

Routledge Critical Sikh Studies

CULTIVATING SIKH CULTURE AND IDENTITY

ART, MUSIC AND PHILOLOGY

Bob van der Linden



Cultivating Sikh Culture and Identity

Cultivating Sikh Culture and Identity explores the development of modern Sikh identities through the concept of the ‘cultivation of culture’. It investigates diverse, but repeatedly overlapping, Sikh encounters in the fields of art, music and philology, and considers their role in the making of a continuous living tradition.

The volume focuses particularly on the imperial encounter and intellectual interaction between coloniser and colonised. It emphasises the enduring importance of the modern rational approach of the Singh Sabha (*Tat Khalsa*) reformers in defining a normative Sikh tradition. In so doing, the author reflects on the importance of philological research and the complexity of modern knowledge production in relation to the formation of cultural identities. The chapters offer a critical historical overview of the changes in the performance and reception of Sikh sacred music in the context of the community’s successive encounters with the Mughals, the British and globalisation. They also provide new insights into the life and work of Max Arthur Macauliffe, author of the classic *The Sikh Religion* (1909), and a contextualised discussion of contemporary Sikh drawings by Emily de Klerk.

Taking a global, interdisciplinary approach, this book will be of particular interest to scholars of religion, South Asian Studies and history.

Bob van der Linden studies modern South Asian cultural history in a global context. His previous publications include *Moral Languages from Colonial Punjab: The Singh Sabha, Arya Samaj and Ahmadiyahs* (2008), *Music and Empire in Britain and India: Identity, Internationalism, and Cross-Cultural Communication* (2013), *Arnold Bake: A Life with South Asian Music* (2018) and *Romantic Nationalism in India: Cultivation of Culture and the Global Circulation of Ideas* (2024).

Routledge Critical Sikh Studies

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Glossary

- Adi Granth** The principal Sikh scripture, better known as the Guru Granth Sahib, compiled by fifth Sikh guru, Arjan, in 1604
- Akal Takht** The main *takht* ('throne') located immediately opposite the Harimandir; see also *takht*
- akali-nihang** The origins of the *nihangs* or *akalis* are unknown, but they claim to be the true representatives of Guru Gobind Singh and accordingly the true *Khalsa*. Originally *akali-nihang* was applied to irregular Sikh soldiers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century who fought on behalf of the *Panth*, acknowledging no leader who was not himself an *akali-nihang*
- bani** Works of the Sikh gurus and the *bhagats* recorded in the *Adi Granth*
- bhagat** Devotee, one who practices *bhakti* (belief in or adoration of a personal god)
- bhagat bani** The utterances of the poet-saints of *Bhakti*, *Sant* and *Sufi* origins recorded in the *Adi Granth*
- bhakti** Devotionalism, with a highly emotional and personal focus on a (Hindu) deity
- Dasam Granth** 'The Book of the Tenth [guru]', a collection of writings attributed to Guru Gobind Singh
- dhadhi** An itinerant singer of Sikh ballads and narrator of the heroic tradition
- dhrupad** The original form of Hindustani music sung at Hindu and Mughal courts in medieval times. The music was formal in structure (four parts) with strict adherence to the purity of the *raga* and *tala*, as well as regulated improvisation around the texts, which were mostly devotional and Vaishnava (devoted to Krishna) in character
- gharana** Traditional musical lineage, which operates as semi-professional guilds in which successful maestros hand down musical learning to their sons, nephews, grandsons, and grandnephews, and sometimes to a talented male apprentice from outside the family
- giani** Exegete of the Guru Granth Sahib
- Gurmat Sangit movement** A revivalist movement that since the 1990s aims to revive the 'authentic' performance of Sikh *kirtan* through the musical

- information available in the Guru Granth Sahib but in view of north Indian music theory
- Gurmukhi** ‘From the Guru’s mouth’; the script in which the compositions of the Sikh gurus were written. In modern times it became the script of the Sikhs
- Harimandir** ‘The Divine Temple of God (Hari)’ in Amritsar, the main Sikh shrine, commonly known as the Golden Temple
- janam sakhi** Hagiographical accounts of the life of first Sikh guru, Nanak
- Khalsa** The Sikh order instituted by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699
- khande ki pahul** *Khalsa* initiation rite in which water sweetened with soluble sweets is stirred with a double-edged sword
- khayal** The predominant vocal genre in the Hindustani music tradition, which is generally in two parts and of a more improvisational character than its predecessor, *dhrupad*, which it increasingly replaced from the early nineteenth century onwards
- kirtan** The singing of hymns, particularly from the *Adi Granth*
- Namdhari** Member of *Namdhari* Sikh sect, also known as Kuka Sikhs, followers of Balak Singh, whom they believe continued the line of gurus after Gobind Singh
- nihang** see *akali-nihang*
- Nirmala** Member of an order of Sikh scholarly ascetic established by Guru Gobind Singh and very influential in the nineteenth century. Their interpretation of the *Adi Granth* draws on the Vedas and Vedantic thought
- Panth** The Sikh community (spelt with a capital ‘P’)
- rababi** Muslim performer of *kirtan*, initially playing the *rabab*, like Guru Nanak’s companion Bhai Mardana
- raga** A tonal framework for composition and improvisation; melodic practice with a specific pitch set and rules that indicate how those pitches should be deployed
- rahit** *Khalsa* code of belief and conduct
- rahit-nama** A recorded version of the *rahit*
- Sant** One who knows the truth; a pious person; an adherent of the *Sant* tradition, a devotional school of north India which stressed the need for interior faith as opposed to external observance
- Sufi** A member of one of the Muslim mystical orders
- takht** One of the five centres of temporal authority in the *Panth*; see also *Akal Takht*
- tala** Rhythmic cycle rather than time signature, whereby each particular cycle contains several *talas* (claps), *khalis* (open hands) and other blank beats called *matras*, which add up to a total that is repeated indefinitely but variable in tempo
- Udasi** Member of an order of ascetics who claim one of Guru Nanak’s sons, Siri Chand, as their founder. From the eighteenth century to the Gurdwara Reform Movement of the early 1920s, they ruled at many gurdwaras

Chronology

- 1469 Birth of Guru Nanak (d. 1539)
- 1604 Guru Arjan compiles the *Adi Granth*
- 1699 Guru Gobind Singh establishes the *Khalsa*
- 1788 William Jones publishes 'On the Hindus'
- 1801 Ranjit Singh proclaimed maharaja of Sikh Kingdom
- 1849 British annexation of Punjab
- 1857 Indian Revolt
- 1864 Max Arthur 'Michael' Macauliffe arrives in Calcutta
- 1865 G. W. Leitner establishes the *Anjuman-i-Punjab* in Lahore
- 1873 Foundation of the Amritsar Singh Sabha
- 1875 Establishment of the Arya Samaj
- 1877 Swami Dayanand Saraswati in Punjab; publication of Ernest Trumpp's *The Adi Granth*
- 1879 Establishment of the Lahore Singh Sabha
- 1884 Macauliffe appointed Divisional Judge
- 1885 Macauliffe meets Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha
- 1892 Foundation of Khalsa College, Amritsar
- 1893 Macauliffe retires from the Indian Civil Service
- 1898 Publication of Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha's *Ham Hindu Nahin*
- 1902 Establishment of the Chief Khalsa Diwan, Amritsar
- 1907–1908 Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha travels twice to England to assist Macauliffe with the proofs of *The Sikh Religion*
- 1909 Publication of Macauliffe's *The Sikh Religion*; Sikh Anand Marriage Act
- 1920 Foundation of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC)
- 1925 Gurdwara Act
- 1945 Sikh Rahit Maryada
- 1947 Partition of British India into India and Pakistan
- 1984 Indian army attacks Amritsar's Golden Temple

- 1991 First *Addutti Gurmat Sangit Sammelan* (Unique Gathering of the Performers of Music in the Guru's View) in Ludhiana
- 2003 Establishment of *Gurmat Sangit* department at Punjabi University, Patiala
- 2016 Sikh Gurdwaras (Amendment) Bill

Preface

This book manifests my on-and-off involvement in Sikh Studies of three decades. My hesitant journey into the field began during my studies in Modern Indian History at New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University (1992–1993). Two articles that were listed in the syllabus, by Norman Gerald 'Jerry' Barrier and Kenneth W. Jones separately,¹ directed me to the Sikh-related topic of my MA thesis, PhD dissertation and first book, *Moral Languages from Colonial Punjab: The Singh Sabha, Arya Samaj and Ahmadiyahs* (2008). Furthermore, when I was finishing my dissertation, my interest in Sikh history received an explicit boost due to my e-mail correspondence with W. H. 'Hew' McLeod and Jerry Barrier, who both urged me to have a closer look at the Sikhs. As part of my wider music studies, then, I most unexpectedly combined my earlier interest in the so-called Singh Sabha Reformation (c. 1873–1925) with a growing fascination for the history of Sikh devotional music (*kirtan*). My first article, which I would like to believe initiated a more critical study of the performance, institutionalisation and reception of *kirtan* since the imperial encounter, appeared in 2008. It was followed by several other (comparative) ones and a book chapter on the same topic. In course, I was invited also to participate in three Sikh Studies conferences organised in the United States, namely, at Hofstra University, Long Island (2010), the University of California, Riverside (2013) and Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles (2016).

Since 2006, my work as a tour manager for Dutch cultural travel groups, mainly to India and Asia, inspired further research into the Sikh tradition. I soon instigated tours to Indian Punjab, of which some were focused on the Hola Mohalla festival in Anandpur Sahib. Also, the job opened doors in the region that during earlier periods of fieldwork had remained closed to me. In Patiala, for instance, I was finally able to see the extensive and most fascinating nineteenth-century mural paintings in both the Qila Mubarak, the grand ancestral fort of the local Sikh princely dynasty at the heart of the old formerly walled city, and the Sheesh Mahal behind the Moti Bagh Palace. In general, my sojourns as a tour manager in Punjab and elsewhere in the subcontinent fostered an interest in Indian art and, over the years, this provided me with another lens to approach Sikh history and culture. Two undertakings, however, were specifically decisive to the eventual appearance of this volume. Firstly, my presentation 'The Making of the Sikh "Nation": Cultivation of

Culture and Identity Politics’ at the conference ‘Cultural Mobilization: Cultural Consciousness-Raising and National Movements in Europe and the World’ held at the University of Amsterdam in 2018,² because it made me rethink my long-term historical framework for the emergence of Sikhism. Secondly, my ongoing attempt to write a historical novel (working title: *The Music Pavilion: Michael Macauliffe and the Sikhs*), because it led to my explorations into the life and work of Max Arthur ‘Michael’ Macauliffe (1838–1913), author of the classic *The Sikh Religion: Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors* (1909).

Arvind Mandair kindly suggested to consider contributing to this series whenever I would have a plan for it. I am thankful for his immediate and enthusiastic response to my subsequent proposal, as well as for his overall support of my explorations in Sikh Studies since my first article for *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory* in 2008. Lou Fenech and Doris Jakobsh saw earlier versions of this book and Tadhg Foley read a draft of the Macauliffe chapters. I am indebted to all three of them for devoting their time and energy to my work and, especially, for their criticism and words of encouragement. Any shortcomings of the text are of course my own. Above all, however, I am grateful to Emily the Klerk, the dedicatee of this book. For reasons that I still cannot fathom, she is always happy to meet Sikhs. Her enthusiasm during our travels together in Indian Punjab since 2010 absolutely reinvigorated my interest in Sikh history and culture. Without her, this book would have never had appeared.

Previous versions of Chapters 1 and 2 were published as “Pre-Twentieth Century Sikh Sacred Music: the Mughals, Courtly Patronage and Canonisation”, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 38, 2, 2015: 141–155 and the fifth chapter of *Music and Empire in Britain and India: Identity, Internationalism, and Cross-Cultural Communication*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. For these chapters, I have also drawn from “Sikh Sacred Music and Rabindra Sangit: A Comparison of Music in Imperial Culture”, *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory*, 11, 1–2, 2015: 133–148 and “Songs to the Jinas and of the Gurus: Historical Comparisons Between Jain and Sikh Devotional Music”, *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory*, 15, 1–2, 2019: 230–245. An earlier rendering of Chapter 6 appeared as “Emily’s Eden: Contemporary Sikh Drawings by Emily de Klerk”, *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory*, 17, 4, 2021: 450–467.

Notes

- 1 N. Gerald Barrier, “The Punjab Government and Communal Politics in the Punjab, 1894–1908”, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 27, 3, 1968: 523–539; Kenneth W. Jones, “Ham Hindu Nahin: Arya-Sikh relations, 1877–1905”, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 32, 3, 1973: 457–475.
- 2 The conference was organised by the University of Amsterdam’s Study Platform on Interlocking Nationalisms (SPIN) led by Joep Leerssen. My subsequent affiliation with SPIN as a guest researcher resulted in: Bob van der Linden, *Romantic Nationalism in India: Cultivation of Culture and the Global Circulation of Ideas*, Leiden: Brill, 2024.



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Introduction

In my modern South Asian history research, the following two historiographical questions have been at the forefront of my mind since my student days:

- 1 How were both Indians and the British culturally and intellectually affected by the imperial encounter and, moreover, how did they interactively reconstitute each other in course and thus create something historically new?
- 2 To what extent are the nineteenth-century categories ‘religion’ and ‘secularity’ appropriate to explain what happened since the imperial encounter?

In relation to the last question, in fact, Max Stille recently highlighted an important dimension of my *Moral Languages from Colonial Punjab: The Singh Sabha, Arya Samaj and Ahmadiyahs* (2008):

[...] when van der Linden provocatively describes the parallels between the discourses and practices of three important reformist organizations across traditions, he successfully challenges the concept of religion, in particular its often reductionist link to belief, theology, or its antagonistic relation to science. Such a radical approach points to new directions in the reworking of scholarly narratives of secularization. It helps correct the tendency of religious language to gloss over change by its traditional vocabulary, and work against a pigeonholing of religion as distinct from concepts of progress, uplift, or rationality.¹

By and large, I introduced the concept of ‘moral languages’ in replacement of the concept of ‘religion’ – and thus inevitably also its binary opposition ‘secularity’ (as propagated globally through the European ‘Protestant’ civilising mission) –² to clarify intellectual and cultural change under colonial rule.³ Instead of taking the two nineteenth-century categories ‘religion’ and ‘secularity’ as a starting point and accordingly arguing that religion continues to be alive and kicking in a world that never became wholly secular, it seemed more worthwhile to me to try to understand what truly happened. Particularly into the nineteenth century the great majority of Europeans self-confidently asserted their own moral superiority, while believing that they were

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summoned by God to bring civilisation, if not Christianity, to the ‘lesser breeds’. On the other hand, the humiliation of conquest, political elimination of their rulers and experience with European racism afflicted Indian intellectuals with melancholy and a sense of self-alienation.⁴ While they were dealing with modern European thoughts and practices, Indians became painfully aware of the fact that the cultural ground was shifting under their feet. As a result, the Indian intelligentsia redefined their traditions into moral languages and nations. Of course, this modern predicament of tradition existed also in Europe itself (from the Napoleonic era onwards), but because Europeans shared the same Judeo-Christian civilisation with Greek and Roman antiquity as a common imagined frame, the questioning of Indian traditional identities by colonialism was culturally and morally more urgent.

Against this global historical background, I believe that both the religious and the secular are nothing more than moral languages motivated and spread by individuals through institutions and practices. Moreover, that the emergent moral communities generally overlapped with the making of nations and that philological historicist research was crucial to this process.⁵ As a matter of fact, the emergence of the modern European discipline of philology was closely intertwined with India. The study and translation of Sanskrit texts had a great impact on European thinkers, who were largely preoccupied with the Enlightenment search for the origins of man, language and music. The most important consequence of this era was the discovery of the Indo-European language family and, closely related, the concept of Aryanism, because these became essential to the emergence of both European and Hindu Romantic nationalist thought.⁶

Particularly constructive for the understanding of the relationship between the philological historicist organisation of knowledge and the making of moral communities and nations is Joep Leerssen’s concept of ‘cultivation of culture’.⁷ Besides being ‘the underlying, unifying concern of early cultural nationalism and romantic historicism’, he explained the phrase as follows:

[...] the new interest in demotic, vernacular, non-classical culture, and the intellectual canonisation process that constitutes such vernacular culture, not merely as a set of trivial or banal pastimes, or as picturesque ‘manners and customs’, but as something which represents the very identity of the nation, its specificity amidst other nations.

This *cultivation of culture* underpins, I contend, nationalists’ scholarly, creative and political-propagandist concern with language, with folktales, history, myths and legends, proverbs, ancient tribal/legal antiquity, mythology, antique heirlooms, etc. All of these undergo, at a specific historical juncture, a crucial transformation. They are lifted from their context of origin by a professionalising philological intelligentsia; they are recontextualised and instrumentalised for modern needs and values; they are studied as organic growth processes and data for the historical track-record of the nation in a prevailing intellectual