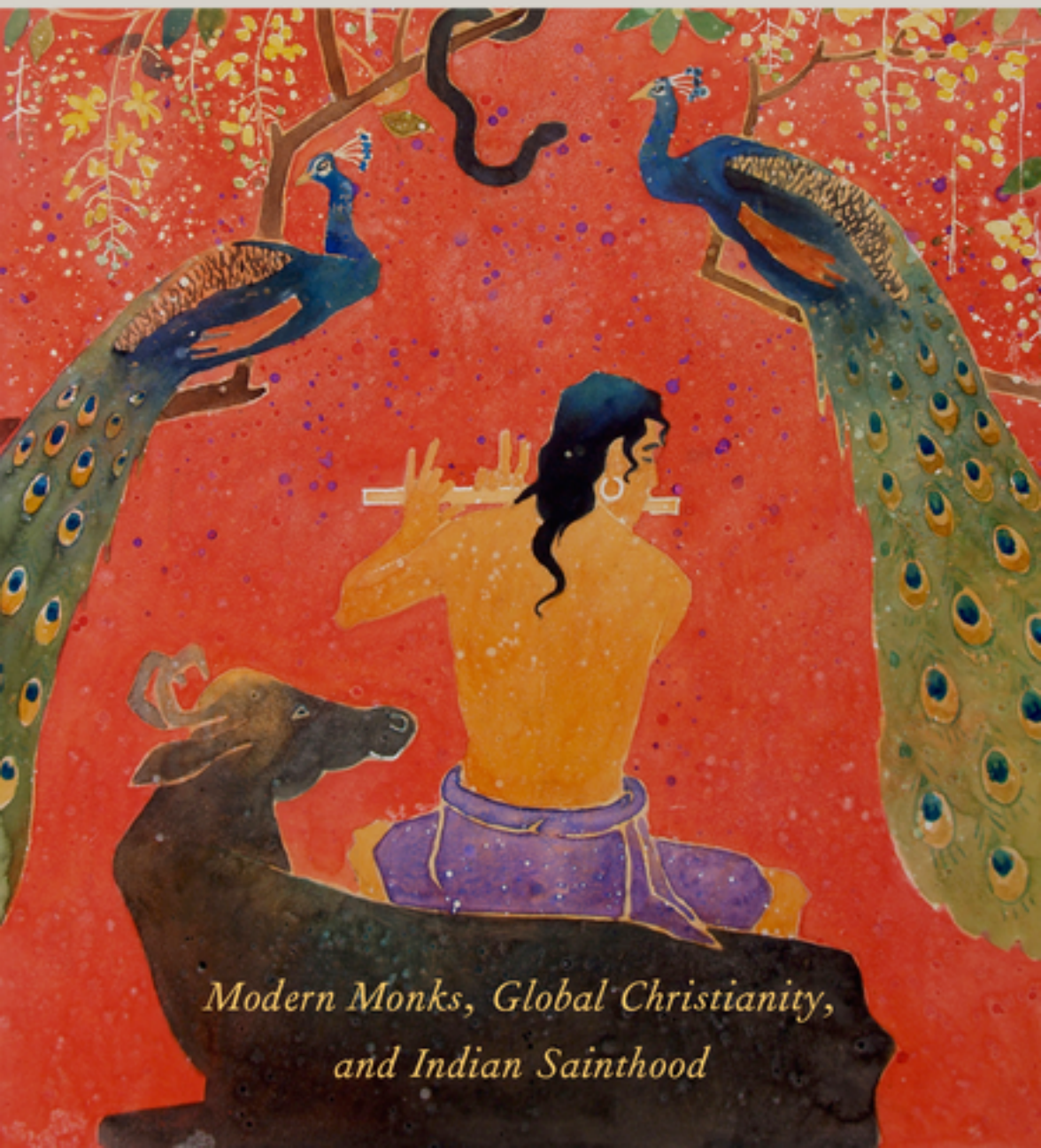


Timothy S. Dobe



HINDU CHRISTIAN FAQIR



*Modern Monks, Global Christianity,
and Indian Sainthood*

Hindu Christian Faqir



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Note on Diacritical Marks

THE FIRST USAGE of proper Indian names and terms in the following text includes full diacritical marks. Thereafter, most Indian terms are distinguished only by italics. Proper names and Indian words now in common English usage, such as Rama Tirtha and guru, appear without italics or diacritical marks after their initial instance. The exception to these rules occurs for the Indian language terms and names occurring in my own translations of Urdu and Hindi text where I again give full diacritical marks.

Hindu Christian Faqir

I

Introduction

UNSETTLING SAINTS

Sadhu does not mean saint.

SUNDAR SINGH

Freedom means to bow to no saint.

RAMA TIRTHA

*I have been long trying to be a fakir and that, naked—
a more difficult task. I therefore regard [Churchill's]
expression as a compliment, though unintended.*

M. K. GANDHI

Sainthood between Accusation, Self-Assertion, and Apotheosis

In 1917, an Anglican missionary priest accused the Indian Christian convert Sundar Singh (1889–1929), in Pune on his first pan-Indian tour, of claiming to be a “saint.” By allowing devotees to call him a *sādhu* and to bow before and touch him seeking blessings, he was, in fact, encouraging idolatry. Sundar Singh responded first by pointing out that the term *sadhu* should not be translated as saint, since it is not an exalted title, but rather indicates an ascetic’s *sādhana*. A *sadhu* is a *sadhu* because of the “method of prayer and devotion” he practices. Second, he reinterpreted his devotees’ desire to see and touch him, not as idolatry, but as an expression of their “love” for him. Third, he reversed the accusation: by allowing people to call him “Father,” was not the priest taking a name that Christ forbade for all but God?

When the Punjabi mathematics professor Rāma Tīrtha (1873–1906) walked into the principal’s office in Lahore Mission College in 1899, he announced his resignation using idioms common to Hindu holy men

and women (*sadhus*), the very kind that worried Sundar Singh's Anglican interlocutor. Sainthood in India, both then and now, has been provocative because Hindu ideas of divine embodiment have offended Christian sensibilities, provided critiques of Christian humility, and challenged scholars of religion to question their own Christian assumptions.¹ As Rama Tirtha put it, he was quitting his teaching job because Principal Ewing could not recognize the very Christ he worshiped standing before him in the form of his Indian employee. This break with emerging forms of Indian middle-class respectability and professionalization was a key moment in the young professor's turn to asceticism, culminating in his formal initiation as a renouncer early in 1901.²

Rather than retire from the world, however, as Indian holy men and women are supposedly wont to do, Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh both launched international tours soon after these confrontations. Rama Tirtha followed Swāmī Vivekānanda's example to become a Hindu missionary, appearing in San Francisco to denounce the slavishness of conventional religion in favor of the divinity of the neo-Vedantin self and to champion Indian religious nationalism. Sundar Singh followed his fellow Indian holy man but went to Europe, America, and beyond to preach the "living Christ" who had appeared to him in a vision but whom the West had forgotten. While abroad, these saffron-robed and turbaned Punjabi holy men were often perceived to be the very Christ that each, in his own way, preached, extending the challenge that such Hindu views of the *sadhu* posed to notions of sainthood in transnational contexts. They both achieved a level of notoriety surpassed only by other "saintly" figures such as M. K. Gāndhī and, to this day, are venerated as saints in India and abroad, memorialized in numerous institutions, and praised in hundreds of texts describing their teachings and lives.³ Their images appear alongside the most exalted figures in Hinduism and Christianity: Rama Tirtha is at home garlanded and encircled by Krishna, the Goddess, and holy men in the Swami Rama Tirtha Mission in Delhi (Fig. 1.1). Similarly, several Indian churches are dedicated in the name of Sundar Singh, a status symbolized in the Australian stained glass window where he stands with Hebrew prophets and New Testament apostles (Fig. 1.2).⁴

Sainthood thus appears first as an accusation, one leveled by a Christian against another Christian, or as a Hindu protest against a failure of western spiritual vision. It appears simultaneously as a kind of self-assertion, at play in Sundar Singh's ready response, reinterpretation, and reversal, in Rama Tirtha's dramatic resignation and divine claims, and in the apotheosis of



FIGURE I.I Swami Rama Tirtha encircled by Kṛṣṇa, Gurū Nānak, and the Goddess Dūrḡa, and swamis of the Swami Rama Tirtha Mission. New Delhi. Personal Photo.

each figure. While their more exalted afterimages and memories may have obscured these earlier, more unsettled moments of sainthood, I argue here that such contestations were crucial to their success as upstart holy men. For the sacred in this colonial moment reflected the dynamics of imperialism, the multi-religious history of Indian sainthood, and a globalizing situation in which Christian sainthood could no longer be conceptually contained in self-referentially singular traditions. Especially as an accusation, the term saint itself requires a complex set of translations, accounts of interpersonal and power relations, plural religious practices, of charges and counter-charges. For Sundar Singh, British Christian understandings of sainthood and suspicions of Indians manifested in a distorted sense of embodied South Asian, Christian, and non-Christian forms of piety, a misapprehension bordering on hypocrisy. For Rama Tirtha, that hypocrisy was most apparent when Christians failed to recognize his growing religious consciousness as akin to their own ideals. As these examples illustrate, the sense of sainthood as an accusation and as a form of self-assertion has little to do with formal canonization, theological concerns about humility, heroic virtue, or confirmable miracles, or with scholarly typologies of the exemplary individual in comparable religions.⁵ Rather the saint emerges

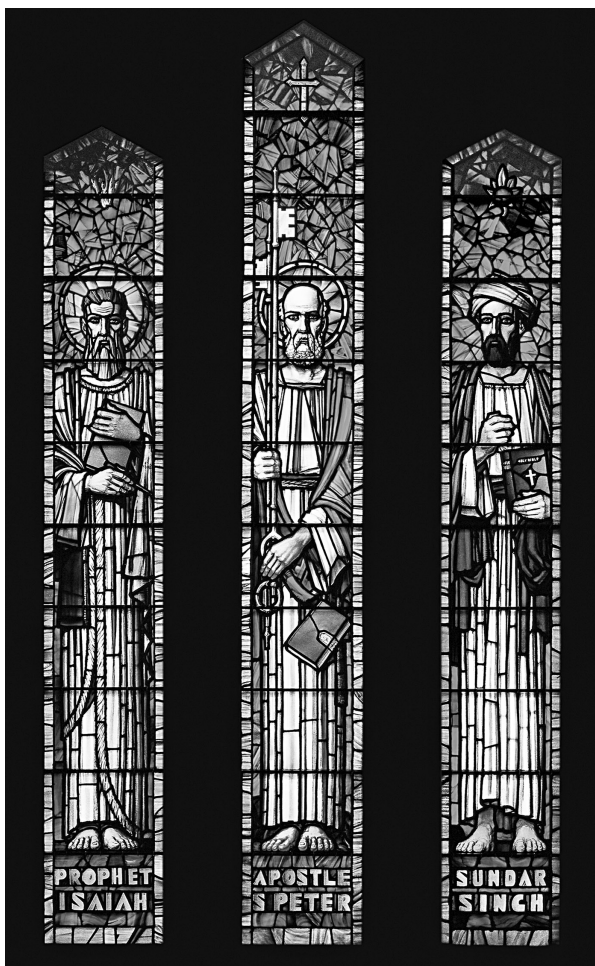


FIGURE 1.2 Christian Waller, *Prophet Isaiah, Apostle Saint Peter, Sundar Singh*, c. 1935. Photography by Christopher Menz. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of South Australia.

as saint within the charged colonial, intercultural encounter in which concepts and practices of religion were being worked out, between British India and metropolitan centers. This book argues that sainthood was one of the foremost, if relatively neglected by scholars, sites for the production of religion.

In pursuing a historicized, comparative analysis of Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh as colonial saints, however, I have resisted allowing the individual textures of their particular, and particularly religious, lives to be drown out by discourse or to be dwarfed by power. Instead, I have

engaged spiritual-nationalist and postcolonial analyses of Indian religion and, simultaneously, have gone beyond them in several ways: (1) Rather than focus on Indian response to western rule and Orientalist discourse, I approach Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh as individuals, describing the particulars of their religious visions, experiences, and biographies and stressing their creative engagement with and partial transcendence of the forces that shaped them. This emphasis is important not only in order to do justice to the depth of their spiritual striving, but also because of the largely overlooked role of the saints themselves in the pursuit and performance of their own sainthood. (2) Unlike most accounts, asceticism plays a more substantive modern role here as constitutive of sainthood for both figures as a local, interreligiously shared idiom of religious perfection and power connected to politically charged discourses of the colonial public sphere.⁶ (3) These two dimensions come together through the ascetic capacities individuals use simultaneously to shape and present the self. The clothing of holy men, for example, resists the split of public and private, much as Islamic “veiling” both hides and reveals sociable and critical piety.⁷ (4) The concept of an ascetic public simultaneously carves out personal and social spaces, acknowledging the interconnections of individuals, their audience and larger contexts and, at the same time, the undeniable construction and power of inwardness, withdrawal, and isolation in the modern period. Put simply, the book unsettles sainthood by comparing and connecting Hindu and Christian upstart saints, men whose lives link religious subjectivity, ascetic practice and transcendence with the globalizing public sphere.

While the rest of the book explores the broader arcs of, key moments in, and critical questions about Rama Tirtha’s and Sundar Singh’s lives in these ways, a minimal sketch of each, as generally understood, will help to put the above details in a wider framework. In their most common accounts, both men can be understood as saints through themes of devotion and standard models available in Hinduism and Christianity, respectively (renunciatory, *bhakti*, missionary heroism, or *imitatio Christi*, for example). Yet key points of tension remain unexplored in these dominant narratives, such as each figures’ vernacular ascetic connections, complex identities, and shared disavowal of their own role as objects of devotion. At the same time, the significance of less explored aspects of their lives and sainthood, each important to understanding their negotiation of contested holy man traditions in a colonial situation, can only be understood against the background of more settled stories.

Rama Tirtha was born in 1873 in the town of Muralīwālā, Punjab, now in Pakistan. Despite his humble upbringing in a poor Punjabi Hindu family, his future achievements carried on his family's elite brahminical heritage and descent from the medieval bhakti saint Tūlsidās (1532–1623). Though he was, like his ancestor, to become famous as a renouncer, religious poet, and guru, his earlier successes in life were mostly more down to earth. After his earliest education in the local mosque and traditional early marriage, he enrolled in missionary high school in Gujranwālā, university at Forman Christian College, and higher mathematics study at Government College in Lahore, the capital of British Punjab. He learned English; excelled as a student despite poverty, ill health, and the demands of family and married life; and eventually taught graduate-level mathematics at premier western institutions in the capital. His early religious propensities, encouraged by his relationship to his guru and father's friend, Dhannā Rāma, were, however, to become ever more central to his life from about 1894 onward. His own deep devotion to and visions of Krishna, work with Hindu reform organizations, and meeting with the great modern Vedantin ascetic, Swami Vivekananda, led him to public preaching, religious publishing, and, eventually, renouncing householder life altogether in 1901. Leaving wife, children, friends, and students behind, he wandered alone in search of the Advaitin (nondual) realization of divine oneness he now preached and, high in the Himalayas, attained the state of liberation-in-life (*jīvanmukti*).

From here, his fame and following spread, attracting even political figures such as the Mahārāja of Tehrī, who sponsored him on a worldwide journey to explain and spread Hindu spiritual wisdom, first in Japan and then, between 1902 and 1904, in America. Here, again showing Vivekananda's influence, he preached a "Practical Vedanta," demonstrating the relevance of this ancient Hindu philosophy of divine Oneness to everyday life in the modern world. After helping his western devotees realize their own inner divinity, Rama Tirtha returned to his motherland, first promoting Indian nationalism and spirituality, but soon turning away from outward organizational and political work and toward inward realities. He retired again to the Himalayas to pursue his own meditation, deeper study of Sanskrit, and a more systematic exposition of the teachings and poetry that had, until this point, spilled forth from his pen and mouth in inspired fragments. In 1906, these plans were left unfulfilled, as Rama Tirtha drowned in a tributary of the Ganges during his morning bathing. His death is understood by most disciples not as an accident, but as a final, watery liberation (*jal samādhi*) that confirms their guru's sainthood. Like the *avatāra* Krishna he

loved so deeply and stands next to in his shrine in New Delhi, Rama Tirtha had fulfilled his mission of supporting Hindu *dharma* amid the rising tide of *adharma* (disorder, irreligion). To be sure, this *adharma* took the form of historical phenomena such as western materialism, Christian conversion, and Indian alienation from their own traditions, but the saint as saint emerges precisely to transcend and deny these, the embodiment of eternal (*sanātana*) and unchanging Indian divinity (and divinities).

Just as Rama Tirtha was pursuing his studies in urban Lahore, Sundar Singh was born to a landholding Jā Sikh family in the village of Rampur, Punjab, in 1889. His devout mother taught him the value of love of God above material things by training him in worship (*pūjā-pāṭh*), arranging for his early religious instruction, and modeling respect for wandering holy men (*sadhus*). Spiritual turmoil came into Sundar Singh's life, however, through his encounter with Christianity at the village mission school his parents enrolled him in and, especially, his mother's death when he was fourteen. As his religious searching, depression, and antagonism to Christianity—he burned the Bible and threw stones at those he considered polluting missionaries—increased, he became so desperate that he vowed suicide on the village railway tracks unless God should appear and save him. Against all his expectations, God did appear, not as Krishna or other deities he was seeking, but as the very Christ of the Christians he so resented. This living, loving, brilliant vision of Jesus gave him the inner peace he sought and led him to Christian conversion. This peace would sustain him through his family's harsh rejection of his conversion, and in his decision to wander across north India and beyond as a *sadhu* himself. After his baptism at St. Thomas' Anglican Church in Shimla in 1905, he began this wandering life in earnest, enduring the hardships of poverty, homelessness, and even persecution for the sake of the Savior (*mukti-dāṭṭa*) he preached to his fellow Indians and, over the Himalayas, into Tibet and Nepal.

After roughly ten years of wandering and preaching in relative obscurity, Sundar Singh gradually emerged as an internationally known "Apostle to India," as seen in the Australian stained-glass window. Starting in 1916, he was written about in glowing terms by western missionaries, scholars of religion, and Indian Christians. His vision for separating the "Water of Life" given by Christ from the "European cup" missionaries usually offered it in caught the imaginations of many and offered hope that India would, after decades of missionary frustration, both come closer to Christ and develop its own forms of fully Indian Christianity. The excitement led to

Sundar Singh's two international tours (1918 and 1920), mostly in England, Europe, and America, where he preached a simple message of the universal human need for spiritual satisfaction, which only the Living Christ himself could fulfill, as he had for him. Despite a brewing European controversy over the possibly idolatrous adulation of the crowds for him and the delusional visionary, miracle, and martyrdom stories he sometimes included in his sermons, Sundar Singh went back to India a confirmed saint, a Christian holy man from the land of holy men, a mystic of mystics. Back in India, his increasing ill health often confined him to his recently purchased home in the Himalayan foothills, where he wrote eight short devotional books, one of which described his ecstatic visions of the "spiritual world" where he conversed with saints, beheld Christ in glory, and found a respite from earthly struggle. His insistence on emerging from such visionary seclusion by regularly returning to wander and preach by climbing across the Himalayas and into Tibet, in disregard for his poor health, eventually led to his disappearance on one last journey in 1929. For his devotees and admirers, this was an appropriate ending, for it meant that the Indian sadhu had likely achieved just the kind of martyrdom he so often spoke of and longed for, a self-sacrificial death like his Lord's.

*Two Colonial Holy Men and (at least)
Three Words for Them*

The South Asian term sadhu, often translated with the Christian category saint, is better understood, in English, to mean Hindu renouncer, monk, ascetic, or holy man. Surprisingly, however, one of the world's most famous sadhus during the colonial period was not a Hindu at all, but, as noted above, the Indian Sikh convert to Christianity, Sundar Singh. Put simply, Sundar Singh's identity as a holy man was a kind of double-sainthood; he was seen both as a Christian saint and as an Indian sadhu. While such complex doublings might strike us as puzzling, they are of a kind with the "disjunctions and surprising juxtapositions" that typify what Brian Hatcher has described as the oft-noted but seldom-analyzed eclecticism of colonial South Asia.⁸ Arguably, too, such stories and lives offer insight into recent postcolonial, comparative, and performative accounts of religion, topics taken up in greater depth in the conclusion.

Like other sadhus, Sundar Singh was a religious specialist who took to wandering, renouncing home, family, sex, and wealth in favor of religious

forms of transcendence long associated with Hindu religious goals, principally *mokṣa* (liberation). So identified was Sundar Singh with this “Hindu” role that the first book to introduce him to his American audience carried the simple title, *The Sadhu*, in much the same way as Gandhi “appropriated the title” of *Mahātma*, another widely used word for South Asian ascetic holy men.⁹ The widespread focus on Singh’s ascetic identity was grounded in his life story: days after his Christian baptism at the age of sixteen he not only became a sadhu but, as he put it, “married” himself to the saffron robe in the manner of Hindu renouncers for life. By all accounts, in this and other ways, Sundar Singh remained remarkably “Indian” despite his conversion to what was commonly understood as a western and imperial religion.

Aside from his saffron robe sadhu, however, what did Sundar Singh’s widely agreed on Indianness or even “Hindu” identity mean? The juxtaposition “Christian sadhu” raised myriad questions: if Christianity could be Indian, where was the line between Indian custom and full-fledged Hinduism? Was this a form of syncretism, eclecticism, theological fulfillment, or simple missionary success? Could Protestant Christians proclaim a living individual to be a “saint,” beyond the affirmation of the collective church as the “community of saints”? If so, on what grounds could Sundar Singh be distinguished from the culture of Indian “godmen”? And, as intellectuals such as Ernst Troeltsch and Antonio Gramsci asked: what was the significance of Sundar Singh’s non-European Christianity for the pressing questions of European religion’s “Absoluteness” or the Vatican’s changing attitudes to non-Europeans, respectively, or in more contemporary terms, for global or world Christianity?¹⁰

The point here is not so much to try to answer these questions as to recall and understand their earlier force. For they represent the issues, interests, categories, and intellectual interventions provoked by the presence and performance of saintliness in the person of Sundar Singh. It is also, however, to call attention to what Jeffrey Cox calls Sundar Singh’s “masterful” ability to draw on a wide range of “orientalist imagery, charismatic Christian tradition, Victorian geo-religious romanticism, and biblical allusion.”¹¹ Yet, just how did Sundar Singh and other colonial saints achieve their multiple effects? What was the “semantic potential of a name or designation”?¹² Building on such questions, this study asks: what indigenous capacities, aptitudes, and traditions provided context and force to the wide array of South Asian saintly names?

If a Christian convert such as Sundar Singh could be a sadhu, Rama Tirtha, Sundar Singh's near contemporary, fellow Punjabi, and Hindu sadhu, could also be a "saint," as he was often described. Such English-language use of historically Christian categories, however, was found not only on the lips of westerners as they improvised English for Hinduism, Islam, or Sikhism but was increasingly used by a wide range of Indians active in colonial encounters, including Rama Tirtha himself. Indeed, Rama Tirtha's Punjabi world was one in which the reforming Hindu monk, Dayānanda Sarasvatī, famously criticized his fellow brahmins by calling them "popes" and accused them of "priestcraft" in Hindi. Rama Tirtha's own disciple, Pūraṇ Singh, described rigidly orthodox brahmins, without gloss, simply as "Pharisees." It was in this context of religious reform, encounter, contestation, and mingling, as a lay organizer for the conservative, Hindu Sanātana Dharma movement, that Rama Tirtha met one of colonial India's most famous modern holy men, Swami Vivekananda, just returned from defending Hinduism abroad. This meeting proved decisive for the young, religiously inclined mathematics professor; he soon became a monk. The specific form of renunciation he took made Rama Tirtha not only a sadhu or saint in the general sense, but a *sannyāsī* in the tradition of brahminical asceticism of the Dasnāmis, the monastic order traced to the eighth-century guru and philosopher Śaṅkara. As discussed further below, the specificity of Rama Tirtha's renunciation as a sannyasi reflects not only his family's brahmin caste (Gosain) and his growing interest in Shankara's philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, but also his engagement with distinctly modern Orientalist and Hindu nationalist versions of both.

Given the complexity of these dynamic interrelationships, even the culturally specific terms sadhu, saint, and sannyasi, I argue, thus need to be rethought, in short, historicized. That is, it is not enough to attend to cultural and religious contexts that do or do not translate the "saint" more or less well, because what counts as culture and religion remains unstable. In short, if culture "*is as culture does*," so with sainthood.¹³ The multiplicity, multivocality, and varied translations of terms for holy men need to be examined as they shuttle back and forth within the flows, counter-flows, and "transcreations" of what Mary Louis Pratt has called the colonial contact zone.¹⁴ When Rama Tirtha embraced life as a sannyasi, was he repeating a centuries-old Hindu, brahminical tradition, departing from it for Vivekananda's neo-Hinduism, or embracing Orientalist disdain for popular Hindu *yogīs*? By launching international tours and advocating patriotic

exercise programs, had such figures politicized an essentially otherworldly mysticism? Did Indian adoption of the language of “saints” indicate capitulation, resistance, or creativity in relation to colonial discourses?

Similar questions, of course, need to be asked of colonial Christian contexts with reference to modern Hinduism, missions, imperialism, and comparative religion. When Protestant missionaries and western scholars called Sundar Singh not only a sadhu, but a “saint,” as they characteristically did, what exactly did they mean and what did such naming accomplish? Was the term a simple translation of the ritual status of a sadhu, a theological judgment, an endorsement or critique of asceticism, an anti-Catholic polemic, the embrace of an emerging comparative religious category, or a strategic response to the rise of Hindu holy men such as Vivekananda, Rama Tirtha, and, eventually, Gandhi? When Sundar Singh himself explained to his hosts in Europe that his own family’s earlier hostility to him had changed, not because he had become famous but “because I am a saint,” what did he say in Urdu and how was he interpreted?¹⁵ How does this claim relate to his earlier claim that sadhu does not mean “saint,” made in the Indian context? That such claims were charged is evident from his and others’ need to defend uses of “saint” language and from the grand levels to which they would rise: Evelyn Underhill, for example, would soon write of Sundar Singh as the modern culmination of the entire history of Christian mysticism—four years before he died.¹⁶ The debate over Sundar Singh’s sainthood between the scholar of comparative mysticism, Friedrich Heiler, and pastor, psychoanalyst, and friend of Sigmund Freud, Oskar Pfister, is perhaps the best example of the unsettling effects of claiming sainthood within competing academic frames.¹⁷

Forgotten Faqirs and Their Afterlives

I thus take sainthood’s polyvalence, situatedness, and controversial nature as starting points. In this sense, a saint can be said to offer himself as the site of multiple frictions and synergies, each building up the potential charge of a charismatic presence. Such questions and possibilities are among the many at play in the world in which the would-be holy men examined here attracted and met the gaze of their audiences. What did Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh do with the vast saintly—Indian and western—repertoires available to them? What did they themselves write and say about how they conceived themselves, other holy men and women,

and their religious goals? How do we acknowledge the power of their quest for religious perfection historically?

Adding to the complexity of terms *sadhu*, *sannyasi*, and *saint* is the type of holy man invoked by Gandhi in his response to Winston Churchill, namely, the *faqir*. The term, most often taken to mean a Muslim holy man or Sufi, obviously means something more to both Churchill and Gandhi. At a minimum it simultaneously signals perceptions of the worst (the Anglicized fukeer or fakir) and the best of Indian holy man traditions (*faqir*); the term is unsettled between the sedition of Churchill's suspicions and the naked striving after religious perfection invoked by his Indian opponent. The term's close association with the figure of the *yogi* helps us start to make sense of this duality, making the saint in this sense, simultaneously, a site of the "reviled other and the ideal of embodied power in the world."¹⁸

The term and its associations are important here, first, because Gandhi and Churchill's usage has ample precedent in the Urdu writings of Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh themselves. These texts reveal that while both used the terms *saint*, *sadhu*, and *sannyasi* in both English and Urdu, they used the term *faqir* to refer to themselves and to other ascetics considerably more frequently in Indian contexts.¹⁹ However, unlike both Christian and Hindu terms so far discussed, the figure of the *faqir* was largely left behind by Rama Tirtha, Sundar Singh, and their admirers when translating sainthood into English. Why? This fact is especially puzzling given the prevalence of this very term in English language descriptions of South Asian holy men during and before the nineteenth century and its later international resonance into Gandhi's own heyday.

Far from semantic hairsplitting, attention to such lexical and translation details are clues to wider historical and religious processes: sites at which social forces and individual creativity take observable shape. It is, moreover, crucial to raising questions about received narratives, for example, the ways in which specifically Islamic traditions and shared Punjabi resonances have largely been written out of Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh's stories. It also reflects the historical complexity, plurality, and intertwined nature of Indian religious traditions, so often noted in India generally, but which take particular shape in Punjab. Even within so-called singular religious traditions such as Hinduism, for example, in the context of Bengali Shaktism, the terms *sādhaka* and *bhakta* map the particularity of holy men and their diverse memories.²⁰ Jeanne Openshaw points out that the Bengali term "Baul," as

used by scholars and by indigenous elites, bears little resemblance to the self-understanding and terminology of those wandering, singing renouncers she describes as *bartamān-panthī*, a category closely associated with the term *faqir*.²¹ Similarly, Katherine Ewing, William Pinch, Mark Singleton, and David White have examined the ways popular ascetic traditions, closely associated with the terms *faqir* and *yogi*, were the target of centuries-old western and indigenous critiques.²² In this sense, *yogi-faqirs* were as much “others within” India as they were others for missionaries, Orientalists, bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, and explorers, figures uniting “respectable Hindus” and colonialists in a mutual distaste.²³ Anglophone translations of yoga such as *haṭha* and the holy men associated with them are thus integral to understanding modern Hinduism in the colonial encounter.

This background offers at least one partial explanation for Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh’s strategic decisions to downplay certain terms and traditions in English-language contexts. That both were willing to use the English word saint and the Sanskritic terms *sadhu* and *sannyasi* in English but consistently left out the Perso-Arabic term *faqir* is evidence of a complex translation process of sainthood. Much as the body had to be left out of the earliest presentations of transnational Anglophone yoga, so too were the *faqirs*, whose bodies were at the very center of western constructions of India, difficult to translate. But while the body has made its way to the center of transnational yoga as *āsana* in practice and its place debated in scholarship, the *faqir* remains largely forgotten, with some exceptions.²⁴

In contrast, the prominence of the term, as seen in their Urdu writings, for both Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh is at the heart of this book for several reasons. First, the term highlights the shifting perceptions and powerful processes that have shaped the figure of the “Indian saint,” “Oriental monk,” and “mystic” in western imaginaries, an unstable process well represented by the once-prominent Anglicized term “fakir” or “fukeer” itself.²⁵ When Churchill called Gandhi “a seditious fakir of a type well-known in the East,” the meaning was as clear for his *western* audiences as it is obscure to many Americans and Europeans today: it was an insult drawing on the host of negative nineteenth-century (and earlier) imaginings of South Asian ascetics. Gandhi’s response was, of course, to thank Churchill for the “compliment,” indicating, again, the instability, transnational circuits, and contested nature of saint language.²⁶ Indeed, Gandhi’s counter-quip evoked past traditions and then-current representations of

Indian holy men in ways far more complex than a reverse-Orientalist version of the “otherworldly sannyasi” or “mystic.”²⁷

Second, the book focuses on the multiple indigenous meanings and dimensions of the term *faqir* itself, namely, its Islamic sources and its polyvalent possibilities in the pluralistic Punjabi context. I thus call attention to Islam as a “third space” beyond both colonial–Indian and Hindu–Christian scholarly binaries that, much like some Hindu nationalisms, still tend to associate Indian and Hindu problematically.²⁸ It was in large part through *faqir* traditions, otherwise known as Sufism, that Islam entered India and became a creative religious presence, adopting local idioms and offering new, widely shared South Asian cultural resources. Thus, contrary to recent views that the indiscriminant colonial use of the term fakir for Hindus and others needs to be exclusively marked as Islamic and reflects western confusion, I point out that, along with other vernacular terms such as *pir* and *yogi* (vernacular, *jogī*), its indigenous usage reflects rich and fluid identities, which cannot be assigned to one religion.²⁹ These usages are grounded in shared religious practices, symbols, rituals, and terms in precolonial Punjab, sharings that simultaneously enabled novel combinations and claims to authority. Lastly, since the term indicates the practice of poverty as a spiritual discipline—*faqir* literally means “poor person”—it foregrounds the shaping of religious subjectivities through ethical norms in ascetic traditions. These three dimensions of *faqir* traditions are, I argue, vital to understanding how Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh made themselves saints: (1) colonial critique of and fascination with vernacular asceticism; (2) specifically Islamic and pluralistic ascetic traditions; and (3) continuing, embodied disciplines of ascetic self-fashioning.

The immediate need to allay colonial suspicions of South Asian holy men and women and their this-worldly dimensions was far from an abstract concern in the lives of Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh. It can be seen, for example, in an incident recorded in Sundar Singh’s earliest piece of self-published Urdu writing. Merely wandering around north India as a *faqir* could get even a seminary-educated, Anglican bishop–befriending, Christian convert detained.

On alighting at the [Baroda] station, the police immediately seized me on suspicion of my being a mutineer, or else a robber, or something like that, and took me to the police station. There they made

minute enquiries of me. I thus had an excellent opportunity of preaching the Gospel to the people.³⁰

Such a reaction on the part of rank-and-file police makes it clear that the everyday world of holy men, of saints, on the ground was a long way from the rarified, so-called spirituality of Hinduism or Indian mysticism. This short account also suggests both Sundar Singh's own firsthand experience with such reactions and his ability to diffuse them. Rama Tirtha too was well acquainted with the intrigue and sedition that formed much of the aura of the spiritual in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century.³¹ Puran Singh records the story of two Indian agents of the Criminal Investigation Division (C. I. D.) visiting Rama Tirtha upon his return from America, but ultimately bowing before him.³² While we might suspect a hagiographical hand at work in this account, the execution of Rama Tirtha's devotee and promoter, Amīr Chand, as one of the "conspirators" in the attempted 1912 bombing of Lord Hardinge offers a closely related historical example of spiritual sedition. We can thus begin to understand the reasons that holy men as fakirs have connections with modern monks as "saints," and thus help us to revision religion, in part, in relation to government regulation, surveillance, and imaginaries.

Skepticism, suspicion, and judgment were not limited to British authorities' concerns, but also took the form of repeated religious and cultural critiques in Europe and America of both these Indian holy men. During their international tours, both Sundar Singh and Rama Tirtha were accused of spreading primitive forms of religion and superstition in an advanced, modern West that had, or at least should have, moved well beyond them. Thus, in order to be recognized as saints successfully, they had to be aware of and make the most of such Euro-American suspicions, negotiating and appropriating the very modern discourses that had marginalized their style of present-day ascetic religious practice. As Sundar Singh preached the Gospel to the imperial police and was widely venerated in Europe and America, so Rama Tirtha made disciples of the very colonial spies who came to investigate him. For both, colonial suspicion and the subduing of those who saw themselves as powerful superiors function as the very stuff of sainthood. Chapters 2 and 3 explore how such modern moments can be understood as new iterations of the longstanding figures of the "saint and the king" of precolonial memory, in which the superior power and authority of the holy man over political leaders is a recurrent theme.³³

The Case of the Bhakti Saint

In many ways colonial suspicions of the popular ascetic, the *faqir* or *yogi*, have been reinforced by Hindu sainthood studies themselves. For much of the twentieth-century religious studies discussion of Hinduism focused on the “poet-saints” of bhakti traditions, rather than on ascetics. For John Hawley, the widely circulated songs and stories of these saints are fundamental, for “modern Hinduism sings their tune.”³⁴ In fact, reflecting the thematics of bhakti poetry itself—its emphasis on the inward reality of devotion and its critique of rival religious specialists, especially Nāth yogis—scholars have tended to present *bhaktas* (devotees) as anything but ascetics and to repeat rather than to complicate bhakti claims to render asceticism optional at best and arrogant at worst. As the fifteenth-century poet-saint Kabir puts it, for example, if salvation came from wandering naked in forests as yogis do, deer would surely be the first to achieve salvation.

Yet, while the broad identification of Hindu sainthood with supposedly non-ascetic bhakti figures might accord well with bhakti rhetoric, it exists in tension with other accounts of Indian holy men, as both earlier and more recent streams of scholarship suggest. The early twentieth-century *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, in an entry on “saints and martyrs,” describes Hindu saints as nearly synonymous with ascetics, and claims that the “chief Hindu saint” is Gorakhnāth, following dominant perceptions of nineteenth-century sainthood.³⁵ Similarly, for David Gordon White, the ascetic Nāth yogis, not bhakti saints, have “always been the chosen holy men and wonder workers of the Hindu masses.”³⁶ Such differing accounts of Hindu sainthood—of the centrality of the *bhakta*, on the one hand, or the (Nāth) *yogi*, on the other, not to mention the Vedantin *gyānī* or *jīvanmuktā*—suggest the need of contextualizing specific terms for holy men and, more importantly, of questioning scholarly models of sainthood itself.

Ironically, bhakti dominance creates problems for the study of bhakti itself. As David Haberman has pointed out, the common definition of bhakti as inward faith, devotion, or love is skewed by the Protestant anti-ritualist assumptions of early scholars of religion such as Rudolf Otto and Nathan Söderblom.³⁷ Haberman’s study of bhakti *sadhana*, the discipline and method of devotion, makes clear that bhakti cultivates and is cultivated by embodied practices and rigorous, bodily discipline—in other words, through asceticism. In this respect, it is significant that Sundar

Singh himself connected the meaning of the term *sadhu* with just this concept, *sadhana*, a “method of prayer and devotion” and his devotees’ bodily behavior with devotional love, as noted above. Moreover, by defining *bhakti* as an inward devotion or love and taking *bhakti* rhetoric at face value, *bhakti* studies have shown little interest in the actual history of devotional asceticism, although the latter is in fact more the norm than the exception, even in traditions having the best claim to being “non-ascetic” such as Sikhism.³⁸ Ironically, this very split is in some ways reified by White’s discussion of the “passing” of the *yogi* due to the mutual reinforcement of the Indian rise of *bhakti*, middle class and upper caste Bengali (*bhadralok*) innovation, and modern, western faith-based inwardness.³⁹ Though Hawley, in my view rightly, has pointed out the problem and identified its roots in scholars’ Protestant historiography, it has largely been left to ethnographers to craft portraits of what to many religious studies scholars might seem contradictory—devotional, specifically *bhakti* and Sufi, artistic asceticisms.⁴⁰

Again, these connections commonly occur in the lives of the figures studied here. When Rama Tirtha stood on the boundary between his previous life as a householder and his new stage of renunciation (*sannyasa*), it was a verse of the blind, wandering, *bhakti* bard Surdās that sprang to his lips. Standing before the crowd gathered to bid him farewell, he recited: “The days have been lost in useless pursuit of the worldly temptations and the nights have been wasted in rest and sleep. O Surdas! Why should you worry about the happenings in the world? You should now remember God” (IWGR 5: 359). Similarly, Sundar Singh explained his ascetic refusal of sleep in order to spend the night in prayer with devotional idioms: night was the perfect time to spend enraptured with “my Beloved,” recalling Sufis’ nocturnal, intoxicating supererogatory prayers.⁴¹ Again the Islamic dimension of such devotional idioms deserves special emphasis here, since the particular Sufi presence within and contribution to South Asia *bhakti* have often been downplayed or neglected, not only due to emergent Hindu spiritual nationalisms, but within religious studies *bhakti* scholarship. Connections between Nānak and Kabir, for example, have been stressed to the neglect of the importance of Baba Farid, much as the Sufi romances’ usage of central Hindu *bhakti* idioms have only recently been discussed in the context of *bhakti* scholarship.⁴²

Who then is the Hindu saint—the brahminical *sannyasi*, the Nāth *yogi-faqir*, the *saguṇa bhakta* or *nirguṇa sant* as poet-saint or *sadhana* practitioner, the Baul or *bartaman panthi*? The *āpta*, *jivanmukta*, *siddha*, *avatara*,

mahātma, *avadhūta* or *paramahansa*? Who is the South Asian saint—the householding Sikh Guru, the humble *gurmukh*, the living Nāmdhārī guru or the ascetic Udāsī, the Muslim *wali* or *faqir*, the Jain *muni*, the Indian Christian convert? What of Hindu, Sikh, Jain, and Christian *faqirs*? Specifying sainthood in local terms and challenging aspects of bhakti sainthood, however, leads to further questions about shared practices and tales: How do we best describe the widespread emphasis on renunciation and spiritual disciplines (*sadhana*), not to mention the mutually-reverberating stories and styles found throughout South Asian—Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Muslim and Christian holy man and holy woman traditions? How do we account for western and Christian effects on and perceptions of older norms in the modern period? The fact that different scholars, various types of scholarship, and successive periods will yield substantially different answers to these questions is a large part of this book’s point. In addition to studying these two holy men’s performances of a polyvalent holiness, then, I aim at the same time to highlight the shifting positions, meanings, and valences of sainthood as a wider category. Comparison, undertaken in shared contexts and contested times, has the benefit of casting a sustained and searching light on such complexities.

The need for suspicions and specificities does not of course end with the South Asian context. The wider study of sainthood, discussed at greater length in the conclusion, must likewise begin with basic questions: Who gets called a saint, by whom, when, and with what meanings? What other English or non-English terms (e.g., prophet, hero, martyr, apostle, genius) are related to sainthood or help demarcate the category’s bounds? How must someone act and speak to be recognized as religiously powerful or exemplary, for example in terms of celibacy and gender norms?⁴³ Can saints complicate standard accounts of the religion they represent? Might the categories of religion cause misunderstandings of holy men and women?

If, as Catholic theologian David Tracy suggests, we need to be critically aware of the ways religious institutions in all traditions have named and at times tamed the holy men and women living at their centers or beyond their margins, such questions become doubly pressing.⁴⁴ Put differently, since the Buddha has been a mortal man, a Buddhist deity, a medieval Roman Catholic saint, the Hindu god Viṣṇu’s avatara, and Vishnu’s sacred superior, caution about the relationship between holy humans, transcendent beings, and the religions that claim them seems prudent.⁴⁵ Since Siddhārtha Gautama has appeared as a “Luther” or a “sweetly reasonable Victorian Gentleman” to religious studies scholars, wariness

toward academic reconstructions is also warranted.⁴⁶ The study of religion, after all, is located within societies for which the “Oriental Monk” has been one of the most charged intercultural images of the past one hundred and more years.⁴⁷ Hardly exemplars of fixed categories such as Hinduism, Buddhism, or Christianity then, holy men and women themselves might have something to say about what religion is or becomes in cultural encounters and in scholarly imaginaries, as a few studies have begun to suggest.⁴⁸

Shared Idioms, Ascetic Practice, and the Vernacular

While highlighting aspects of sainthood at times obscured by the broad categories of religion, this study also stresses that, in the north Indian context, the holy man is a strikingly singular, undeniably “magnificent, even theatrical figure.”⁴⁹ That is, *sadhus*, *faqirs*, *sannyasis*, *yogis*, and, to a greater extent than usually recognized, exemplary *sants* and *bhagats*, are all figures united not so much by their teachings as by their distinctive forms of ascetic practice and flair. The great variety of types of and terms for Indian holy men and women are unthinkable without attention to ascetic distinctiveness, disciplines, and narrative tropes. Their lives are marked by social rupture—setting forth (*parivrajyā*), renunciation (*sannyasa*), or the embracing of poverty (*faqīrī*)—and their bodies by forms of dress and adornment that set *all of them* apart from householders. This is true of such supposedly householding *sant* figures of *bhakti* as Guru Nanak or Vaiṣṇava *bhagats* as it is of any *yogi*, at least as conceived in the hagiographical tradition. The hagiographical tradition is, of course, far more relevant for understanding the precolonial background of ascetic practice in modern Punjab than historical reconstructions of an “original” Nanak. Indeed, as McLeod has shown, the term *sant*, so associated with Sikh and other *bhakti* traditions, and Indian (*bhakti*) sainthood generally, is largely absent from Sikh tradition before the nineteenth century, and thereafter takes on the sense of popular living holy men whose piety and power can be sought for blessings as well as for intervention in the colonial public sphere.⁵⁰ These findings are echoed by Gold’s work on the network of living holy men that constitute *santmat* throughout north India as much as they are foreshadowed by Dayananda Sarasvati’s more negative usage of the term *sant*.⁵¹ Put simply, South Asian holy men and women in general,

much like David Gordon White's yogis, are recognized in the everyday, in story or in life, far less for what they believe, their philosophy, or their poetry, and far more for what they do, how they attract others through the ascetic power (*tapas*, *baraka*) that they offer. The point here then is to expand on White's "yogi as practitioner" by shifting away from a "history of meditation" in the works of "philosophers, commentators and scholars" and toward narrative accounts and performance, going well beyond *hatha* and Tantra.⁵² If, in particular, White highlights the power of yogis to create and inhabit a wide range of bodies, this study can be seen as exploring the way modern monks, as *faqirs*, deployed similar powers of self-fashioning.

The turn to practice, performance and power, however, is hardly a turn away from texts, since to focus on action is one way to "historicize texts and textualize history."⁵³ Indeed, literary scholars have provided productive models to think with and beyond religions to the shared idioms of South Asian religion and culture. More than a fixed Hindu epic with stable meanings, the Ramayana, for example, functions as a shared literary model that offers basic elements—what A. K. Ramanujan calls a "pool of signifiers"—from which others may draw for widely disparate visions, including Buddhist, Jain, Shākta, Dravidian anti-Brahmin, modernist Indian Christian, and feminist. Just so, I argue, South Asian holy men and women "not only relate to prior [examples] directly, to borrow or refute, but they relate to each other through [a] common code or common pool. Every [new example], if one may hazard a metaphor, dips into it and brings out a unique crystallization, . . . with a unique texture and a fresh context."⁵⁴ As Farina Mir has shown, much the same can be said of Punjab's poetic *qissa* tradition in which *faqirs* figure prominently and, of course, variously. The genre's sources in Islam and Islamicate traditions and their disparate adaptations in much wider circles nicely parallel both the heterogeneous approaches to the *faqir* in these texts and the approach taken here.⁵⁵ In this sense, South Asian holy men and women are not unlike these literary formations, made central not by a classical instance (an Ur-text model) but through repetitive, unwieldy and contested cultural and religious histories.

The analogy of ascetics and texts of course breaks down: unlike literature, renouncers are a special class of persons of nearly any religious tradition marked as both similar to and different from each other by their practices and appearance, not first and foremost by language, literary styles, or even particular deities. Precisely because of this, however, asceticism offers multiple adoptions and iterations. Texts, their retelling

and remixing, are only one element, as it were, in the ascetic repertoire. This virtually unlimited range of reference can incorporate the pluralistic web of figures, things, symbols, and stories, each a potential resource for upstart saints. An author or reciter may retell or rewrite a singular tale in new ways, but, through the ever-expanding network of tales, practices, and material culture of holy persons, each individual can improvise retellings. They can draw on the many genres of stories told by ascetics and in which ascetics appear and improvise on practices shared across religious boundaries. Authority and recognition are available through varied lineages, the achievement of ascetic feats, the performance of miracles, and material objects that enable context-specific spectacles.

How might we best characterize the “pool of signifiers” that adorns the holy man to account for the centrality of practice: in terms of styles, as shared idioms, as common sites of cultural memory, through the patterns of ritual grammar? As the recent emergence of these terms in scholarship suggests, there is no simple consensus for complexifying standard models of classics, canons, and religions, thus keeping scholarly categories open to revision. Seen as a “minimal set of props,” however, new scholarly categories might respond to the dynamic contexts and lives at the heart of this study.⁵⁶

The idioms shared by South Asian holy men help locate them in the spaces betwixt and beyond singular religious traditions. More specifically, the concept moves beyond models of syncretism long applied in discussions of popular religious practice. Instead, shared idioms highlight “everyday cultural and religious conduct,” which exhibits not unconscious mixings of prior “wholes,” but “vital elements of identity formation as an ongoing process and the historical product of creative human interventions.”⁵⁷ As Peter Gottschalk and Anna Bigelow have shown, these idioms often cluster around sites of cultural memory such as Hindu and Muslim temples and shrines; often founded on the pasts, presents, and presences of holy men, such sites offer productive places to explore everyday conduct and local narratives.⁵⁸ Susan Bayly’s work further shows how shared spiritual landscapes, constructed from Sufi and Śaiva imaginaries, for example, may be the very site in which to situate literary texts.⁵⁹ In her words, “[T]he Muslim cult saint has always been a figure who may leap the boundaries between ‘Hindu’ and ‘non-Hindu,’ ‘Islamic’ and ‘un-Islamic.’ He is therefore a figure who has moved in a sacred landscape which would be familiar to almost any south Indian.”⁶⁰ Rather than take Punjabi “shared piety” primarily in the sense of shrine veneration, then, I focus on the figure of

the *faqir*, whose presence, narratives, and memory are at the center of such communities, and consider the role of ascetic practice and values to be central to understanding such relationships.

Perhaps most importantly for the present study, work on the ritual grammar used by South Asian holy figures points us to the living relationship between holy men and women and their followers. By attending to the ritual dimensions of these relationships, Joyce Flueckiger has shown how they are shaped not by religion in the abstract, but by the physical spaces, material and visual texts, colors, rhythms, multivocal lexicon, and public intimacies that embody healing in the vernacular. More than the *sannyasi*, *yogi*, *bhakta*, or even *pir*, the figure of the *bābā*, signifying a “supernaturally protective father-figure or ‘patron’”—and, Flueckiger and Meena Khandelwal would add, the *amma* (mother)—emerges as central in ethnographic studies of holy persons in South Asia attentive to dynamic boundaries and crossings.⁶¹ Ritual grammar helps us articulate the ascetic as a figure of power and intimacy, self-consciously and proudly drawing on multiple religious affiliations and identities even while asserting strong and particular commitments.⁶²

Although this book is largely historical and comparative, my own field experiences during research in India pushed me toward these kinds of anthropological insights for understanding holy men in Punjab and South Asia, generally, and in the case of the two saints examined here. After all, these two specific figures and vast company of contemporary Indian ascetics remain alive, powerful, and myriad in India and beyond. Visits to Sundar Singh’s home village and birthplace in Rampur made the limits of theological, textual, and classical sources especially obvious. A cup of tea with a neighbor of Sundar Singh’s family home, now memorial church, for example, brought out this story: a new bride’s struggle with infertility was solved when Korean pilgrims to Sundar Singh’s birthplace prayed for the family, an act of blessing that produced the beautiful young boy who came out into the courtyard, on cue, to pose for a picture. Was it Sundar Singh’s or God’s power that brought the boy, I asked, but had trouble understanding the answer, likely due to both language and theological translation difficulties. At the site of the *sadhu*’s home itself, I noticed the image of Sundar Singh placed iconically at center of the worship space, met a teenage boy who viewed Sundar Singh as an *avatara*—just one of the many forms God takes, he said—and spoke with a female member of Sundar Singh’s extended family who had started coming there because of the *sadhu*’s powerful, persistent and haunting appearance in her dreams.