitivity to women's issues. From their different backgrounds and different orientations and different strategies, they have together equipped me with valuable approaches, frameworks, and expressions to remember the silence, invisibility, subordination, and abuse of women—all of which I have personally witnessed and continue to witness. My re-memory of Guru Gobind Singh's emancipatory deed floods with memories and more memories of tragic inequities. And yet if we just shift our perspective from the male norms by which it has been engraved in our minds, that very re-memory floods with hopes and dreams of an inclusive and egalitarian world.

In my own case, Dad's death led me to the theme of birth, bringing me much comfort and fulfillment. I began to picture Guru Gobind Singh as a

maternal figure who—like a mother—birthed his Khalsa. I had imagined him primarily as a Herculean figure, who fought heroically, dressed resplendently, galloped ferociously, carried masculine weapons, shot gold-tipped arrows, and recited patriarchal poetry. I myself used to share the popular taste described by McLeod: “It is as Lord of the Khalsa that popular Sikh taste reveres him.”¹⁷ As a child, whenever I was scared of the dark, I was told to remember that I was Guru Gobind Singh’s daughter. Even though these words came from my mother and grandmother, they merely covered up and denied my fear; they never reached inside me to instill courage of any sort. With false consciousness perpetuated by our patriarchal culture, to which my grandmother, mother, and I all belong, we were required to hide behind the metallic mask of our chivalrous guru. That external image prohibited me from probing my fears and feelings, and validating myself in any way. But as soon as I took off those androcentric spectacles, I began to feel close to the tenth Sikh guru. By approaching him as a mother figure, I could physically and emotionally connect with him and detect his real fears and real courage. By discarding the myth of invulnerability, I discovered Guru Gobind Singh’s humanity, and many powerful dimensions of his creativity have started to unfold for me. It is my contention that when we recognize him as the Mother of the Khalsa—rather than as the Lord of the Khalsa—we experience the full force and joy of the Khalsa’s birth.

I do not want to take away from the role of his wife, Mata Jitoji, and appropriate it to Guru Gobind Singh, nor do I want to neuter the male guru in any way. Nor do I want to imply in the least that “motherhood” is essential for women. The “germinative ocean” carried within every woman, mother or not, is what the male guru essentially shares with all of us women. As a feminist mystic beautifully says, “Whether or not a woman actually conceives, she always carries the essence of the germinative ocean within her, the flux of the energy in formless potential. It is a spiritual fertility, full from within, a woman’s inheritance, not dependent on [an] external catalyst.”¹⁸ My goal is to recognize the female side of the heroic guru so that we can fully participate in his liberating action. The Khalsa, I argue, is birthed by the guru. It is not ordered or commanded out. Like every birth, the birth of the Khalsa is entrenched in mystery, pain, and exultation. As contemporary feminist philosophers have made us aware, a focus on birth ushers in hope and wonder and replaces the attention given to death and striving for the other world in traditional patriarchal discourse.¹⁹ New possibilities for men and women open up with Guru Gobind Singh, who as the “mother” conceives the embryonic Khalsa inside her body (chapter 1), who goes through intense labor (chapter 2), who in the postpartum stage makes *amrit* for the newly born (chapter 3), who then dresses up the Khalsa in the five Ks (chapter 4), and gently whispers in the “mother” tongue the five hymns (chapter 5). His

conception, labor, adornment, lactation, and maternal murmurs created Sikh identity, but they draw upon the amniotic waters of the River Bein in which Nanak first tasted the Divine Name and received his Sikh identity. The very name of this river is from the ancient Indian term for a woman's braid (*veni*). Unfortunately, privileging the topknots of boys and men, the community has utterly abandoned the powerful flow in female braids. Androcentrism and machismo have led Sikhs astray from the physically and spiritually nutritious *amrit* that the tenth Sikh guru ultimately derives from Nanak's Bein.

It is, therefore, with a positive hermeneutic that I return to the historical Khalsa event. In fact, it is a "hermeneutics of unfolding" with which I try to recover the many meanings of the traditions and texts surrounding Baisakhi 1699. This strategy, suggested by Harold Coward, stimulates us to discover the richness and multivalent meanings and insights from our literary resources; it takes readers and listeners into account, as well as their geographical and chronological locations.²⁰ A "hermeneutic of unfolding" inspires each one of us to imaginatively reunite the male-female and creativity-procreativity binaries imposed by the reductive, patriarchal processes so that we can reconstruct our human subjectivity. Each of us is male and female, but we have divided ourselves into either masculine or feminine for far too long. And we have only been weakened as a result. It is not the jealous gods who cut us in half, as in Aristophanes' popularly cited myth from Plato's *Symposium*, but we ourselves who have split from the other half. While building and pumping up the one, we have subordinated and lost the "other" side of ourselves. Guru Gobind Singh created the Khalsa at a time when his Sikhs were weak and insecure. His goal was to rid them of psychological and political oppression, and change them into authentic subjects living a life of equality and justice. But after three hundred years we have subjected ourselves to all kinds of fears. Sikh life both at home and in diasporic communities is stifled by and shackled to sexism, casteism, classism, and racism. I especially sympathize with the abuse and oppression of women. In many cases, their victimization even leads to suicides, murders, and "honor killings." What an aberration of and deviation from Guru Gobind Singh's egalitarian vision of society embodied in his Khalsa! As we go forth into the fourth century of the Khalsa's birth we need to become whole and retrieve the repressed and oppressed other, our "m-other."

When fathers stop acting out their "male" roles and become like mothers, they are liberated from their prison of gender; in turn, they do not exert power over us, but rather they empower us with their tears, love, and nurture. Explorations cease to be exploitations of the other; they become gateways to discovering, experiencing, and sharing new resources with each other. The message of the Sikh gurus was precisely to strengthen us, men and women, Brahmin and Shudra, Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim. For too long we

have remembered Guru Gobind Singh in some “tough guise”²¹ image, and missed out on the maternal love and beauty and empowerment that are the matrix of his Khalsa institution. Sikhs will recover their true pride and authenticity not in tough and macho acts and words, but in the rejected and repressed female side of the body and words of the guru. Male and female, death and birth, creativity and procreativity are not contradictions of each other; to use Rabindranath Tagore’s comforting image of life and death, they are the right and left breasts of the mother.²²

Abbreviations

Akal Ustat	by Guru Gobind Singh, Sabdarath DG, pp.16–52. Cited by verse number.
Anand	The six prescribed stanzas recited during the amrit initiation are by Guru Amar Das. They begin on p. 917 of the Guru Granth. Cited by stanza number.
Bhai Gurdas	<i>Varan Bhai Gurdas</i> , edited by Bhai Vir Singh (Amritsar: Khalsa Samachar, 1977). Cited by chapter and verse numbers.
BN	<i>Bicitra Natak</i> by Guru Gobind Singh Sabdarath DG, pp. 53–91 Cited by chapter and verse numbers.
CC 1	Candi Caritr 1, by Guru Gobind Singh Sabdarath DG, pp. 92–127. Cited by verse number.
CC 2	Candi Caritr 2, by Guru Gobind Singh Sabdarath DG, pp. 128–53 Cited by verse number.
CS	W. H. McLeod, (editor and translator) <i>The Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama</i> (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1987) Cited by verse number.
Chaupai	by Guru Gobind Singh, Dasam Granth, pp. 1386–8. Cited by verse number.

DG	Dasam Granth <i>Shabdarath Dasam Granth Sahib</i> Bhai Randhir Singh (editor), (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1985) This three volume edited text goes till p. 1249. Cited by page number.
GG	Guru Granth <i>Sabdarath Sri Guru Granth Sahib</i> (Amritsar: Shromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, 4th edition, 1964) Cited by page number.
Jaap	by Guru Gobind Singh, Sabdarath DG, pp. 1–15. Cited by verse number.
Jap	by Guru Nanak, Guru Granth, pp. 1–8. Cited by stanza number.
Khalsa Mahima	short hymn by Guru Gobind Singh, <i>Sarabloh Granth</i> (<i>Sampuran Steek</i> Part III, annotated and published by Singh Sahib Baba Santa Singh Ji Chhianven Karori (Anandpur: Shromani Panth Akali Buddha Dal Panjvan Takhat, n.d.), pp. 531–32.
Koer Singh	<i>Gurbilas Patshahi 10</i> , (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1968) edited by Shamsheer Singh Ashok. Cited by chapter and verse numbers.
Puratan Janamsakhi	<i>Puratan Janamsakhi Guru Nanak Devji</i> . (Published in Amritsar by Khalsa Samachar, 1946.) Our focus is on the “Vein Parvesh,” pp. 16–19.
Sabdarath DG	<i>Shabdarath Dasam Granth Sahib</i> Bhai Randhir Singh (editor), (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1985). Cited by page number.
Sabdarath GG	<i>Sabdarath Sri Guru Granth Sahib</i> (Amritsar: Shromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, 4th edition, 1964) Cited by page number.
Sainapat	<i>Sri Gur Sobha</i> (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1967) ed. by Dr. Ganda Singh. Cited by chapter and verse numbers.

Sukha Singh	<i>Gurbilas Patshahi 10</i> (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1989) ed. by Gursharan Kaur Jaggi. Cited by chapter and verse numbers.
Swayyai	These ten short passages by Guru Gobind Singh are from his Akal Ustat, Sabdarath DG, pp. 20–21. Cited by Swayya number.
Var Durga Ki	by Guru Gobind Singh, Sabdarath DG, pp. 154–167 Cited by verse number.
Zafarnamah	by Guru Gobind Singh, Sabdarath DG, pp. 1238–1249 Cited by verse number.

Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.