Participating in Other Worlds: Locating Gurbilās Literature in the Wider World of Brajbhasha Traditions

by

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Participating in Other Worlds: Locating Gurbilās Literature in the Wider World of Brajbhasha Traditions

submitted by Julie Vig in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Asian Studies

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Abstract

My dissertation asks the question: How can Sikh cultural production in the premodern and early modern period be placed within and understood through wider cultural and literary movements and forces such as the world of Brajbhasha traditions? While such wider forces have shaped scholarly discussions about the formation of other communities and textual traditions in early modern India, they have only recently received attention in Sikh and Punjabi Studies. This recent scholarship by Dhavan, Murphy, Rinehart, and Fenech has not only contributed to connecting the Sikh tradition to other cultural and literary worlds but also to expanding the parameters within which it has been studied, beyond the restricted boundaries of Sikh Studies that have disconnected the Sikh tradition from its wider literary and cultural context. New research developments however allow us to see the many connections the tradition has had with broader cultural and literary worlds.

To address this broad question, my dissertation examines the case of an important relationship between the Sikh cultural world and the Braj literary world. More specifically, it opens a conversation between gurbilās literature with the wider literary, cultural, and religious context of late seventeenth and early eighteenth century North India and examines how this literature relates to Brajkhasha literature produced in other courtly and religious contexts, as well as in other social milieux. Gurbilās literature—or “the play or pastimes of the Guru”—refers to a collection of biographies of the Sikh Gurus written in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. My dissertation wishes to engage with gurbilās literature as a literary genre that was not only
part of the Sikh and Punjabi world but also part of the wider world of Brajbhasha literature whose reach across northern India extended well beyond a specific community or place.¹

Lay Summary

This dissertation locates gurbilās literature in the cultural and religious context of early modern North India and examines how it interacts with Brajbhasha literature produced in other courtly and religious contexts. Brajbhasha is a cosmopolitan-vernacular language that came to occupy a prominent place in religious and courtly circles in premodern North India. Gurbilās literature refers to a collection of historical poems about the Sikh Guru. My dissertation engages with gurbilās literature as a literary genre that was not only part of the Sikh and Punjabi world but also part of the wider world of Brajbhasha literature that extended across North India in the early modern period and in which various Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, and Jain communities participated. By locating Sikh and Punjabi cultural production in relation to Brajbhasha traditions, my research contributes to the enrichment our understanding of early modern North India and opens up a rich world of shared imaginaries.
Preface

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author Julie Vig.
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To Élinore, who has changed my life for the very best, I dedicate this dissertation to you.
Note on Translation and Transliteration

All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. All proper names, names of places, and languages are un-transliterated. Primary sources used in this dissertation are written in various languages (Brajbhasha, Punjabi, SLS), but appear mostly in the gurmukhī script. I follow the transcription system found in Christopher Shackle’s *A Gurū Nānak Glossary*² as well as the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST). Independent vowels and unmarked consonants are transliterated as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Punjabi</th>
<th>IAST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ਉ (u)</td>
<td>ū</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ਊ (ū)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ਓ (o)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ਹੋ (au)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ਹੀ (i)</td>
<td>ī</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ਮੇ (i)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ਰੋ (rō)</td>
<td>ṛ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ਲੋ (lō)</td>
<td>ḍ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ਵੋ (vō)</td>
<td>ḍh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The final short vowel (a) is omitted modern Punjabi is transliterated, whereas it is included when texts in Brajbhasha are transliterated.

Whenever the gurmukhī symbol *addhak* is used on top of a consonant, the length of that consonant is doubled and is transliterated as follows: ਪੱਤਾ (pattā): leaf.

---
Nasalization in gurmukhi is represented by two symbols: the ḍippi and the bindī. The transliteration of nasalization depends on the consonant that follows. I am reproducing Shackle’s system here:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ਸੰਕ} &\text{ṅ} &\text{ka} &\text{ (similarly ŏ before kh g gh ŏ)} \\
\text{ਸੰਚ} &\text{ṅ} &\text{ca} &\text{ (similarly ŏ before ch j jh ŏ)} \\
\text{ਸੰट} &\text{ṇṭ} &\text{a} &\text{ (similarly ŏ before th ḍ ḍh)} \\
\text{ਸੰੜ} &\text{anta} &\text{ (similarly ŏ before th d dh n s)} \\
\text{ਸੰਪ} &\text{ṃpa} &\text{ (similarly m before ph b bh m)} \\
\end{align*}
\]

Final nasal sounds represented by the ḍippi or the bindī are transliterated following the IAST and are indicated by the symbol ōī. For example: ḋūṃ (nūṃ) and ṭāṃ (tāṃ).

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3 Shackle, A Gurū Nānak Glossary, xxiii.
Dedication

Pour Élinore, qui m’a donné le courage de terminer et de continuer.
Introduction: Punjab, Punjabi, and Sikhs

The association of Punjab with Sikhs and the Punjabi language is well anchored in the imaginary of many people today, particularly in India and the Indian Punjabi Diaspora. This association, however, does not reflect the complex changes undergone within the Sikh tradition in regards to its relationship with territory and language since the sixteenth century when Guru Nanak founded the community.¹ While the Punjabi language attained official status in Punjab, Haryana, and Delhi in the second half of the twentieth century and one of its dialects (mājhī, used in the region around Amritsar and Lahore) has become the standardized form of Punjabi in the media and in modern literature,² what constitutes Punjabi even today is not easy to define with clear boundaries.³ It is also common for authors of literary anthologies and histories of literature to conceptualize the Punjabi language and literature as more or less homogeneous.⁴ Sheldon Pollock has suggested that until recently, language in South Asia had never been a major “pole of identification.”⁵ The boundaries of modern languages drawn on ethnic and


⁴ Harpreet Singh, “Religious Identity and the Vernacularization of Literary Cultures of the Pañjāb, 1500-1700” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2012), 20.

geographical affiliations were more porous, fluid, and “fuzzy”\(^6\) in the early modern context of North India. People participated in complex multilingual environments\(^7\) and the Sikhs were no exception. It is well known today that the Sikhs produced literature in multiple languages including Punjabi, Persian, Sanskrit, Sant Bhasha and Brajbhasha. While this fact is well-attested in scholarship, Punjabi has often been perceived as a main pole of identification for Sikhs which has led to generally overlooking their complex relationships with other languages, literatures, and cultural worlds.

This dissertation wishes to complicate the common association between Sikhs and the Punjabi language by addressing this question: “How can Sikh cultural production in the late seventeenth and eighteenth century be placed within and understood through wider cultural and literary movements and forces such as the world of Brajbasha literature?” While wider cross-regional forces have shaped scholarly discussions about the formation of other communities and textual traditions in early modern India in past decades, they have only recently received attention in Sikh and Punjabi Studies.\(^8\) This recent scholarship has not only contributed to connecting the Sikh tradition to other cultural and literary worlds but also to expanding the parameters within which it has been studied, beyond the restricted boundaries of Sikh Studies that have disconnected the Sikh tradition from its wider literary and cultural context. New


\(^8\) Scholars such as Purnima Dhavan, Anne Murphy, Robin Rinehart, Louis Fenech and Harpreet Singh, to name a few leading examples, have addressed this question to various degrees.
research developments allow us to see the many connections the tradition has had with broader cultural and literary worlds.9

To address this broad question, this dissertation examines a case of the intersection of Sikh and Braj literary and cultural worlds through comprehensive and careful examination of one text: Kuir Singh’s *Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das*, a mid-to-late eighteenth century text that relates life stories of Guru Gobind Singh in the form of poetic narration.10 In addition to narrating episodes of the life of the Tenth Guru and to praising his heroic character, Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās*, like all *gurbilās* texts,11 articulates through various episodes “connections between the Guru and the *panth*, and the narration of what constitutes the *panth.*”12 The *gurbilās*—which literally means “the play or pastimes of the Guru”—refers to a collection of biographies of the Sikh Gurus written in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries emphasizing the narration of life stories of Guru Gobind Singh and his heroic deeds. My dissertation provides a study of Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* text to understand how this “connection between the Guru and the *panth*”13 is represented and how the “community around the Guru”14 is imagined. It is also concerned with

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9 Dominique Sila-Khan’s work, for instance, not only exemplifies this effort to connect religious communities in North India to broader movements and trends but also contributes to scholarly discussions that view categories of religion as relational rather than in static terms that change over time and according to contexts. Dominique Sila-Khan, *Crossing the Threshold: Understanding Religious Identities in South Asia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004).


12 Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past*, 94.

13 Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past*, 94.

14 Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past*, 84.
exploring new themes and issues that will arise from reading the text afresh within its own context rather than within the context of later political and historical developments, and in connection to texts and traditions from other contexts that bear compelling similarities. More specifically, in so doing, it opens a conversation between gurbilās literature with the wider literary, cultural, and religious context of late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century North India and examines how this literature relates to Brajbhasha literature produced in other courtly, literary, and religious contexts, as well as in other social milieux. This dissertation engages with gurbilās literature as a literary genre that was not only part of the Sikh and Punjabi world but also part of the wider world of Brajbhasha literature whose reach across northern India extended well beyond a specific community or place.15

Among scholars who have examined the issue of linguistic composition of gurbilās literature, few have studied the social and cultural implications of the choice of Braj as the predominant language of these texts. Ami Shah characterizes the language of the early gurbilās text, Gursobhā, dated to the early eighteenth century (ca. 1708)16 by the author Sainapati, as “an admixture of Punjabi and Braj Bhasha, two north Indian vernacular languages”17 and Kulwant Singh designates it as an “archaic sanskritised Hindi-Punjabi hybridized usage and diction.”18 Generally, the linguistic composition of gurbilās literature is said to be located, to various degrees, somewhere on a spectrum between Punjabi and Braj, with the occasional influence of

15 Busch, Poetry of Kings, 195.
16 For discussion on dating, see Dhavan, When Sparrow became Hawks, 182, and Murphy, The Materiality of the Past, 83, footnote 55.
Persian. In regards to Kuir Singh’s *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das*, the text is predominantly written in Brajbhasha. According to Fauja Singh, of the 2,938 verses that form the text, only 37 are written in what he calls, “pure Punjabi”\(^{19}\) whereas the remaining text is written in Brajbhasha. When we look at the text closely, what constitutes “pure Punjabi” is not clear. However, as observed by Murphy and Singh, we find terms that are used today in modern Punjabi, such as the genitive postpositions “dā” “dī” “de”\(^{20}\) (equivalent to Modern Standard Hindi “kā” “kī” “ke”), or the locative postposition “vic”\(^{21}\) (MSH: “men”) or the accusative postposition, “nūṃ” (MSH: ko) and finally the postposition “nāl” (MSH: “ke sāth”). We also find the presence of the possessive pronoun *meriā* in the feminine plural, which is a characteristic of modern Punjabi and not Modern Standard Hindi.\(^{22}\) The presence of these linguistic characteristics that pertain to modern Punjabi in the *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das*, however, represent the exception, and some, such as the postposition “vic,” are also common in early modern forms of *bhākhā*, or the vernacular.

In addition to the presence of Braj and Punjabi in the *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das*, we find the presence of Persian and Sanskrit vocabulary. Since the standardization of Punjabi and its institution into the official language of East Punjab, Persian and Sanskrit vocabulary are an integral part of modern Punjabi. However, in regards to *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das* and other *gurbilās* texts produced between the late seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries, the question

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\(^{19}\) Fauja Singh, “bhūmikā,” In Kuir Singh’s *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das Krit Kuir Singh*, ed. Shamsher Singh ”Ashok” (Patiala: Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, 1999), xxiv.

\(^{20}\) Murphy, “Punjabi in the (Late) Vernacular Millennium.” See an example of this in Kuir Singh, *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das*, 117, verse 103.

\(^{21}\) Anne Murphy, “Punjabi in the (Late) Vernacular Millennium.”

\(^{22}\) We find an example of this in chapter 10 of Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* entitled “Invitation to assemblies of Singh and the defiance of the hill rājas” (sikkha saṅgatām nūṃ saddā ate pahārī rājiām di bemukhatāy; dekke bāla misālāṃ suta pita meria tā te tāta pukāre bhāī meriā. Kuir Singh, *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das*, 139. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
arises as to how we can conceptualize the boundaries and the relationships between Punjabi, Braj, Persian, and Sanskrit before these linguistic categories became less permeable and regional identities became less fluid. This dissertation reflects further on the choice of language by the authors of gurbilās as choosing a language also involves choosing to participate in a particular socio-textual community, as Pollock has discussed at length. By examining the various implications of the choice of Brajbhasha by authors of gurbilās, this dissertation expands and complicates the cultural and social world which Sikhs were part of.

**Early modern Sikh cultural production in Braj**

A large number of texts produced in the early modern Punjab by members of various communities, mostly non-Muslim, are written in Brajbhasha. Brajbhasha is an early modern vernacular language that came to occupy a prominent place in religious and courtly circles in early modern North India at a time when Persian was a dominant court languages and a range of vernaculars were ascendant in non-courtly and religious settings. It emerged as a literary language by the sixteenth century for the oral and literary expression of Krishna worship in the region of Braj (Mathura and Vrindavan). As Allison Busch’s work has shown, by the end of the sixteenth century, the systematization of Braj started to take shape with the work of Kesavdas, signalling the emergence of the rīti or courtly, “refined” literary culture. Kesavdas is known to

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24 According to Murphy, it is important to take into account that in this period, most Muslim authors were producing literature in Punjabi at the intersection of Hindustani and Persian. She suggests that “further archival work is necessary to access fully the use of Braj in Punjabi contexts among Muslims.” Personal communication with Anne Murphy.


be the first poet of the riti tradition, developing a literary system for Braj based on Sanskrit precedents.\textsuperscript{27} As Brajbhasha became more systematized and started reaching the status of a cosmopolitan-vernacular language, that according to Pollock’s formulation aspires to become cosmopolitan by appropriating standards of a preexisting dominant language,\textsuperscript{28} it began to be used in courtly and non-courtly literary circles in the areas around Delhi and Agra, and Braj poets were increasingly present at different courts across North India.\textsuperscript{29} Although Persian was the most prominent literary language at the Mughal court, Braj also held an important position from the time of the emperor Akbar. Braj poets were rarely employed by a single court but travelled from court to court. These nomadic poets were part of an active network of literary activity across northern India. They also travelled to Punjab where their work had a strong influence on the local literary scene.

The use of the term Brajbhasha is not without shortcomings. According to Busch, the term Brajbhasha probably started being used in the late seventeenth century by the Sanskrit commentator, Samartha.\textsuperscript{30} The close associations of Brajbhasha with the Braj region and the Vaishnava world can obscure its connections with other worlds such as the Mughal court, Rajput kingdoms, Jain, Sufi, and Sikh literary circles.\textsuperscript{31} I will discuss the particularities of Braj in Kuir Singh as I look at the text more closely and explore Braj as a language that was in common usage beyond the Vaishnava world. In chapter 3, the connections between Brajbhasha and the


\textsuperscript{28} Pollock, \textit{The Language of the Gods in the World of Men}, 400.

\textsuperscript{29} Busch, “The Anxiety of Innovation,” 191.

\textsuperscript{30} Busch, \textit{Poetry of Kings: the Classical Hindi Literature of Mughal India}, 8, 123, 273 (note 63).

\textsuperscript{31} Busch, \textit{Poetry of Kings}, 9.
Vaishnava world will help me shed light on the reasons why Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* uses various Vaishnava vignettes and why its use of imagery is not a statement on the author’s religious identity.

Many scholars such as Rinehart, Murphy, Dhavan, Shackle, and Fenech have noted the pervasive use of Brajbhasha in Sikh literary contexts such as *gurbilās* literature. Choosing Brajbhasha for Sikh authors meant choosing to participate in a cultural community that was wider than Punjab. And the implications of this choice are well reflected in *gurbilās* literature. But what were the choices available to them? Why did they choose to write in Brajbhasha rather than in Punjabi?\(^{32}\) Was Punjabi even a choice? In a recent article, Murphy interrogates the emergence and use of Punjabi in the early modern period and notes that when Punjabi is used, it often appears in concert with other cosmopolitan languages such as Persian or Braj.\(^{33}\) According to her, before the colonial period, Punjabi was found “at the periphery” and “as an alternative to institutional powers”\(^{34}\) (such as the court, religious centers, or languages of power) articulated as an “aesthetic practice” within a cross-religious and cultural “affective domain.”\(^{35}\) Punjabi, like other vernacular languages used alongside cosmopolitan languages, often appears as a “flavour” “enacting its own set of affective connotations” that are different from the more cosmopolitan and institutional affinities of Braj.\(^{36}\) For authors of courtly historical poems, such as *gurbilās*, produced within centers of power, the use of a language of power such as Brajbhasha, therefore,


\(^{33}\) Murphy, “Punjabi in the (Late) Vernacular Millennium,” 2-3.

\(^{34}\) Murphy, “Punjabi in the (Late) Vernacular Millennium,” 18.

\(^{35}\) Murphy, “Punjabi in the (Late) Vernacular Millennium,” 18.

\(^{36}\) Murphy, “Punjabi in the (Late) Vernacular Millennium,” 19.
makes sense. There was no circumscribed literary sphere exclusively dedicated to Punjabi at the
time of Kuir Singh. To be recognized as a poet beyond the local, one had to produce literature in
a cosmopolitan language. There are “flavours” of Punjabi in Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās*, as Murphy
has suggested, but the text is overwhelmingly written in Brajbhasha.

The question of why Braj instead of Punjabi, therefore, does not make much sense in a
context where Punjabi and Braj worked as, in Murphy's words, “a kind of *interface*, not a
competition, while still recognizing the distinction between the two.”37 The relationship between
Braj and other vernacular languages thus, can be seen more as a spectrum than as a dichotomy,
something that is generally true of emergent vernaculars in the north in the early modern period.
In many early modern Sikh texts, Braj regularly interfaces with Sanskrit, Punjabi, Khari Boli,
and Persian, which exemplifies Busch’s statement that in early modern India, Brajbhasha was “a
highly versatile poetic idiom that appealed to many people.”38

Multilinguality was also common practice in early modern India. Being proficient in
more than one languages meant that an individual could access and function in various social
contexts, as argued Hakala.39 In literary contexts, it was thus common practice for authors to use
multiple languages and Kuir Singh was no exception. While most of his *gurbilās* was written in
Brajbhasha, it is safe to suggest that Kuir Singh also had a certain knowledge of Persian.
Whether or not his knowledge of Persian was limited to words that were already integrated into
Brajbhasha and Punjabi, Kuir Singh was aware of their Persian origin as illustrated by his
deliberate use of *double entendre*. For example, occasionally Kuir Singh uses the Persian and

37 Murphy, “Punjabi in the (Late) Vernacular Millennium,” 13-14.
Braj words *daras/darasana* which are written the same in the *gurmukhī* script. This verse illustrates his technique:

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saraba desa kī saṅgatī āvai/darasana dayā sindhu ko pāvai/
adhama anika jo darasa karāhī/janama marana gati mokha dharāhī/
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The community came from all over the country/They received *darshan* from the Ocean of Mercy/
The lowly ones who gained holy audience are placed on the path of liberation, forsaking birth and death.\(^{40}\)

In the first line, *darsana pāvai* means *to obtain a darshan/sight* and *daras karāhī* could both mean *the lowly ones who were caused to see* or *the lowly ones who were taught a lesson*. In Farsi *daras kardan* means “to teach” whereas in modern Punjabi, *darshan karnā* means “to see”.

The use of these bilingual *double entendres* by Kuir Singh illustrates that he was conscious of boundaries and differences between languages, and was utilizing those differences to his rhetorical advantage.

There is something important to be said about the choice of identifying the language in Kuir Singh as Brajbhasha rather than Hindavi. As noted by Busch, before the modern period, Hindavi was often used as a generic term by Muslim communities to refer to literature that was not produced in Arabic or Persian. Today, Hindavi is often perceived as synonymous with the Eastern dialect Awadhi which is well represented by Jayasi’s *Padmāvat* (1540). The close proximity of Punjab to the Braj region around Agra, Mathura, and Vrindavan, largely explains this choice of terminology. While Guru Gobind Singh is remembered as travelling as far East as Patna (Bihar), as far West as Merta (Rajasthan), and as far South as Nanded (Maharashtra), *gurbilās* texts, as far as we know, were produced in Punjab, close to the Mughal centre and to the Braj region. As argued by Busch, while it has been commonplace to associate Brajbhasha

\(^{40}\) Kuir Singh, *Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das*, 63.
literature as pertaining almost exclusively to Vaishnava communities, it is important to broaden our understanding of Brajbhasha as a language that does not exclusively reflect the Hinducentric Vaishnava world.\textsuperscript{41}

The objective of this dissertation is twofold. First, it provides a comprehensive study of one gurbilās text, \textit{Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das} authored by Kuir Singh and analyzes how it relates to other gurbilās texts. Second, it brings Kuir Singh's \textit{Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das} and the gurbilās literature in general into conversation with broader literary and cultural movements that were shared across the broader Braj literary world. The goal of this dissertation overall is to locate Sikh cultural production within a wider world, rather than isolate it as unique and unconnected. While this dissertation discusses the relationship between gurbilās texts and community formation in broad terms, it is not its central concern.\textsuperscript{42} Its main concern is to connect the cultural, literary, and aesthetic worlds of the gurbilās to wider cultural forces and access Sikh imaginaries in regards to court culture, martiality, \textit{bhakti}, and space.

This dissertation is divided into four chapters. Chapter one locates the production of gurbilās literature within the late Mughal period. It focuses on providing broader political and historical contexts of early eighteenth-century North India. More specifically, it explores how the decline of the Mughal Empire and the gradual decentralization of power impacted the development of the Sikh tradition and its cultural production in the early eighteenth century. It also introduces gurbilās literature and discusses recent scholarship about gurbilās literature. This first chapter also provides a broad introduction to Kuir Singh's \textit{Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das} which will be analyzed in more details in chapter two. Finally, it discusses the issue of language choice in

\textsuperscript{41} Busch, \textit{Poetry of Kings}, 9.

\textsuperscript{42} Anne Murphy and Purnima Dhavan address this issue in their work.
scholarship about early modern South Asia and gestures towards possible motives underlying the choice of Braj in the Sikh and Punjabi context.

Chapter two locates Kuir Singh’s *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das* in its context of production by giving information about its author and about the social, cultural and political milieus in which he operated. The second section discusses and compares the sources used in this dissertation which are Ashok’s edition of the *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das* (1968) and the manuscript 605 held at Khalsa College. Following this, I reflect on the notion of intertextuality in relation to *gurbilās* literature and to do so, I will examine one episode of a famous battle widely narrated in *gurbilās* texts, the battle of Bhangani (dated to 1688), in Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās*, as well as in other texts in the same genre—the *Bacitra Nāṭak*, attributed to Guru Gobind Singh and dated to the late 17th century, and Sainapati’s *Gur Sobhā*, completed ca. 170843. An examination of *gurbilās* texts produced at both ends of the eighteenth century will allow me to reflect on the nature of the intertextual dynamics that characterize the relationship between these texts and on what these dynamics can tell us about the historical circumstances in which these texts were produced. In addition, I will explore how these three narratives illustrate how *gurbilās* literature interacted more formally with the wider world of Braj literary traditions by examining the metrics used by Kuir Singh. Specifically, I will discuss how the use of the *chand* meter for the description of battle scenes in the three narratives invites us to open a conversation between *gurbilās* literature and Braj martial poetry but also provides us with material to think about the context of performance of these texts. I will conclude with a broad reflection on how these three narratives

43 The dating of the text is based on the work of Dhavan and Murphy and will be discussed below.
represent a textual microcosm that reveals the many connections *gurbilās* literature—and more broadly the Sikh cultural world—has with other genres and traditions.

Chapter three engages with my concern for connecting the Sikh tradition to other cultural and literary worlds by examining two examples of encounters between the Sikh literary tradition and wider cultural worlds in Kuir Singh’s *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das*. Specifically, it explores how the use of Vaishnava symbolism in Kuir Singh’s *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das*, and of Mughal symbolism in Sikh visual art, are tied to notions of power and authority in literary, religious, and political contexts of the eighteenth century in North India. Scholars have already highlighted encounters that occurred between Sikhs and Vaishnava traditions, as well as between Sikh and the Mughal worlds since as early as the seventeenth century and have analyzed the presence of these elements in *gurbilās* literature and in Sikh literature and visual art in broad terms. My overall goal is not to exhaustively discuss all possibilities of ties between *gurbilās* literature and other cultural worlds but instead to explore two examples of connections that invite us to imagine the Sikh world beyond Punjab. These two case studies reflect the relationship between the notion of encounter and the process of identity formation.

Chapter four examines how landscapes and literary geographies are imagined in Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* in relation to the Sikh Gurus and to the communities that formed around the Gurus. I also interrogate how the travels of the Sikh Gurus, especially those of Guru Gobind Singh, and the emotional responses from communities wishing to connect with their Guru

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passing through or staying in their city, shape the notion of sacred space (īrtha), and sketch by extension a sacred geography. To do so, I will look at three case studies or vignettes in Kuir Singh’s gurbilās which describe a Sikh landscape that included territories that are today not perceived as part of the Punjab-centered Sikh world:45 Bihar (Patna), Rajasthan (Jaipur), and Uttar Pradesh (Ayodhya). While it is not the goal of this chapter to look closely at the specific composition of the social landscape imagined by Kuir Singh and which shaped the Sikh Panth in the late eighteenth century, it does examine how Kuir Singh’s mapping of the Tenth Guru’s travels allows us to discuss the relationship between place and community. Guru Gobind Singh’s travels and encounters also exemplify the complex roles he played as spiritual leader and political figure and as an embodiment of the policy of mīrī-pīrī (temporal-spiritual) articulated by the sixth Guru, Guru Hargobind. Through a discussion of his travels and encounters with powerful figures, I also wish to further illustrate how Kuir Singh’s gurbilās represents a textual microcosm that reveals the complexity of Guru Gobind Singh’s “court” and how it falls uneasily within the fixed categories of “religious” and “secular”.

45 Except Patna where is located one of the five takhat, the Takhat Šri Harimandar Ji Patnā Sāhib.
Chapter 1: Locating *gurbilās* literature in early modern North India

1.1 Historiography about the Sikhs in the eighteenth century

The eighteenth century is generally described in South Asian historiography as a century marked by political, social, and economic change. In many instances, it has been viewed as a turbulent transitional period between the rule of the Mughals and the rule of the British.¹ Seema Alavi identifies two pivotal moments that characterize the eighteenth century: the decentralisation of political and economic power from the Mughal centre to the regions in the first half of the century and the political and economic changes brought by the East India Company in the second half of the century.² Peter Marshall speaks of “a ‘long’ century, perhaps from about 1680 to about 1830”³ marked by ruptures and discontinuities (as argued, for instance, by Athar Ali⁴ and Irfan Habib) but mainly characterized by political and economic continuities with the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries.⁵ In Sikh historiography, the eighteenth century

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¹ For an instance of this view, see Alam: “The eighteenth century in Indian History, particularly its first half, was unfortunate in that it was sandwiched between the political glory of the Great Mughals and the humiliation of colonial rule.” Muzaffar Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707-1748* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 9.


⁴ According to Athar Ali, the Mughal polity was in rupture with previous polities such as the Delhi Sultanate and the Sūr polity for its “extreme systematization of administration, a new theoretical basis of sovereignty, and a balanced and stable composition of the ruling class.” Athar Ali, *Mughal India: Studies on Polity, Ideas, Society, and Culture* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 61.

⁵ “Economically, the long phase of expansion from the seventeenth into the eighteenth century may have lost some of its momentum in mid-century, but a ‘prolonged and widespread depression’ does not seem to have set in until the second quarter of the nineteenth century.” Marshall, *The Eighteenth Century in Indian History*, 36. Quote within Marshall’s quote by Asiya Siddiqi (ed.), *Trade and Finance in Colonial India, 1750-1860* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 22. Burton Stein also argues against the thesis of economic decline in the eighteenth century: “Contrary to the prevailing and long-established historiography of eighteenth-century India, the economy was dynamic. (…) The period is also marked by qualitatively new economic relations involving commercialization of rights previously outside of the commercial nexus; investment of capital from new sources, especially of revenue receipts, and in new ways, dictated by the interests of tax-farmers and monopoly contractors; increased importance of money-use and its penetration into new relations; intensification of pressure for domination over labour as seen in
is also commonly viewed as a period of economic and political crisis and restructuration. The period from 1699 to 1799, starting with the creation of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh\(^6\) and ending with the formation of Ranjit Singh’s kingdom, has often been studied through the lenses of later historical developments. Indeed, many scholars of the Sikh tradition have perceived a teleological relationship between these two events. In other words, the creation of the Khalsa has been viewed as the first step towards the achievement of a unified Sikh empire. One common approach that has deeply influenced research about Sikhs in the eighteenth century interprets the century as a teleological ascension of the Sikhs into an empire.\(^7\) It is not uncommon to read in Sikh historiography that the kingdom of Ranjit Singh constitutes the culmination of Sikh rule and sovereignty in the Punjab. Grewal suggests that 1799 marks “the beginning of sovereign Sikh rule in the Punjab”\(^8\) and Indu Banga argues that the claims of sovereignty for the Khalsa were articulated by Guru Gobind Singh and contributed to the establishment of the Khalsa rule over the course of the eighteenth century until the establishment of Ranjit Singh’s kingdom. Banga adds that the code of conduct *N asi̇hat-nāmā* attributed to Bhai Nand Lal contains Guru Gobind Singh’s “prophecy of sovereignty for the Khalsa: ‘raj karega Khalsa’.”\(^9\) The saying ‘raj karega Khalsa’, claims Gurinder Singh Mann, “reiterates the Khalsa’s destiny to rule” and is “part of Sikh aspirations for sovereign rule.”\(^10\) Banda Bahadur is believed to have pursued the mission

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\(^6\) On debates regarding the dating of the creation of the Khalsa, see for instance Dhavan, *When Sparrows became Hawks*, 187-188, note 2.

\(^7\) Dhavan discusses this issue in *When Sparrows became Hawks*.


dictated by Guru Gobind Singh before his death to ensure the political dominance of the Khalsa Sikhs by fighting the Mughals and resisting the Afghan invasions in order to establish the “Khalsa Raj.”

However, as Anne Murphy and Purnima Dhavan argue, the relation between the creation of the Khalsa and the formation of Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s kingdom is not as unilinear and teleological as these scholars suggest. Over the course of the eighteenth century, not only were “Sikhs” and “Khalsa” not interchangeable terms, the Lahore state was never a “Sikh state,” since the polity never featured a Sikh majority population.” Neither was the Lahore state a Khalsa state even though the Khalsa Sikhs were a dominant faction among the Sikhs. In addition, as Dhavan points out, it is common in historiography about the eighteenth century “to depict this period as a struggle between a powerful Mughal imperium and a small but ideologically cohesive group of Khalsa Sikhs.” She argues that this struggle was more complex and textured than a simple conflict between two monolithic groups or entities. In fact, in Sikh historiography, it is common to describe the ‘Sikh community’ and ‘Sikh tradition’ with clear and unalterable boundaries unaffected by internal changes and external influences. However, how the Sikhs evolved and transformed themselves throughout the eighteenth century and how

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12 Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks, 12.


14 Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks, 12.

15 Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks, 195.
they interacted with notions of power, authority and sovereignty is a complex and nonlinear history that is well reflected in gurbilās literature.16

1.2 Sikhs in the early eighteenth century: a historical turning point

The eighteenth century marked an important transition in Sikh history and represented a pivotal moment for Sikhs.17 The beginning of the century was marked by the gradual decline of the Mughal Empire and the rise of contestant groups and successor regimes of which Khalsa Sikhs were part. In the Punjab, local groups gradually sought increasing political, economic and military power in order to face local functionaries of the Mughal state and the neighbouring hill chiefs.18 The Sikh contestant groups in the Punjab represented a significant threat to the Mughal forces in the region.19 According to Alam, the successive governors of the province of Punjab in the first half of the eighteenth century failed to alleviate the Sikh uprisings which led the Sikhs to increasingly gain power and authority in the second half of the century. More generally, Sikhs were active participants in the military labour market, as well as armed resistance. The Khalsa Sikhs, like many other groups of that period, embraced the culture of martiality20 that upgraded their social status from peasants to warriors to resist imperial authorities.21 As Stewart Gordon remarks, “Military service was the commonest entrepreneurial activity of pre-modern South

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16 Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks. Murphy, The Materiality of the Past.


18 Alam, The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India, 303.


20 Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks, 139.

21 Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks.
Asia” and the success gained in battles by a leader and his followers, such as the Khalsa Sikhs, could result in an upward shift in status. In addition to this wider political context, the death of Guru Gobind Singh in 1708 in Nanded—which was concurrent with the beginning of the Mughal Empire’s decline—significantly impacted Sikh identity and the literature produced in the eighteenth century. A few weeks preceding his death, Guru Gobind Singh is said to have vested the office of Guru in the Ādi Granth and in the Khalsa from which point the human Guruship shifted to a textual one. This switch from human guruship to a textual guruship was significant in the shaping of Sikh identity in the eighteenth century.

The Khalsa Sikhs exemplify the dynamic between the Mughal Empire and contestant groups in the early eighteenth century. Purnima Dhavan has shown how, throughout the eighteenth century, the Khalsa Sikhs underwent complex processes of identity formation in their interactions with the Mughal Empire. The Khalsa Sikhs neither formed a homogeneous group, nor were they ever synonymous with the category “Sikhs” as they are often understood today. They redefined themselves as a group at different points throughout the eighteenth century through their involvement in internal and external tensions, conflicts and alliances. From the early to the mid-eighteenth century, the Khalsa Sikhs were mainly composed of peasants and zamindars, and by the end of the century they were mainly composed of religious and political

23 Gordon, Robes of Honour, 144.
24 Grewal, The Sikhs of the Punjab, 79.
25 Murphy, The Materiality of the Past, 84-85.
26 Murphy, The Materiality of the Past, 84-85.
27 Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks, 12.
28 Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks, 13-14.
elites: “The rise of the Khalsa Sikhs from a ragtag band of rebels after the death of Guru Gobind Singh in 1708 to regional dominance in 1799 is a story of how a small and relatively powerless group overcame a once mighty empire.”

The rise of Banda Bahadur as a powerful contestant leader challenging the Mughal authorities in the early eighteenth century constitutes a major example of how the weakening imperial power dealt with increasingly powerful local groups in Punjab. In Sikh historiography, Banda Bahadur is described as having had a significant encounter with Guru Gobind Singh at Nanded after which he claimed that the tenth Guru chose him to assume the leadership of the Khalsa. However, this claim was contested within the Khalsa for its afront to “the notion of joint sovereignty of the Khalsa as a corporate body and with the evolving notion of guru panth.” Banda Bahadur’s disciples were not exclusively Sikhs but rather were from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Banda drew strong but not absolute support from the local revenue collectors, the zamindars, especially the Jat zamindars, who provided him with shelter, “grain, horses, arms, and provisions” when he was pursued by Mughal armies. The zamindars who sought to increase their power and autonomy in the region had interest in becoming allies with Banda Bahadur and his troops as they were very powerful in the region.

29 Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks, 19-20.
31 For a discussion on the debates surrounding this issue, see Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks, 49 and 195-196, note 5.
32 Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks, 56; also quoted by Murphy, The Materiality of the Past, 80.
33 Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks, 53.
34 Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks, 54.
The followers of Banda Bahadur were not strictly united along religious or ideological lines.\textsuperscript{35} Banda Bahadur, in his resistance against Mughal power and other local groups such as the Mein and Ranghar Rajputs, the Qasur Afghans and the hill chiefs, led raids in villages and distributed his riches among his followers.\textsuperscript{36} But why, asks Dhavan, “were Sikhs, particularly those of the Khalsa, drawn to Banda, and how did they view his leadership?”\textsuperscript{37} The creation of the Khalsa created a schism within the Sikh community. As Dhavan argues, numerous high-caste groups, especially the Khatri Sikhs, did not accept the new Khalsa culture “and broke marriage alliances and other social contracts with those who became Khalsa Sikhs.”\textsuperscript{38} A decade after the creation of the Khalsa, when Banda was already powerful in the villages and the hills of Punjab, the Khatris had already embraced distinct interests\textsuperscript{39} from the Jat-dominated followers of Banda. According to Syan, many Khatris found it more beneficial to embrace military service rather than seeking employment in the Mughal administration but he argues that a large number of them would highly benefit from the maintenance of the imperial power: “A large number of Khatris were merchants whose fortunes were very closely linked with political stability which in the prevailing circumstances could be envisaged only through the maintenance of imperial

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\textsuperscript{35} Murphy, \textit{The Materiality of the Past}, 79.
\textsuperscript{36} Dhavan, \textit{When Sparrows became Hawks}, 53 and 56.
\textsuperscript{37} Dhavan, \textit{When Sparrows became Hawks}, 52.
\textsuperscript{38} Dhavan, \textit{When Sparrows became Hawks}, 47.
\textsuperscript{39} Muzaffar Alam, “Sikh Uprising under Banda Bahadur 1708-15,” in \textit{The Khalsa over 300 Years}, ed. J.S. Grewal and Indu Banga (New Delhi: Tulika, Indian History Congress, 1999), 44.
\end{flushleft}
authority.” Following Banda Bahadur allowed the underprivileged classes to improve their material situation.

Banda Bahadur was captured and executed in Delhi in 1715-16 following an order issued by the emperor of the time, Farukh Siyyar (1713-19) and the years following his death until the mid-eighteenth century have been described as “shrouded in mystery” and as “perhaps the least known and most confused chapter in the history of the Sikhs in the eighteenth century.” The historical context of the reign of Muhammad Shah and the following second half of the eighteenth century, which shaped the production of important gurbilās texts such as Kuir Singh’s gurbilās and Sukha Singh’s gurbilās, will be discussed in the second chapter, when the context of the production of Kuir Singh’s gurbilās will be addressed in more depth. The second half of the eighteenth century, more specifically, the establishment of misls (group of soldiers in the eighteenth-century Punjab), the emergence to power of Sikh chiefs, the Afghan invasions, the ghallūghārā (massacres), and the martyrdoms within the Sikh Panth marked the second half of the eighteenth century and is reflected in gurbilās literature.

In cultural and artistic domains, the eighteenth century was a thriving period in regional contexts of North India, and the Punjab was no exception. In Sikh and Punjabi contexts, the eighteenth century was marked by a high production of Sikh historical prose and poetry,

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41 Alam, The Crisis of Empire, 145.

42 Grewal, The Sikhs of the Punjab, 83-84.


44 Alam, The Crisis of Empire, 176.
exegesis, romance, short stories, poems, religious literature, and ballads. The production of gurbilās literature exemplifies the active literary production in the eighteenth century.

1.3 Contextualizing gurbilās literature

Gurbilās literature refers to a collection of biographies of the Sikh Gurus written in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, emphasizing the narration of the life of Guru Gobind Singh and his heroic character. The authors of gurbilās texts do not share the same religious, cultural or historical backgrounds, but they all share love for and devotion to the memory of Guru Gobind Singh. People from different cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds were tied together around the memory of Guru Gobind Singh and his court and formed what Dhavan calls “affective communities.” These “affective communities” were composed of groups of people whose identities were not restricted to their devotion to the tenth Guru. Dhavan claims that these “affective communities” were composed of three groups of people: First, the Khalsa Sikhs who contributed in propagating and enacting the memory of Guru Gobind Singh after his death; second, the authors of gurbilās texts; and third, communities such as the Udasis and the Nirmalas who also contributed to extending the memory of the tenth Guru within their respective institutions (ḍerā, dharamsālā). These three groups shared a common devotion to the tenth

45 As will be discussed below, Anne Murphy argues that the term hagiography, understood as Rupert Snell’s authoritative definition, does not apply well to gurbilās literature. The life stories narrated in the gurbilās texts have spatial and temporal boundaries. In gurbilās texts, argues Murphy, the past “is chronologically and geographically ordered and located, and concerned with specific chronologically narrated events.” Murphy, The Materiality of the Past, 84. Rupert Snell views hagiographical texts as reverental texts “intending to locate the life-stories of its subjects in a sweep of time knowing no boundaries between the contemporary and the ahistorical.” Rupert Snell, “Introduction: Themes in Indian Hagiography,” in According to Tradition: Hagiographical Writing in India, ed. Winand Callewaert and Rupert Snell (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1994) 1, cited in Murphy, The Materiality of the Past, 85-86. Purnima Dhavan chooses to refer to gurbilās as biographies. See Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks, 19.


47 The notion of affective communities will be explored further in my dissertation.
Guru without losing their other identity affiliations. There was no confusion of identities,

“outside of these devotional contexts, however, their social lives and status were unaffected by
the discipline imposed by the Khalsa *rahit* (code of conduct).”\(^{48}\) The members of these affective
communities were therefore primarily Khalsa Sikhs, service groups such as bards, poets, and
courtiers, Udasis, and Nirmalas.\(^{49}\)

This mutually ennobling love binds together generations in a perpetual experience of
bliss, as devotees removed in time from the Tenth Guru’s court formed deep ties to the
received memory of his court from the affective communities formed around texts,
shrines, and cultural practices that commemorated the last Sikh Guru as the epitome of
courtly and spiritual grace. Such devotion is rewarded, according to *gurbilās* texts, not
only by spiritual benefits but also by an enhanced position as warriors and rulers.
Participation in such affective communities as portrayed in some of these texts was not
equated with conversion to the Sikh Khalsa. Interestingly, membership in such affective
communities allowed room for those in the Guru’s service and their putative descendents
to continue to inhabit their pre-existing social identities, while still considering
themselves fully a part of the Guru’s darbar (court) and those of his Sikh inheritors.\(^{50}\)

However, according to Murphy, people drawn to these affective communities in Kuir
Singh were part of a broad and inclusive community configured beyond the question of caste.

According to her, Kuir Singh had a cosmopolitan vision of the community around the Tenth
Guru and this community was defined broadly and inclusively, regardless of caste. She gives as
an example the narration of the creation of the Khalsa in which the description *pañj piāre*, the
five beloved who formed the basis of the Khalsa at its beginning, and of their caste, maps the
Sikh landscape in all four directions:

Kuir Singh’s text is centrally about the configuration of the community, particularly
around caste, and his is a cosmopolitan vision. What is important in Kuir Singh is not the
sovereignty per se—which is assumed in the case of the Guru’s centre at Anandpur—but

\(^{48}\) Dhavan, *When Sparrows became Hawks*, 159. Chapter three will explore Dhavan’s notion of “affective
communities” in the context of Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās*.

\(^{49}\) Dhavan, *When Sparrows became Hawks*, 159.

\(^{50}\) Dhavan, *When Sparrows became Hawks*, 152.
the complex political field that the Guru was located within and, perhaps even more so, the complexity of the politics within the Guru’s community itself.\textsuperscript{51}

What drew the “affective communities” (to use Purnima Dhavan’s term) to the Guru, these devotees of diverse backgrounds who found a place in relation to the Guru at the centre? In Kuir Singh, it was the broad contours of the community in inclusive terms that he most strenuously argues for.\textsuperscript{52}

In chapter 4, I will examine more closely examples of what it looks like for Kuir Singh to imagine the Sikh community in such broad and inclusive terms.

The precise dating of \textit{gurbilās} texts is open to debate although their production can be located in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{53} Among the most studied \textit{gurbilās} texts of the eighteenth century, the \textit{Bacitra Nātak}, which is part of the \textit{Dasam Granth}, a major anthology associated with Guru Gobind Singh, is generally considered to be the earliest example of \textit{gurbilās} literature.\textsuperscript{54} Another important early \textit{gurbilās} text is Sainapati’s \textit{Gur Sobhā}, which was produced in the early eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{55} In addition, there are \textit{gurbilās} texts that were produced later in the mid-to-late eighteenth century: Kesar Singh Chibber’s \textit{Bansāvalīnāmā} (1769), Sarup Das Bhalla’s \textit{Māhimā Prakāsh} (1770?), Sukha Singh’s \textit{Gurbilās Daswin Pātshāhī} (1797), and Kuir Singh’s \textit{Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das} (mid-to-late eighteenth century).\textsuperscript{56}

If not all \textit{gurbilās} texts can be dated with certainty, or if the authors of these texts are not necessarily historically connected, what can these texts tell us about the eighteenth century in North India? Dhavan asks a further question: “If this genre reflects the growth of a large but also

\textsuperscript{51} Murphy “Thinking beyond Aurangzeb,” 554.

\textsuperscript{52} Murphy “Thinking beyond Aurangzeb,” 554.

\textsuperscript{53} Dhavan, \textit{When Sparrows became Hawks}, 182.

\textsuperscript{54} Murphy, \textit{The Materiality of the Past}, 84.


\textsuperscript{56} Dhavan, \textit{When Sparrows became Hawks}, 182; Murphy, \textit{The Materiality of the Past}, 105.
diverse affective community, what implications did the popularity of such texts have in actual historical circumstances?" Murphy suggests that these texts provide an access to “Sikh historical imagination through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” and while these texts are not confined to the Sikh tradition, they “are representative of a Sikh (rather than Punjabi, or South Asian) perspective on the past in just this sense: they are written about Sikh Gurus and members of the community of followers of the Gurus.” In other words, gurbilās literature offers a space where Sikh historical representations and political imaginaries are articulated in different modes. Murphy has shown how the gurbilās literature represents a site where Sikh historical representations are articulated in order to form “the community around the memory of the Guru” and where the conflicts and tensions experienced between the Mughal Empire and the successor groups such as the Sikhs in the eighteenth century are articulated “to reflect the place of the Sikh community in an unstable political field at an early stage of this process.”

The gurbilās texts are closely intertextually related and share a common “concern for history” in their “articulation of connections between the Guru and the panth, and the narration of what constitutes the panth.” However, as Dhavan has shown, gurbilās also constitutes a site where different competing narratives about the life of Guru Gobind Singh are expressed, specifically

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57 Dhavan, *When Sparrows became Hawks*, 164.
58 Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past*, 78.
59 Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past*, 76.
60 Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past*, 105. Even though extensive archival work on the gurbilās texts still remains to be done, there are a significant number of printed editions currently available to which scholars like Purnima Dhavan, Anne Murphy and Louis Fenech have given attention.
61 Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past*, 85.
62 Murphy “Thinking beyond Aurangzeb,” 542.
63 Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past*, 94.
regarding the creation of the Khalsa, the ideas about moral order that the Khalsa represents, the Sikh political sovereignty and castes.64

According to Dhavan, gurbilās texts are less important for what they can teach about the historical circumstances of the life of Guru Gobind Singh than for how they act as “rich sources to understand the social modes of courtly behavior, emotive bonds among patron-client groups, and the complicated networks of patronage that had emerged in Punjab with the rise of the Sikh States.”65 Gurbilās literature is not an isolated product of Sikh historical and literary circumstances but rather the fruit of active interactions with other literary traditions of the period.66 Dhavan emphasizes the importance of contextualizing the gurbilās texts outside of Sikh hagiographic traditions and bringing them into conversation with the “emergent notions” of courtliness, heroism and masculinity that were prevalent among warrior groups that claimed more power in the eighteenth century when the Mughal Empire was declining and that were promoted in various literary traditions produced by warrior groups and families.67 Expanding the parameters of the discussion about eighteenth century Sikhs, which generally occurs within the restricted boundaries of Sikh studies and which too often seeks to disconnect the Sikh tradition from its historical context, allows us to see the rich world of mobility and cultural exchange in which Sikhs were involved.

Gurbilās literature exemplifies the world of literary, artistic and religious encounters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in North India. This literary genre was not confined to the

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66 Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past*, 77.

67 Dhavan, *When Sparrows became Hawks*, 164.
Sikh tradition nor restricted to the Punjabi language and was therefore in constant interaction with a broader literary world. It not only brought together people from different backgrounds but was also in conversation with other genres of literature of the period that were composed in the same literary language, Brajbhasha.\textsuperscript{68} \textit{Gurbilās} texts were in constant intertextual relation with other texts of the period,\textsuperscript{69} as they share themes and ideals that were prevalent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in North India.\textsuperscript{70}

The Dasam Granth exemplifies the participation of the Sikh and Punjabi textual tradition in a wide network of cultural influences. Robin Rinehart argues that the Dasam Granth has been studied for too long within the boundaries of Sikh Studies and claims that these boundaries should be expanded to the wider context of Indian literature in order to better understand the literary network in which Guru Gobind Singh and his court poets participated. As her work has shown, the Dasam Granth contains numerous references to Puranic tales, Sanskrit stories and Brajbhasha literary works which indicates close cultural connections with other oral and textual traditions of the time. When the Dasam Granth is viewed as a work belonging exclusively to the Sikh and Punjabi textual tradition, it impoverishes our understanding of the text and of its context of production. The \textit{Dasam Granth} has also raised controversies in scholarship about the Sikhs regarding the question of authorship. Some people strongly reject the idea that Guru Gobind Singh is the author of the \textit{Dasam Granth} for, according to them, it contains “Hindu”

\textsuperscript{68} Busch, \textit{Poetry of Kings}, 245.

\textsuperscript{69} Murphy, \textit{The Materiality of the Past}, 77.

\textsuperscript{70} “It is true that the specifically exegetical details of the \textit{gurbilās} form probably held the widest appeal to Sikhs; however, the heroic ethos of the narrative had wide appeal at a time in which dramatic social mobility had increased the number of groups claiming warrior status. The affective language of these texts, with its emphasis on the fraternal bonds between warriors, mirrored the importance placed on courtliness, masculinity, and fraternal bonds in the political discourse of the period.” Dhavan, \textit{When Sparrows became Hawks}, 164.
elements and themes that contradict the “Sikhness” of the text. According to Robin Rinehart, we need to leave aside the question of authorship and treat the Dasam Granth as a site where close cultural connections between the court of Guru Gobind Singh, the Mughal darbār, other subimperial courts and oral traditions occur rather than seeing it as a space where modern categories of “Hindu” and “Sikh” are anachronistically positioned in conflict.71 The debates around the Dasam Granth exemplify the sorts of anachronistic discussions that happen today around the formation of early religious and textual traditions and that cause many controversies and anxieties.

As Anne Murphy has argued, so far, the gurbilās texts have not been looked at in their own terms or “within their historical moments of creation and in their literary/textual forms as a whole” but “as corroboration.”72 She provides as an example Louis Fenech’s recent monograph73 in which the author selectively uses Kuir Singh’s Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das to corroborate his argument. For instance, Fenech gives disproportionate attention to the notion of sovereignty and argues that the Zafarnāmā—which is a letter that is said to have been sent from Guru Gobind Singh to the Emperor Aurangzeb is a “declaration of the sovereignty of the Sikh community.”74 Murphy argues that Kuir Singh’s text should be read in its own historical terms and that one should realize that the notion of sovereignty is indeed present but is not as central as Fenech suggests. Reading Kuir Singh’s text in its own terms reveals a concern for the “configuration of community, particularly around caste” rather than with sovereignty, which is only one of many

71 Rinehart, Debating the Dasam Granth.
72 Murphy “Thinking beyond Aurangzeb,” 540.
73 Fenech, The Sikh Žafar-Nāmah.
Murphy's argument opens up a wide array of questions and issues that this dissertation will attempt to address.

Anne Murphy has shown how reading Kuir Singh’s *Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das* anachronistically or selectively can lead one to give disproportionate attention to certain themes such as sovereignty or the view that the Mughals were the main political ‘others’ of the Sikhs. For example, Murphy observes that the division of chapters in Shamsher Singh Ashok’s edition exemplifies "the kind of selective reading of the text that has constituted the norm to date." Indeed, the table of contents is written in modern Punjabi rather than in the language of the text, Punjabi-Braj and the editor selectively chooses events related to the life of Guru Gobind Singh while omitting others. Murphy argues that by emphasizing certain political themes and issues over others, the table of contents exemplifies this common selective and anachronistic reading of *gurbilās* texts:

Conflict with the state and local forces and political matters are prominent in the list, from the early sections where the ninth Guru’s tenure is discussed and his death at Mughal hands is described (Chapter 4), to later descriptions of the political conflicts of the Guru with surrounding Pahāṛī chiefs (e.g. Chapter 6), and to the sending of the *Zafarnāmāh* after the loss of Anandpur (Chapter 16); also central are aspects of Sikh community formation such as the formation of the Khalsa in (Chapter 9) and a controversial accompaniment to that creation, the worship of the goddess (Chapter 8).

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76 1- First story; 2- Rājā Mān Singh and Aurangzeb; 3- From Kāshī to Ayodhyā; 4- Acquisition of knowledge and the Kashmīrī pandit; 5- Maker of the kingdom; 6- Battle of Bhaṅgānī; 7- Freedom of Anandpur: Rājā Bhīm Chand’s request for pardon; 8- Apparition of the Devi; 9- Creation of the Khālsā; 10- Invitation to assemblies of Singh and the defiance of the hill rājas; 11- Masant of the hills under protection and the battle of Lohgarh; 12- Killing of Husain; 13- Arrival of Prince Muazam; 14- Invasion of the king’s armies and war; 15- 15th chapter; 16- Story of the Zafarnāmāh; 17- Bhāī Dayā Singh ji took the Zafarnāmā to Aurangzeb; 18- Talvanḍī Sābo, Damdamā Sāhib; 19- Prince Tārā Āzam died; 20- Delhi the eternal city, Nandeṛh; 21- Last message.

77 Murphy “Thinking beyond Aurangzeb,” 546.

78 Murphy “Thinking beyond Aurangzeb,” 15.
Murphy also argues that Kuir Singh's text hosts a wide variety of themes and issues that have been overlooked in scholarship and reading *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das* in its own context could enrich our understanding of "Sikh representation of the past."79 An examination of these themes and issues, which not only connect Kuir Singh's *gurbilās* with other *gurbilās* texts but also with other textual traditions of the eighteenth century, opens up to a rich world of shared political and cultural imaginaries.

Among themes in Kuir Singh's *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das* that reflect this world of shared political and cultural imaginaries of the eighteenth century, we find the presence of puranic elements, the valorization of martial culture, the representation of Guru Gobind Singh as an avatar of Vishnu, the presence of the Devi, discourses about castes, rich representations of women, descriptions of Guru Gobind Singh's *darbār*, representations of courtliness and of imperial idioms of power, as well as encounters between Sikhs and various religious and political figures (Mughals, Pahari Rajas, Sufi pirs). For instance, Kuir Singh's text, as well as other *gurbilās* texts, also opens an avenue to explore the history of the Mughals and of the hill rajas from the periphery. There are many instances of encounters between Guru Gobind Singh and Mughal political figures, as well as Rajas from the Punjab hills. Various representations of these encounters and of these political others nuance the dominant view in Sikh historiography that holds the Mughals to be the unique “opponent other.”80 For instance, Anne Murphy has highlighted how Rajas of the hill states "are portrayed very much as political ‘others’ in Kuir

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79 Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past*.

Singh's text, and the treachery of the Rajas is emphasized overall, over that of Aurangzeb. Similarly, Dhavan notes that in Kuir Singh's text, Rajput rulers of the Punjab hills are represented as being jealous "over the growing wealth and influence of the Sikh Guru's darbar." Kuir Singh's text, as well as gurbilās literature more broadly, can also provide an alternative historical understanding of Mughal history from the perspective of the Sikhs. This line of inquiry has proved fruitful in broad terms in the study of early modern South Asia. In her article on Amrit Rai’s Māncarit, Allison Busch illustrates how Hindi historical literature can provide an alternative historical understanding of Mughal history from the perspective of regional Rajput courts and open a dialogue between Persian and Hindi historiographical traditions. Allison Busch says that Mughal historiography is dominated by Persian sources and our understanding of this period of history suffers if we continue to ignore the vast body of literature composed in early Hindi/Brajbhasha. We can add to this that our understanding of this period, both within the Sikh tradition and outside it, is lessened by not allowing a fuller reading of these texts in broad terms. Reading gurbilās literature in concert with other Braj literary texts opens a dimension of our understanding of the past that would remain closed if we kept its study within the boundaries of “the Sikh tradition” or “Sikh studies.” Looking at gurbilās literature in the wider frame of Brajbhasha literature written between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries instead of confining the discussion to the exclusive frame of “Sikh” and/or “Punjabi” literature has the potential to significantly enrich our understanding of the history of

81 Murphy, “Thinking beyond Aurangzeb,” 547.
82 Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks, 157.
83 Busch, Poetry of Kings, 292.
84 Busch, Poetry of Kings, 289.
the Sikhs, Mughals and of the Punjab hills.

1.4 The issue of language choice in the literary milieux of early modern India

Understanding of Kuir Singh’s text relies upon exploration of the issue of language choice in relation to literature in early modern North India and more specifically, the use of Brajbhasha as the main vehicle for the literary production at Guru Gobind Singh’s darbār and in the later contexts of gurbilās texts in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Sheldon Pollock has argued that poets and writers of the past were not constrained to use a particular language for literature, they always consciously and intentionally chose a language for their literary production “to achieve expressive and political ends.” But what did this choice entail? What were the options available to poets and writers? What were the limits of their choices? The issue of language choice is complex and can involve a combination of multiple internal and external motives that the following chapters will examine in details in relation to gurbilās literature.

A language can be chosen for its nonsectarian character, as Murphy suggests is the case for the emergence of early Punjabi. This dynamic is exemplified by the choice of Persian by the Mughals as language of the state from the time of Akbar. According to Muzaffar Alam, Akbar chose Persian as the language for administrative work and literary production because unlike

87 Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past*, 75.
89 Alam suggests that although Persian was never devoid “of a religious character” its dominant features were on the secular side. Muzaffar Alam, “The Culture of Politics of Persian in Precolonial Hindustan”, in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock, (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2003), 188.
90 Murphy, “Writing Punjabi Across Borders.”
Sanskrit, Braj or Hindavi, Persian could fulfill Mughals’ aspirations “to evolve a political culture that overarched the diverse religious and cultural identities of India.” Alam suggests that Persian was chosen rather than Sanskrit or Hindavi because Sanskrit was perceived by the population not as an ordinary language but as a “language of the gods or heaven (deva bāṇī; ākāś bāṇī)” and Hindavi had not yet developed into a systematized language in North India and may have not offered a suitable literary system for the production of literature the same way Persian could. By the seventeenth century, Brajbasha, Sanskrit and Persian were used as languages of power for the literary production within both courtly and non-courtly settings.

Choosing a language, especially a language of power, can also be driven by a need from a group to participate in the same literary field as a more powerful group to assert itself and resist assimilation from that group. Nile Green describes this process at play among the Kurds and the Afghans who chose to write their own histories in Persian, the language of power, instead of writing respectively in Kurdish and Pashto. This choice, suggests Green, reflects a “twin process of hegemony and resistance” that allows, on the one hand, a less powerful group to legitimize its own history and assert its position in a wider sociopolitical world, while it also allows, on the other hand, the same group to resist the assimilation of certain forms of hegemony.

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96 Busch, Poetry of Kings.
Language choice in early modern India is also generally tied to state patronage. A language is chosen to suit the demands and requirements of patrons. Examples abound of artists and writers who chose to produce outside of their comfort zone to earn a living. This also applies to the world of painting. Molly Emma Aitken has shown how painters, in the Mughal period, who were able to work in various styles, were more likely to find employment at different courts. For instance, paintings done in the more cosmopolitan style called *dilli kalam* were more in demand in Rajput courts than, for instance, paintings done in any of the Rajasthani styles. Painters had to learn the more global language of painting, the imperial Mughal style, if they wished to avoid being stuck at one specific local court.

Finally, legitimation theory is often invoked to explain the choice of language in early modern India. Many scholars have argued that in a context where a less powerful group uses the language of a more powerful group to produce art and literature, it is to seek legitimacy from the more powerful group and to assert authority in the face of competing groups. For instance, in his study of the Avadhi-language *prem-ākhyān Padmāvat* (1540), a mystical romance composed by the Chishti and Mahdavi Sufi poet, Muhammad Jayasi, Thomas de Bruijn explains the relation between power and culture in term of legitimacy without arguing for a unilateral use of culture by a political entity for legitimation. He suggests that *Padmāvat* operates as a space where Jayasi...
acts as a mediator between the spiritual and worldly realms of power, represented respectively by the Sufi dargāh and Jayasi’s local patrons. In this context, the relation between power and culture is not articulated in a unilateral logic of instrummentality.¹⁰² Culture is not unidirectionally needed or used by a political entity for legitimation of its power: both the spiritual and worldly powers need and interact with each other for legitimation of their power.¹⁰³

Sheldon Pollock has articulated a critique of the use of legitimation theory. According to him, the notion of legitimation, which has been repeated over and over again in the scholarship to explain the relationship between power and culture, is a major obstacle to understanding early modern India.¹⁰⁴ He suggests that “the logic of instrumental reason” that is “central to the argument that in premodern southern Asia, cultural systems across the board were “needed” for political “legitimation” has “never been explained, let alone critiqued and defended.”¹⁰⁵ According to him, legitimation theory is associated with capitalist modernity¹⁰⁶ and “cannot be assumed to be transhistorically applicable.”¹⁰⁷ Therefore, we should ask “why, accordingly, should we hold that pre- or non-capitalist power “needs” culture to effect its own legitimation?”¹⁰⁸ Daud Ali argues along such lines as well, adding that theories of legitimation fail also in the assumption of an instrumental relationship between power and culture as monolithic agencies. Yet, political power in early modern India, he argues, often represented by

the court, was made of “complex agencies” and was not, as is generally assumed, represented by a single royal figure. In other words, says Ali, legitimation theories tend to “impoverish court sociology, [construing power as] one dominated by the single figure of the king/patron.”

Another of Pollock's mentees, Audrey Truschke, has also illustrated how the language of legitimation theory is unfit to explain the relationship between the Mughals and culture. According to her:

The relationship between aesthetics and politics was fluid for the Mughals and took different forms rather than being confined to a set framework. Here again legitimation theory offers a presumptive understanding of political power that automatically subordinates aesthetic events to political objectives and fails to accurately capture the multiple political and social dimensions of Mughal cross-cultural interests. Rather than the mere tools of legitimation, the Mughals saw literary pursuits themselves as a crucial part of a successful imperial formation.

One of the examples Truschke gives to illustrate her argument relates to Akbar and his patronage of the Persian translation of the *Mahābhārata* called the *Razmnāma*. She argues that Akbar did not commission the production of this translation to legitimate his authority as a king: “if we say that the Razmnamah was intended to legitimate Akbar as a king, then we assume a need for the Mughals to justify their rule through the language of Sanskrit (and Persian) aesthetics, and it is unclear how, why, or for whom such justification would actually work.”

The translators of the *Mahābhārata* did not use languages of power to legitimate the rule of their patrons; they choose to participate in the wider worlds of Sanskrit and Indo-Persian aesthetics to

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not only provide “a mixture of imaginative history, political advice and a great story”\textsuperscript{113} but also to develop an interpretation of the *Mahābhārata* that significantly shaped Mughal imperial identity.

Some scholars move away from “political and religious explanatory paradigms”\textsuperscript{114} and explain language choice in terms of internal motives. Allison Busch, for instance, has argued how the choice of a language for literature can be driven by internal motives. In her exploration of texts of five Braj poets from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Keshavdas, Chintamani Tripathi, Bhushan Tripathi, Rahim and Raslin), Busch shows how the choice of writing in Brajghasha for these poets was less a matter of expressing their ethnic or religious identity than a matter of having access to the best literary tools to compose “the most beautiful poem possible.”\textsuperscript{115} Brajghasha was widely used by early modern writers and poets for its wide range of lexical possibilities and comprised of a “spectrum of written registers ranging from the Sanskritised (*tatsama*) or semi-Sanskritised (*ardhatatsama*), to a more basic vernacular style (*tadbhava*), to a Persianised idiom.”\textsuperscript{116}

Thomas de Bruijn and Aditya Behl\textsuperscript{117} have also shown in their studies of *Padmāvat* that interpreting language choice in terms of ethnic or religious identity is anachronistic.\textsuperscript{118} In his

monograph, de Bruijn locates *Padmāvat* “at the crossroads of various Indian and Islamic literary traditions” from oral and textual sources, exemplifying the literary dynamic of early modern India overall but also the process of identity formation in a literary context marked by what he calls “semantic polyphony.”

De Bruijn frames the agency of the poet in terms of “habitus that is informed and defined by the interests in the literary field.”

According to him, Jayasi’s agency was shaped by the various socio-religious roles of the local Chishti Sufi dargāh he was affiliated to. Jayasi made deliberate literary choices that were reflective of his literary milieu that was “hybrid, heteroglossic and polyphonic” and not reflective of a syncretic political-religious identity. Jayasi, despite Chishti and Mahdavi Sufi allegiances, thus chose to participate in the literary network that extended beyond the world of Sufism. This example is reflective of the complexity of the issue of language choice and agency.

Directly relevant to the interest here in Sikh utilization of Braj in the Punjab context, Cynthia Talbot has explored the choice of Brajbhasha by the Kyamkhanis, an Indian Muslim community that lived in Rajasthan from 1450 to 1730, to record their own history. According to Talbot, making a choice of a language for literature does not imply making a statement about one’s religious identity. To convey the complexity of the issue of language choice, Talbot focuses on a seventeenth century text *Kyamkhan Rasa* whose author, Nyamat Khan (pseudonym Jan Kavi) chose to write in Brajbhasha. Jan Kavi was part of a lineage of a warrior gentry community who was in the service of the Mughals. Even though Jan Kavi was exposed to

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Persian, he made the choice to write in Brajbhasha. According to Talbot, the main reason why Jan Kavi chose to write the *Kyamkhan Rasa* and most of his poems in Brajbhasha lies in his desire to “participate in the literary universe inhabited by his warrior neighbours, the Rajput lords of Rajasthan and its vicinity.” The complexity of the relation between language choice and identity formation is well exemplified by the *Kyamkhan Rasa*, which locates and roots the Kyamkhanis at a junction between Indic and Islamic worlds. On the one hand, the Kyamkhanis honoured their ancestor who is said to have converted to Islam in the fourteenth century and, on the other hand, they perceived themselves as Rajput warriors. Although to a modern mind this expression of identity may appear contradictory, there was no confusion of identities. Talbot reminds us that religion, in early modern India, was one of many aspects that define one’s identity. People’s identities were forged as a result of multiple alliances with people from different religious, ethnic and religious backgrounds. It was also common in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries to see people from different religious allegiances taking part in the military labour market. Also, as Talbot notes, the seventeenth century witnessed a significant increase in the production of martial literature and genealogies. She also suggests that social mobility dramatically increased from the seventeenth century onwards, which created a context where an

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126 See Dhavan, *When Sparrows became Hawks*.


increasing number of peasant communities started to claim warrior status.\textsuperscript{129} To legitimise their new status, some of these groups started to produce martial literature such as gurbiḷās and the \textit{Kyamkhan Rasa}.\textsuperscript{130} Like literature produced by the Kyamkhanis, gurbiḷās literature exemplifies the complex interplay between language choice and identity formation, as will be discussed in Chapter Three.

\textbf{1.5 Identity formation and religious identity}

What does it mean to produce “Sikh” and “Punjabi” (in regional terms) literature in a world of shared idioms, symbols and representations? Allison Busch has expressed the possible risks of retrofitting modern categories of languages onto early modern North India; this risk also exists with reference to categories of religion and ethnicity, as Talbot and others have shown.\textsuperscript{131} Thomas de Bruijn argues that the “boundaries between religious and cultural communities in early modern North India were much more fluid than was presumed earlier, and that they did not coincide with those that divide contemporary South Asian society.”\textsuperscript{132} This fluidity, which characterizes the world of cultural exchange and mobility of early modern North India, strongly impacted identity formation, and must cause us to reconsider commonly held assumptions about what constitutes “Sikh literature.”

Binary categories such as “Hindu” and “Sikh” themselves, for instance, are created to facilitate the organization of knowledge. Dominique Sila-Khan calls for a change in the parameters of the discussion and insists on seeing the categories of “Hindu” and “Muslim” as

\textsuperscript{129} Dhavan, \textit{When Sparrows became Hawks}, 164.

\textsuperscript{130} Dhavan, \textit{When Sparrows became Hawks}, 164. Talbot, “Becoming Turk the Rajput Way.”

\textsuperscript{131} Busch, “Riti and Register,” in Orsini, \textit{Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture}, 87.

\textsuperscript{132} De Bruijn, \textit{Ruby in the Dust}, 18.
relational rather than static terms that change over time and according to different contexts. Sila-Khan suggests that we start asking “which Hindus have coexisted and interacted with which Muslims; which Muslims have been hostile to which Hindus; and which Hindus have regarded which Muslims as their enemies.”  

According to Heidi Pauwels, we need to leave aside assumptions of binary relationships between two monolithic entities. Instead of asking anachronistically how Hindus and Muslims interacted with each other in the past, we need to start asking how the self was thought in relation to the “other”, how “others” were defined by particular groups, and “In excluding others, what communities were affirmed or created, with appeal to what identities of the audience.” She examines more precisely how the opponent-others, the śāktas, were defined by different bhakti communities. She concludes that the “opponent other” was less defined along institutional religion lines than along practice or caste-based lines. In the texts explored by Pauwels, it is not evident whether or not the “opponent other”, the śāktas, refers to a well-defined specific group of people with condemnable practices such as the killing of animals or “unclean dietary habits” or “Tantric sexual practices” or just “a more generic set of “non-believers”.

Pauwels’s article illustrates how categories of language or religion were relational. Other scholars have shown the relational interactions of categories of language and religion. For instance, Lorenzen refers to terms such as yavanas, mlecchas, farangis, musalmans

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133 Sila-Khan, Crossing the Threshold.

134 Pauwels, “Who are the Enemies of the bhaktas,” 509.

135 Pauwels, “Who are the Enemies of the bhaktas,” 510.

136 Pauwels, “Who are the Enemies of the bhaktas?,” 520.

137 Pauwels, “Who are the Enemies of the bhaktas?,” 515.

138 Pauwels, “Who are the Enemies of the bhaktas?,” 534.
and *Turks* used in Indic texts to connote different invaders who came from the northwest not as static but relational categories whose meanings varied according to different contexts.\(^{139}\) Arvind Mandair, quoted by Murphy, also argues in this sense and suggests that “the logic of identity changes from complex or relational to dualistic” in the colonial period.\(^{140}\) Understanding early modern identity as relational rather than dualistic shapes the way we understand and conceptualize encounters; we can also seek out shared ideas and idioms that do not require or presuppose shared confessional identities.\(^{141}\)

Tony Stewart proposes to conceptualize religious encounters using a translation theory model.\(^{142}\) Stewart is unsatisfied with previous theoretical models or categories such as *syncretism* to understand religious encounters, especially encounters between various Hindu traditions of Bengal with Islam. According to him, the interpretative concept of syncretism fails in that it not only “assume[s] that two distinct entities – in these examples, “Islam” and “Hinduism” as if those were somehow truly monolithic entities – were brought together to form some new construction that share parts of both but could be classified as neither,”\(^{143}\) but also implies that the parties involved in the encounter bear “the very institutional (ritual, theological, social)


\(^{143}\) Stewart, “In Search of Equivalence,” 270.
structures that are not yet present in any enduring way.” 144 The conclusion that a group has syncretic beliefs, for instance, is often drawn on the observation of its use of multiple languages in the production of its religious literature. As Stewart notes, “the model of syncretism” “operates on the assumption that language transparently and faithfully reflect the tradition behind the language.” 145 Translating means searching for equivalence from the source language or culture or conceptual world to a target language of culture 146 without assuming that the two terms of the comparison are identical.

Finbarr Flood 147 has also conducted research on the question of encounters, more specifically on “Hindu-Muslim” encounters between the ninth to the mid-thirteenth centuries. Unlike Stewart who focuses on understanding religious encounters through textual-linguistic analysis, Flood not only takes into account textual sources but also material culture sources such as temples, sculptures, monuments, paintings, coins and modes of dress. Flood is careful about the use of categories of “Hindu” and “Muslim” and notes that his use of the quotation marks in the title reflects his will to “call into question the inherent stability of these very identities.” 148 Like other authors discussed above, Flood seeks to understand encounters and identity formations in relational terms in order to deconstruct the monolithic categories of Hindus and Muslims with the goal of “emphasizing relations rather than essences, “routes rather than

144 Stewart, “In Search of Equivalence,” 262.
145 Stewart, “In Search of Equivalence,” 270.
146 Stewart, “In Search of Equivalence,” 274.
148 Flood, Objects of Translation, 3.
roots”. Similarly to Stewart, Flood prefers to understand encounters, identity formation and cultural exchanges through translation theory and the notion of transculturation rather than through the concepts of “hybridity”, “syncretism” and “permeability” that have proven unfit. It is not only common to see the past through binary lenses but also to not attribute to premodern subjects the same a priori of agency that we attribute to modern subjects: “If the identities of modern subjects are depicted as protean, subjective, and heavily inflected by personal choice (or at least the perception that such choices exist), those of premodern subjects are represented as fixed and stable, reflecting subscription or submission to shared cultural norms.” Understanding of early modern subjects, as Pollock suggested, must also acknowledge choice.

In her study of the Punjabi-language literary genre called qisse, Farina Mir also argues for the inadequacy of the concept of syncretism to understand the shared devotional practice of saint veneration. Based on scholarship that has dealt with the question of syncretism, Mir argues that syncretism is an unhelpful concept to “historically situate a literary genre that draws on both Perso-Islamic and Punjabi local aesthetics” and to “contribute to a nuanced

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150 According to Flood, the concept of “permeability” occludes “questions of agency that are central to understanding the sorts of negotiations that produced these forms both materially and ontologically.” According to him, the concepts of “hybridity” and “syncretism” are also inappropriate to understand encounters: “Metaphors of hybridity presuppose (if not produce) “pure” original or parent cultures, betraying with their roots in nineteenth-century scientific discourses on race, within which culture was a sign or symptom and cultural mixing (like racial miscegenation) was generally frowned on as an uneasy, unnatural, and unstable state of affairs. The alternative model of syncretism is no less redolent of an essential purity to which the syncretic acts as foil, although its genealogy is closely tied to questions of religious practice, shifting the emphasis more decisively from race to culture.” Flood, *Objects of Translation*, 5.

151 Flood, *Objects of Translation*, 266.


understanding of devotional practices in which Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs all participated.”¹⁵⁴ According to Mir, the Punjabi-language qisse genre illustrates that all inhabitants of Punjab, regardless of their religious identities, “shared notions of pious behaviours.”¹⁵⁵ Mir suggests that Punjabi qisse are very consistent when it comes to how they represent piety, “always privileging saint veneration. This was a form of piety that all Punjabis could participate in, irrespective of differences of religion, class, or caste.”¹⁵⁶ Saint veneration constitutes a space where people from different religious or ethnic backgrounds interact with each other without fear of losing their sense of self. Mir’s study provides an additional reading of the past that is not caught in religious binaries and monolithic categories that antagonise rather than bring into dialogue, religious groups whose boundaries were more permeable than they are today. We find a similar space formed around the memory of Guru Gobind Singh in gurbilāṣ literature, as argued by Murphy and Dhavan. Celebrating the memory of Guru Gobind Singh was shared among different groups of people from different religious and social backgrounds that formed “affective communities” composed of people whose identities were not restricted to their devotion to the tenth Guru.¹⁵⁷

Monika Horstmann remarks that over the history, what she calls “non-mainstream Sikh traditions” and their textual traditions have been neglected by “the mainstream Khalsa Sikh persuasion” which has prevented scholars from opening an enriching discussion between the Khalsa Sikhs with Sant traditions, “Sikh unorthodox preaching” and Islamic traditions. The

¹⁵⁷ Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks.
Pāras-bhāg is an eighteenth century text written by Bhai Addan, and is a translation in Hindi\textsuperscript{158} of the Persian text Kimiyā-yi Saʿādat, written by Al-Ghazali, which is itself a translation of the Arabic text *Ihya’ ‘Ulūm ad-dīn* also composed by Al-Ghazali.\textsuperscript{159} The Pāras-bhāg is not only a literal translation from Persian and Arabic into Hindi but also a cultural translation of Islamic concepts into Indic concepts.\textsuperscript{160} Bhai Addan wrote for an audience that did not have the background to understand Islamic concepts so had to translate into Indic concepts that would be understandable and not alien to the audience. However, various concepts could not find their exact equivalent in Hindi which shows how the Pāras-bhāg had taken a life of its own after being translated from Persian/Sufi literature.\textsuperscript{161} In other words, the Pāras-bhāg is not merely a direct and literal translation of the Kimiyā-yi Saʿādat, “it illustrates the rich cultural exchange taking place between groups now marked Muslims, Sikh or Hindu sectarian groups, before these identities hardened and new orthodoxies nearly obliterated or drastically reinterpreted the evidence of earlier fluidity.”\textsuperscript{162} The text was composed and first evolved among the Sevapanthis in Punjab and Sindh and grew out of these frontiers to influence the formation of Rajasthani sants. The Pāras-bhāg, just like the Dasam Granth or gurbilās literature, exemplifies not only the world of shared cultural representations but also the porosity of religious, cultural, and linguistic boundaries of premodern India that have become less permeable in the modern era.

\textsuperscript{158} Monika Horstmann mentions that this Hindi translation has features of Punjabi and is written in the Gurmukhi script.


\textsuperscript{160} Horstmann, “Pāras-bhāg,” 15-16.

\textsuperscript{161} Horstmann, “Pāras-bhāg,” 16.

1.6 The Choice for Braj in eighteenth-century Punjabi Sikh contexts

The following chapter will locate Sikhs and their cultural production in the eighteenth-century Sikh context in a wider cultural and literary network of Braj activities. A better understanding of the multiple cultural worlds in which Sikhs participated can only enrich our knowledge of the past and of the present. It also illustrates how our understanding of language choice, religious identity, and the social organization of literary production must expand to account for the complexity of choices made in the early modern period, and the perils of “reading back” contemporary interests onto that period.
Chapter 2: Kuir Singh’s *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das*: context, intertextuality, and performance

Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* exemplifies the vast and rich cultural world which early modern Sikhs were part of. What makes Kuir Singh’s verses particularly compelling is their capacity to both encompass and reveal the many connections Sikhs have had with the Braj literary world beyond Punjab. Kuir Singh’s *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das* is an important source for understanding Guru Gobind Singh’s lifetime for scholars working today. Dhavan utilized it and related texts for her exploration of the development of the Khalsa in the eighteenth century.1 As Dhavan has also shown, such texts also inspired nineteenth- and twentieth-century Persian and English authors to write about Guru Gobind Singh, and to shape contemporary popular discourses about the Tenth Guru’s life.2

In this chapter, I begin with a contextualisation of Kuir Singh’s *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das*, provide information about its author, Kuir Singh Kalal, and discuss debates regarding the dating of the text. I also broadly explore similarities and differences between Ashok’s edition (1968) and the manuscript 605 held at Khalsa College, specifically their linguistic variations. I then examine paratextual elements of manuscript 605 and the context in which it was copied by Bhai Sahib Singh in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Next, I explore recent scholarship about the presence of Punjabi in early modern India and its relationship to cosmopolitan languages

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1 Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks*.

such as Brajbhasha. Following this, I discuss and unpack notions of intertextuality in relation to gurbilās texts. What connects gurbilās texts to other gurbilās texts? And what makes them connected to other works of Sikh literature? To do so, I will examine one episode of a famous battle widely narrated in gurbilās texts, the battle of Bhangani (dated to 1688), in Kuir Singh’s gurbilās as well as in other texts in the same genre: the Bacitra Nāṭak, attributed to Guru Gobind Singh and dated to the late 17th century, and Sainapati’s Gur Sobhā, completed in ca. 1708. My goal in doing this is twofold: On the one hand, I wish to reflect on the nature of the intertextual dynamics that characterize the relationship between these texts and on what these dynamics can tell us about the historical circumstances in which these texts were produced. On the other hand, I wish to explore how these three narratives, and more broadly gurbilās literature, interact more formally with the wider world of Braj literary traditions. Specifically, I will discuss how the use of the chand meter for the description of battle scenes in the three narratives invites us to open a conversation between gurbilās literature and Braj martial poetry but also provides us with material to think about the context of performance of these texts. I will conclude with a broad reflection on how these three narratives represent a textual microcosm that reveals the many connections gurbilās literature—and more broadly the Sikh cultural world—has with other genres and traditions.

2.1 Kuir Singh’s gurbilās: texts and context

Kuir Singh Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das, edited by Shamsher Singh Ashok and published in 1968 by the Publication Bureau of Punjabi University, Patiala, is the edition most commonly

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used by scholars who have worked on Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās*.

In the introduction, Fauja Singh mentions that Ashok visited four places and consulted four manuscripts to form his printed edition. For the purpose of this dissertation, manuscript 605 held at the Sikh History and Reference Library of Khalsa College was copied and compared with Ashok’s edition. Bhai Gandha Singh of Ghhajwal, (Distt. Ludhiana) acquired the manuscript from Bhai Sahib Singh Granthi whose brief biography is discussed in the last pages of the manuscript.

At the end of manuscript 605, we find a note written over 9 folios by Gandha Singh on April 29, 1934. According to him, the manuscript was copied by Bhai Sahib Singh, who was the *granthī* (textual specialist) of the 26th Punjab infantry, possibly between 1890 and 1892 in Meerut. The 26th Punjab infantry had Sikhs, Dogras, and Pathans enlisted. The 26th Punjab infantry became the 15th Punjab infantry in 1922 and Bhai Sahib Singh’s nephew became the new *granthī*. Ganda Singh judged it important to write a note about the *granthī* who copied this manuscript because he believed that the *panth* should research his life story and publish it. Bhai Sahib Singh was from Mardan Heri, a village that was part of the *tehsil* of Patiala. In Patiala, Bhai Sahib Singh studied Sanskrit, Hindi, and Gurmukhi in the *akhāra* of Tara Singh ji Narottam (1822-1891), who was a prominent and prolific Nirmala scholar. Most of his scholarly

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4 For example Anne Murphy, Purnima Dhavan, Louis Fenech, Gurje Singh.

5 Fauja Singh, “bhūmikā,” in *Gurbilās Patshāhī Das*, xxvi. The four manuscripts are not mentioned but it appears that the three manuscripts that were consulted to form Ashok’s edition are located in Khalsa College, Amritsar, in the Sikh reference library of the Golden Temple — which was probably destroyed in 1984 —, and in the Moti Bagh palace in Patiala.

6 Bhāi Sāhib Singh Granthi was the tāyā of Sant Singh, i.e., the older brother of Sant Singh’s father.

7 *panth nīṃ uhnā de jīvan caritr dī khoj karke uhnā dā hāl chapvā deṇā cāhīdā hai.*

8 It is interesting to note that Ganda Singh does not use the term Punjabi but Gurmukhi, which represents the common conflation of the script with the language. See the discussion in Murphy “Punjabi in the (Late) Vernacular Millennium” and “Writing Punjabi Across Borders.”

9 Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the
life was spent in Patiala (where he was patronized by Maharaja Narinder Singh) and in Hardwar where he published several exegetical and theological texts and was involved in creating dictionaries. Bhai Sahib Singh was also trained in reading and interpreting the Ādi Granth. Following his training in Patiala, he became the granthī of the 26th Punjab infantry until he passed away in 1901. Throughout his life he remained celibate and took great pleasure in meditating on vāhigurū and on reciting gurbānī. He wore the 5 ks at all times, and every day he is said to have woken up at 2 am to take his ritual bath (ismān) and read the pañj granthi and das granthi. When the granthī Ajmer Singh left for Hong Kong in 1932, he told Ganda Singh that one of his relatives possessed a gurbilās in the name of Bhai Mani Singh.

This contextual information about manuscript 605 is not discussed in Ashok’s edition, which appears to be the most significant variation between the two texts. Indeed, there are no major variations between Ashok’s edition and manuscript 605. I will, however, mention some of the main paratextual and linguistic differences between the two and discuss them in more detail throughout this dissertation.

Paratextual elements: The text is written in black with meters usually written in red. At times, Bhai Sahib Singh Granthi alternatively uses both red and black to write each syllable of a word or a sentence. There are no illustrations within the text apart from occasional flowers ornamenting the margins, page numbers, or the vowels -o, and -au, and the semi-vowel -ya. The

Sikh Tradition (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 124ff. ; Murphy, The Materiality of the Past, 120-1, 241-2. The Nirmala Panth is a group of Sikhs who were prominent intellectuals in the nineteenth century. They are today seen as controversial due to their puranic and vedantic interpretation of Sikh teachings. (See Murphy, The Materiality of the Past, 43; W.H. McLeod, Historical Dictionary of Sikhism (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 148-49.


11 The pañj granthi is a collection of five significant Sikh texts such as the japī, anand sāhib, sukhmanī, sodar raharās, kirtan sohilā, and āsa dī vār. The das granthi contains texts from the Dasam Granth.
manuscript is complete and contains 182 folios, each measuring 32 x 24 cm. The numbering of verses is different from Ashok’s edition. The titles, subtitles, and table of contents are absent from the manuscript. The main topic of a chapter is usually briefly explained in the opening verse and summarized in the very last verse of each chapter. These brief summaries often do not correspond to the themes underlined in modern Punjabi in Ashok’s table of contents. As Murphy has argued, Ashok’s division of chapters is a later addition which emphasizes political and religious concerns that are not prioritized by Kuir Singh in the manuscript. For example, while the chapter two is entitled राजा मान सिंह ते अरुणाजेब (“Raja Man Singh and Aurangzeb”) in the table of contents by the editor, Ashok, the text itself summarizes the content of the chapter as follows: इति स्री गुर्बिलास पाती पियान मद्रा देश अगमण काशी प्रवेस बरानानां नाम दुती धीयी (“the name of the second chapter of this honourable gurbilās is a description of the entrance to Kashi, the arrival in Madra Desh, and the departure from Patna”). Raja Man Singh and Aurangzeb are indeed mentioned in the second chapter, but when one reads the manuscript without consulting the printed edition there is no expectation of finding these two royal figures portrayed so centrally.

Linguistic variations: The linguistic variations lie predominantly in the way certain words are pronounced, which seems to be reflective of regional dialect differences. One common linguistic characteristic found in Ashok’s edition is the dropping of the sihari or short –i and its replacement with the semi-vowel –ya. For example, while in Ashok’s text ल्यावटा (bringing) is used, in the manuscript we find the same verb written as लियावटा. The consonant –ga is also occasionally used interchangeably with –ka (sakala/sagala, whole), –va with –ba (bistārī/vistārī,
expansion), -sha with –sa (ashoka/asoka, carefree), –ra with –va (caritra/calitra, story), –ya
with –ja (jā/yā, that), –o with –au (sodhaṃ/sodhom, the Sodhis), and –u with –ū (sukh/sūkh, joy).

Some substitutions are puzzling and require the readers to pay close attention to the context in order to understand the meaning of a word. For example, when Ashok uses the word āyasa in the manuscript, we find it spelled as āiṣa. āyasa means “command” or “order” but if read out loud, the word can sound like āiṣa, which in Braj can mean “to come” (āisi) or “thus” (aisā). While in these two segments of verses, āyasa/āiṣa means “command” or “order”, “āyasa/āiṣa lai gura kī sikha saṅgati” (the sikh sangat took command from the Guru)\(^\text{14}\) and “he prabha maiṁ tuma āyasa māṇi” (hey Prabhu! I accept your command)\(^\text{15}\), it could be understood as the verb “to come” in another context. Finally, in very few places, there are verses that appear in the manuscript but not in the printed edition, however these additional verses do not change the narrative line nor provide substantial new information. More specific variations between Ashok’s edition and manuscript 605 from Khalsa College will be noted later on.

The manuscript provides 1751 as a date of composition and it is likely that this date marks the year when Kuir Singh Kalal started writing.\(^\text{16}\) The text comprises 2938 verses in Brajbhasha in the Gurmukhi script and is organized in 29 different meters. The text itself does not provide much biographical information about Kuir Singh or the context of production of his gurbilās.

What we know about Kuir Singh comes from a verse at the very end of the text:

\[ kuirā singha kalāla ati joī/ rahai kamboana aṅgana soī/ \]

\(^{14}\) Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāṭshāḥī Das, 23. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.

\(^{15}\) Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāṭshāḥī Das, 14. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.

\(^{16}\) Personal communication with Purnima Dhavan.
The great Kuir Singh Kalal lived in the Gardens of the Kanabos. His name was Matri before taking the khande pahul initiation. When he gave up his service, he became a bairāgī, when he heard these stories, his mind became enchanted. When he heard the fine words spoken by Mani Singh who brought the honourable Khalsa to his mind, He told this religious story. In great details, he made this fine eyewitness account.

This verse tells us the few things we know about Kuir Singh: That he is from a place called Kamboan, that he had a different name before taking the initiation (pāhul), and that he was fondly devoted to the widely remembered martyr and scholar, Bhai Mani Singh, who has a central place in Kuir Singh’s gurbilās. In various parts of the text, Kuir Singh reiterates having heard the story from Bhai Mani Singh (manī singh bhana gātha rasālā/Mani Singh recited a story filled with rāsa) or (manī siṅgha gāhī/ kathā aura cāhī/jabe bhīma candana/gayo dhāma nandana//Mani Singh sang the story and other information/When Bhim Chand went to his son’s

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17 In Ashok’s edition, we read siṅgha (Singh) instead of saṅga (with) that we find in the manuscript. Both words have very different meanings. In Ashok’s edition, Kuir Singh’s name would have bear the name Singh before taking initiation.

18 Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das, 276. In the manuscript 605, the segment pāhal na khāī is written instead of pāhul na lāī found in Ashok’s edition. Also, the very last word, rākhī in Ashok’s edition appears as sākhī in the manuscript.

19 Fauja Singh suggests that Kamboan was possibly a district near Lahore but gives no explanation as to why he thinks so. Fauja Singh, “Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das,” in Encyclopedia of Sikhism, ed. Harbans Singh, volume II (Patiala: Punjabi University, 2004), 135.

20 Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das, 63.
house).\(^{21}\) Even the very final verse of the text attributes the text to Bhai Mani Singh’s discourses (\textit{iti srī gurbilāsa srī manī singha mata vakhyāna barnanana nāma ikīsamo dhīāif\textsuperscript{This is the honourable gurbilās, which is a praise-description from the mind of Bhai Mani Singh, in a chapter named 21.}\(^{22}\) Bhai Mani Singh was an influential scholar in the seventeenth and eighteenth century associated with Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh. He edited important works of Sikh literature such as the \textit{Dasam Granth} and produced commentaries and narration of the lives of the Gurus such as \textit{Giān Ratnāvalī} and \textit{Bhagat Ratnāvalī}.\(^{23}\) In Kuir Singh’s \textit{gurbilās}, as well as in other \textit{gurbilās} work, Bhai Mani Singh is presented as a direct witness of Guru Gobind Singh’s life who actively participated in the religious and political life of the \textit{sangat}. For example, he was appointed as the \textit{granthī} of the Harimandir Sahib by Guru Gobind Singh and participated in important battles involving the Mughals and the hill chiefs.

Kuir Singh’s text is rarely discussed in anthologies of Punjabi and Sikh literature and when it is mentioned, it is often only in passing. It is however commonly referred to and cited in history books about the Sikh past and about Punjab. This fact alone tells us about the ways in which the text has been received in academia: usually as a historical source, to understand the lives of the Sikh Gurus and other important figures, and, secondarily, as a source to understand doctrinal and ethical ideas associated with the teachings of the Gurus, rather than as a work of literature.\(^{24}\)

This brings us to the central question of genre. What kind of text is Kuir Singh’s

\(^{21}\) Kuir Singh, \textit{Gurbilās Pāshāhī Das}, 56.

\(^{22}\) Kuir Singh, \textit{Gurbilās Pāshāhī Das}, 277.


\(^{24}\) Murphy, “Thinking Beyond Aurangzeb.”
gurbilās? Is it historical? Hagiographic? Didactic? It is indeed common in the academic study of
the Sikh tradition to focus on the ideas, narratives, and facts according to historiographical and
hermeneutical approaches; discussions of genre have rarely gone beyond listing or mentioning
genres or formal features of texts. Gurbilās literature’s relevance beyond the nineteenth century
has often been ignored, and the question of genre is dismissed. For instance, in influential
anthologies of Punjabi literature, gurbilās texts are not recognized as a genre but are either
grouped as heroic literature or even just ignored.25 In his History of Punjabi Literature, Kohli
includes a chapter on eighteenth-century Punjabi literature and a “heroic poetry” subcategory but
does not mention gurbilās literature as a genre or any gurbilās texts.26 Sekhon and Duggal as
well do not make any reference to gurbilās literature in their History of Punjabi Literature.27
Other scholars have talked about gurbilās literature in terms of hagiography, biography or
religious biography, or history. As will be discussed, Kuir Singh and Sukha Singh, generally end
their chapters in their gurbilās texts with “itti sṛī gurbilās...” which indicates that they
consciously located their texts in connection with some idea of vilāsa literature.28 What wider
world did these authors see their work as a part of? How did Kuir Singh envision that world? In
what terms did he think about vilāsa texts?

While Kuir Singh’s gurbilās, and gurbilās literature more broadly may indeed constitute
a genre, it is one that lies at the intersection of other genres, as a type of historical writing that

25 See for instance Surindar Singh Kohli, History of Punjabi Literature (Delhi: National Book Shop, 1993); C.L.
Narang, History of Punjabi Literature 850-1850 A.D. (Delhi: National Book Shop, 1987); Sant Singh Sekhon and

26 Kohli, History of Punjabi Literature.

27 Sekhon and Duggal, A History of Punjabi Literature.

contains many modes.²⁹ It is inspired by courtly eulogies, puranic texts, and even gāthā (story/edifying tale), and caritra (life story), as Kuir Singh himself labels his narrative. Even if categories of genre cannot be conceived of as separate when referring to many early modern Indic genres of literature, the fact that Kuir Singh’s text and other gurbilās texts have been mostly analyzed within the framework of the modern discipline of history has led to overlooking their literary aspects such as prosody, figures of speech, and language usage, as will be discussed below. The preoccupation with assessing the text's relationship to Sikh history has also impoverished our understanding of the many connections this tradition has with a wider Indic cultural world. One important link that connects the two worlds is the language of Braj or Brajbhasha, an issue that we addressed in the introduction.

Kuir Singh’s text is written in a versified Brajbhasha and this choice of form tells us about the literary world to which the authors of gurbīlas texts perceived themselves to be part. Not only did Kuir Singh make the choice to write in Brajbhasha, which located him in interactions with other authors, communities, and social formations that also used this language, he also made the choice to write his narrative in a versified form which demanded of him specific skills in the mastering of language and meters. As Christopher Shackle has argued, questions of form and genre in Sikh texts have generally been overlooked in the scholarship, in order to focus more on “questions of authenticity and historicity.”³⁰ The study of Sikh texts would, he argues, highly benefit if “questions of authenticity and historicity” [would] be more usefully subordinated to explorations of genre and rhetorical intent. The same is true, as has been

²⁹ Velchery Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Textures of Times: Writing History in South India, 1600-1800 (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 4; Murphy, The Materiality of the Past, 84.

noted, of the examination of Kuir Singh's text, and thus it is equally crucial to look at the form in which Kuir Singh chose to write. Kuir Singh could have chosen to write a sākhī, in prose, about Guru Gobind Singh, for example, but he chose to write in verse. The choice of specific literary forms is not aleatory and reflects a desire to be anchored in a specific tradition. Gurbilās texts are not only intertextually close but, to borrow the terminology of Gérard Genette (discussed below), share various transtextual elements. An attention to content as well as form — such as linguistic and stylistic choices, as well as the use of meters — can only reveal more about the text itself and its context of production which, at the moment, we do not know much about.

Kuir Singh’s gurbilās’ verses are organized in various meters: caupaī, soraṭhā, savaiyā, dohrā, kabitt, chappai, salok, tribhaṅgī, aṛilu, and a wide variety of chand meters (jhūlaṇā, gīā, ṣaṅkar, bhujaṅg prayāt, tribhaṅgī, rasāvala, rasāla, tomara, padhaṛī, sirkhaṇḍī, nirāja, saṅgīta, cacrī, mohaṇī, acakārā, tākara, nāraja, thelī bindram, and sadhubhār. The large majority of scholarship about gurbīlas literature focuses on the narrative content of the texts and spends little time discussing the form and choice of medium. This overlooking of form has been noticed by Karine Schomer in her study of the Sants.

It is common for studies of religious literature to focus almost exclusively on the doctrinal, ethical or mythological content of texts, and to relegate the literary form of these texts to a position of relative inconsequence. In the case of Sant religion, the aim is usually to construct a coherent picture of Sant beliefs, values and ideas, with verses or lines quoted as illustrations. This lack of attention to form is unfortunate, for the conventions of literary forms and genres are the structural framework that shapes and transmits thought content and, as such, are an integral part of any text being studied. “Message” and “medium” are not really separable.31

According to Schomer, form and content are inseparable and attention to content should not be subordinated to a careful study of literary forms. In keeping with such concerns, I remain

attentive to form, more especially to meters as a vehicle of oral performance and of transmission, in my exploration of themes and episodes in Kuir Singh's text, as follows.

2.2 Gurbilās literature and intra-genre intertextuality

Gurbilās texts have strong intertextual relationships with one another, and these are of various kinds. Gérard Genette has defined five types of what he terms as transtextual relationships. Defining these types of transtextualities in the context of gurbilās literature can help shed light on the nature of relationships that not only tie gurbilās texts to each other but also gurbilās texts to other literary texts produced in Brajbhasha.

The first type of intertextual relationship, which is the least abstract according to Genette, exists between two or more than two texts and is most commonly defined by practices such as citation, allusion, and plagiarism. As we will see below, this type of transtextual relationship manifested through citations and allusions is pervasive within Kuir Singh’s text. Kuir Singh occasionally cites and frequently alludes, explicitly and implicitly, to other Sikh literary contexts such as the Adi Granth, the Dasam Granth, as well as other gurbilās texts such as Sainapati’s Gur Sobhā (“The Spendour of the Guru”), which is an early eighteenth-century gurbilās text written in Brajbhasha about the life of Guru Gobind Singh.

The second type is called paratextuality and consists of relationships that exist between a text and its formal and material constituents, such as the title, subtitles, notes, illustrations, etc. In a gurbilās manuscript, for instance, paratextual elements include the title and subtitles, the

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materiality of the manuscript (type of paper and ink used), scribal notes, fixed typos, meters, or illustrations.

The third type of transtextuality is called metatextuality and is defined by a commentatorial relationship between two texts. Genette suggests that this type of relationship is a *relation critique* between two or more texts. A metatext is a text that provides a commentary, explicit or not, about another text. For instance, in *gurbilās* literature, commentaries on Sikh Scriptures are present and sometimes explicit, and sometimes only alluded to. It is not rare to find in Kuir Singh’s text core doctrinal teachings that are present in the *Adi Granth* but given a new texture within the context of the life story of Guru Gobind Singh. For example, segments of verses invoked from the *Adi Granth* emphasizing the proper religious practice to be performed in order to become one with the divine are pervasive: *gurmukhi hvai dhyāe je koī/srī hari jū ko pāvai soī*/*The one who meditates is a gurmukh/(that gurmukh) (and) obtains Srī Hari* is closely related to the following segment of verse by Guru Amar Das: *gurmukhi hovai su nāmu dhiāvai sadā hari nāmu samāli*/*They become Gurmukh who meditate on the nām and forever remembers Hari* (GGS 600).

Genette calls the fourth type of transtextual relationship *hypertextuality* which is a relationship that a text (what Genette calls the *hypertext*) has with an earlier text (that Genette calls a *hypotext*). As we will see in the description of the battle of Bhangani, Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* can be perceived as the *hypertext* having connections with earlier *hypotexts* such as the *Bacitra Nāṭak* and the *Gur Sobhā*.

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36 Kuir Singh, *Gurbilās Pāshhāhī Das*, 1
The fifth type of transtextual relationship is called architextuality and is defined by a relationship that is not necessarily explicit between a literary work and its genre. For instance, some texts are conceived as *gurbilās* texts by some scholars even though the authors of these texts do not categorize their work as *gurbilās*. Sainapatí’s *Gur Sobhā*, is considered by Murphy Dhavan, and Fenech as *gurbilās* literature even though the author, Sainapatí, does not explicitly classify his text as *gurbilās* but as *sobhā* (splendour), *upamā* (metaphor, praise), *sākhī* (eyewitness account), and *kathā* (story).38 One of the reasons for this is that Sainapatí’s *Gur Sobhā* shares genre characteristics with texts that are more explicitly classified as *gurbilās* literature such as Sukha Singh’s *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das* and Kuir Singh’s *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das*, such as content and aspects of form. For instance, Kuir Singh and Sukha Singh, in their respective *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das*, consistently end their chapters with “*iti srī gurbilās…*” which indicates that they consciously made the choice to locate their text within a wider idea of *vilasā* literature.39 But a relationship between a text and a genre, as Genette suggests, is often implicit. The *Bacitra Nāṭak*, attributed to Guru Gobind Singh, is not classified as *gurbilās* the same way Kuir Singh or Sukha Singh’s texts are. But the question of genre is a complex one. While *gurbilās* literature is accepted roughly as a genre by many authors such as Murphy, Dhavan, Fenech, and Hans, it is not clear whether or not the authors of *gurbilās* texts perceived *vilāsa* as one, per se, beyond the notation mentioned above. Indeed, there is evidence of the idea of *vilāsa* functioning on par with other ideas such as *tārīkh* and *līlā* in the period.40 While Genette’s five

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38 Grewal notes Sainapatí’s use of these terms to describe his account in J.S. Grewal, “Praising the Khalsa: Sainapatí’s *Gursobha,*” in *The Khalsa Sikh and non-Sikh Perspectives*, ed. J.S. Grewal (Delhi: Manohar, 2004), 35-45.


40 Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past*, 84, note 59.
types of transtextual relationships exist between *gurbilās* texts, in this chapter I will examine more closely two of these relationships in *gurbilās* texts. Specifically, I will examine how notions of hypertextuality and architextuality unfold in a Sikh literary context by examining formal and thematic interactions of Kuir Singh’s *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das* with three *gurbilās* texts and their portrayal of an important battle widely narrated in Sikh history: the battle of Bhangani (dated to 1688).

While Kuir Singh claims his *gurbilās* had been orally transmitted by Bhai Mani Singh, he certainly relied on earlier accounts about the life of Guru Gobind Singh to craft his poem, as Fauja Singh has also noted.\(^{41}\) He implicitly and explicitly draws on earlier *gurbilās* texts to articulate his history of the life of Guru Gobind Singh. The two *gurbilās* texts that are used as authoritative sources by Kuir Singh are the *Bacitra Nāṭak* (late seventeenth century, attributed to Guru Gobind Singh) and Sainapati’s *Gur Sobhā* (ca. 1708). Another important source that is pervasive throughout the text is the *Adī Granth*. I will discuss its relationship with Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* in chapter 3.

### 2.3 The Battle of Bhangani: form and content

The battle of Bhangani is one of the many episodes of Guru Gobind Singh’s life narrated in *gurbilās* literature. The episode is also widely remembered and recounted among Sikh communities today.\(^{42}\) Dated to the late 17th century—1688 in most accounts—this battle occurred at a time when Guru Gobind Singh resided within the districts of Bhim Chand of Kahlur and Fateh Shah of Garhwal (Sri Nagar). This battle is one of the various battles fought by

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\(^{42}\) See for instance popular online encyclopedia and websites such as sikhwiki.org and thesikhencyclopedia.com to name a few.
Guru Gobind Singh against local rulers of the Punjab Hills that are narrated in *gurbilās* texts.43 While scholars generally acknowledge the existence of various narratives of the battle of Bhangani, a large majority of dominant voices in Sikh Studies have reconstituted the narrative based on the *Bacitra Nāṭak* under the assumption that this text is “almost the only source of information on this phase of Guru Gobind Singh’s life”44 or the “only reliable evidence regarding the Battle of Bhangani.”45 While the *Bacitra Nāṭak* has had significant influence on shaping Sikhs’ understanding of their past through the eighteenth century,46 contemporary accounts of the battle of Bhangani suggest that the *Bacitra Nāṭak* was not the dominant narrative in popular circles at that time.47 My goal, to be clear, is not to assess which narrative is closer to a “historically truthful” version of the battle, but to explore in broad terms the nature of the intertextuality that ties these three narratives of the battle of Bhangani together and how they relate to wider Braj literary worlds in terms of prosody and performance. The narratives that I am exploring here are part of three texts generally deemed to be a part of the *gurbilās* genre: 1) the *Bacitra Nāṭak*, attributed to Guru Gobind Singh and dated to the late 17th century; 2) the *Gur Sobhā*, attributed to Sainapati and completed ca. (1708); 3) the *Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das*, attributed to Kuir Singh.

Before I dive into my analysis of the battle of Bhangani, I wish to provide contextual background on the three narratives examined here. The *Bacitra Nāṭak* or "Wondrous Drama" is

part of the *Dasam Granth* and is generally considered to be the earliest example of *gurbilās* literature, and is dated to the late seventeenth century.\(^{48}\) It provides a versified account of Guru Gobind Singh’s life divided in fourteen chapters. While authorship of the Dasam Granth as a whole is debated, most commentators attribute the *Bacitra Nāṭak* to Guru Gobind Singh.\(^{49}\) The text is written in Braj bhasha and structured in various meters. While the author of the text uses *dohrā, savaiyā, caupaī*, and *aṅil* meters, the vast majority of meters used are *chand* meters. The predominant use of *chand* meters is not surprising since a major theme addressed in the *Bacitra Nāṭak* is the many battles fought by Guru Gobind Singh and his troops against the hill chiefs and Mughals.\(^{50}\) This use of the *chand* meter was common within martial literary communities of early-modern North India.\(^{51}\) I will discuss below what the use of the *chand* meter in the three narratives can tell us about their context of performance.

Sainapati *Gur Sobhā* (1708) is a biographical eulogy of Guru Gobind Singh that was composed in the first decade of the eighteenth century. Scholars generally see Sainapati’s *Gur Sobhā* — along with the *Bacitra Nāṭak* — as the earliest examples of *gurbilās* literature. It lays out a theological and historical narrative about the life of the Tenth Guru, weaving specific incidents about the Guru's life with religious injunctions and claims, and descriptions of the relationships that encompass the community.\(^{52}\) The *Gur Sobhā* contains twenty chapters, is versified and written in a mixed Sadhukarri/Braj bhasha form quite distinct from the more ornate

\(^{48}\) Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past*, 84.

\(^{49}\) For a thorough discussion on issues surrounding authorship in relation to the Dasam Granth see Rinehart, *Debating the Dasam Granth*.

\(^{50}\) Rinehart, *Debating the Dasam Granth*, 9.


\(^{52}\) Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past*, 84.
Braj language visible in Kuir Singh’s work.\(^5^3\) The battle of Bhangani is described early on in chapter 2. Sainapati uses various meters to narrate the battle such as the dohrā, caupaī, kabitt, savaiyā, narāj/niraj chand, and antukā rasāval chand. Most of the narrative is centered around a vivid description of the battle itself. While the description of the battle follows a similar narrative line to that in the Bacitra Nāṭak, the battle is narrated following a different prosody. While Sainapati uses the same types of meters than are used in the Bacitra Nāṭak, the use of the chand meters is not predominant. Out of the fifty verses of the chapter, eleven are written in dohrā, four in caupaī, one in kabitt ten in narāj/niraj chand, four in antukā rasāval chand, and twenty in savaiyā. The predominant use of a narrative meter in Sainapati’s Gur Sobhā (savaiyā) in comparison to the predominant use of the chand meter in the Bacitra Nāṭak sheds light on their context of production and of performance which will be discussed below.

In Kuir Singh, the description of the battle of Bhangani is longer than in the two earlier texts. While the narrative in the Bacitra Nāṭak has thirty-eight verses (chapter 8), and the narrative in the Gur Sobhā has fifty verses, Kuir Singh’s narrative has one hundred and eighty-seven verses. It is interesting to note that in the manuscript, the chapter in which the battle of Bhangani is described is not called “the battle of Bhangani” like in Ashok’s edition. The chapter is rather summarized as being the sixth chapter (khaṣṭam dhyāi). The pre-battle narrative is also not exclusively contained within the sixth chapter but starts earlier in the text, in chapter five.

2.4 The pre-battle narratives

The three narratives of the battle of Bhangani start with a eulogy of Guru Gobind Singh’s regal and playful activities at a place called Paonta, located in today’s Indian state of Himachal Pradesh (located on the North East side of Punjab). In 1685, Guru Gobind Singh moved from

\(^5^3\) Murphy, “Punjabi in the (Late) Vernacular Millennium,” 315.
Chak Nanaki to Paunta in an attempt to avoid a conflict with Bhim Chand, the hill chief of Kahlur (Bilaspur) following an invitation by the chief of Sirmur (Nahan), Medina Prakash, to reside on his territory. Guru Gobind Singh accepted the invitation and decided to set his darbār at Paunta until 1688. Paunta was located next to the territories of Bhim Chand of Kahlur and of Fateh Shah of Garhwal (Sri Nagar) with whom the tenth Guru had had a history of repeated conflicts and alliances. The establishment of Guru Gobind Singh’s residence next to the territories of Bhim Chand and his increasing displays of power resulted in a serious diplomatic incident with Bhim Chand and Fateh Shah that led to the important battle of Bhangani.

In the earliest account, the Bacitra Nāṭak, the context leading up to the battle is provided within a brief three verses. Within these three verses, Guru Gobind Singh is described as enjoying various kinds of play (līlā) and as hunting different kinds of animals such as antelopes, bears, and lions on the bank of the Yamuna River. The Guru’s activities anger the chief Fateh Shah on whose territory Guru Gobind Singh had taken residence and provoke the start of the battle.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ra} & \text{ja s} \text{ā} \text{j} \text{a hama para ja} \text{ba ā} \text{yo/ja} & \text{thā sakata taba dharama cal} & \text{āyo/} \\
\text{bh} & \text{ā} \text{n} \text{ī b} \text{hā} \text{nī bana khela sikā} & \text{rā/māre richa rojha jha} & \text{ā} \text{kharā/} \\
\text{desa cā} & \text{la hama te pūnī bha} & \text{ā}/\text{sahara pāvata kī sudhi la} & \text{i/} \\
\text{kā} & \text{lindrī tā} & \text{ta kare bilāsā/anika bhā} & \text{nti ke pekhi tamāsā/} \\
\text{ta} & \text{ha ke singha ghane cuna māre/rojha richa bahu bhā} & \text{nti bidāre/} \\
\text{fate sā} & \text{ha kopā tabi rājā/loha parā hamaso binu kājā/} & \text{56}
\end{align*}
\]

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56 Dasam Granth, chapter 8, verses 1-3, MN-000106, www.panjadbilib.org
When the making of the kingdom came upon me/I spread the dharma according to my power/
In the forest, I enjoyed many kinds of leisures and hunted/I killed bear and bleating antelopes.
Then I left my country/And became aware of the city of Paonta/a place of refuge
On the bank of the kālindri river (Yamunā), I enjoyed myself and watched various kinds of spectacles/
There we selected groups of lions and killed them/We also killed bears and antelopes/
Then Fateh Shah got angry/He pointed a weapon at me/us without any purpose/

In Sainapati’s Gur Sobhā, the storyline follows very closely that of the Bacitrawaṅat. The author starts with a eulogy of Guru Gobind Singh’s qualities as a spiritual as well as a political leader. He then positions Guru Gobind Singh at the end of the line of the nine previous Sikh Gurus and goes on to describe his life at Makhowal and Paonta where, for many years, he enjoyed various kinds of play (līlā) and performed miracles on the bank of the Yamuna River. Guru Gobind Singh’s activities at Paonta triggers Fateh Shah’s anger which leads to the battle between Fateh Shah’s and Guru Gobind Singh’s troops.

mākhowāla suhāvanā satiguru ko asthāna/
līlā anika aneka bidhi kautaka karata bhāna//
ketaka barasa bhānti iha bhae/ desa pāṃvāte satiguru gae/
jamanā tīra mahala banavāe/ karata ānanda prabhū mana bhāe//
anika bhānti līlā taha karī/ fate sāha suni kai mani dhāri/
bahuta kopa mani māhi basāyo/ fauja banāī judha kau āyo//
bahu prabala dala jori kai sainā saṅgi apāra/
nikaṭa āna derā dīye khabara baī darbāra //ś

Beautiful Makhowal was the guru’s abode.

57 Sainapati, Srī Gur Sobhā, 15-16.
He enjoyed many plays in a variety of ways.
He performed festivities at dawn.
He spent many years this way, and then went to the region of Paonta.
He had a palace built on the bank of the Yamuna river
His mind was on Prabhu, he was happy.
He enjoyed many kinds of delights there,
[but when] Fateh Shah heard about these things, it stuck to his mind.
The anger that dwelled in his mind was huge,
He amassed an army and set out in battle.
He made a great and powerful army, with countless soldiers,
He came close and made camp, and news came to the Guru’s *darbār*.

It is against the background of a serious diplomatic incident with Bhim Chand and Fateh Shah that Kuir Singh describes Guru Gobind Singh’s court at Paunta, and the diplomatic incident with Bhim Chand is described as partly emerging from a religious offering or *bhet*, as will be clear below. In both the *Bacitra Nāṭak* and in the *Gur Sobhā*, the pre-battle context is brief and assigns the cause of the battle to Fateh Shah’s anger.

In the later Kuir Singh’s *Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das*, the pre-battle context differs significantly. Not only is it longer than the two earlier narratives by almost two hundred verses, it is also much richer in contextual details. In chapters 5 and 6 of Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās*, Guru Gobind Singh is described as having just settled down in Paunta Sahib where he set his *darbār* on the bank of the beautiful river Yamuna. Kuir Singh describes the tenth Guru as producing literature in the morning, such as the story of Krishna (*krisan cāritr*, which comprises a section of the Dasam Granth, in the Chaubis Avatar section), and as preparing food for his congregation and setting up his royal *divān* (*punī tāte gura bāhara āvaim/bhōjana karaim divāna lagāvaim*).58

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Together with his congregation (saṅgat), the tenth Guru is described as engaging in activities (līlā), organizing millions of festivities that even poets cannot describe (kautaka koṭa karaim gura jaiselkahe si bhinna bhinna kavi kaisel),\(^59\) and hunting various kinds of animals such as antelopes, bears, and lions. Many bards and poets reside at his court to sing the qualities and the genealogy of the Guru and to read poetry in chand and savaiyā meters.\(^60\) Music is also profusely played at the Guru’s divān described by Kuir Singh, who provides evocative portraits of the Guru’s musical ensemble (naubat), comprised of various musical instruments such as multiple drums (nīsānī, bheri, nagārī, bamba, dundabhi, mridaṅgī, mucaṅg, dāṅg), trumpets (saranā, tūr, naphīri), cymbals (jhālari), bells (ghaṇṭ), conches (sānkh). Kuir Singh also describes the regular worship of various weapons such as bows and arrows (kamān, tūr), spears (sela, barchā), swords (teg, kutkān, saiph, kharag), muskets and guns (tuphaṅg, tupak), and daggers (kaṭār, khaṅjar), and the presence of royal symbols such as the canopy (chatr), the flywhisk (caurī), royal horses (bājī), crest (kalgī), and the Guru’s throne, often described as studded with precious gems and golden stones. Kuir Singh also uses interchangeably both “religious” and “secular” epithets to qualify the tenth Guru such as “Ocean of compassion or grace or mercy (dayānidhi, kripasindhu, karunānidhi) or as the “King of Kings” or “King of the world” (sāhan sāha or jagā rāī), reflecting larger trends in the description of religious figures at the time. Kuir Singh describes congregations as coming from all regions to receive the Guru’s darshan, sing congregational songs (kīrtan), repeat the nām, perform seva, and to make religious offerings (bheṭ). In addition to these courtly symbols that reflect the religious, political, as well as cultural priorities of Guru Gobind Singh’s court, the religious offering or bheṭ of the prasādī elephant given by Raja Rattan

\(^{59}\) Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das, 63. “the way in which the guru performs millions of miracles. How can various poets describe it?”

\(^{60}\) Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das, 49.
Rai of Assam to Guru Gobind Singh is an example of the intertwined interaction between the political and the religious.

In Kuir Singh’s account, prior to the Guru’s establishment in Paunta, the king Rattan Rai of Assam offered a precious elephant to Guru Gobind Singh out of devotion and service. It is believed that the father of Rattan Rai of Assam, king Ram Rai served Guru Tegh Bahadur when he was travelling to Assam. Following Guru Tegh Bahadur’s death at the hands of the Mughals, his son, Rattan Rai, decided to pay a visit to Guru Gobind Singh in Punjab in honour of their fathers’ relationship and offered the *prasādī* elephant. This royal elephant is described as having special abilities, such as using his trunk as a flywhisk to wave at Guru Gobind Singh and stopping the Ganges river just to wash the Guru’s feet. When Bhim Chand’s messengers informed him of the rising splendor of Guru Gobind Singh’s court, of the frequent play of the drum of victory (the *raṅjit nagārā*), and of his possession of such a powerful symbol of authority and royalty as the elephant, this only exacerbated Bhim Chand’s jealousy. Bhim Chand perceived these various displays of power by Guru Gobind Singh as an explicit affront to his own authority and decided to devise a ruse to steal the Guru’s elephant. The Guru’s possession of such a powerful symbol made Bhim Chand concerned that he would be perceived by local rulers as the Guru’s subordinate. As part of his ruse, Bhim Chand decided to send his minister (*vazīr*) to meet with the Guru and to ask to borrow the *prasādī* elephant for two or three days.


64 Kuir Singh, *Gurbilās Pāshāhī Das*, 55.
(hāthī dehu garība nivājā/doi ṭīna dina hama ko ḍījai),\textsuperscript{65} enough time to bring it to the marriage festivities between Bhim Chand’s son and Fateh Shah’s daughter. The wife of Guru Gobind Singh, Mata Jit Kaur, quickly realized that Bhim Chand was playing a trick on the Guru and that he was hoping to steal the precious elephant. As soon as she informed the Guru, he refused to oblige Bhim Chand.\textsuperscript{66} Later on, Bhim Chand asked the Guru for permission to pass through Paunta on his way to Sri Nagar to attend his son’s marriage. Due to Guru Gobind Singh’s increased distrust towards Bhim Chand, he refused to let him pass through Paunta for fear of being attacked and suggested that he use another route.\textsuperscript{67} This resulted in Bhim Chand missing his own son’s marriage which, in combination with earlier actions of the Guru which he perceived as affronts to his honour, contributed to his anger and his will to attack the Guru and his troops. This, in addition to Bhim Chand’s frustration at witnessing the Guru’s accumulation of wealth, eventually resulted in the battle of Bhangani.\textsuperscript{68} In this episode, the Raja of Assam’s religious offering or bhet to Guru Gobind Singh became a central symbol of power and a major cause of a diplomatic faux pas. There is also more to discuss about the significance of religious offering or bhet in the context of gifting practices within Sikh contexts, which I will come back to in chapter 4.

While the three narratives share intertexts that are strikingly similar in the way they describe the battle, the earlier accounts bear important differences with the later account in the way they frame the pre-battle context. I want to suggest that the relation between the earlier

\textsuperscript{65} Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāshāhī Das, 57.

\textsuperscript{66} Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāshāhī Das, 59.

\textsuperscript{67} Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāshāhī Das, 67-68.

\textsuperscript{68} Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāshāhī Das, 68.
narratives and the later narrative exemplifies what Janet Kamphorst has called (based on Stuart Blackburn), a “process of narrative expansion” according to which, over time, “(...) a story accumulates themes, imagery and episode by crossing local and regional boundaries as poets and performers refurbish their narrative in order to hold the attention of new, regional audiences consisting of people from different social groups (...).” The difference in the way the pre-battle events unfold in earlier accounts as compared to later accounts, such as Kuir Singh, suggests a change in the composition of the target audience. As Dhavan has shown, the composition of the Khalsa Panth underwent important transformation processes throughout the eighteenth century and its membership became more diversified and accommodating of “non-Khalsa practices” by the end of the eighteenth century. For instance, the presence of the wedding episode in Kuir Singh, while it may not reflect actual historical circumstances, represents perhaps issues that may have been important for those who produced and consumed the text in the second half of the eighteenth century. As Dhavan said, honor feuds had increased in late eighteenth century Punjab and were tied to “the evolving martial Khalsa identity.” Dhavan has also argued that weddings were especially conducive to provoking honor feuds. It was expected that the father of the bride be a generous host to the family of the groom and a breach to that custom could potentially “[endanger] not only the status of the bride’s father as a generous host but also his sense of masculine honour as a warrior, if the insult was allowed to pass without retribution.” In Kuir

69 Kamphorst, In Praise of Death, 15.

70 Kamphorst, In Praise of Death, 15.

71 Dhavan, When Sparrows Became Hawks, 10.

72 Dhavan, When Sparrows Became Hawks, 137.

Singh’s *gurbilās*, since Bhim Chand missed the marriage of his son, it can be conjectured that since the bride’s father, Fateh Shah, could not fulfil his role as an honourable host, he became angry and decided to wage a battle against the Guru. While this narrative may not reveal the actual historical circumstances of the battle, it exemplifies, at the very least, how an honor feud could be imagined in the late eighteenth century, and how battles for status and rivalry among regional polities could unfold.\(^{74}\)

According to Teja Singh, the authors of *gurbilās* may not have understood the reason why the battle of Bhangani started and speculated that Bhim Chand became jealous after seeing that the king of Assam, Rattan Rai, gifted a *prasādī* elephant to Guru Gobind Singh when he visited the Guru at Anandpur to receive his *darshan*. Bhim Chand would have sent his secretary (*vazir*) to meet the Guru and asked to get the *prasādī* elephant as a wedding gift for the son of Bhim Chand. The refusal of the Guru to give the *prasādī* elephant to Bhim Chand would have caused the beginning of the battle.\(^{75}\)

### 2.5 Description of the battle: performance and intertextuality

We do not have any information about whether or not Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* was performed but there is little reason to believe that it was not. An examination of the meters used suggests that at least part of the text may have been performed. Also, the fact that Kuir Singh claims to have heard the text from the mouth of Bhai Mani Singh and his frequent usages of the imperative form of *sunā* or *sunnā* (to listen, as in *bahuri gāthā jā vidhi bhaũ/suno santa dai kāna*/Listen attentively, sants, to the manner in which the story unfolded.\(^{76}\) and words such as

\(^{74}\) Personal communication with Allison Busch.


\(^{76}\) Kuir Singh, *Gurbilās Pāṭshāḥī Das*, 64.
bhākhanā (to speak, as in siṅha mani taba bhākhata bhe/then Mani Singh spoke.) 77, kahanā (to tell, as in kathā dandame kī kahai aṭhadas dhyāi majhāra. The story of Damdama is told in the eighteenth chapter). 78 jāp (repetition/recitation, as in ho sadā kathā mashūra saṅgati jāpa hai/continually, the congregation repeated this famous story) 79 and gānā (to sing, as in deta pradakhan sīsa niāvata gāvata gīta kripānidha kere/They circumambulated, bowed their heads, and sang songs of the treasure-house of Compassion (Guru Gobind Singh)) 80, are indications of the possible context of production of the text, as observed by Orsini and Lutgendorf in relation to other literary contexts. 81

While we do not have much contextual evidence about whether or not Kuir Singh’s gurbilās was performed, the text itself provides us with some clues on the question. In his study of the context of performance of the Bengali poet Alaol’s texts, Thibaut d’Hubert has argued that three elements characteristic of Alaol’s texts can function as internal evidence to imagine how his poetry may have been performed in seventeenth-century Bengal: “the description of the sabha (assembly), paratextual indications, and the mise en abyme (…).” 82 Something along these lines appears in Kuir Singh’s text. The most pervasive internal evidence for the performance of Kuir Singh’s text is the presence of pauses where Kuir Singh describes the context in which Bhai

77 Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāṭhāhī Das, 63.
79 Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāṭhāhī Das, 235.
80 Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāṭhāhī Das, 19.


82 Thibaut d’Hubert, “Patterns of Composition in the Seventeenth-Century Bengali Literature of Arakan,” in Orsini and Schofield, Tellings and Texts, 430.
Mani Singh has shared his stories with congregations of Sikhs. Indeed, it is not rare to find verses that remind the audience of the oral chain of transmission from Guru Gobind Singh to Bhai Mani Singh to Kuir Singh. Kuir Singh often quotes Bhai Mani Singh’s words that he himself claims to have heard from the Tenth Guru. For example, this narrative verse in savaiyā meter illustrates this chain of transmission:

srī manī singha bakhānata hai sunī gāthā apāra mahān sukhadānī/
soya rahe nisa mai guru ji jaba saṅga paṭhānana baina bakhānī/
jānata bhe nija mai saba gāthā tabe kachu naina lagai hari dhyānī/
tāvata kāla sabhai dhara kai nabha ke gura āna milai hita sānī//

Shri Mani Singh said: Listen to this long great joy-giving story.
As the night went on, Guru ji told his story to the Pathans in his company.
He came to know the whole story himself, and with his eyes lowered, he meditated on Hari.
Meanwhile, all beings from the sky and earth came for the sake of meeting the Guru.

There are also moments of dialogue reported by Kuir Singh between Bhai Mani Singh and the congregation when Sikhs ask Bhai Mani Singh about Guru Gobind Singh’s deeds:

e gāthā suna sikha jaba bolai/ mani singha pai baina amolai/
kā vidha gura gae nisa griha māhīṁ/kā vidha saṅga karāyo tāhī/
kauna kopa tāṁ para gura kīnā/tāṁ mana malana bhayo kīma cīnā/
kaho gāthā hama ko visathārī/sudhā pivāvahu moha prakārī//

Having heard this story, the Sikhs spoke/priceless words to Mani Singh/
“Which way did the Guru go at night in the house/In what way did he get there?
With whom did the Guru get angry? Who knew that his mind was dirty/wicked?”

83 Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das, 76. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
84 Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das, 104. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
Tell us the story in full details! Let us drink the nectar of all kinds of wordly love.

As these two quotes illustrate, Kuir Singh makes the chain of transmission clear in various places in his text. He, the narrator, reports an interaction between Bhai Mani Singh and congregations of Sikhs about Bhai Mani Singh’s testimony of Guru Gobind Singh’s life. As mentioned above and as shown by Schomer, the formal framework of a text is not only what gives shape to a narrative but also what allows it to be transmitted. The transmission of *gurbilās* texts was facilitated by formal characteristics pertaining to *gurbilās* texts that made them easy to be performed, remembered, and circulated. In fact, the prosody of each account of the battle of Bhangani is an indication that even though texts like Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* may have not circulated in popular circles as much as the *Bacitra Nāṭak*, for instance, this does not negate the possibility that the text was also orally performed.

Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* is predominantly written in *dohā*, *caupāī*, and *savaiyā* meters. Unlike the *chand* meter that is often used for its “rhythmic and musical quality,” the *dohā*, *caupāī*, and *savaiyā* meters are rather used for verses whose main role is to forward a narrative. However, as Busch has suggested, this is less true of the *savaiyā* meter which “has strong musical cadences.” The *caupāī-dohā* pair is a well known meter-duo that constitutes what Philip Lutgendorf has called “the basic structural unit for a poetic narrative (...) [which has] had a long history in the North Indian vernacular” and which was used among Hindi poets across communities in early modern India. The *dohā* will generally encapsulate a central idea that

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85 Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text*, 16.

86 Personal communication with Allison Busch.

following caupāī verses will expand on or emphasize the preceding caupāī verses. In fact, this verse structure can be found in texts as early as the ninth century A.D. within Jain literature in Apabhramsa. As Allison Busch has expressed, “A measure of artistic success in the dohā form is the ability to telescope a narrative into just two brief lines.” But more specifically, the caupāī and dohā verses start appearing in tandem within the poetry of Kabir and within Indian Sufi tales.

While Bangha suggests that savaiyā meters were generally not meant to be sung but to be “recited or written down,” Busch notes their musical quality which made them suitable to be sung. In the three texts discussed, the chand and savaiyā meters are used to describe what appear to be the most heated moment of the battle. In Kuir Singh’s gurbilās, the chand meter is preferred over the dohā, caupāī, and savaiyā meters. A similar decision regarding prosody was made for the narration of the battle of Bhangani in the Bacitra Nāṭak. Out of the thirty-eight verses, thirty are written in the chand meter to describe the details of what happens on the battlefield. Sainapati’s Gur Sobhā, on the other hand, favours both the savaiyā and chand meters. Although the pre-battle context differs between the earlier and later texts, the descriptions of the battle itself are closely tied.

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89 Bangha, A Curious King, 370.

90 Schomer, “The dohā as a Vehicle of Sant Teachings,” 74-75.

91 Busch, Poetry of Kings, 78.

92 Schomer, “The dohā as a Vehicle of Sant Teachings,” 74-75.


In this battle, Guru Gobind Singh’s troops and Bhim Chand’s troops met in the battle field at a place close to Paunta called Bhangani. Right before the battle started, a large section of Guru’s troops ran away to the opposing side. Five thousand Pathans and five thousands Udasis deserted but the head of the Udasis, Mahant Kirpal Das, stayed with Guru Gobind Singh to fight. The army of the Guru suddenly became smaller but was in no way weakened. The courageous warriors Kirpal Chand, Sahib Chand, Sango Shah, Jit Mal, Gulab Chand, Mahari Chand, Ganga Ram, Lal Chand, Maharu, and Nand Chand stayed with the Guru to defend their Guru and to fight fiercely against the enemies Najabat Khan, Hayat Khan, Bishan Khan, Hari Chand, the kings of Guleria, Jaswal, and Dadhwal. All the warriors, no matter which side they were fighting on, are described as mighty and fearless, and as engaging in combat skillfully while roaring like lions and riding their horses, attacking each other with various spears, bows, and arrows. In this, the text mimics the way Gur Sobhā too constructs general characters as types, as observed by Murphy. Both armies were fighting while surrounded by the sounds of kettledrums and trumpets and the eager eyes of the fierce Chamunda goddess, Dakas and Dakinis, hungry vultures, and laughing ghosts and monsters. Countless warriors escaped and countless warriors departed for the land of Yama or to the heavens. At the end of the battle, a last confrontation between Guru Gobind Singh and Hari Chand occurred. Hari Chand made three failed attempts at killing Guru Gobind Singh with his arrows but could not survive the Guru’s counter attack, aided by Prabhu/Kal, that killed him, leading up to the Guru’s victory and his return to Anandpur.

95 The mantri, having met Guru Gobind Singh at Paonta, came back to Bhim Chand and reported what that he saw a big army with thousands of Pathans, Sikhs, and Sants who bore a large number of weapons. Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das, 66, 71. The portrayal of Udasis as warrior ascetics is notable.

96 Murphy, The Materiality of the Past, 85.
My English summary of the battle may lack musicality when read, but in the Punjabi-Braj texts when recited out loud, the rhythm of the chand meters reproduces the fast-paced rhythm of the battle. Janet Kamphorst has shown how the chand meter has been widely used within the Pabuji tradition to describe bloody battle scenes and the martial skills of the warriors. These verses written in the chand meter and accompanied by the use of various rules of alliteration and onomatopoeia express in sharp details the “martial spirit” and the “sounds and moods of war.” Allison Busch has talked about the use of the chand meter to describe battles in Braj texts. One example she gives is the description of the battle of Haldigathi by Narottam Kavi’s biography of Man Singh, Māncarit, dated to the 1600s. According to her, Kavi’s “alliterative technique” and “the structured assonances and onomatopoeia evoke the sounds of war drums and the bustle of an army, bringing history alive for his audience.” I will give a brief example of such a passage in Kuir Singh’s gurbilās that encapsulates the substance of the battle and uses the bhujāṅ prayāṭ chand meter and alliterative rules to evoke the sound of the battle:

\[
\text{cāgaradam cīke, gāgaradam gīdham/}
\text{bhāgaradam bhūtaṁ, bāgaradam bīraṁ//}
\text{jāgaradam jāge, hāgaradan harīcandam/}
\text{rāgaradam rājā, gāgarada.. girindam//}
\text{tāgaradam tīraṁ, māgaradam mārā/}
\text{bāgaradam bājī, tāsa bidāra//}
\text{dāgaradam dūjo, guru pai dārā/}
\]

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97 Kamphorst, In Praise of Death, 125.
100 Busch, Poetry of Kings, 90.
While we cannot know for sure if these episodes were sung, their poetic and metrical structure gestures towards the possibility that they were at the very least orally recited.\textsuperscript{102} This, I want to suggest, is in invitation to open a conversation between gurbilās literature and Braj martial poetry. The shared poetic and metrical structure between gurbilās literature and poems within the wider genre of Braj martial poetry suggests other potential fruitful connections with other literary traditions such as rāso or vīr kāvya.

There seems to be a connection between the use of chand meters in Kuir Singh’s gurbilās and its intertextual relationships with earlier texts such as the Bacitra Nāṭak. The Bacitra Nāṭak is predominantly written in chand meters in addition to dohrā and caupai meters. A number of verses in Kuir Singh’s gurbilās written in chand meters are directly appropriated from the Bacitra Nāṭak. Loehlin suggests that the descriptions of battles in the Dasam Granth are written in kabitt, savaiyā, padhiśṭakā, and bisnupad and “to capture the sounds as well as the swift movements on the battlefield”, the padhiśṭakā meter is usually used.\textsuperscript{103} However in chapter 8 of the Bacitra Nāṭak, two types of chand meters — bhujaṅ pryat chand and rasāval chand — are

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\textsuperscript{101} Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das, 78.
\textsuperscript{102} Dhavan, When Sparrows Became Hawks, 160
used to illustrate the “sounds and moods of war.”\textsuperscript{104} Out of the thirty-eight verses of the narrative of the battle of Bhangani eight verses are written in \textit{caupai or dohā} and thirty verses are written in \textit{chand} meters. The above passage does not appear exactly as is in the \textit{Bacitra Nāṭak} but parts of it appear in the larger context of the Dasam Granth and the text is organized in a slightly different way.

While the three texts do not share many passages word for word, the narrative line of the battle description is similar on three levels: their descriptions of particular warriors and of their skills on the battlefield, their descriptions of the mythological landscape filled with gods, goddesses, and demons (etc.), and their descriptions of the final confrontation between Hari Chand and Guru Gobind Singh. Even though the pre-battle context in the three narratives differs in the way it articulates the cause of the battle, it presents some interesting connected intertexts such as the bucolic description of Guru Gobind Singh and his congregation at Paonta indulging in leisurely activities such as hunting and writing, as the above examples illustrate. In the description of the battle itself, the warriors on the Guru’s side are described in similar ways in the three texts. For example, Mahant Kirpal Das, the head of the Udasis who fought on the side of Guru Gobind Singh, is described as killing the opposing warrior, Hayat Khan in a similar way in the three texts. In the \textit{Gur Sobhā}, Mahant Kirpal Das kills Hayat Khan in a verse written in the \textit{savaiyyā} meter:

\begin{verbatim}
  lai kutakā kara me kirapāra sambhāra kai khāna hayāta ke māryo/
  aisī daī sira mai tiha ke mano toryo pahāra gadāna so ḍāryo/
  mato mataṅga mahā balavāna hanio china mai rana māhī pachārio/\textsuperscript{105}
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{104} Kamphorst, \textit{In Praise of Death}, 112.

\textsuperscript{105} Sainapati, \textit{Srī Gur Sobhā}, 11.
Having taken his wooden club in his hand, Kirpal took care of and killed Hayat Khan. The way in which he hit his head was as if he broke a mountain throwing a mace. And the strong intoxicated elephants, he killed in an instant, and dashed down to the ground, on the battlefield.

In the Bacitra Nāṭak and in the Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das, not only are the descriptions of the actions of Mahant Kirpal Das on the battlefield akin to the descriptions of his actions in the Gur Sobhā, but they also share a similar metaphor referring to the lore of Krishna’s childhood. In the Bacitra Nāṭak:

\[
kripāla kopīyaṃ kutako sambhārī/haṭhī khāna hayāta ke sīsa jhārī/
tūṭhī chīcha ichāṃ kaḍha meja jorāṁ/mano mākhanāṃ māṭakī kāni phorāṁ/\]

Kripal got angry and took up wooden club and chopped off Hayat Khan’s head as if Krishna broke a jar of butter.

In Kuir Singh’s gurbilās, produced over half a century later, the same metaphor is present:

\[
srī kripāla tā kutaka mārī/calī mijha tā sīsa maṇīhārī/
jasa srī kāna phori maṭa mākhana/tāvata maṭa jānyo tāṃ ākhana/\]

The honourable Kripal struck him (Hayat Khan) with his wooden club and he let loose his arrow in his head. The way in which Sri Krishna broke the jar of butter, that way the eyes flowed from the body.

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106 Dasam Granth, chapter 8, verse 7, MN-000106, [www.panjadbilig.org](http://www.panjadbilig.org)

107 Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das, 74. In Braj, maṭi (body) is close to māṭakī which refers to a small earthenware jar. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
The final confrontation between Hari Chand—the hill chief of Hanḍūr who fought on the side of Bhim Chand and Fateh Shah—and Guru Gobind Singh, resonates closely in all three narratives not only in the sequence of actions described but also in the vocabulary chosen by the three authors to describe the battle. In the three texts, at the very end of the battle, Hari Chand tries to kill Guru Gobind Singh by shooting three consecutive arrows at him. In the Gur Sobhā, Guru Gobind Singh’s riposte to Hari Chand’s attack is described this way by the poet Sainapati:

\( bicāra vāra sāraï/kamāna bāna dhāraï/ \\
\( calāï tīra mārio/su dūta ko nihārio// \\
\( aneka bīra dhāṃ vahī/apāra bāna lāva hī/ \\
\( harī su canda mārio/sameta sāthi tārio//\)

(The Guru) again thought about achieving as he was bearing his bow and arrows. He shot an arrow as he looked intently at the soldier. As many warriors immediately let them loose, and endless arrows were shot (at them.) He (the Guru) killed Hari Chand, and his companion turned away.

That description of Guru’s counter-attack on Hari Chand by Sainapati is also found in the earlier text, the Bācitra Nāṭak, and the passage in the Bācitra Nāṭak is in turn cited word for word in Kuir Singh’s gurbilās:

\( jabai bāna lāgyo/tabai rosa jāgyo/ \\
\( karam lai kamānām/hanēm bāna tāṇām/ \\
\( sabai bīra dhāe/saroghaṃ calāe/ \\
\( tīsai tāka tāṇām/hanyo eka ju āṇām/ \\
\( harī canda māre/sojodhā latāre/ \\
\( sukārora rāyaṃ/vahai kāla ghāyaṃ/ \\

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108 Sainapati, Sṛī Gur Sobhā, 14.
When I was touched by the arrow, then (my) anger awoke/
Taking the bow in my hand, I set my arrow to strike/
All the warriors fled, chased by many arrows/
Then I stretched [my bow] with them, [my arrows], and one of them killed [a warrior] who was coming/
Hari Chand was killed and [his] soldiers were trampled/
The king of Sukaror, died a great death/
They abandoned the battle and fled/all of them drowning in fear/

These two examples, and the earlier ones too, in addition to illustrating explicit instances of reception of the *Dasam Granth*, the *Bacitra Nāṭak*, and the *Gur Sobhā* by Kuir Singh, also exemplify an instance of hypertextuality according to which an earlier text (here, the *Bacitra Nāṭak*) is inserted within the context of a later text (here, Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās*). Not only does it indicate that Kuir Singh was well aware of the existence of the *Gur Sobhā* and the *Dasam Granth*—as well as its chapter *Bacitra Nāṭak*—but it also attests to a history of reception over a period of almost a century.

Intertextual practices are pervasive in Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* and while most of them are implicit references to other texts or traditions not necessarily tied to the Sikh tradition, some of them are explicit such as the use of citation. A citation is a piece of text extracted from its original context and reinserted into a new system of meaning. Citing is one of the most explicit practices that connect two texts intertextually and can be used for different purposes: “The citation sometimes acts as an argument of authority […] sometimes its objective is to highlight a

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convergence […] sometimes it is placed [within a text] solely to be contested or to support a counterargument.”111 Kuir Singh uses citations to locate himself and his text within the oral and textual tradition of the Sikh Gurus. In his *gurbilās*, Kuir Singh often uses quotes attributed to the Gurus, and this transtextual practice can be seen as a seal of authority to reinforce his own narrative. One example of this appears in the *antima samācār* (the last chapter) where four verses of the fifth Guru, Guru Arjan (1563-1606), are cited:

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khuliā karamu kirapā bhai ṭhākura kīrtana hari hari gāī/sramu thākā pāe visrāmā miṭa
gāi sagalī dhāī//1//
aba mohi jiṅjan padavī pāī/ciṭi āyo mani purakha bidhātā santana kī saraṇāī//1//raḥāo//
kāmu krodha lobhā moha nivāre nivāre sagala bairāī/sada hājūra hai nājara katahi na
bhayo durāī//2//
sukha sītāla saradhā sabha pūrī hoe santa sahāī/pāvana patati kīe khina bhītari mahimā
kathana na jāī//3//112
nirbhau bhae sagala bhai khoi gobinda carana oṭāī/nānaka jasu gāvai ṭhākura kā raini
dina su līva lāī//4//113
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Karma has been fortunate and my master has become merciful. I sing the kirtan of the Lord, Hari/
I am exhausted by effort, and I am not at rest, and, running, everything has been wiped away.
Now, my life has obtained the state of dignity/
The first being, the Creator, has come to my conscience, in my mind, [with] the protection of the saints//1//
Sexual desire, anger, greed, and attachment are expelled and all enemies are gone/


112 In Ashok’s edition, there is a mistake. It is written *pāvana patita kīe kīe bīna bhītari mahimā kathanu na jāī* instead of *pāvana patati kīe khina bhītari mahimā kathanu na jāī*/

113 Kuir Singh, *Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das*, 268-269 and GGS 1000. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
[The divine] is always present, all-seeing, and everywhere and is never far
My cool happiness and faith all have become complete with the help of saints/
They have purified the sinners within an instant, their grandeur cannot be told
I have become fearless, all my fears are forsaken and the feet of Gobind have become my shelter/
Nanak sings the glory of his master and night and day is in deep meditation

These are not the only verses from the Adi Granth quoted by Kuir Singh. We also find instances of citations of verses attributed to Guru Gobind Singh in the Dasam Granth. As suggested above, the use of the citation of authoritative scriptures within Kuir Singh’s text can be seen as a way to gain authority within congregations of Sikhs in the late eighteenth century.

2.6 Gurbilās literature and genre: history, hagiography, and poetry

We have discussed here the ways in which the gurbilās texts can be understood as a genre, and how they work in conversation within that set of texts. They also relate to a broader history of representations within Sikh tradition. The janam-sākhī and gurbilās are both literary genres produced between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries about the lives of the Sikh Gurus that have been significant in the shaping of Sikh representation and understanding of the past.114 While the janam-sākhī primarily focus on relating events of the life of Guru Nanak,115 gurbilās focuses on relating events of the life of Guru Gobind Singh. Both janam-sākhī and gurbilās literature are generally categorized as hagiographies or sacred biographies and can be understood

114 Murphy, The Materiality of the Past, chapter 3.

as reflecting similar genres. Gurbilās texts, which were produced later than the janam-sākhī, follow the same conventions as the sākhī genre, which literally mean “testimony” and “witness”. According to McLeod, who extensively studied the janam-sākhī, these texts provide an understanding of the mythical and historical aspects of the Sikh tradition and “are important as examples of hagiographic growth-processes, as sources of Punjab history for the post-Nānak period within which they developed as a cohesive factor in subsequent Sikh history, and as the earliest works of Punjabi prose.”

Rupert Snell has argued that hagiography is comprised of reverential texts “intending to locate the life-stories of its subjects in a sweep of time knowing no boundaries between the contemporary and the ahistorical.” Anne Murphy argues that this definition does not apply well to gurbilās literature. The life stories narrated in the gurbilās texts have spatial and temporal boundaries. In gurbilās texts, argues Murphy and as mentioned above, the past “is chronologically and geographically ordered and located, and concerned with specific chronologically narrated events.” Maintaining a hard line between the concepts of hagiography and biography or reverential and referential texts can lead to overlooking the

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117 Purnima Dhavan, “Reading the Texture of History and Memory in Early-Nineteenth-Century Punjab”, in Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East 29, no. 3 (2009): 520. See also discussion on sākhī and tārīkh in Murphy, The Materiality of the Past, 76.


120 Murphy, The Materiality of the Past, p. 84.

121 Snell, “Introduction,” 1-2. “A feature of the study of religious biography is the gulf separating the traditional scholarship of the paññātī from the critical scholarship of objective research methods: the one is characteristically reverential, intending to locate the life-stories of its subjects in a sweep of time knowing no boundaries between the
potential of texts categorized as hagiographies to provide “historiographic textures.” 122 Murphy and others have discussed at length the issue of history writing and historical consciousness in South Asia. 123 Murphy calls for the expression of the multiplicity of historicalities and historical imaginations in South Asia that do not fall in the “simplistic valorization of the “historical” in relation to the “religious” in colonialist/nationalist terms.” 124 In relation to the Hindi literary past, Busch suggests that we move past the question of whether or not Indians produce history and focus instead on exploring the rich textual heritage of the subcontinent that provides a plurality of expressions of “historical sensibilities.” 125 Since the janam-sākhī and gurbilās have been generally categorized as hagiographic literature, it is important to consider how this category is understood in scholarship and to evaluate whether or not it highlights the multiple literary and historical layers that these texts contain. Novetzke argues that the category of hagiography is often narrowly understood as bearing “no direct and intentional relation to fact” 126 and as a result


124 Murphy, “History in the Sikh Past,” 365.

125 Busch, “Portrait of a Raja in a Badshah’s World,” 290.

is viewed as relevant for understanding the ideological perspectives of a group but irrelevant as historical source.

In relation to Sikh textual sources, McLeod also argues these lines. According to him, hagiographical texts do not “provide history. What they provide is rather an interpretation of the Gurū’s life (…)” The nature of all hagiography, says McLeod, is to relate stories and tales that reinforce the authority of a religious leader who teaches devotees how to reach liberation. The purpose of the janam-sākhī, for McLeod, is to legitimise the authority of Guru Nanak as a leader able to convey the path of liberation to his followers. This definition of hagiography is not uncommon in scholarship about the Sikhs and should be broadened, according to Novetzke, to reveal the theological and historical agendas of sacred biographies.

In order to reveal these agendas, Novetzke opposes history to memory. While he views history as “marked by the logic of time and place, set in the language of proof and fact,” he suggests that memory is what “makes connections freely, dips into shared pools of legend, and forms associations that are inherently social.” But as Murphy has argued at length, and as will be discussed more fully below, history and memory are not opposite: works such as gurbilās texts can address historical memory in literary terms while at the same time showing a strong interest in the chronology of events.

Such discussions of genre, in broad terms, can aid in facilitating the organization of and the comparison among literary traditions, but it also has limited the reading of texts outside of a specific context. When texts are classified into fixed literary genres based on their type of

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narratives (historical, hagiographic, fiction, etc.) and their content, other comparisons with texts perceived outside a specific tradition can be overlooked. Thomas de Bruijn, among others, has shown how reading texts beyond the boundaries of their literary genres can lead to fruitful new interpretations of these texts. In his study of the genre of medieval Avadhi epics, de Bruijn suggests that Avadhi epics constitute “a ‘dialogic’ genre that encompassed different religious contexts, mainly through its role in the competition of both Sufi and Bhakti institutions for patronage and political prestige.”

Just as a text can contain several linguistic affiliations, it can also fall within multiple categories of genre. De Bruijn argues that premodern texts were part of a dynamic dialogical interaction with texts affiliated to other literary genres:

the distribution of genre in the literary field referred not so much to completely distinct cultural forms but rather to different positions within a single but composite field. These positions represent different points in a complex matrix of differences that could be based on religious affiliation, clientship of particular patrons, relative distance to other traditions, caste or political grouping. This matrix was never fixed as new positions could develop under new circumstances that called for the extension of existing genres or the definition of new boundaries or divisions.

We can think of gurbilās literature as part of this composite cultural field that De Bruijn describes. If we expand our field of analysis to locate gurbilās texts beyond Sikh cultural production, what kind of conversations will potentially start? To form a genre, a set of texts does not need to share a set of characteristics that overlap perfectly, nor do they need to state explicitly their affiliation to a genre to be part of that genre. Literary genres are not hermetic categories and many of them are more contiguous than separate. As Yigal Bronner expressed


131 De Bruijn, “Dialogism in a Medieval Genre,” 125.

in his examination of Kalhaṇa’s *Rājataraṅginī*, binary questions about a textual genre or its form often lead to unsatisfying and fragmentary discussions. For example, when scholars ask whether Kalhaṇa’s text can be categorized as history or poetry, Bronner replies that “it is far more compelling to ask how we can read it as a poem and what can we do with it as historians.”

*Gurbilās* literature is defined by Murphy and Dhavan as comprising texts that all share a “concern for history.” While the *Bacitra Nāṭak* and the *Gur Sobhā* are explicitly cited by Kuir Singh to recount historical episodes surrounding Guru Gobind Singh’s lifetime, Kuir Singh’s text provides more historical details about certain episodes than its textual predecessors. For example, according to Fauja Singh, Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* is the earliest account that gives historical details about Guru Gobind Singh’s early life and about the preceeding guruships. In earlier texts, such as the *Gur Sobhā*, *Bacitra Nāṭak*, and *Kuliāti*, not much detail is given about the period before Guru Gobind Singh’s departure to Paonta. Fauja Singh has also argued that other literary work about the life of Guru Gobind Singh produced in the early modern period such as Ani Rai’s *Jangnāmā Srī Gurū Gobind Singh Jī* and Sainapati’s *Gur Sobhā*, for instance, provides a lot of information about the life of Guru Gobind Singh, but does not give many details about the connections between events. Singh adds that Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* stands out from these earlier works in that it is not only rich in descriptions of important events about the life of Guru Gobind Singh, but also provides a narrative that connects events with one another.

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134 Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks*; Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past*.


137 Fauja Singh, “bhūmikā,” x.
Murphy has argued that Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* in not the only *gurbilās* text that values chronology. In her detailed analysis of the *Gur Sobhā*, she has shown how in Sainapati’s text, the past “is chronologically and geographically ordered and located, and concerned with specific chronologically narrated events.” But more than their interest in history and chronology, Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* and other *gurbilās* texts can be seen as “literary memory” in the sense that the texts were all produced after the events they describe. *Gurbilās* texts — and Kuir Singh more specifically — also had a certain distance towards the past they described and created an “aspirational biography” to inspire Sikh congregations of the time that were no longer directly connected to human Gurus. According to Murphy, a work can address historical memory in literary terms and still show a strong interest in chronology, which is what *gurbilās* texts illustrate so well:

The texts of the eighteenth century in different ways constitute the Sikh *panth* through history, organized around the Guru and his memory. The concern for history satisfied particular theological and social concerns for the Sikhs community in its self-identity formation around the narration of the past and in relation to the intervention of the Gurus in the world in that past and the continuing presence of the Guru in the present through the relationships that form the community. The relationships that constitute the community are constructed through various means: the textual production of the past, and the markers of those connections in material terms.

In her recent work on the twelfth-century king Prithviraj Chauhan, Talbot traces the literary memory of the ruler over a period of eight hundred years. According to Talbot, no one

138 Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past*, 84.

139 Murphy and Dhavan discuss *gurbilās* texts in relation to history and memory.

140 Purnima Dhavan, personal communication.

141 Fenech talks about *gurbilās* as work that inspires communities in Louis E. Fenech, *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition: Paying the ‘Game of Love’* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 191. Murphy discusses the production of *gurbilās* literature as a way to create a connections between congregations of Sikhs and the Sikh Gurus in *The Materiality of the Past*.

142 Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past*, 108.
text contains a full historical description of Prithviraj.\footnote{Cynthia Talbot, The Last Hindu Emperor: Prithviraj Chauhan and the Indian Past, 1200-2000 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).} Certainly the same is true of any attempt to understand Guru Gobind Singh as a historical figure in \textit{gurbilās} texts. That does not mean one should despair of trying to understand Prithviraj as a historical figure: one way to access that is to look how he has been remembered by later generations. Talbot does not distinguish between history and memory and does not attempt to figure out whether a source should be categorized as historical or not.\footnote{Talbot, The Last Hindu Emperor, 1-28.} The same issue concerns me here with \textit{gurbilās} literature. It is not my goal to elucidate whether or not these sources correspond to a certain definition of history. Since the study of \textit{gurbilās} literature has often been confined to this debate, it has prevented us from locating them in their cultural and literary context. \textit{Gurbilās} texts are historical \textit{and} literary and are a cultural manifestation of the contexts from which they emerge. Perceiving \textit{gurbilās} texts as historical alone has limited our understanding of the use of images and themes, and led to their literal interpretation. For instance, Kuir Singh has often been accused of being confused between his Sikh and Hindu identities because he uses vignettes and images that are considered to be part of a Hindu mythological world. In the next chapter, I will analyze how the presence of Vaishnava elements in Kuir Singh’s \textit{gurbilās} — and in other \textit{gurbilās} texts — can be conceptualized differently than as a statement on Kuir Singh’s religious identity.
Chapter 3: Encountering other Worlds: Kuir Singh’s gurbilās, Vaishnava Imagery, and Sikh Visual Art

In the first chapter, I discussed a series of questions and debates in the scholarship about South Asia that engage with the notion of encounter. One way to understand the connections between Sikhs and wider worlds beyond Punjab is to look closely at the various ways in which their literature and art are tied to worlds beyond the Sikh world. This chapter engages with my concern for connecting the Sikh tradition to other cultural and literary worlds by examining two examples of encounters between the Sikh literary tradition and wider cultural worlds in Kuir Singh’s Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das. Specifically, it explores how the use of Vaishnava symbolism in Kuir Singh’s Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das, and of Mughal symbolism in Sikh visual art, are tied to notions of power and authority in literary, religious, and political contexts of the eighteenth century in North India. Scholars have already highlighted encounters that occurred between Sikhs and Vaishnava traditions as well as between Sikh and the Mughal worlds since as early as the seventeenth century and have analyzed the presence of these elements in gurbilās literature and in Sikh literature and visual art in broad terms. My overall goal is not to exhaustively discuss all possibilities of ties between gurbilās literature and other cultural worlds but, instead, to explore two examples of connections that invite us to imagine the Sikh world beyond Punjab. These two case studies reflect the relationship between the notion of encounter and the process of identity formation.

1 Fenech, The Darbar of the Sikh Gurus and The Sikh Zafar-Namah of Guru Gobind Singh; Rinehart, Debating the Dasam Granth; Murphy, The Materiality of the Past, “An Idea of Religion,”; Goswamy, Piety and Splendour and “Sikh Patronage of Painting,” to name a few leading examples.
Kelly Pemberton and Michael Nijhawan have discussed how the notion of encounter has generally been conceptualized in two ways according to what they called post-modern hermeneutic methods:

Post-modern hermeneutic methods typically characterize these encounters in two ways. First, the relationship between dominant representations and local “micronarratives” is couched in the language of conflict, particularly where a struggle over resources or desire for access to certain forms of power (e.g., economic resources, control over symbolic capital, or influence within or over institutions of governance) is apparent. Second, where they involve “fruitful encounters” — particularly at the level of the so-called “popular” or “vernacular” religious experience — this relationship is often depicted as one of syncretism.²

The relationship between the notions of encounter and identity is complex, as previously discussed in chapter 1. The notion of syncretism, that we have discussed, based on Stewart’s work, as well as the “language of conflict,” do not provide adequate interpretative tools to understand the forms of encounters that interest me here. Admittedly, there is some level of tension and conflict involved in the appropriation of idioms of power by groups seeking to carve out a place for themselves in a competitive political, religious, and cultural field. However, as I will show, this language of conflict is not the exclusive feature defining the rapport between the Sikhs and the idioms of power they chose to use but rather is part of a complex web of motivations and factors.

The notion of encounter is closely related to the notion of identity. It is not uncommon to find in scholarly books about the Sikhs the use of “Sikh identity” as an immutable category. Pemberton and Nijhawan have argued, based on Brubaker and Cooper’s work, that the notion of identity, instead of being taken as a monolithic whole, should be broken down into “more

manageable terms (such as “bounded groupness,” “self-identification,” and “narrative”) that can perform the work of analysis effectively.” According to them, “one should not try to collapse different levels of analysis into one broad category (identity) without taking into account the multi-sited, historically and culturally shifting parameters of identity formations.” Approaching the notion of identity and the process of identity formations as such allows us to make space, in my analysis of Kuir Singh’s text, for new subjectivities to arise. To be clear, when discussing notions such as fluidity and porous boundaries, I am not questioning the religious boundaries of the Sikh tradition. What I do instead is to locate Sikh cultural production within a larger cultural field with the hope of unfolding new narratives and imaginaries.

I will start this chapter with a discussion of Vaishnava imagery in Kuir Singh’s gurbilās and of how these have been interpreted in scholarship about early modern Sikh literature. It will be followed by an examination of visual and literary portraits of Guru Gobind Singh in a selection of paintings and gurbilās texts.

These two case studies suggest how the use of these two idioms of power — Vaishnava imagery and Mughal symbols — can be interpreted as what Nile Green has called a “twin process of hegemony and resistance” by which the use of idioms of power and their adaptation to reflect local histories serve as strategies used by marginal groups to establish their authority locally within the community and to express and assert their position of power among other dominant groups. The use of these two idioms of power — which had a high symbolic capital in the literary and visual markets of early modern North India — can be interpreted as a strategy

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used by painters and by authors of *gurbilās* texts to assert Guru Gobind Singh’s position as spiritual and political leader in the wider cosmological and competitive sociopolitical field of the time and as a result, to strengthen the foundations of the articulation of Khalsa Sikh identity.  

3.1 **Vaishnava imagery in Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās***

One important point of contact between the Sikh cultural world and the wider landscape of Brajbhasha traditions in early modern Punjab was with the Vaishnava world and more specifically, with the world of Krishna worship. The association between the Vaishnava and Sikh worlds in early modern Sikh literature has generated strong reactions and heated discussions among those today who perceive these worlds as distinct and unconnected. *Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das*, for example, has created uneasiness among some commentators, since Kuir Singh fully embraces Guru Gobind Singh’s association with the god Vishnu. Parallel controversy attends sections of the Dasam Granth as well, and figures more prominently. While Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* locates Guru Gobind Singh in a world which contains a large number of Shaiva and Shakta images, it is his association with Vishnu and his depiction as an avatar of Vishnu that has caused most of the debates in Sikh historiography. Robin Rinehart summarizes well these debates in her monograph about the Dasam Granth. She suggests that some Sikh commentators have felt uneasy with the presence of Vaishnava imagery in the Dasam Granth and with the placement of Guru Gobind Singh within the Hindu narrative framework of the avatar “because it seems to be an example of a Sikh leader being cast into a Hindu framework.” According to her, casting the Tenth Guru within the avatar model in the context of the Dasam Granth (and

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6 As it will be clear below, this argument draws on the work of Deol, Murphy, and Rinehart.

7 Rinehart, *Debating the Dasam Granth*.

8 Rinehart, *Debating the Dasam Granth*, 68.
specifically within the context of the *Bacitra Nāṭak*), does not mean that the Guru is represented as a Hindu *avatar*. She remarks that before the Guru Gobind Singh was sent to earth as an *avatar*, all the previous *avatars* in the *Bacitra Nāṭak* did not succeed in their mission to re-establish the *dharma*, whereas the Tenth Guru is portrayed as succeeding in restoring the *dharma*: “Guru Gobind Singh represents a new conceptualization of the role of the figure sent by god in defense of righteousness.”

In *Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das*, we find various vignettes and motifs describing the Guru as an avatar of Vishnu whose mission is to destroy errors and duality, restore the dharma, and establish the divine Name. At various places in the text, the Guru is referred as Ram, Hari, or Krishna (राम तुमें, पुनि क्रिसना तुमात्र, पुनः स्री गुराः है सभा साहा अवतारी. *You are Ram, you then are Krishna, then you are the Guru, the avatar of the good Shah*). While the use of “Hari” and “Ram” in bhakti literature does not always carry Vaishnava connotations, in Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* the associations with the god Vishnu through images and metaphors are common. In various places in Kuir Singh’s texts and also in other *gurbilās* texts, Guru Gobind Singh is referred to as Rama or as Krishna (*तुम गुराः राम च क्रिसना अवतारी/you are the guru avatar of Rāma and Krishnā*). According to Hans, the Hindu depiction of Guru Gobind Singh is also illustrated by Kuir Singh’s clear allusion to the Ramayana, comparing the Tenth Guru’s departure from Patna to Rama’s departure from Ayodhya, and the death of his mother, Mata Gujari, with the death of Sita.

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9 Rinehart, *Debating the Dasam Granth*, 68.
However, the use of these Vaishnava idioms by Kuir Singh is insufficient evidence to demonstrate that he self-identified as a Vaishnava. In the tradition of Kabir’s poetry, for instance, the name Ram is often invoked to refer to God in general and not to Ram as a *saguṇa* manifestation of Vishnu. According to Vaudeville, Kabir’s use of the name of Ram does not refer to any specific Vaishnava group that worships a material manifestation or Ram. We see the same usage of such terms, such as Hari, in the Guru Granth Sahib, as well. In his research on Appayya Diksita’s *Varadarājastava*, Ajay Rao has also shown the complexity of the question of identity. He addresses the use of Vaishnava imagery by the Saiva intellectual and his self-positioning in the religious and literary world of Vaishnavism with “a distinctively Vaiṣṇava authorial persona” at a time of conflicts and tensions between Saivas and Vaishnavas in sixteenth century Aḍayapalam. Rao suggests alternative ways of understanding this positioning that do not challenge Diksita’s identity as a Saiva, such as his dual Vaishnava-Shaiva lineage, his Vaishnava patrons, and his possible emulation of Vedanta Desika whom he perceived as a role model. Another reason for this apparent contradiction, Rao argues, is that one could identify as a Shaiva due to being born as one and through following certain rituals pertaining to Shaiva institutions: “(…) it emerges that there were deep fissures between the worlds of ritual and discourse. These fissures enabled someone like Appayya Diksita to write as a Vaishnava, and yet remain committed to being a Shaiva and to identifying himself as one.” While there is not

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13 John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), 44.


much information available about Kuir Singh’s life, the use of Vaishnava imagery and associations with the god Vishnu in his 
gurbilās is not sufficient evidence to draw the conclusion that Kuir Singh was a Vaishnava. Some scholars have conjectured that the names Srikant Hari and Bishan Hari that are used in the earlier parts of the 
Gurbilās Pāṭshāḥī Das, may be an indication that Kuir Singh Kalal was a Vaishnava before his encounter with Bhai Mani Singh¹⁸ and would have changed his name to Kuir Singh Kalal after going through the amrit or initiation ceremony:

\[ is \text{ toṁ } ih \text{ anumān lāiā } \text{ gaiā } \text{ hai ki ‘bisan } \text{ singh’ } \text{ kuir } \text{ singh } \text{ dā } \text{ hī } \text{ dūjā } \text{ nān } \text{ sī } \text{ jo } \text{ us } \text{ ne } \text{ amrit } \text{ chaka } \text{ ṇ } \text{ ton } \text{ bād } \text{ nām } \text{ dī } \text{ tabdilī } \text{ dī } \text{ paramparā } \text{ sikhām } \text{ vic } \text{ bahut purāṇī } \text{ hai}. \]

From this, it can be guessed that Bishan Hari was his other name which is a very old custom in the Sikh tradition to change name after taking amrit.

There is no way, however, based on what we know about Kuir Singh, to verify whether or not this assertion is true. But the extent to which Kuir Singh did or did not self-identify as Vaishnava should not be the main factor explaining the motives underlying his use of Vaishnava symbolism.

Kuir Singh also locates the Tenth Guru within the mythological world of Krishna. Various episodes from the Krishna lore are used and adapted by Kuir Singh to describe Guru Gobind Singh’s life and deeds. The description of Guru Gobind Singh’s court at Paonta Sahib is a good example of this dynamic. Kuir Singh describes Guru Gobind Singh’s court as located near the forest of the Shivalik Hills at the border of today’s Himachal Pradesh and his description of the landscape echoes common pastoral descriptions of Krishna in Vrindavan performing various plays or līlā. The Tenth Guru is described as dwelling with his congregation on the bank


of the Yamuna river that is referred to as syāma niśra sundara or beautiful Krishna-like black river.  

$saratā nikaṭa ravaja bhara sohata. siyāma niśra sundara mana mohata.$

$kautaka koṭa karaiṁ gura jaise. kahe si bhīna bhīna kavi kaise.$

(They were) near the beautiful river Ravi. The water was dark and beautiful like Syama/Krishna, capturing the mind. The way in which the Guru performs millions of miracles, how can the various poets describe it. His life story is also compared to the life story of Krishna.

According to Kuir Singh, Bhai Mani Singh would have narrated the story in the same way the story of Krishna is told, a reference that also appears in later gurbilās texts.

$prathama pahara satigura taha aise. kisana calitra gātha likha taise.$

_In the way the story of Krishna was written, the same way I will tell the story of the True Guru._

Ram and Krishna as avatars are often invoked to illustrate the Guru’s mission on earth such as illustrated in this passage:

$taba prabha yā bidha girā ucārī/maiṁ nija suta to kīṇa sudharī/
 jāī tahāṁ te pantha calāya/ kabundhi karana te loka haṭāī//47//
 rāma krisana jaga bhe avatārī/ nara nārāyana budhi bidha dhārī/
 tuma nija bhagata dharo jana māhī/jānte haṁ mamatā miṭa jāī//48//
 kalajuga mahī nahi rahai sudharamā/tuma kachu karo sikhana yuta maramā/
 tora mahāika maiṁ sada jāṇī/hantā tora bhae nahi māṇī//49//$

_bhūjaṅ chand:_

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20 Kuir Singh, _Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das_, 63. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.

21 Kuir Singh, _Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das_, 63. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.

22 In his _gurbilās_, Santokh Singh mentions that Guru Gobind Singh wrote the Krishna Avatar section of the Dasam Granth. See online version of the text: https://searchgurbani.com/sri_gur_pratap_suraj_granth/page/26/volume/14

23 Kuir Singh, _Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das_, 63. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
Then god spoke in this way: “I have reformed my son.” He went and put the Panth into motion, the people who engage in ignorance are driven away. Rama and Krishna became avatars in the world, holding Nara-Narayan in their mind in this way. You should hold devotion in the heart, in which the ego and desire are then erased. In Kaliyuga good dharma does not remain, You do something [to make] the heart endowed with learning. Always go to your helper, do not accept that you have become a killer.

bhujang meter:

Then accepting this, absorbed in the words, the avatar-Guru spoke about the Sackhand (state of bliss). The Masands do not behave correctly, the people and disciples take punishment on earth.

Repeat the one name in different ways, great heroes with pure hearts. Kill all the flesh of the intoxicated Mlechas, and in the heart, contemplate the undifferentiated one. When that Panth was created, all the evil went away. Recitation of the Devi causes the mind to reside in Brahma.

Know the timeless and Maya as two different things, and accept the 33 vastu as untrue.

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24 Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das, 14. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
All the Vedas distinguish Purusha and Prakriti, One and the many, there is nothing else. When the beautiful ones came, the mother was shining with the splendor of Shri. In this way that Vishnu went, to purify the sants, in that way Mata Gujari shone like a goddess./53/

In another instance, Guru Gobind Singh is described as having freed Sudama the brahmin from poverty which recalls many poems attributed to Surdas that describe how Krishna freed his childhood friend Sudama from poverty (bipa sudāma dārada ṭārā/ you had poverty removed from Sudama the Brahmin!).

For instance, in the recent edition of Sur’s poems by Bryant and Hawley, one poem in particular recounts the story of Sudama who was saved from poverty from Hari (sūradāsa prabhu syāma kripā tainā/dvārai āni racyau ju kalapataru/By the grace of Sur’s Dark Lord,” she said. “a wishing tree’s been planted at your door.”)26

The associations between Guru Gobind Singh and Krishna as portrayed in the Mahabharata are also explicit in Kuir Singh's text. For example, he is described as the protector of the Pandavas who fought the Kauravas (pāṇḍava kī rakhyā tuma karī. kairava kare māra kai charī/You protected the Pandavas. Having deceived the Kauravas, you killed them.) and killed Kamsa, Keshi, and Sisupal (kamsa, kesa, sisapāla bidāre. He destroyed kamsa, kesi, sisupāla//). The battlefield on which Guru Gobind Singh is described as fighting the hill chief Bhim Chand of Bilaspur is compared to the battlefield

25 Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das, 65. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.


27 Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das, 65. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.

28 Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das, 65. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
of Kurukshetra.\textsuperscript{29} \textit{(jana pāṇḍa putrana kairavana sabha khetra kura asthāna/As if the Pandava sons and the Kauravas were all in Kuruksetra/)}.

Pervasive references to Vaishnava elements were more problematic to some later commentators than to Kuir Singh, who uses frequent Vaishnava imagery without hesitation. Some scholars have made arguments to reconcile this apparent contradiction by identifying his work in singular terms. According to Surjit Hans, for instance, Kuir Singh “held heterodox beliefs”\textsuperscript{30} and portrayed Guru Gobind Singh exclusively in “Hindu” terms.\textsuperscript{31}

Another author who has worked on Kuir Singh’s \textit{gurbilās}, Gurtej Singh, claims that Kuir Singh was a Hindu before taking the \textit{pahul} or ritual of Khalsa initiation. He suggests that Kuir Singh felt conflicted in regards to his Hindu and Sikh identities and was unable “to subscribe exclusively to one or the other.”\textsuperscript{32} Gurtej Singh, like Surjit Hans, perceives the categories “Sikh” and “Hindu” as separate entities and anachronistically positions the presence of Vaishnava elements in Kuir Singh’s \textit{gurbilās} in conflict with Sikh elements. It is not argued here that Kuir Singh does not articulate a modality of Sikh subjectivity in his \textit{gurbilās};\textsuperscript{33} in fact, Kuir Singh’s text is in line with core Sikh doctrinal and ethical elements that pervade the central scriptures, the Guru Granth Sahib, as will be discussed below. However, it is important to reframe the commonly assumed dichotomy between “Sikh” and “Hindu” in Kuir Singh’s text. Murphy has argued that in the context of Kuir Singh’s \textit{gurbilās}, the category “Hindu” should not be

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{29} Kuir Singh, \textit{Gurbilās Pāshāhī Das}, 73. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Hans, \textit{A Reconstruction of Sikh History}, 248.
\item \textsuperscript{31} “Besides doctrinal heterodoxy Guru Gobind Singh is portrayed paradigmatically as a Hindu incarnation.”; Hans, \textit{A Reconstruction of Sikh History}, 248.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Gurtej Singh, “Compromising the Khalsa Tradition,” 49.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Murphy, “An Idea of Religion,” 98.
\end{itemize}
perceived as a static category referring to a defined group of persons. The category “Sikh” in Kuir Singh refers to those who follow the Guru\textsuperscript{34} and “Hindu” refers to those who are not Turks.\textsuperscript{35}

Kuir Singh’s text is not the only \textit{gurbilās} that articulates an association between Guru Gobind Singh and Vishnu. Robin Rinehart has examined associations between Guru Gobind Singh and the mythological world of “Hindu” deities as articulated in the Dasam Granth. Rinehart’s examination of Guru Gobind Singh as an avatar of Vishnu is drawn from the \textit{Bacitra Nāṭak}, which is generally considered to be the earliest example of \textit{gurbilās} literature dated back to the end of the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{36} According to Rinehart, the depiction of Guru Gobind Singh as an avatar of Vishnu serves to represent the Guru both as a spiritual and political leader.\textsuperscript{37} She argues that the descriptions of battles in which Guru Gobind Singh appears as Vishnu to fight evil and to restore the dharma, mirror worldly conflicts between Guru Gobind Singh and his congregation with the Mughals and the neighbouring hill chiefs.\textsuperscript{38} According to her, the association between Guru Gobind Singh with an avatar of Vishnu is a way to “appropriate the power associated with a rival group.”\textsuperscript{39} She also suggests that many religious groups in India have used the concept of avatar in various ways throughout history to gain the power and

\textsuperscript{34} Murphy, “An Idea of Religion,” 107.
\textsuperscript{35} Murphy, “An Idea of Religion,” 107.
\textsuperscript{36} Murphy, \textit{The Materiality of the Past}, 84.
\textsuperscript{37} Rinehart, \textit{Debating the Dasam Granth}.
\textsuperscript{38} Rinehart, \textit{Debating the Dasam Granth}, 109.
\textsuperscript{39} Rinehart, \textit{Debating the Dasam Granth}, 170-171.
legitimacy associated with more powerful groups.\textsuperscript{40} She also argues that portraying “someone as an avatar, or at least in terms evocative of the avatar (which is clearly the case in many portrayals of the Sikh Gurus) also likely served as an effective rhetorical means of conveying the power and status of the Gurus to audiences beyond their immediate followers.”\textsuperscript{41}

Rinehart also notes that Vishnu and Rama are regularly seen in Sanskrit literature about kinship as both king and spiritual leaders. According to her, the characterization of Guru Gobind Singh as an avatar of Vishnu locates the Guru within a larger cosmological world and in continuity with a wide mythological past. Also, in addition to legitimizing the Tenth Guru’s rule within this larger mythological world, she argues that this allows for the articulation of a vision of political leadership in response to the unsettled context in which Guru Gobind Singh and his followers participated.\textsuperscript{42} Deol argues that in the Bacitra Nāṭak, the placement of Guru Gobind Singh within what he calls a “puranic metanarrative” —in which we find side-by-side descriptions and praises of Akal Purakh, Guru Gobind Singh, and the avatars of Vishnu, Brahma, and Rudra,\textsuperscript{43} —the narratives about the puranic avatars “are subordinate to the text’s account of the life of Guru Gobind Singh.”\textsuperscript{44} Murphy has also argued in this sense in relation to later gurbilās texts. According to her, mythological associations with Guru Gobind Singh situate the Guru

\textsuperscript{40} Rinehart, Debating the Dasam Granth, 170.

\textsuperscript{41} Rinehart, Debating the Dasam Granth, 171.

\textsuperscript{42} Rinehart, Debating the Dasam Granth, 164.

\textsuperscript{43} Deol, “Eighteenth Century Khalsa Identity,” 33.

\textsuperscript{44} Deol, “Eighteenth Century Khalsa Identity,” 33.
within a wider cosmological world by giving a prime importance to him.\textsuperscript{45} An example of
this would be the opening verses of Kuir Singh's \textit{gurbilās}. From the beginning, the Guru
is located within a wider cosmological world where Brahma, Shiva, the Nagas, the gods,
the demi-gods and demons all coexist, and is presented as the one true guru:\textsuperscript{46}

\begin{quote}
binavo ādi purakha kartārā/jina yaha kino sagala pasārā//
acuta eka anika ghaṭa vāsī/alakha purakha ko lakhai su tāsī//1//
gagana bhūma jala tata prakāsai/sagala srisaṭi mahi kīna nivāsai//
logana ko iha bhrama kai kai/nirakhata āpi niāro hvai kai//
dānava deva phaninda banāī/kinnara jacha race adhikā//
baḍe baḍe monī brata dhārī/kā kalapa jiha japata gudārī//
loṃasa te tapa bala adhikāī/sahasa badana sahasā nana ganāī//
caturā nana mukha cāra sukare/pūta pāṇca khaṭa tiha tiha sukhadhare//
tandapa anta kachū nahī pāyo/sabha mila netaṇi neta batāyo//
koṭī jatana karamaim nahī āvai/cāro beda sādhū muni gāvai//
guramukhi hvai dhiāe je koī/srī hari jū ko pāvai soī//
dhanna dhanna satigura karatārā/kīna javana yahi pantha sudhārā//
\end{quote}

I bow down to the eternal creator being, the one who are made everything//
The eternal one dwelling in many bodies, this invisible being cannot be seen by
anyone.
[It] manifests as sky, earth, water, and matter, abiding in all of creation.
People are deluded in this way, that they perceive themselves to be separate.
[It] created the demons, the gods, Sheshnag and the Nagas/and created many
celestial musicians, and demi-gods.
Each great sage take vows, they perform recitations and pass through many ages.
Lomas became more powerful through performing tapas and singing about the
thousand-bodied-and-faced-one.

\textsuperscript{45} Murphy, “An Idea of Religion,” 100.

\textsuperscript{46} Kuir Singh, \textit{Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das}, 1. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
[It] made the four faces of the four-faced one [Brahma], and the five and six (faced) sons.
In the end, nothing is gained, saying it is not this and not that, you get everything.
You may try millions of times, but it won’t come/ the Sadhus and Sages sing the four Vedas.
If one concentrates, they will become a gurmukh and they will receive Shri Hari,
Praise, Praise the True Guru, the Creator, who created this Panth.

As seen earlier with Gurtej Singh and Hans, the presence of Krishna and Vaishnava themes and tropes in Kuir Singh’s gurbilās and in gurbilās literature in general has been viewed as a testimony of Kuir Singh’s ambivalent religious identity. However, when one looks at the widespread use of this imagery in Braj literature produced in the early modern period by authors not exclusively identifying themselves as Vaishnavas, it is not peculiar to interpret Kuir Singh’s use of Vaishnava imagery as non-unilaterally defining his religious identity, but as a gesture to locate himself as a poet in this larger cultural field.

While the use of Vaisnava imagery and puranic elements by Kuir Singh has been interpreted as a statement of Kuir Singh's heterodoxy by Surjit Hans, Mandajit Kaur argues that this literary landscape is the result of Kuir Singh’s transition to a Khalsa identity later in life. According to her, Kuir Singh’s “puranic vision” is the result of his life before taking the pahul (sword initiation) and becoming a Khalsa Sikh: “It appears he has at places projected his old convictions and personal beliefs in explaining Sikh theology and Sikh practices as also futurology of Sikh history.”47 While arguing this, Kaur also recognizes that the Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das is a cultural product reflective of the literary milieu of the time. She describes Kuir

Singh’s text as “typical” of eighteenth century Punjabi literature.\textsuperscript{48} However, even though Kaur criticizes Hans’ argument—according to which Kuir Singh’s “‘Hindu’ portrayal of Guru Gobind Singh” and his perception of the Goddess as being responsible for creating the Khalsa made him believe that Kuir Singh had a heterodox identity\textsuperscript{49}—she explains the use of these literary devices as the vestiges of Kuir Singh pre-Khalsa identity.\textsuperscript{50} So both authors, despite their divergent arguments, interpret Kuir Singh’s use of puranic, Vedic, ‘Hindu’ imagery as deeply reflective of his religious identity. However, as discussed earlier, the choice of a language for literature as well as cultural and religious landscapes depicted in a literary work, may not necessarily be a statement of an author’s religious identity. One precise example of this in gurbilās literature is reflected in the use of pastoral elements related to Krishna to describe moments in Guru Gobind Singh’s life. The use of these elements has been interpreted as a statement on an author’s ‘hinduized’ or ‘confused’ Sikh identity. But there are other ways to interpret this.

3.2 Kuir Singh’s gurbilās and the process of “pastoralization”

In his article about the relationship between Krishna and the pastoral, Entwistle explores what he terms the pastoral mode in the Krishna lore in the Braj region. According to him, the main common denominator between the European idea of the pastoral and its development within the Krishna context in India is the representation of a contrastive landscape of the busy life of the city with the romanticized rustic rural life.\textsuperscript{51} In the context of Krishna bhakti lore, the representation of the rustic is well deployed in the descriptions of young Krishna indulging in

\textsuperscript{48} Kaur, “Koer Singh’s Gurbilas Pathshahi 10.”

\textsuperscript{49} Hans, A Reconstruction of Sikh History, 248.

\textsuperscript{50} Kaur, “Koer Singh’s Gurbilas Patshahi 10.”

festivities, music, and the company of sakhī in a bucolic landscape.\textsuperscript{52} Entwistle suggests that in the context of bhakti, such pastoral descriptions of Krishna’s idyllic life in Braj, while not in exile, is a way to offer the devotee (bhakta) an experience beyond the mundane world: “By immersing himself in Braj pastoral, the devotee aims to visualize and internalize the paradise of Krishna so that he may be lifted out of the mundane phenomenal world and be transported into the supernal realm of Krishna’s eternal play (nitya līlā) — a condition that the devotee hopes to enter permanently at death.”\textsuperscript{53} Such vignettes are pervasive in Kuir Singh’s work. The Guru is portrayed as surrounded by his congregation (saṅgat) and described in a picturesque landscape representing an ideal environment to uplift the devoted audience above their everyday life in order to experience harmony with the divine in the company of their congregation (saṅgat). Such a landscape often translates in Kuir Singh’s descriptions of Guru Gobind Singh whether at Paonta Sahib, as described in the previous chapter, or at Kiratpur and Anandpur while often using Vaishnava imagery to describe the Guru. For example, following his victory against Bhim Chand at Bhangani, Guru Gobind Singh and his troops left Paonta Sahib to Anandpur and stopped on the way to Kiratpur, a city located about 10 km from Anandpur. Kuir Singh describes their passage at Kiratpur in these terms:

\begin{quote}
\textit{hama tuma aba calīe tahāṃ jai duṃdabhī bajāī}
\textit{srī ānada pura thāṇa hai gura prabha āyasa cāī. (183)}
\textit{yā bidha tāhi payana kīō atī hī cara tā taha kautaka kīne.}
\textit{ketaka sāla bitao tahā puna kīrata jo pura tā lakha līnai.}
\textit{prithamai prabha kīrata nagra ae tahi āna kaṛāhi karai atī cīnai.}
\textit{sabadaṃ dhuna hota ghanī asa hī hovata jaisa purī hari bīnai. (184)}\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{52} Entwistle, “The Cult of Krishna-Gopāl.”

\textsuperscript{53} Entwistle, “The Cult of Krishna-Gopāl,” 80.

\textsuperscript{54} Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das, 80. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
You and we should go there now and play the drum of victory.
At the place of divine bliss (Anandpur), Guru Prabhu established his command.
In that way they departed there and were on the move, they were celebrating.
They spent many years there and then a lakh of them took Kiratpur.
First, Prabhu came to the city of Kirat and there he made *kaṛāh prasād* and he was recognized by many.
There was also [we could also hear] the beating sound of shabad like clouds, as if the flute of Hari was in town.

Entwistle coined a productive term to understand this phenomenon. He suggests the term “pastoralization” to describe a process of “religious adaptation” by which literary communities use Krishnaite imagery to describe their own communities and their leaders and this process, which Entwistle suggests is not “directly governed by socio-political or socio-religious factors, but [is] the result of the desire for pastoral embellishment of devotional literature and ritual. The strategies belong to the realm of rhetoric, aesthetics, and psychology.”

When Guru Gobind Singh is referred to as Rama, Krishna, or Hari, it is less because Kuir Singh portrays the Tenth Guru “as a Hindu incarnation,” as argues Hans, than that he chose to make certain aesthetic choices to embellish the landscape around Guru Gobind Singh in the pastoral mode, the same way Nagaridas does in his work. If we look again at the example of the description of Guru Gobind Singh at Paonta Sahib, the associations with Krishna are explicit:

*saratā nikaṭa ravaja bhara sohata/sīma nīra sundara mana mohata/

---

57 Entwistle, “The Cult of Krishna-Gopāl.”
(They were) near the beautiful river Ravi. The water was dark and beautiful like Syama/Krishna, capturing the mind. The way in which the Guru performs millions of wondrous acts, how can various poets describe it?

The description of the Guru indulging in leisurely activities such as hunting, writing, organizing festivities and collective meals, as well as singing sessions at Paonta Sahib, resonates with that bucolic environment of Krishna in Braj. In addition, the description of the Braj region as a space where “time is suspended”, as Entwistle has described in relation to some poems of Nagaridas that incorporate elements of the Krishna lore, is akin to the description of the forest at Paonta Sahib where the Guru resided from 1685-88. That suspension of time is expressed by Kuir Singh in expressions such as tām kānnana maim prabhā nīta vāsī/In that forest, the Guru/Prabhu dwelled eternally/ The Guru and his congregation are also portrayed in a rustic environment that is in contrast with the well-travelled, busy, and urbane Guru often described as meeting far-away congregations.

3.3 Heterodoxy or situational identity

Why has Kuir Singh’s gurbilās been classified as heterodox by some commentators? How can we understand this discomfort with the presence of “Hindu” terms in texts perceived as Sikh today and what does it mean to think about a text as being “heterodox”? In his research about the seventeenth-century Sikh notion of militancy, Syan has shown how historians of
precolonial Sikh history still read the past through the lenses of the category of *doxa*.\textsuperscript{62} Scholars of the early Sikh tradition, suggests Syan, have generally used sources that pertain to the mainstream or orthodox Sikh tradition and hence, have constructed a selective history based on those sources and framed through categories such as “orthodox”, “heterodox”, and “unorthodox”. According to him, this categorization has led to a limited understanding of the past based on limited sources considered “orthodox”, dismissing other sources from non-mainstream/marginal groups and movements. For instance, in the seventeenth century, texts attributed to Miharvan have not been seriously appreciated in the writing of history as Miharvan has been viewed as leading an heterodox group challenging the guruship of the sixth Sikh Guru, Guru Hargobind.\textsuperscript{63} Syan argues that the division between orthodox and heterodox groups within the Sikh tradition supports today’s orthodox community.\textsuperscript{64} Thinking about a religious tradition in relation to other cultural milieus does not threaten the way people identify themselves. Acknowledging that most of the Sikh literature written in the early modern period was produced in Brajbhasha and contains images of divinities today associated with Hindu mythology is not a statement about the boundaries of the tradition or people’s religious identity. While Brajbhasha emerged as a devotional and literary language in the context of Krishna worship in the sixteenth century, it became a *lingua franca* in North India beyond the Krishnaite context and was used in court settings, in religious and artistic milieus in in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Using Brajbhasha, and in the context of this chapter, using Vaishnava imagery, is akin to using English today in Vancouver. For many people, English is not a first language used at home and

\textsuperscript{62} Syan, *Early Sikh Historiography*, 146.

\textsuperscript{63} Syan, *Early Sikh Historiography*.

\textsuperscript{64} Syan, *Early Sikh Historiography*, 146.
in their private lives. English is used in public institutions and using English does not put into
question one’s cultural or religious identity.

3.4 Kuir Singh’s gurbilās’s articulation of Sikh doctrinal and ethical elements

While Kuir Singh uses literary forms and devices such as language, metaphors,
vignettes, meters, that locate him within a cultural world that is not considered to be
uniquely “Sikh” today by some representatives of orthodoxy, he very well articulates
core doctrinal and ethical elements that are pervasive within the Guru Granth Sahib and
other authoritative early texts. First, at the very beginning of the text, the description of
the divine as being the creator of everything, transcendent and immanent, indescribable,
and eternal is very close to what we find in the mul mantar or the first mantra, as well as
within Guru Nanak’s Japji Sahib in which the divine is described. While the two
descriptions are not similar word for word, conceptually, they resonate in various ways:

\[\text{binavo ādi purakha kartārā/jina yaha kino sagala pasārā//}\\
\text{acuta eka anika ghaṭa vāsī/alakha purakha ko lakhai su tāśi//1//}\\
\text{gagana bhūma jala tata prakāsai/sagala srisaṭi mahi kīna nivāsai//}\\
\text{logana ko iha bidha bhrama kai kai/nirakhata āpi niāro hvai kai//}\\
\text{dānava deva phaninda banāi/kinnara jacha race adhikāī/}\\
\text{baḍe baḍe moni brata dhārī/kaï kalapa jiha japata gudārī//}^{65}\\

I bow down to the supreme being creator, the one who made/created
everything//
The eternal one dwells in many bodies, this invisible being cannot be seen
by anyone//1//
[It] manifest as the sky, earth, water, matter, abiding in all creation//

---

65 Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das, 63. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
People are deluded in this way that they perceive themselves to be separate. 

[It] created the demons, gods, Sheshnag and the Nagas, and many celestial musicians (kinnara) and demi-gods (jacha).

Each great sage take vows, and they perform recitations and pass through many ages.

The first two verses describe the divine as being responsible for creating the universe and all living and non-living beings. It is designated as the supreme being creator (ādi purakh kartārā) in the first verse of this benedictory stanza (magalācaraṇ) as well as in the mul mantar (kartā purakh) and elsewhere in the Guru Granth Sahib in verses attributed to Guru Nanak, Guru Ram Das, and Guru Arjan. The term is also used by the non-Guru poets called bhagats whose verses are included in the Guru Granth Sahib, such as Kabir, Bhatt Bhika, and Bhatt Mathura. The conception of the divine as being omniscient, immanent and transcendent is a core doctrinal element that is pervasive in the Guru Granth Sahib. While Kuir Singh alternates between saguna (conceived with attributes) and nirguna (conceived without attributes) descriptions of the divine within his text, in the second segment of the very first verse of this benedictory verse, he praises a divinity that is omniscient yet invisible which corresponds to a nirguna description of the divine. The divine resides in many bodies (anika ghaṭa vāsī), in all creation (sagala srisāti mahī), and is manifest in the sky, earth, water, and matter (gagana bhūma jala tata prakāsai). This verse also puts forward a doctrine of non-dualism by stating that people are deluded when they think that they are separate from the

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66 Dhavan discusses this idea in her monograph (2011).
divine (logana ko iha bidha bhrama kai kai/nirakhata āpi niāro hvai kai). Kuir Singh has been described as subscribing to the philosophy of non-dualism of Advaita Vedanta by scholars like Dhavan and Singh. According to Dhavan, “[it] would appear that the advaita (non-dual) reframing of the Tenth Guru in both saguna (with attributes) and nirguna (without attributes) forms of bhakti were appealing to men such as Koer Singh.”

This magalācaraṇ is also interesting in that it clearly locates the Sikh divine beyond any gods of the Hindu mythology. Indeed, the Sikh divine created gods (deva), demi-gods (jacha), demons, (dānava), nagas (phaninda), and celestial musicians (kinnara). In the following verse, the divine is also described as having created Shiva and Brahma: caturā nana mukha cāra sukare/pūta pāṇca khaṭa tiha sukhadhare/[They] made the four faces of the four-faced one [Brahma], and the five and six (faced) sons. So Kuir Singh espouses Sikh doctrinal and ethical elements that are well articulated in the mul mantar and Guru Nanak’s Japji Sahib, which embody Sikh’s vision of the divine.

In the last chapter of Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das, Kuir Singh quotes a gauṛī vār of the fourth Guru, Guru Ram Das, from the Guru Granth Sahib to describe what morning ritual routine that a Sikh who perceive themselves as Sikh of the True Guru should perform:

\[
gura satigura kā jo sikhu akhāe so bhalake uṭhi harināmu dhiāvai//
udamu kare bhalake parabhārī isanānu kare amritisari nāvai//
upadesi guru hari hari japu jāpai sabhi kila vikha papa dokha lahi jāvai//
phiri caṛe divasu gura bāṇī gāvai bahadiā uṭhadiā harināmu dhiāvai//
jo sāsi girāsi dhiāe merā hari hari so gura sikhu guru māna bhāvai//
jisa no daiālā hovai merā suāmī tisu gura sikha guru upadesu suṇāvai//
\]

67 Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks, 163.
One who calls themselves a Sikh of the Guru, the true Guru, wakes up in the morning and meditates on the name of Hari//
When they wake up in the morning, they bathe and clean themselves in the pool of nectar.69
Following the teachings of the Guru, they will repeat Hari Hari. All sins, evils, and pain will be erased//
Then, when the sun rises, they sing the Word of the Guru; seated or standing, they will meditate on the name of Hari.
One who meditates (on) my Hari Hari with every breath, they become accepted as a gursikh//
That one who has compassion for my suāmī, that gursikh tells the teachings of the Guru.

We also learn about the path to liberation towards the end of the Japji. He also describes the importance of the Name (nām) and of the practice of meditation on the Name (nām simran) in order to attain liberation (muktī). In Guru Nanak’s poetry, the nām is often compared to an ocean that is boundless and that represents the ultimate divine reality, and only by repeating the nām can one access this ultimate reality.70 The nām is boundless and without form or attributes; it can only be experienced, but not made concrete or limited or even represented in visual or material forms. The nām, like the divine order (hukam) is internal, but unrealized or unexperienced due to the presence in our human heart (man) of five emotions or principles that

68 Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāshāhī Das, 265-66. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
69 This could also be read as “When they wake up in the morning, they bathe and clean themselves in Amritsar.”
70 Hawley and Juergensmeyer, Songs of the Saints, 74.
must be eradicated in order to perceive the divine order (hukam) that will lead human beings to liberation, as expressed by the fifth Guru, Guru Arjan. These five emotions are 1) the ego (haumai); 2) kām (which is an excessive focus on sexuality); 3) anger (krodh); 4) greed (lobh); and 5) attachment to worldly things (moh):

O [emotional attachment], invincible god whose power overpowers [even] the bravest heroes.

71 GGS, 1358.
[You] infatuate birds, animals, humans, gods, celestial musicians, and demigods, Nanak, greet the Creator, the One, and take shelter within God.

O lust, you forget people in hell and you make them wander through many births. You take away thoughts gone in all three worlds and destroy good conduct such as murmured recitation and penance,

You only [give] a little bit of joy, you make [people] weak and restless, and you are reabsorbed within the high and low,

The Saadh Sangat removes your fear, O Nanak, through the lord,

O anger, you are the root of the Kaliyuga, compassion never arises [in you].

All the sinful living beings reside in you who make them dance like monkeys,

In your company, people become low and are punished by the messenger of death,

O the one who removes pain from the world, O compassionate Prabhu, Nanak protects us all,

O greed, companion of the great, your waves delude many,

You make them run and wander around in many ways and directions,

You have no respect for friends, deities, relatives, mother or father,

You make them do evil deeds, eat what they should not eat.

Save me, save me, Nanak and my swami and the lord.

O ego, you are the root of birth and death and the soul of sin,

You abandon friends, give power to enemies, and expand the world of delusion,

You make living beings come and go until they are exhausted, you delude them in joy and pain,

You make them wander in the wilderness of doubts, you make them face incurable diseases,

The only doctor is the great lord paramesvara, O Nanak recites, har har hare.

These five emotions constitute a wall that prevents human beings from perceiving the divine order (hukam). These five emotions are also responsible for creating the duality in the human-divine relationship that is so characteristic of bhakti. How do we get rid of these emotions? One way that is emphasized in the teachings of the Gurus is by repeating the nām
(nām simran). In addition to overcoming the ego, excessive sexuality, anger, greed, and attachment, the repetition and the meditation on the nām also erases karmic traces. Shackle and Mandair explain that:

It provides a means for the individual to actively participate in the world and to change whatever destiny had been inscribed onto the self as it passed through different existences and life forms accumulating karmic traces. The experience of the Name attained through the constant practice of simran erases the production of karmic traces thereby transforming the mechanical existence of the manmukh into the spontaneous activity of a gurmukh.72

mukh means “facing” so a manmukh is someone who faces the man which is where are located the five emotions or principles. A gurmukh, on the other hand, is someone who is turned towards the Guru. The Guru is a bridge that allows a devotee to cross the ocean of existence or samsara. The Guru also embodies the divine world and it is through the Guru that one can achieve liberation (mukti). This is what makes the Guru Granth Sahib, for Sikhs, not a book in the material sense of the word, but an embodiment of the word (bānī) that if meditated upon and repeated, can lead to spiritual liberation (mukti). Guru Nanak exposes the path to liberation in five steps (pañj khand). He describes the last step as a state of bliss (sacckhand) that occurs when the devotee is one with the divine and sees themselves free from their karmas:

saca khaṇḍi vasai niraṅkāru/
kari kari vekhai nadari nihāla/
tithai khanda maṇḍala varabhaṇḍa/
je ko kathai ta anta/
tithai loa loa ākāra/
jiwa jiva hukamu tivai tiva kāra/
vikhai vigasai kari vīcāru/

nānakā kathānā karaṛā sāru//

In the realm of truth abides the Formless One,
Having seen, looked, and watched [it],
There, in that realm, [is] a circular universe,
To which there is no end describing it,
There are people, people, and forms,
Each of them operates through the command,
[the One] sees and rejoices having contemplated [them]
Nānak says: to describe [this] is hard like iron.

This state of bliss is thus not attainable on one’s own but when accompanied and surrounded by the congregation (saṅgat), a principle that is also echoed in Kuir Singh’s gurbilās.

These doctrinal elements described by Guru Nanak in the Japji Sahib appear in various places in Kuir Singh’s text. For example, in the beginning, Kuir Singh talks about the discipline of the Gurmukh:

\[
gurmukhi hvai dhiāe je koī/śrī hari jā ko pāvai soi/
dhanna dhanna satigura karatārā/kīna javana yahi pantha sudhārā//
srī asayujam kahu pragaṭa dikhāyo/gurmukhi gāḍī rāha calāyo/
aise satigura kī bheṭa su bhaī/kavana basata kahu dharīai kahu jāi//
\]

When one meditates, [they] become gurmukh [and they] receive the honourable Hari, Praise, praise the True Guru, the Creator who created this Panth,
The honourable Creator is revealed, and sets the vehicle of the gurmukh on the path,
In this way, the offering to the True Guru is pleasing, what should one wear? where to go?

\[73\] GGS 8.

\[74\] Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das, 1. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
In addition to subscribing to doctrinal elements articulated by Sikh Gurus in the Guru Granth Sahib, we also find in Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* reiterations of Sikh practices such as the repetition of the Name (*nām simran*), the communal singing of songs (*kīrtan*), the importance of service (*seva*), and the sharing of food (*laṅgar*). These are often described as a series of activities performed when the Guru is surrounded by his congregation. For example, right before the battle of Bhangani, Guru Gobind Singh describes something about an eternal battle and the Kaliyuga:

\[
\begin{align*}
puna \text{ sura ko } \text{ taba aise kahā/pantha } \text{ khālsā } \text{ kara sukhā lahā/} \\
\text{ kaṛāhā prasādu karai tuma soī/tumhi sugandha sadā nita lehī/} \\
\text{ nāma japai saba muna sukhā pāvai/puni āvai gura musaka lakhāvai/} \\
\text{ hamai loga bripa khāvata nāhī/ turaka khāta sada nīca lakhāhī/} \\
\text{ kalyāna karā hamarā mukha lāya/ tau gura kahai baina sata bhāva/} \\
\text{ mo sikha nāma bhajai taji bharamā/ karata bhoja hari sati ko maramā//} \\
\text{ rupe sama rūpā lai khāhī/gājara rūpai bhoja lakhāhī/} \\
\text{ jabai khālsā dhara mainḥ hoī/prathamaim dukha pekhegā soī/} \\
\text{ puna jaba rāja dilī mainḥ kara hī/pāvaim sukhā so akāla ucara hī/} \\
\text{ vāhigurū kī phate bulāvai/sasatra asatra pūjai sukhā pāvai//} \\
\text{ japa harirāsa kīratana gāvai/nāma japai mana tana sukhā pavai/} \\
\text{ sansā hata jāvo nija ainā/tuma ko sukhā hovai nita cainā//}^{75}
\end{align*}
\]

Then, to the gods, he said in this way: When the Khalsa will be made, joy will be obtained,

You have made the *kaṛāh prasād*, and you will forever take its fragrance.

Reciting the Name, sages gain happiness. Then the Guru came and was seen smiling.

We do not eat like brahmans, and when the Turks eat, it is seen as lowly,

Cause good fortune, that will bring joy to us. The guru replied true words endowed with good emotion:

---

*75* Kuir Singh, *Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das*, 77. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
My sikhs worship the Name and abandon delusion. Dining brings them close to the heart of the true Hari.

On the silver plate, they took the onions and ate, seeing the carrots, they ate.76

When the Khalsa will come to be on earth, at first, it will see pain, Then, when it rules in Delhi, they will forever obtain joy.

They say “vahiguru ki fateh”, worship their arms and weapons and obtain joy.

They recite Hari Ram and sing kirtans. They repeat the Nam and obtain joy in their mind and body. Their doubts and worries are all gone. Joy will will forever bring peace of mind.

In this rich passage, we find mentioned various principles that are central to Sikh tenets as articulated in the Guru Granth Sahib. Here, Kuir Singh reports Guru Gobind Singh’s words to his congregation right before the battle of Bhangani. The practice of making karāh prasād, repeating and worshipping the Name (nām japai and nām bhajai), preparing food (kartā bhoj), abandoning illusion (taji bharmā), reciting vahiguru ki fateh, worshipping arms and weapons (sastra asatra pūjai), reciting the Name of God/Hari Ram (jap harirām), and singing congregational songs (kīrtan gāvai). This communal atmosphere of religious practices performed in the company of other members of the sangat is also echoed in the Guru Granth Sahib. For example:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{simari simari suāmi prabhu apunā nikaṭi na āvai jāma//} \\
\text{mukati baikuṇṭha sādha kī saṅgati jana pāio hari kā dhāma//}^{77}
\end{align*}
\]

Remembering, remembering my Prabhu-Swami the god of death does not come near.

76 Here the editor thinks rupe refers to silver and rūpā refers to onions. It is unclear what connections Ashok makes here and for what reasons he does not think rupe and rūpā refer to “form” here.

77 GGS, 682.
The liberation of *Vaikuṇṭha* is found in the *sādh saṅgat*, a devotee finds Hari’s place.

Here, Guru Arjan expresses that liberation is found in the company of other members of the congregation. Elsewhere in the Guru Granth Sahib, the fifth Guru expresses ways and practices to perform with the congregation in order to achieve liberation and cross over the ocean of rebirth, such as singing congregational songs (*kīrtan*) and repeating the name of God (*nam simran/japai*):

\[
sādhasaṅgi kiratana phalu pāiā/
jama kā mārgu drisaṭi na āiā/\textsuperscript{78}
\]

I have obtained the fruit of the kirtan in the Saadh Sangat
I do not look at the path of death anymore.

\[
sundara suāmī dhāma bhagataha bisrāma āsā lagi jīvate jīu/
mani tane galatāna simarata prabha nāma hari amritu pīvate jīu/\textsuperscript{79}
\]

The place of my *suāmī* is beautiful, a resting place for the devotees who live hoping,
[Their] minds and bodies are plunged in the remembrance of the name of Prabhu and drink the nector of Hari.

These brief passages illustrate that the question of whether or not Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* should be classified as a heterodox text due to its usage of ‘hinduized’ imagery is not obvious. Kuir Singh does articulate a clear modality of Sikh subjectivity that is

\textsuperscript{78} GGS, 197.

\textsuperscript{79} GGG, 80.
coherent with core Sikh doctrinal and ethical elements that pervade the central scriptures, the Guru Granth Sahib.

The notion of encounter in relation to the process of identity formation invites more comparisons beyond the literary world by including the world of visual art. Flood’s work, discussed in detail in Chapter One, utilizes material culture as a primary site for the reading of encounters, for example. The combination of visual and textual materials in the study of the early modern Indic period constitutes a major recent development in South Asian Studies, as argued by Nadia Cattoni and Maya Burger, integrating the previously quite separate fields of art history and textual studies.80 Heidi Pauwels, for instance, provides a striking example of the value of creating rapprochements between textual studies and art history in her work on poetry and paintings from Kishangarh.81 According to her, it is crucial to adopt what she calls a “synoptic process of reading evidence” from both disciplines in order to open up new avenues to research and understand the early modern period more fully. Likewise, in relation to the Sikh world, such connections between Sikh literature and visual art are critical to imagining the Sikh world beyond Punjab. A “synoptic reading” of visual and literary portraits of Guru Gobind Singh in a selection of paintings and gurbilās texts is a first step for allowing this conversation to occur.


3.5 Literary and visual networks: a world of encounters

Sikh historiography often describes the eighteenth century in the Punjab as a period of political instability and artistic void. Some authors go as far as claiming that the eighteenth century “has very little to offer” in terms of artistic production. In contrast, the nineteenth century is often viewed as a period of Sikh artistic and literary revival with the establishment of Ranjit Singh’s kingdom in 1799. Although it is true that a significant number of Sikh visual and literary works were produced in the nineteenth century, recent scholarship has shown that the eighteenth century was far from being artistically unproductive. North India was home to centres of literary and artistic activities in which Sikhs were actively partaking. One major example of such a centre was the darbār of the tenth Sikh Guru.

It is generally accepted in scholarship about the Sikhs that in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Guru Gobind Singh held a court or darbār modeled on the Mughal imperial court and was active in patronizing art and literature. The darbār of the tenth Guru shared similar idioms of power with Indo-Persianate courts and was active in patronizing art and

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83 Mcleod, “The Development of Sikh Art,” 231.


86 This argument is articulated by Louis Fenech in Fenech, The Darbar of the Sikh Gurus.
The influence of Persian language and culture had been prominent in North India since the eleventh century when Mahmud of Ghazna founded the Ghaznavid dynasty and made his capital city, Ghazna, an important centre for Persian culture, up to the nineteenth century when Urdu along with English took the place of Persian as the languages of power. While Persian was used during the Delhi Sultanate period (1206-1526), it became increasingly used in literary and political spheres by the sixteenth century when Akbar made Persian the language of the state.

According to Fenech, Guru Gobind Singh’s darbār developed in three stages. First, it was set at Paunta between 1685 and 1688. Second, Guru Gobind Singh moved his darbār to Makhowal where he founded Anandpur which became an active center of literary activities filled with poets and writers who migrated from different horizons in search of patronage. When Guru Gobind Singh was forced by Mughal authorities to leave Anandpur in 1704 he went to the Lakkhi Jungle where many poets are said to have followed him to form an itinerant court. The court of the tenth Guru at Paunta, Anandpur, and in the Lakkhi jungle was active in producing literature. While most modern Sikh cultural production is today written in Punjabi, in early modern North India we find a wide range of texts written in Persian, Punjabi and Brajbhasha. The literature produced during the life of Guru Gobind Singh and following his death in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – including gurbilās - was mostly produced in Brajbhasha.

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87 Fenech, *The Darbar of the Sikh Gurus*.


89 Mann, “Sources for the Study,” 232, 247, and 266.

Guru Gobind Singh's court and its use of various transcultural idioms of power have been interpreted by some as reflecting his will to make a political claim of sovereignty over territories controlled by the Mughals or the hill chiefs. Louis Fenech, for instance, argues that by using imperial idioms of power at his court, the tenth Guru was making a political claim of sovereignty over territories controlled by the Mughals or the hill chiefs. However, as Murphy points out, although Fenech argues in one sense that spiritual and temporal power and authority reside in Guru Gobind Singh’s darbār, he also, in fact, claims that by enacting the divine darbār on earth, the tenth Guru was not making a political claim challenging Mughal power under Aurangzeb and the hill chiefs but rather was asserting his power and authority exclusively over Anandpur, and that his was a substantive critique of earthly, political power.91

The early eighteenth century was marked by the gradual decline of the Mughal Empire and the rise of contestant groups and successor regimes of which Sikhs were part, as discussed in Chapter One. In this precarious political and social context, the formation of Guru Gobind Singh’s court has been perceived as a statement of political autonomy or even a claim to sovereignty towards competing groups.92 Consequently, the relationship between power and culture within the tenth Guru’s court has been commonly understood through the lens of legitimation theory. According to Pollock, legitimation theory has been a major obstacle to understanding the relationship between power and culture in early modern India, as seen in

91 See Murphy, The Materiality of the Past, 74, notes 21 and 92. We also see this position articulated in Indu Banga, “Raj-Khalsa: Ideology and Praxis,” Journal of Punjab Studies, 15, 1 and 2 (2008): 34; and in Mann, Sikhism, 49 and 122.

92 Anne Murphy discusses the multivalent ways in which notions of political power and sovereignty are articulated in Sikh contexts. See Anne Murphy, Murphy, “Thinking beyond Aurangzeb,” and Anne Murphy, “A Millennial Sovereignty? Recent Works on Sikh Martial and Political Cultures in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” History of Religions 55, 1 (2015).
chapter one. This discussion is relevant to the context of Guru Gobind Singh’s court, for it allows us to see that the presence of idioms of power should not be reduced to a unilateral logic of political instrumentality. The court of the tenth Guru was shaped by a complex interaction of political, religious, social, and cultural priorities which are manifest in Kuir Singh’s gurbilās, and the role of the literary in relation to the political may be more complex than legitimation theory allows. In other words, cultural production was not used at Guru Gobind Singh’s darbār for the sole purpose of acquiring more political power.

The implications of the idea of the "court" — whose political function has been predominantly emphasized in scholarship about Sikh courts — can be interpreted in different ways and do not translate the more textured concept of darbār which is best rendered by notions such as “gathering” and “audience” rather than “court” alone, as suggested by Murphy. Louis Fenech has argued that Guru Gobind Singh's darbār was considerably shaped by “the whole grammar” of the Mughal court and of the Indo-Persianate courtly culture. A major feature of this was Guru Gobind Singh's patronage of court poets and writers:

Put simply, the Sikh Gurus and their disciples embraced the very ‘grammar’ of the Mughal court, its rituals, symbols, and ceremonies to convey power and authority as would be understood in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; became adept in its use; and adapted it accordingly to reflect their particular situations and fulfil their own unique and multiple interests. Clearly this was no mere mimicry nor was it simply the mechanical functionalism of ‘legitimation’.

Fenech’s claim that the tenth Guru’s darbār was shaped by Indo-Persianate courtly symbolism does not imply that the Guru and his court attendants were passive agents in this

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95 Murphy, The Materiality of the Past, 75.
96 Fenech, The Darbar of the Sikh Gurus, 10.
encounter. The Mughal court did not “influence” Guru Gobind Singh and his court attendants in the sense that it was imposing its norms in a one-way process. As it is the case with other subimperial courts or contexts during the Mughal period, and as Vishakha Desai argues in the context of the relationship between Rajput and Mughal painting, the relationship between the Mughal court and the Sikh darbār should not be framed as a relation of unilateral power:

The discussion of the relationship between Mughal and Rajput painting, especially in the seventeenth century, is often framed in terms of the influence of the more powerful Mughal court on the smaller Rajput kingdom governed by the Hindu warrior-rulers, who came in the Mughal orbit either intentionally or by force.97

As is the case with the relationships between Mughal and Rajput painting, the notions of influence and power cannot be defined unilaterally with regards to encounters between the Mughal empire and political or artistic groups. In other words, the Mughal empire was not imposing its idioms of power unilaterally to passive agents who could at best resist. As Flood suggests, we should go beyond what Clifford frames as a “dichotomy between ‘absorption by the other or resistance to the other’”98. The result of encounters between a more powerful and a less powerful entity does not result in a complete assimilation or a complete rejection of the idioms of the powerful. The result of such encounters involves multiple negotiations. As it will briefly explored in the third section of this chapter in the discussion on the notions of repetition and innovation, painters and writers made conscious choices in various political and cultural fields. For instance, painters of portraits of the tenth Guru made conscious choices regarding style and iconography and were not unilaterally influenced by Mughal idioms of power. Aitken mentions

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Vishakha Desai’s proposal to define the relationship between a more powerful and a less powerful entity in terms of “selective adaptation” instead of influence:

Vishakha Desai addressed the failure of Mughal painting fully to influence Rajasthani painting by substituting for “influence” the concept of “selective adaptation.” Instead of the passivity implied by the word “influence”, “selective adaptation” suggested conscious choice. The Rajputs, Desai argued, accepted only those elements of Mughal art that were appropriate to their culture; in other words, they were agents in the mediation of styles.99

These writers and artists were evolving in an environment in which they were exposed to different stylistic, iconographic and thematic influences while nevertheless keeping their agency to create texts and paintings reflecting their values and aspirations. In other words, artists and writers in the early modern period were not simply products of their environment.

3.6 Portraits of Guru Gobind Singh and their relation to Sikh art

The world of cultural exchange and mobility in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries opens the question of how we understand identity boundaries. What does it mean to produce Sikh art in a world of shared symbols and representations? McLeod, Goswamy, Kavita Singh and Susan Stronge have all highlighted the difficulty of defining what constitutes Sikh art.100 According to McLeod, Sikh art has been defined along five lines: as produced by Sikh artists; on a territory governed by Sikhs; representing Sikh subjects; and/or ordered by a Sikh patron; or showing a style that can be recognized as Sikh. He claims the beginnings of Sikh art can be traced to the seventeenth century with the production of illustrated manuscripts depicting episodes of the life of Guru Nanak, the janam-sākhīs. McLeod states that the illustrations found in the janam-sākhīs were produced by artists who were highly influenced by Sufi iconography


and style. He suggests that Sikh art should be defined by focusing “on content rather than on style.”\textsuperscript{101} According to him, unlike content, style is borrowed and “the purpose for which it is borrowed is, however, distinctively Sikh and it soon generates its own iconographic apparatus.”\textsuperscript{102} McLeod claims that the eighteenth century was almost entirely devoid of Sikh art production. According to him, it is only in the nineteenth century under Ranjit Singh’s rule and following his conquest of the Punjab Hills that the development of a relation between Pahari art and Sikh patronage started to emerge challenging the boundaries of the definition of Sikh art: “when Ranjit Singh carried his authority into the hills Guler was the first hill state to be formally annexed and it was Guler which supplied the most distinguished Pahari contribution to traditional Sikh art.\textsuperscript{103}

It is from the 1730s that, according to Goswamy, the artists in the Punjab hills became progressively influenced by Mughal art. The increasing Mughal influence in the Punjab hills, he argues, cannot be explained by theories of immigration according to which, families of artists trained at the Mughal court in the plains would have moved to the Punjab hills following Nadir Shah’s invasion in 1739.\textsuperscript{104} While on the one hand, McLeod highlights the problem of defining Sikh art, on the other, Goswamy points out the need to revise the wrong assumption that the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Mcleod, “The Development of Sikh Art,” 230.
\item Mcleod, “The Development of Sikh Art,” 230.
\item Mcleod, “The Development of Sikh Art,” 234.
\item “The intriguing thing, however, is that there can be no denying the arrival of an influence from outside in the hills and this influence came most probably from the Mughal court. I am inclined to think that the influence did not arrive through the migration of a family of refugee artists: it started becoming important because of the awakening of some sensibilities in the hills to the charm of the naturalistic style of several paintings that \textit{about this time} appeared in the hills. The agency through which these paintings arrived at this time is not known: it may have been a hill raja who brought them with him from the plains. The contacts with the plains were many and we have at least two independent sources of evidence which lead us to believe that the hill Rajas were aware of this kind of paintings being done in the plains, especially at the Mughal courts.” Goswamy, “Pahari Painting,” 33.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
category of painting in the Punjab is often understood to be predominantly Sikh paintings produced at the Lahore court in the nineteenth century. He argues, however, that painting in the Punjab started earlier as a category that includes Sikh painting but cannot be reduced to it. There is evidence showing that the production of painting in Punjab covers a range of themes that are not associated with the Sikh tradition such as Heer and Puran Bhagat.

The next section will focus on examining a selection of portraits of Guru Gobind Singh and will attempt to understand how portraits of him function in similar ways as the way the Tenth Guru is portrayed in gurbilās literature. On the one hand, these portraits tie together patrons, artists and viewers into “affective communities,” to use Dhavan's terminology, who share love for and devotion to the memory of Guru Gobind Singh and his court. On the other hand, the “Mughalized” portraits of Guru Gobind Singh illustrate a need to commemorate and glorify, for members of these communities, the figure of the Guru: as Goswamy has argued, “It is easy to understand this interest in portraits, for personal achievement needed in some ways to be celebrated, and in a warring unstable world, ephemeral life was seen as worthy of being commemorated.” In this way, the portraits act as a visual parallel to the textual gurbilās.

3.7 Denoting power in Guru Gobind Singh’s portraits

The portraits of Guru Gobind Singh consulted for this case study were found in various catalogues and are dated from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is not the goal of this section to assess where groups of painters differentiate themselves by making stylistic choices


106 Goswamy, “Sikh Patronage of Painting,” 98. “There is for instance that group of inscribed and dated paintings with clear ‘Punjabi’ themes, like Heer, heroine of one of the classics of Punjabi literature, and Puran Bhagat, a character from a well-loved Punjab legend.”

reflecting their values and aspirations nor to trace the historical trajectory of each individual painting. Since I rely on catalogues and since the information about each painting is limited, I confine my attention to portraits of the tenth Guru containing Mughal symbols of power. Despite the fact that there are limits to what can be concluded from such a restricted set of data, I would like to start a conversation between the literary world of the *gurbilās* literature and the visual world of portraits of Guru Gobind Singh in order to gain a better understanding of how visual and textual cultural exchanges, in tandem, operate in the context of the eighteenth and nineteenth century North Indian Sikh tradition.

Numerous portraits of Guru Gobind Singh can be found in the exhibition catalogue *Sikh Miniatures in Chandigarh Museum*, with a few other portraits in other catalogues.\(^{108}\) All of the portraits consulted for the purpose of this section represent the tenth Guru in the visual language of the Mughal court symbolizing power and authority as well as denoting courtliness, masculinity and warrior values. In many portraits, Guru Gobind Singh is represented as riding a horse, either hunting or in a procession,\(^ {109}\) sometimes followed by attendants. When the tenth Guru is followed by attendants, a person carrying a fly-whisk, a peacock fan or an umbrella—all very common symbols representing power and royalty\(^ {110}\)—is always standing close to the Guru. These images and symbols also appear frequently to portray Guru Gobind Singh in the *gurbilās*


In Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās*, Guru Tegh Bahadur is described in kingly terms in an episode when he is returning to Patna to meet his newborn son, Guru Gobind Singh:

\[
\text{taṃbū kanāta mayane sucāra su jājama au satreňja sudhārī/}
\text{syāmndana pālakī bājara umaṭa anekana ūpara saujahi bhārī/}
\text{kaṅcana āyadhā ke gana bhāntani khaṅjara tegana bugada kaṭarī/}
\text{mola ananta jīne gana nanā kachu topa tamacana sipara kaṭarī/}^{111}
\]

Lovely within the tent walls, playing chess on the adorned carpet
A chariot, a sedan chair, horse and camel, saddled with provisions of all kinds
Golden weapons of different kinds: a dagger, sword, long knife, and waist dagger
Endless value, countless: canon, pistols, shield, waist dagger.

In this passage, we find images that echo the display of Mughal symbolic power: the adorned carpet, the chariot (*pālkī*), and weapons made of gold.

Another recurrent symbol is the presence of a falcon\(^{112}\), traditionally appearing in portraits of Mughal emperors symbolizing power and according to some, sovereignty\(^{113}\). The tenth Guru is also often pictured with a halo\(^{114}\) around his head, another convention of Mughal portraiture\(^{115}\). In other portraits, Guru Gobind Singh is shown seated in a *darbār*, on a royal canopy, surrounded by his sons or devotees or court attendants. In many of the portraits consulted, Guru Gobind Singh is portrayed in a warrior attire, carrying a sword, bow and arrows,

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\(^{111}\) Kuir Singh, *Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das*, 17. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.

\(^{112}\) See Suwarcha Paul, see figures 2389, 2607, 2642, 3138, 2632; in Archer, *Paintings of the Sikhs*, 198 or in Stronge, *The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms*, 36.


\(^{115}\) Aitken, *The Intelligence of Tradition*, 115.
emphasizing the qualities of warriors highly praised in the period. According to Fenech, although these “mughalized portraits’ of non-Mughal figures such as Guru Gobind Singh and the paharī rajas were subjected to such Islamicate styles”, 116 they were nevertheless depicting figures that were highly recognizable. For instance, the painting *Guru Gobind Singh seated in royal regalia, fanned by courtier* could not be confused with a Mughal portrait due to its turban style that is associated with Rajput influence. 117 The “highly recognizable” aspect of these portraits relates to Aitken’s notion of “contextual portraits,” a genre of portraiture representing certain ideals and depicting recognizable figures involved in historical events such as “hunting, grappling with crazed elephants, attending entertainments and festivals, worshipping, going on procession, and assembling.” 118 These contextual portraits, according to Aitken, are timeless as well as not timeless. They are timeless in that they represent “ideals such as bravery, physical skill, strength, leadership, diplomacy, good taste, and devoutness” and they are not timeless in that they depict figures enacting these ideals at a precise moment in history:

What is timeless about these actions is that they represent abstract ideals, which are virtually universal, ideals such as bravery, physical skill, strenght, leadership, diplomacy, good taste, and devoutness. What is not timeless about these paintings is that they show rulers enacting their ideal qualities in real time. Enactment seems like a fine point, but inscriptions make a point of it, for in addition to dating event precisely, they often restate the moment-to-moment occurrence of these events.” 119

Not all of the portraits of Guru Gobind Singh consulted fall into the category of “contextual portraits” as they do not all date or indicate events precisely. Examples that would

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118 Aitken, *The Intelligence of Tradition*, 121.  
119 Aitken, *The Intelligence of Tradition*, 121.
fall into this category are portraits depicting scenes related to the creation of the Khalsa that are not dated historically\textsuperscript{120} but that are narrated in \textit{gurbilās} literature.\textsuperscript{121}

We learn from the catalogues that although these portraits of Guru Gobind Singh were produced by painters from different places at different points in time during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they all share the use of a Mughal language of power. Moved by their love, devotion and desire to glorify Guru Gobind Singh, the “affective communities”\textsuperscript{122} extended far beyond the tenth Guru’s court in space and in time. In fact, numerous portraits and numerous \textit{gurbilās} texts post-date Guru Gobind Singh’s death. This illustrates the continuity of the community through the memory of the tenth Guru through texts and material culture:\textsuperscript{123}

Examination of the formation of Sikh historical representations – material and literary – in the eighteenth century reveals that in the Sikh case the narration of the past as history was a means for the constitution of the community around the memory of the Guru, and that this past was substantiated both materially and textually in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a period of turbulence and uncertainty in Punjab as successor claims to sovereignty rose while Mughal power waned.\textsuperscript{124}

As discussed in relation to \textit{gurbilās} literature, portraits of Guru Gobind Singh are imbued with royal symbolism associated with the Mughal court. As previously seen, the “grammar” of the Mughal \textit{darbār} shaped subimperial courts, elite cultural production, and religious communities; among these was the Guru Gobind Singh’s \textit{darbār}.\textsuperscript{125} This “grammar” includes symbols of power and royalty that many painters from various backgrounds chose to use in their

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{120} See for instance figures 2601, 2606, 2632 and 2638 in Suwarcha Paul.
\item \textsuperscript{121} Kuir Singh. “khālsā panth dī racnā,” in Kuir Singh, \textit{Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das}, 108-120.
\item \textsuperscript{122} Dhavan, \textit{When Sparrows became Hawks}.
\item \textsuperscript{123} Murphy, \textit{The Materiality of the Past}.
\item \textsuperscript{124} Murphy, \textit{The Materiality of the Past}, 71-72.
\item \textsuperscript{125} Fenech, \textit{The Darbar of the Sikh Gurus}, 10.
\end{itemize}
portraits of important religious and royal figures of the period. In the context of the Sikh tradition, we can see such an influence at play from early on:

Early Sikh tradition significantly accepted and displayed a number of Mughal symbols denoting power and royalty and thus legitimacy and authority, for example, kettledrums (Pbi: nagārā; Per: naqqārah); tents (Per: khaimah, bārgāh); khil’ats or siropās (Per: sar o pā ‘[from] head to foot’; robes of honour), and the production of books to name but a few.126

Even though portraits of the tenth Guru shared a number of similar themes, ideals, elements of styles and iconography, they were not portraits of Akbar and the distinctions could be attributed to a difference in style. According to Goswamy, style—more than region—is the criterion we can use to understand what distinguishes a family of artists from another. And despite the major influence of Mughal art on artists in the Punjab hills, style was not static.

3.8 Imitation, repetition, and innovation

In the world of visual arts as much as in the world of literature, contemporary critics often judge the quality of a work based on whether or not the work is innovative. For example, in her research on the poet Kesavdas, Allison Busch points out how modern scholars of Hindi literature have been dismissive towards rīti literature for its supposed lack of innovative “newness”. Busch claims that the rīti poets’s reliance on Sanskrit literary system for the development of ritigranths is not contradictory with being innovative.127 In the same way, in the visual world, many painters have been dismissed due to their work being considered merely imitations of the work of their

126 Fenech, The Darbar of the Sikh Gurus, 4.

127 “The newness that we see in riti texts is not earth shaking – at least not by contemporary measurement. But it is a newness we should take seriously, by attempting to comprehend the logic and functioning of a fledgling branch of vernacular knowledge as it began to put forward increasingly strong claims to a separate existence from Sanskrit. Carving out a new domain of vernacular writing from a Sanskrit mold was not a process undertaken lightly; it engendered a range of anxieties about trangressing age-old language hierarchies. But alongside the uncertainties we hear unmistakable voice of strenght: an excitement about new literary and intellectual possibilities evident in the oft-repeated phrase of the riti poet-scholar, “I have composed this passage according to my own understanding.”” Busch, “The Anxiety of Innovation,” 56.
predecessors. Take for example Percy Brown who reflects an extreme position but a position that is not unique:

By constant repetition the student’s mind was saturated with the elements of his subject so that it became a part of his nature…such methods in art at least, would tend to crush all initiative and would so deaden the inventive faculties that it would produce nothing better than a mere copying machine, a soulless creature depending on the brains of his forefathers and relying in no sense on his own.128

Aitken and Goswamy argue against this position and claim that an artist’s training was not only the basis of style but also a requirement for innovation. Only an artist mastering the rules of his tradition could be consider worthy of praise by the rasika of his time. Innovation without mastering the tradition was worthless. Goswamy argues that even though every artist is trained to learn the family kalam/style, the artist was not bound to that style:

This is not to say that the kalam remained static or that the successive members of the family produced dead repetitions of an old formula from generation to generation; the styles were living things, dynamic and capable of change, depending upon both the ability and the inclination of individual artists.129

Although painters were often constrained by the parameters set by their patrons, they were not devoid of agency when it came to using different styles or elements of style. Of course painters were trained in a particular kalam but it did not mean that they were constrained to blindly reproduce the skills inherited in the family workshop. Aitken points out how:

Today, copying is the first step in a traditional South Asian painter’s training, and it probably always was. Until a painter became a recognized master, he looked back to the past and drew from it. When he became a master, like Bihzad or Miskin, he continued to acknowledge those from whom he had learned, but he also became a model for those to come. Even the greatest painter did not leave respect for the past behind, because his own


129 Goswamy and Fisher, Pahari Masters, 8.
greatness was founded in that respect. Indeed, South Asian painters sometimes painted under the names of revered painters of the past to honor their predecessors.130

As was the case for painters in early modern India, imitation in the world of literature was also “always a dynamic process”131 and never denied artists’ and writers’ agency.

The goal of this case study was to open a discussion between the literary world of gurbilās literature and the visual world of portraits of Guru Gobind Singh in the context of the eighteenth and nineteenth century North Indian Sikh tradition. I argued that patrons, artists and viewers who engaged in the visual world of Sikh portraiture formed an “affective community” in the same way that patrons, authors and devotees who participated in the world of gurbilās literature were also part of a literary “affective community.” While on the one hand, the gurbilās authors and audience were part of a wider Braj literary network, painters and viewers of portraits of the tenth Guru participated in a sociovisual community sharing, among other things, the use of Mughal symbols denoting power, symbols of a heroic ethos, as well as values of courtliness and masculinity. Painters and writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not passive agents in their encounter with the Mughal empire. Despite the major influence of the Mughal empire in artistic and political domains, painters and writers kept their agency to create texts and paintings reflecting their values and aspirations.

Exploring a different context and historical dynamic, Nile Green has argued that the appropriation of a language of power by marginal groups for recounting their own histories can be seen as a “twin process of hegemony and resistance”132 by which: “(…)
the adoption of common idioms and genres have made the histories of certain groups conform to the norms of others, while at the same time these commonalities have served to undermine certain forms of hegemony by disguising local social systems or cultural practices in the respectable genres and language of the powerful."\textsuperscript{133} A similar process may have been at play when we consider Kuir Singh’s choice to use Brajbhasha for the production of his \textit{gurbilās} and his pervasive use of Vaishnava motifs to describe Guru Gobind Singh. In a context where Sikhs were at the early stages of their identity formation, we can imagine how the use of Brajbhasha and of Vaishnava imagery—two dominant idioms in the wider religious and cultural context of the time—helped to locate the group’s history and its position in the larger sociopolitical world. Guru Gobind Singh's association with Vishnu may have helped to assert his position as spiritual and political leader in the wider cosmological and political world of the time and as a result, strengthen the foundations of the articulation of Khalsa Sikh identity.

\textsuperscript{133} Nile Green, “Idiom, Genre, and the Politics of Self-Description on the Peripheries of Persian,” 204.
Chapter 4: Literary geographies: imagining the broader world and the community

In the previous chapters, I have drawn connections between Kuir Singh’s gurbilās and examples of cultural worlds that are today imagined as being separate from the Sikh and Punjabi cultural world, such as the worlds of Braj martial poetry, Vaishnava representations, and Mughal symbolism in visual art. What I would like to do in this last chapter is to reflect on the notion of a broader world that I have been using throughout this dissertation. One more way to think about this broader world in which Sikhs participated, is to map how Kuir Singh imagined the Sikh landscape in his gurbilās. Kuir Singh’s mapping of Sikh landscapes and literary geographies reflects a telling example of how the Sikh world could be imagined beyond what is known today as the political territory of East Punjab, and in dynamic interface with multiple linguistic, literary, and religious traditions.

In this chapter, I examine how landscapes and literary geographies are imagined in Kuir Singh’s gurbilās in relation to the Sikh Gurus and to the communities that formed around the Gurus. I also interrogate how the travels of the Sikh Gurus, especially those of Guru Gobind Singh, and the emotional responses from communities wishing to connect with their Guru passing through or staying in their city, shape the notion of sacred space (tīrthā), and sketch by extension a sacred geography. To do so, I will look at three case studies or vignettes in Kuir Singh’s gurbilās which describe a Sikh landscape that included territories that are today not perceived as part of the Punjab-centered Sikh world:¹ Bihar (Patna), Rajasthan (Jaipur), and Uttar Pradesh (Ayodhya). While it is not the goal of this chapter to look closely at the specific composition of the social landscape imagined by Kuir Singh and which shaped the Sikh Panth in

¹ Except Patna where is located one of the five takhat, the Takhat Šrī Harimandar Jī Patnā Sāhib.
the late eighteenth century, it does examine how Kuir Singh’s mapping of the Tenth Guru’s travels allows us to discuss the relationship between space and community.

Guru Gobind Singh’s travels and encounters also exemplify the complex roles he played as spiritual leader and political figure and as an embodiment of the policy of mīrī-pīrī articulated by the sixth Guru, Guru Hargobind. Through a discussion of his travels and encounters with powerful figures, I also wish to further illustrate how Kuir Singh’s gurbilās represents a textual microcosm that reveals the complexity of Guru Gobind Singh’s “court” and how it falls uneasily within the fixed categories of “religious” and “secular”.

4.1 Imagining the world beyond Punjab

What does it mean to imagine the world beyond Punjab when the idea of Punjab prior to the Partition of the subcontinent in 1947 shifted at different points in time? According to Anshu Malhotra and Farina Mir, the idea of Punjab is embedded in a complex tripartite conception of territoriality: the historical, the spatial, and the imaginary. The term Punjab was first mentioned in late sixteenth century Mughal sources to refer to the administrative region of Punjab (government of Punjab or province of Punjab, sarkar-i Punjab and suba-i Punjab, respectively). According to Malhotra and Mir, this administrative idea of Punjab has often been conflated with the geographical idea of Punjab which has led historians to anachronistically use the term Punjab. The borders of the administrative region of Punjab have been reshaped in response to changing political and cultural developments and have extended beyond what we know today as the modern state of East Punjab:

Undoubtedly, this anachronistic use of the term serves to reify the notion of a coherent region stretching back to time immemorial—a notion that must surely be interrogated


3 Malhotra and Mir, “Punjab in History and Historiography,” xix.
rather than assumed. This is not to suggest, however, that historians have taken a static view of Punjab’s territoriality. Rather, what is perhaps more evident in the existing scholarship is the recognition that embedded in the term from its earliest use is a relationship between a geographical entity—one that is taken to be relatively stable—and administrative entities—whose contours have shifted over time. The latter sometimes map quite comfortably onto the former, and sometimes less so.4

Mir has argued that while the historical territoriality of Punjab has shifted over time, the Punjab has what she calls a geographical-cultural core “whether conceived as an axis connecting the major cities of Amritsar, Lahore, and Multan, or more broadly as the five doabs and the cis-Sutlej territory.”5 The geographical-cultural core of the region of Punjab has represented a crossroads between the subcontinent and the Middle East with which it had close cultural, economic, and political ties. Today, when we read about the Sikhs and their relationship with territory in Sikh historiography, it is not uncommon to associate members of the Sikh community to the bounded territory of the state of Indian Punjab. However, as is corroborated by many literary sources of premodern India, the political, economic, and cultural boundaries of Punjab and the ways it has been imagined in premodern India have varied at different points in time. One major way in which the relationship between territory and community has shifted occurred during the colonial period and had a significant impact on the way in which the Sikh landscape has come to be imagined as bounded to a territory, as shown by Murphy:

Whereas objects and sites participated in the articulation of a community in the textual formations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the practice of reverence recorded there, it was the determination of the value and status of property, and the designation of communities wedded to place through the demarcation of identity, in the Raj that transformed the historically inflected landscape of the community into one of territory. Community and territory came to be coterminous. This has carried forward from the colonial period into the contested postcolonial era, and has contributed to the

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4 Malhotra and Mir, “Punjab in History and Historiography,” xx.
over-determined position of the historical within Sikh territorial discourse, and the political presence of history in the recent Sikh past.\textsuperscript{6}

Today, Murphy argues, the representation of the Sikh past is mobilized and can be “still tied to the articulation of a sovereign space for the Sikh community, but it is one that need not be mapped as directly to territory in Punjab, but rather to an evolving and deterritorialized notion of the past and the community’s relationship to that past.”\textsuperscript{7} In the past, too, the imagination of the Sikh landscape evades a strictly territorial view. This chapter explores this terrain. While it would be fruitful to conduct a diachronic study on how the territory of Punjab has been imagined in various early modern sources, this goes beyond the scope of this chapter. What I do instead here is examine literary contexts in which Punjab and the Sikh landscape has been imagined beyond the idea of today’s state of Indian Punjab. The mapping of the Tenth Guru’s journeys across the subcontinent in the following sections exemplifies that deterritorialized conception of space that Murphy discusses.

The most cited source that is used in scholarship about the Sikhs to reconstruct a narrative about the travels of the Guru Nanak is the \textit{janam-sākhīs}, that I briefly discussed in chapter two. As discussed, the \textit{janam-sākhīs} is a collection of idealized biographies about the life of the Gurus mostly produced from the eighteenth century on. The \textit{janam-sākhīs} contain important representations of Guru Nanak and his travels and provide a map of a geographical world that later Gurus and communities nurtured. According to Pinkney, “The \textit{Janam Sakhis} sketch out a draft geography for a Sikh sacred landscape, through their description of places said to be frequented by Guru Nanak and thereby blessed by his presence.”\textsuperscript{8} The travels of Guru

\begin{footnotes}
\item[7] Murphy, \textit{The Materiality of the Past}, 264.
\end{footnotes}
Nanak mark onto the Sikh landscape the first imprints that initiated the delineation of a sacred geography. These representations have also shaped the way the Gurus and the space they occupied are remembered by Sikhs today around the world. While Guru Nanak’s life and travels are narrated and remembered mostly in the janam-sākhiś, the life and travels of later Gurus, especially the sixth, ninth, and tenth Gurus (Guru Hargobind, Guru Tegh Bahadur, and Guru Gobind Singh) are found in the hukamnāma and gurbilās literature. While the hukamnāmas allow us to map the places with which later Gurus had connections, gurbilās literature allows us to explore more deeply the texture of the Sikh landscape beyond Punjab.

4.2 Mapping the Guru’s travels at the intersection of the religious and the political

In Sikh historiography, Patna is remembered as representing an important religious place where Guru Gobind Singh was born and where he spent his early childhood. It is also remembered as having been visited by Guru Nanak and Guru Tegh Bahadur in various works of early Sikh literature.9 When one looks at how the travels of the first Guru, Guru Nanak, have been remembered in janam-sakhis and in popular culture, it striking that Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh are often described, in gurbilās texts and hukamnāme for instance, as travelling to similar distant places as Guru Nanak. These representations of travels impacted how Sikh landscape has been imagined more broadly and how Patna has come to be perceived as a sacred space within the Sikh context. The many narratives about the Gurus in Patna in early Sikh literature contribute to consolidate the Sikh landscape onto a sacred geography.

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These connections between the Sikh Gurus and Patna, that is today part of the eastern state of Bihar and is located more than 1200 km from the eastern border of East Punjab, exist in multiple Sikh sources such as the janam-sākhīs, gurbilās texts, and hukamnāme. While today Patna has a vibrant community of Sikhs, its connection to Punjab and to the Sikh landscape in the subcontinent in the precolonial period is often limited to the narrative of the birth and early childhood of the Tenth Guru as well as the presence of one of the five Takhts managed by the S.G.P.C., the Sikh Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, the Takht Sri Harimandir of Patna.

In Sikh historiography, Guru Gobind Singh’s childhood is described in both bucolic and regal terms. In Bhai Vir Singh’s Gur Bālam Sākhīā, for example, the young Guru Gobind Singh is described as excelling in all things related to learning, and as exhibiting the virtues of a Guru and the qualities a prince, such as generosity and valour, sharing food with his friends and redistributing the gifts offered to him among the people in need:

āpne sāthī bālaṁ nūṁ bālak sṛī gobind singh jī kaī ver ghar laī āunde, paṅgat luāke roṭī khulānde.¹¹
Many times, the young Guru Gobind Singh ji invited his friends to his house and prepared rotis for them.

sāre bheṭā agge rakh ke matthā ṭek ke guru kīṁ khusīāṁ lai ke jad baiṭh gae tāṁ ṭiṁ divān vic kuch gariṁh te lōrvand ā gae. uhnāṁ vall takk ke bālā prīṭam dā sadā khirīā cihṛā kuch udās jihā ho gīā. par pher khir pae te lāḍ jihe vic uṭhe, jo jo śai te nakdī arthāṭ paise ruppaye āe agge pae sī cuke te āe lōrvandāṁ nūṁ vanḍ dite.¹²
All the offerings had been put in and after the Guru’s blessings had been put on the forehead had sat down, [and] when [everyone] had sat down in the assembly/royal court

¹² Bhai Vir Singh, Srī Gurū Gobind Singh diāṁ Gur Bālam Sākhīāṁ, 35.
(dīvān), some people in need and affected by poverty came. After looking in their direction, it was as if there was some sadness on the always cheerful face of the beloved child. But then he became cheerful again and indulgent, stood up lovingly and distributed whatever cash there was, meaning the money and rupees that had already been given [to the Guru], to the people in need.

In many sources, Guru Gobind Singh is also described as enjoying leisurely hunting and as being trained in martial arts, in reading Sikh scriptures and in studying various literary languages such as Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic and Punjabi. According to Fenech, while we cannot know for sure if Guru Gobind Singh did or did not receive such training, it is very likely that his education was inspired by the sort of education traditionally received by kings and princes, which is reflected in Kuir Singh’s gurbilās. However, as Murphy as suggested, this kind of education was also promoted among the elites and courtly figures in general, as well as in religious contexts.

The idiom used to describe his birth and childhood is that of a royal figure, but we also see, as elsewhere in the text and as discussed previously, pervasive Krishnaite imagery. Kuir Singh starts by calling Guru Gobind Singh the child Mukand, which is a famous epithet attributed to child Krishna in bhakti literature (he karunānidha bāla mukanda, nivāsī tumai paṭnā puri dhānī/Oh Ocean of Compassion, child Mukand, you are resident of the city of Patna). Kuir Singh then places the Tenth Guru within a bucolic and pastoral environment akin to the cities of Mathura and Vrindavan, two places associated with Krishna’s birth and childhood in bhakti literature:

\[
\text{eka kahaiṁ bidha kāma kīyo ghaṭi tohi viyoga na dūkhā pachānī/}
\]

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13 Grewal, The Sikh of the Punjab; Fenech, The Darbar of the Sikh Gurus.

14 Fenech, The Darbar of the Sikh Gurus, 144.

15 Personal communication with Anne Murphy.

16 Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Dās.
nīrā tajai sapharī kara dūkhata ehu prakāra bhaī hama jānī/
kumadama koka sa āsahi dhārata kañja khirai ravi mūrati bhānī/
dūkha byoga so hai jaga nāhani sūkha milāpa so nāhana sānī.\textsuperscript{17}

One said, working in this way, they won’t know the pain of separation from your body. In the same way that the fish suffers out of water, in that way, o brother, we know. The koka bird of the waterlily keeps hope [while] the lotus perishes with the pleasing form of the sun. Those who [experience] that pain of separation in this world will not experience the joy of meeting.

There are important themes here that connect Guru Gobind Singh to the pastoral environment of Mathura and Vrindavan, the epitome of the \textit{bhakti} world: the pain in separation (\textit{dūkha vioga}) symbolized by the cuckoo bird (\textit{koka}) yearning for the moon and which is a representation of the beloved divine, and the waterlily (\textit{kumadama}), which closes when the sun (\textit{ravi}) rises and which blooms at night. The placement of Guru Gobind Singh’s birth and childhood within this devotional context of \textit{bhakti} contributes to marking Patna as a sacred place, and by extension, the Sikh landscape.

4.3 \textbf{What makes a space sacred in the Sikh context?}

Places that are invested with meaning are not, by definition, religious or sacred. Many theories exist in Religious Studies that conceptualize the notion of sacred space or religious space. Eliade’s theorization of the notion of sacred space has been used by many scholars to develop what has been called the “spatial turn” in Religious Studies in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{18} According to Eliade, a place is marked as sacred if what he calls a

\textsuperscript{17} Kuir Singh, \textit{Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das}, 18. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.

hierophany has been experienced in that very place. A hierophany designates a primordial experience of the divine that marks the central axis (axis mundi) from which the sacred world is deployed. Without this first experience of the sacred, there is no foundation, no order and no meaning in the world. This primordial experience of the sacred precedes any reflection on the world and acts as the ontological basis of the world. Without this experience of the sacred, humans experience the world and space as chaotic, shapeless, and meaningless. The consecration of a place or marking a place as sacred allows humans to organize their world in a way that connects them to the divine. The key to maintaining this connection with the divine is ritual. Rituals allow humans to actualize the world of the divine into their own space and, as a result, bridge the rupture that exists between the two modes of existence. We will see below how pilgrimage and the notion of tirthā in Kuir Singh’s text allow us to understand the connections between the Guru, the community, and the Sikh landscape.

While the notion of sacred space is polysemic and varies according to the context in which it is articulated, in the context of gurbilās texts, the notion can be broadly defined as “the places associated with events and persons in the Sikh past,”19 and which take part in structuring the way members of the Sikh community represent themselves in relation to these persons, events or places. Places described in Kuir Singh’s texts are marked as sacred by the very connection they maintain with Sikh Gurus and events associated with the Gurus.20 The connections with the broader worlds of Braj and bhakti are also significant in contributing to mark the intersecting Sikh landscape sacred.

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19 Murphy, The Materiality of the Past, 11.

20 Murphy, The Materiality of the Past.
4.4 Connecting the sacred with Braj and bhakti

One element that defines and shapes the Sikh landscape in Kuir Singh’s gurbilās, and in gurbilās literature in general, is its relationship with the Braj language and the world of bhakti. The use of Braj carries a complex baggage of cultural representations. While it has been used in early modern India to produce secular rītī literature, as Busch has shown, many of those representations articulated in the Braj language are also rooted in the devotional world of bhakti which is heavily marked by the Vaishnava world.\(^{21}\) Thus, the connection between the Sikh landscape to the landscape of bhakti which is widely—but not exclusively—defined by Braj marks in important ways the Sikh landscape as sacred.

Space is enlivened in Kuir Singh’s gurbilās around the communities’ emotional responses to the presence of the Guru, when the Guru visits them during his travels. Whereas the emotional response to a particular place can change over time, as shown by Pernau, who has worked on how space relates to emotions in Delhi. She argues that space and emotions are always experienced through bodies and so the connection between space, emotions and the experience of them is not necessarily mediated by language. Although Pernau argues of the important of material culture in one’s experience and emotional response to a particular space, in a literary context like gurbilās texts, the imagined sacred space associated with the Gurus and the community’s emotional response to their own encounters with the Guru are consistent throughout the text. For example, various categories of emotions are expressed by the congregations when the Guru visits them: joy (sukha), reassurance (ita īta kī cintā gaī/ the worries of here and there are gone),\(^{22}\) mind intoxication (moda bhae mana māhī/intoxicated in

\(^{21}\) See the work of John Stratton Hawley.

\(^{22}\) Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das, 64.
the mind/heart),²³ being immersed in love (mati bhīnī),²⁴ devotion (bhagata), bliss (ananda), and love (prema). As I will discuss in more detail below, while in the context of gift exchange between Guru Gobind Singh and a kingly figure prem is often the response given by the Guru to the giver, in his encounters with the congregations, not only is love (prem) the emotional response to the Guru from the community, it is also a form of reward (prasād) “given” by the Guru. Dhavan argues that prem is also what is experienced by authors and audiences of gurbilās texts: “The prem (love/devotion) that Sukha Singh expresses is echoed in nearly every gurbilas by other writers to explain how they find themselves enraptured in the “sport” or lila of the Tenth Guru, even as they urge their readers to join them in experiencing this profound love for themselves.”²⁵

This expression of a strong emotional register links it to a broader bhakti or devotional register. In partial terms, this connection is simply rendered by the relationship of Kuir Singh’s gurbilās, and the gurbilās literature in general, with the Braj language and the world of bhakti. The use of Braj carries a complex baggage of cultural representations. While it has been used in early modern India to produce secular rītī literature, as Busch has shown, many of those representations articulated in the Braj language are also rooted in the devotional world of bhakti which is heavily marked by the Vaishnava world.²⁶ Thus, the connection between the Sikh landscape to the landscape of bhakti which is widely—but not exclusively—defined by Braj marks in important ways the Sikh landscape as sacred and connects it to a certain world of

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²³ Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāṣhāhī Das, 71.
²⁴ Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāṣhāhī Das, 4.
²⁵ Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks, 151.
emotions. As argued by Dhavan, categories of emotions have been neglected in the study of early modern Sikh literature. According to her, “The neglect of affective themes within this literature [gurbilās] is surprising, given the particularly rich scholarship on the emotive categories of bhakti and other devotional contexts in South Asia.”

The devotional world of bhakti is closely connected to the Sikh world, which also departs from it in important ways.

Bhakti is the closest notion or idea that we have to describe beliefs, rituals, ways of life, and practices that were shared by various religious and cultural communities of early modern India. Bhakti is a very loaded term. It comes from the Sanskrit root “bhaj” that means “to share in”, “to belong to” “to participate” “to worship”. It is often translated by the English word “devotion” but the word “devotion” does not communicate the various degrees of emotion involved in bhakti, which “embraces the notions of belonging, being loyal, even liking.” Bhakti has also been defined as a “divine-human relationship as experienced by the human side”. That divine-human relationship unfolds in a variety of ways within the diverse bhakti movements of North India and their literature. Today, bhakti is seen as part of a more monolithic idea of Hinduism, but it is more accurate to see it as an element shared by various strands of sectarian communities that were later on, in the nineteenth and twentieth century, perceived as part of more unified idea of Hinduism.

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27 Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks, 150.


29 Carman, “Bhakti,” and Hawley, A Storm of Songs, 5.


31 Personal communication with Anne Murphy.
The world of *bhakti* offered a pool of categories of emotions to Kuir Singh. Dhavan has suggested that Kuir Singh was significantly engaged with the world of *bhakti* and according to her, he “appears to accept prevailing late-eighteenth-century *bhakti*-infused identification of the Tenth Guru as an avatar of Vishnu and, while stressing the Guru’s Sikh connections with greater emphasis than does Sukha Singh, Koer Singh does not disengage from this devotional context.”

Bhakti poets circulated and contributed to make *bhakti* religiosity something shared across communities and places, which mark the *bhakti* world as broad and embracing world.

### 4.5 *Virahā, bhakti, sacred place, and emotions*

There are many intersections between the Sikh world and the world of *bhakti*, and another category of emotions that is shared by both worlds—which is central within *bhakti* poetry of early modern India—is the notion of *virahā* or the pain of separation. The bucolic description of Patna also evokes the theme of *virahā* or the pain of separation. The pain of separation is characterized by the figure of the cuckoo bird, as briefly evoked above, and is pervasive in Braj poetry and *bhakti* literature produced in the context of various traditions. It is also an image that is used frequently in the Guru Granth Sahib by Guru Amar Das, to symbolize the yearning devotee that is represented by a bride in pain of separation called a *virahiṇī*. A *virahiṇī* is a woman-lover who experiences physical and emotional pain due to the separation from her divine Beloved:

\[
\begin{align*}
& cāṭrika tū na jāṇahī kiā tudhu vici tikhā hai kitu pītai tikha jāī/ \\
& dūjai bhāi bharaṁīṁ āmṛīta jalu palai na pāī/ \\
& nadari kare je āṇī tāṁ satiguru milai subhāī/
\end{align*}
\]

32 Dhavan, *When Sparrows became Hawks*, 163.

nānaka satigura te amrīta jalu pāiā sahaje rahiā samāi.  

Oh rainbird, you do not know what kind of thirst is within you and what you can drink to quench it,
[You] are misled by being pleased with duality, you will not receive the amrīta jalu even for a moment,
If the True Guru casts the glance of grace, one can naturally meets him,
Oh Nanak, when amrīta jalu is obtained from the True Guru one merges in a state of bliss.

This pastoral imagery—that is also present in the Guru Granth Sahib and which surrounds Kuir Singh’s descriptions of Guru Gobind Singh’s first moments after birth and childhood—contributes to portray Patna as a sacred site that is part of the sacred geography constituting the Sikh landscape as imagined by Kuir Singh.

The detailed description of the Tenth Guru’s divine birth marks Patna as a sacred place. His birth is narrated in religious terms and is embedded in a description of a real life birth which departs from his common birth narrative of the Bacitra Nāṭak, which exclusively describes his birth in the language of the avatar without the mention of his mother. In Kuir Singh, the Guru’s birth is described in both human and divine terms:

purakham prakiratam sabhai beda bhanaṃ, eko aneko nahīṃ aura ṭhānai/
jabai āna dhūrā sarūpāma tāhi, su mātā birājai jimai srī lasāhī/

imai vinsū jāyo sudhaṃ santa gunāhī, timai gūjarī māta devī lasāhī/

All the Vedas distinguish Purusha and Prakriti, One and the many, There is nothing else. When the beautiful one came/was born, the mother was shining with the splendor of Shri.

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34 GGS, 1284.
35 Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das, 14. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
In the way in which Vishnu was born [with] pure and true virtues in that way Mata Gujari shone like a goddess.

A little further in the text:

\[\text{ratha palakī nāga kikāna ghanem, disa māghadhī āna aneka prakāri/}
\text{dekhā sarūpa sabai bala jāvata pūrana kāmana hota apāri/}
\text{dhanna māta pitā dhanna jota prakāsata, rāma te jaisa bhayo lava barī}
\text{srī gura tega bahādara te hari bhyo avatārana ko avatārī/}\]

[There were] chariots, pallanquins, nagas, and horses of many kinds that came in the direction of Magadha,

[When] they all saw the true form, they went to make sacrifices, all desires were fulfilled without end,

Blessed is the mother, blessed is the father, blessed is the light that shines, just like Lava was [born] from Rāma.

Through Sri Guru Tegh Bahadur, Hari has become an avatar.

Simultaneously with the description of his human birth, Kuir Singh describes his divine birth in the idiom of the *avatar*. This is a common trope in other *gurbilās* texts and literature of the period, as Robin Rinehart has shown and as discussed in the previous chapter. According to her, an *avatar* is:

one who restores *dharam* or *dharma* in its widest sense of overall social, political, and cosmic order, regardless of the varied identities of the subjects of the realm or those who rule it. To conjure the image of an avatar past, present, or future, is to say something about what is wrong about the world in the here and now, and how it might be set aright. Avatars almost always address some global or cosmic problem that transcends the problems of one particular religious community. As such, discussions of avatars do not occur only within a specifically “Hindu” or “religious” realm, for the dharmic problems

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36 Kuir Singh, *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das*, 15. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
they solve transcend such boundaries.  

The divine description of the Guru’s birth, using the religious vocabulary of gods, goddesses, and avatars, contributes to making Patna as a sacred place.

4.6 Relationship between tirthā and pilgrimage

As mentioned above, rituals can allow humans to actualize the world of the divine into their own space and, as a result, bridge the rupture that exists between the two modes of existence. Pilgrimages can be seen as rituals that allow humans to experience the divine. Pilgrimage is also a contentious issue for some Sikh commentators. In the Guru Granth Sahib, it is not the act of pilgrimage that is criticized, but rather the definition of tirthā which is commonly understood to be located outside oneself. Guru Nanak is clear in his verses that the only valuable place of pilgrimage (tirthā) is to be found within oneself. Guru Nanak, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das, Guru Arjan, and Guru Tegh Bahadur all composed verses criticizing the uselessness of pilgrimage to eradicate one’s ego (haumai). As discussed in the previous chapter, the ego is one of the five obstacles to overcome to attain liberation in Sikh theology. In the Gurus’ teachings, humans are all perceived as equal before the divine and all are born with a partially blinded vision of the world. The heart-mind (man/manu) is the universally shared faculty that is the seat of emotions, consciousness and ego (haumai) of which the divine moral order (hukam) is also part. However, although humans are inhabited by the divine, they are constantly blinded by their ego which keeps them stuck in a world of illusion (maïā) and the cycle of rebirth (samsāra) and prevents them from perceiving the true nature of the world

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crossed from all sides by the Akal Purakh. The teachings of the Gurus say that only an assiduous meditative discipline characterized by the repetition of the divine name (nam simran) can enable the devotee (gurmukh) to surpass world of illusion (maïā), and attain spiritual liberation (jivan muktī).

These verses from Guru Nanak, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das, Guru Arjan, and Guru Tegh Bahadur illustrate what is often presented as the authoritative Sikh position on pilgrimage:

\[
tīrathu tapu dāiā datu dānu \\
je ko pāvai tila kā mānu \\
suṇiā manniā mani kīā bhāu \\
antaragati tīrathi mali nāu.\]

Pilgrimage, austerities, compassion, offerings, and giving, They only bring so little to the mind.  
Listening and believing within the mind is what loving is.  
Within yourself is the place of pilgrimage where you cleanse yourself with the Nam.

\[
haumai mailā ihu samsārā \\
nita tīrathī nāvai na jāi ahāmkārā \\
binu gura bheṭe jamu kare khuārā.\]

This world is soiled by the ego.  
By constantly bathing at places of pilgrimages, egotism/pride will not go away.  
Without meeting the Guru, they are disgraced at death.

While the Gurus criticize the ritual of going on pilgrimages to purify one’s mind, travelling to sacred places associated with the various moments of the lives of the Sikh Gurus is

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38 GGS, 4.  
39 GGS, 230.
still today meaningful and life-transforming to many members of the Sikh community. In her research on Sikh pilgrims in the Hemkunt region associated with the Tenth Guru, Heather Michaud has shown how pilgrimage within the Sikh tradition is not as contradictory as it first appears. According to Michaud, who conducted one of the rare ethnographic studies on Sikh pilgrimage, while Sikh pilgrimage is not given any normative value in the Sikh Scriptures, “it is given operative value by Sikhs” themselves who undertake pilgrimages to Sikh sacred places to this day. Based on her interviews, Michaud argues that for Sikh pilgrims, not only is Hemkunt a sacred place that embodies the possibility of achieving union with the divine, it also represents a space where the tenth Guru is remembered to have experienced the sacred (hierophany). Today we can find the Gurdwara Hemkunt Sahib erected at the spot where the Tenth Guru is remembered to have had his experienced of oneness with the divine. The Gurdwara Hemkunt Sahib now commemorates this event and for Sikh travellers, a pilgrimage to Hemkunt is significant in structuring their world and in bridging their experience of the mundane with the world of the divine. According to Michaud, the majority of pilgrims interviewed undertake a pilgrimage to Hemkunt in order to come in contact with the divine through the Guru, who can be historical (Guru Gobind Singh in this case), communal (Panth) or textual (Granth). Pilgrimage is indeed not perceived to be a meaningless ritual by Sikh pilgrims but an opportunity to establish and intensify their relationship with the divine via the guru.

In Kuir Singh’s gurbilās, Guru Gobind Singh is not described as being on a pilgrimage, but rather as visiting places of pilgrimage (tirthā) during his travels. However, in Kuir Singh’s text, tirthā has a more general sense of what Diana Eck has described as “a place of spiritual

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crossing, where the gods are close and the benefits of worship generous. At a spiritual crossing place, one’s prayers are amplified, one’s rites are more efficacious, one’s vows are more readily fulfilled. Tirthā, with its many associations, is a word of passage and, in some ways, a word of transcendence.42 When Kuir Singh describes the places where the Guru travels to meet with his congregations, he described places that have accumulated sacralities by the accumulations of myths, stories, and all sorts of narratives by various Indic cultural and religious groups.43 As Alex Macay has shown in relation to the sacred geography of Kailas, “sacred geography is a process of accumulation”44 and “the sacred is attached to a place through the accumulation of a potentially infinite number of such sacralities.”45 Patna, being remembered as a place visited by Guru Nanak, Guru Tegh Bahadur, and Guru Gobind Singh is then representing a place with many layers of such sacralities. Kuir Singh’s mapping of the Gurus’ travels extends as far East as Patna but also as far West as Rajasthan.

4.7 Moving the Sikh Landscape: The Guru’s connections to the West

One more way to illustrate how the Sikh world is mapped based on the “connection between the Guru and the community” is to look at the Guru’s distant travels outside of Punjab. One such encounter that is narrated in Kuir Singh’s gurbilās is between the Guru and Raja Man Singh the Rajput from Jaipur. In his edition of the Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das, Ashok argues that Kuir Singh made a mistake and meant to write that it was Raja Ram Singh who accompanied Guru Tegh Bahadur to Assam and not Raja


43 Alex McKay, Kailas Histories: Renunciate Traditions and the Construction of Himalayan Sacred Geography (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2015), 446.

44 McKay, Kailas Histories, 446.

45 McKay, Kailas Histories, 10.
Man Singh which is corroborated by the fact that Raja Ram Singh was alive during Guru Tegh Bahadur’s life and Raja Man Singh, his great-great-grandfather, was already no more:

\[ \text{etē ra} \text{jā mān si} \text{ngh dī thāvem rājā rām si} \text{ngh sahī hai, ki} \text{umki} \text{mugalei itihās de mutābik rājā mān si} \text{ngh shāh akbar te jahāṅgīr dā samkālī sī te rājā rām si} \text{ngh shāh aurangzeb dā samkālī.}^{46} \]

Here, instead of Raja Man Singh, Raja Ram Singh is correct because according to Mughal history, Raja Man Singh was a contemporary of Kings Akbar and Jahangir whereas Raja Ram Singh was a contemporary of Aurangzeb.

Raja Man Singh of Amber was the leader of the Kacchwaha Rajput clan and was a highly ranked general at the Mughal emperor Akbar’s court. Raja Man Singh was also the ruler of Amber (Jaipur) from 1589 to 1614, which corresponds to the reigns of the Mughal emperors Akbar (r. 1556-1605) and Jahangir (r. 1605-1627) and the guruships of Guru Arjan (g. 1581-1606) and Guru Hargobind (g. 1606-1644). Raja Man Singh took part in many expeditions in Gujarat, Punjab, Kabul, Bengal, and Bihar, on behalf of Akbar. According to Catherine Asher, his extensive travels and patronage of architecture and arts contributed to serve “his own interests and those of the emperor, and as he did so pivotally important in establishing a Mughal aesthetic across the realm.”^{48} While Raja Man Singh lived and ruled before Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh were even born, his connection with earlier Sikh Gurus is not improbable.

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In the Khalsa College manuscript 605, Raja Man Singh is the name used in the text but it is important to mention that there are two Man Singhs, even though Ashok lists them as the same person in his index. One was Man Singh, the king of Amer (Jaipur) who lived from 1550-1614 and the other one was a dear companion of the Tenth Guru, who followed him to the Anandpur, Chamkaur, the Lakkhi jungle, and to the Deccan. Man Singh is known as a devoted disciple in service of the Guru. According to Ashok, he died on the bank of the Narmada river.49

While there is no connection made between Guru Tegh Bahadur and Raja Man Singh of Amer in the gurbilās texts consulted so far, the connection between Guru Tegh Bahadur and Raja Ram Singh is clear in Sikh historiography even though there is still research to be done to corroborate that encounter. For example, A.C. Banerjee claims that when Raja Ram Singh was appointed as the leader of an expedition to Kamrup or Assam by the emperor Aurangzeb, his mother suggested that he visit Guru Tegh Bahadur to receive his blessings as “Assam or Kāmrūp was notorious for the sorcerous arts (…)”50 As Guru Tegh Bahadur was already on his way to Assam to connect with the distant communities, Raja Ram Singh asked the Guru if he could join him on his journey to the East and the Guru accepted. Raja Ram Singh encountered tensions with the local community of Ahoms and returned to Delhi a few years later while Guru Tegh Bahadur returned to Punjab. Banerjee based his claim about his encounter between Guru Tegh Bahadur and Raja Ram Singh on four sources. The first one, Gian Singh Giani’s Twārīkh Gurū Khālsā, mentions both Bishan Singh and Man Singh, but his sources are not clear.

49 Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāshāhī Das, 296.

The second source is Harbans Singh’s *Guru Tegh Bahadur* which also connects the ninth Guru with the son of the Raja Jai Singh of Amer. The third source is Trilochan Singh’s *Guru Tegh Bahadur: Prophet and Martyr* which also connects the Guru with Raja Ram Singh. And the fourth source, Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās*, which is the only primary source used by Banerjee, does not mention Raja Ram Singh but his great great grand-father Raja Man Singh. This confusion between Raja Man Singh and Raja Ram Singh in these secondary sources is treated differently by Macauliffe, another secondary source that is not clear about the specific sources used to reconstruct Guru Tegh Bahadur’s life does mention both Raja Ram Singh and Raja Man Singh. According to him, when Raja Ram Singh meets the Guru to ask to accompany him to the East, he tells the Guru about the context of why he was sent by the emperor:

> O true Guru, we Rajas of Hindustan were subject to the emperor Akbar. The King of Kamrup alone became a rebel, and defied his authority. The emperor then expressed his desire that some brave general should take an army and conquer that country. When the Emperor’s wishes were communicated to his bravest Muhammadian officers, none of them volunteered for the expedition. One the contrary they represented that even with the greatest bravery it would be impossible to carry out the Emperor’s design. There was, however, they represented among the Hindu Rajput chiefs, one man, Raja Man Singh, who might be sent on the perilous errand. If he perished in the attempt, no matter, there would be only one enemy the less; and if he were victorious, it would have one more country subjected to his authority. Akbar was pleased with this suggestion, and the next day in public darbar informed Raja Man Singh, who he said was the first of all his brave Rajput princes, that he had appointed him to lead the expedition.

Raja Ram Singh then proceeds to explain how his great great grand-father’s expedition to Assam provoked contestations from the local groups which prompted the

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Emperor to send more troops as reinforcement. A few years later, Aurangzeb sent Mir Jumla to calm the rebellions without success so he sent Raja Ram Singh on that mission.

In a hukamnāma or order of the Guru, sent to the congregation of Patna by the Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Guru mentions that a king is travelling with him after leaving his family with the congregation in Patna (asī parai rāje jī ke sātha gae hām kabīla hamo pātnē mo choḍā hai/we went with raja jī and left our clan/family in Patna). The name of the king is not specified but according to Fauja Singh, there is no doubt that this king refers to Raja Ram Singh of Amer. This narrative is closer to what we find in Kuir Singh’s gurbilās but we do not find a detailed narrative of Guru Tegh Bahadur’s trip to Assam:

dohrā

māna śingha gura sānga lai gayo desa nijā sāhi/
puna guru janama bakhānīai dhiāi dūsare gāmha/
puni āyo tāṅ nagara maiṁ māna śingha rajapūta/
e suni kai bolata bhae śingha naina su sapūta/

Man Singh, taking the Guru with him, went to his own country. Then the birth of the Guru is to be described in the second chapter. Then he/they came into that city, Man Singh the Rajput Speaking after having heard this, Singh looked at the good son.

caupaī

kahoṁ gātha srī gura visathārī, pūraba thora sunim ruci bhārū/
kā pūra te kāṁ vidha so āyo, taba srī māna śingha sukha pāyo/
kahata bhae gāthā suni kānā, dakhana desa basata sukha nānā/

53 Guru Tegh Bahadur, Hukamnāme, 15.
54 Guru Tegh Bahadur, Hukamnāme, 5.
Please tell the story of the Guru in details, having heard a little before, it fills one with pleasure,
The honourable Man Singh was made happy by that city and by that way he came,
Saying “Listen carefully to the story, living in the southern region has various joys,
The great city of Jaipur is in that direction, in that region, as also is the great fort of Gopacal.
Man Singh’s capital, the joy-giving jewel of the Rajputs,
They approached the king and took pleasure in enjoying the king’s kingdom,
Whenever the army went on an expedition, they all remained at peace near the king,
In that place in Delhi where there are various beautiful gardens and homes.

The presence of Raja Man Singh at the beginning of the second chapter entitled Rājā Mān Singh te Aurangzeb (Raja Man Singh and Aurangzeb) provides an illustration of connections between the Guru and Rajasthan which was included in how territory was imagined. The mapping and imagination of space beyond Punjab in Kuir Singh illustrates the marking of the religious onto the Sikh landscape and demonstrates connections that were also economic and political. As discussed in chapter two, the religious offering or bheṭ of the prasādī elephant by Raja Rattan Rai of Assam to Guru Gobind Singh is a telling example of the Guru’s engagements in domains that were not strictly cultural,

55 Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das, 11. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
political, or religious, and of the intertwined nature of his participation in these domains.

Gifting practices within Sikh contexts such as \textit{bh\text{e}t} in Kuir Singh exemplify this complexity.

4.8 \textit{Bh\text{e}t, pras\text{\=a}d, and d\text{\=a}na}

Horstmann has described \textit{bh\text{e}t} and \textit{pras\text{\=a}d} as being at the core of a type of relationship between royal and religious figures in the R\=am\=anand\=i context. Her study, which focuses on the relationship between the R\=am\=anand\=is of Galta (which is close to the city of Jaipur) and the royal family of the Kachav\=ah\=as clan of Jaipur (previously Amer) examines the relationship between the royal and religious domains which was mediated by two kinds of offerings, \textit{bh\text{e}t} and \textit{pras\text{\=a}d}:

The material expression of the interaction between royal and religious personae was \textit{bh\text{e}t} and \textit{pras\text{\=a}d}. \textit{Bh\text{e}t} was the donation made by the king (or any other lay person) which was reciprocated by the “gift of grace”, \textit{pras\text{\=a}d}, sacrificial food and cloth coming from the deity and handed to a devotee by the mahant (or, as the case be, by other officiants).\textsuperscript{56}

While the divine which Guru Gobind Singh is a representation of in Kuir Singh’s text is a complex combination of nirgu\=na and sagu\=na manifestations of the divine,\textsuperscript{57} the \textit{pras\text{\=a}d} takes the form of love or grace (\textit{prem, kirp\={a}}).\textsuperscript{58} We have seen in chapter two how the precious elephant received by Guru Gobind Singh as a \textit{bh\text{e}t} from Rattan Rai was a mark of devotion that became an object of royal and secular power in the eyes of the competing hill chiefs. Other occurrences of this kind of exchange are narrated by Kuir Singh. In another vignette that describes Guru Tegh Bahadur’s nomination as the successor of Guru Har Krishan in Bakala, a Sikh named Labana discovered the ninth Guru offering a \textit{bh\text{e}t}. According to Kuir Singh, when Labana was stuck on

\textsuperscript{56} Monika Horstmann, “The R\=am\=anand\=is of Galt\=a (Jaipur, Rajasthan),” in \textit{Multiple Histories: Culture and Society in the Study of Rajasthan}, edited by Laurence A. Babb, Varsha Joshi, and Michael W. Meister (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2002), 179.

\textsuperscript{57} Dhavan, 2011, 163.

the ocean with his ship, he committed to place a *bheṭ* at the feet of the Guru if he would come to assist him. After meditating on the Guru and placing him in his mind, his ship was released and he decided to go to Bakala to fulfill his promise of *bheṭ* as the Guru already responded to his request by offering his grace/help:

\[
\begin{align*}
    &\text{ika sikha labānā sidha maṁ le poṭa āvata aṭakiyo/} \\
    &\text{tina dyāna gura mana dhārayo guraṅ nānakāṁ mana su cikyo/} \\
    &\text{taba paṅca sata ati bheṭa dhārau joa tā pada rāja hī/} \\
    &\text{jo gura saco moha tāra hai ima cīta mai tina sāja hī/} \\
    &\text{taba gura su tega bahādaram tāṁ kāma krita mahāyanam/} \\
    &\text{punī bhūra te tāṁ rakha karī griha tāṁhi supana lakhāyanam/} \\
    &\text{supana dīno soca taji taba chuṭi jahāja su le dhanna/} \\
    &\text{pura bakāle pūnja cahi mana phirata bhālata so dhanna}/^{59}
\end{align*}
\]

One Labana Sikh, came on a ship on the ocean and got stuck,
He meditated on the Guru, and placed Guru Nanak in his mind,
Then he would make great offering at the foot of the one who would be king,
That one who is the true Guru, will save me, he thought, and I will adorn him.
Then Guru Tegh Bahadur helped him,
Then he seized by fear and had a dream,
The dream took away [his] grief, then his ship was released,
He arrived in the city of Bakala, he was wandering and searching [for the Guru].

\[
\begin{align*}
    &\text{karī taṛāgī makhana sāhā do do dāma dīna gura pāhā/} \\
    &\text{so gura lakḥā na tāṁ ke māṅhī saraba nagara pūjana yā tāhī/} \\
    &\text{puni le saṅgati āyo tāṅhī avāja graṅtha jī tāṁ manacahi/} \\
    &\text{prāta avāja gurū jī dīnī tegā banda karo tuma cīnī/} \\
    &\text{pura sodhata puni sikhana saṅgā kaho kahāṁ tegā hai cangā/} \\
    &\text{hai baurā choīana maiṅ soī ati hī lupata rahai jaga mohī/}
\end{align*}
\]

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^{59} Kuir Singh, *Gurbilās Pātshāḥi Das*, 6. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
Makhan Shah gave two coins to find the Guru,
He could not see the Guru, whom the whole city would worship.
Again that voice came to the congregation, and the granth was a desire in their mind,
In the morning, the voice spoke to the Guru, “Stop now, Tegha, you have been recognized.”
The Sodhis searched the city again, with the Sikhs, “tell us, where is Tegha?”
It is crazy, he is completely vanished.
“Oh mother! Is Tegha the Suami? Where has he gone to?”
Do not allow him to remain hidden, show him, then all the Sikhs will desire to seek him out.

In this passage, when Makhan Shah vows to himself that he will bring an offering (bhet) to Guru Tegh Bahadur if he assists him in freeing his ship from the ocean, he uses the term rāja (king) to refer to the ninth Guru. This sets a relationship between the devotee and the Guru perceived as both a royal and a religious figure.

Bhet as a type of offering that connects members of Sikh congregations and the Guru takes the form of offerings in money or objects to the Guru. This act of devotion aims to support the growth and prosperity of the congregation. This material and economic growth was meaningful to Sikhs. We see many examples of this in the hukamnāmas of Guru Tegh Bahadur. For instance, in one hukamnāma addressed to the congregation of Patna, we see instances of

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60 Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das, 6. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
offerings of clothes (bhēt kapṛे),\textsuperscript{61} or money to the congregation for the Guru via one of his trusted members of the congregation.

Another form of gifting practice that is pervasive in Kuir Singh’s 

\textit{gurbilās} is 

\textit{dāna}, which is a term use to generally denote the act of disinterested giving that is shared by many communities in South Asia.\textsuperscript{62} In the Sikh context, 

\textit{dāna} is part of the widely practiced ethical concept of \textit{vaṇḍ chhakō} which is one of the three fundamental ethical principles taught by Guru Nanak in the Guru Granth Sahib. It is also part of the conceptual triad \textit{nām, dān, and isnān} pervasive in Guru Arjan’s poetry.\textsuperscript{63} Murphy has noted how literature about the Sikhs generally emphasizes the importance of the Name (\textit{nām}) as being the most important precept to be followed, whereas the notions of \textit{dān, and isnān} are often not given as much importance:

We can begin by noting in general terms the two short aphorisms that are often taken to encapsulate Sikh thought. One, “\textit{nām, dān, isnān}” means “the Name, giving, and bathing” expresses the importance of three interrelated activities at the center of Sikh practice and thought. The first word of this series means “name”; this refers to the experience of the sacred name, the one all-encompassing force and presence that is God. \textit{Isnān} refers literally to bathing, which by extension is interpreted to refer to rightful and ethical living. The middle of these three terms is \textit{dān}; giving. While most literature on Sikh tradition emphasizes the meaning and status of the Name as the central feature of Sikh thought, ethical living and giving in this famous formulation are identified alongside the Name as essential to Sikh forms of practice and being. In a related mode, the saying “\textit{kīrat karo, nām japō, vandhke chakko}” means “work hard, recite the name, and divide and share [one’s wealth].”\textsuperscript{64} In this formulation, too, two out of three facets directly relate to the act of working and giving of the benefit of that work. The overarching idiom for public engagement and the enactment of good is that of \textit{sevā} or service.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{61} Guru Tegh Bahadur, \textit{Hukamnāme}, 57.


\textsuperscript{63} For example, \textit{gura parasādi mukhu ījalā japi nāmu dānu isnānu}. GGS 46.

\textsuperscript{64} Anne Murphy, “The emergence of the social in service of the Guru,” In \textit{Generating the Guru: Genealogies of Religious Authority in South Asia}, ed. István Keul (University of Bergen) and Srilata Raman (Toronto), forthcoming. Murphy has argued that \textit{sevā} and and gifting practices are at the core of community building in the Sikh context. See discussion in Murphy, \textit{The Materiality of the Past}. 

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An understanding of the role of dāna in Kuir Singh’s gurbilās in relation to the more politically inclined notion of bheṭ enables us to see how intimately intertwined the political and religious roles of the Guru are in Kuir Singh’s narrative. It also illustrates how Kuir Singh imagined the Tenth Guru’s enactment of the policy of mīrī-pīrī which was formulated by the sixth Guru, Guru Hargobind, who wished to claim the authority of the Guru not only over spiritual (pīrī) but also temporal (mīrī) matters affecting the community. Kuir Singh’s description of Guru Gobind Singh’s travels also contributes to posit the Guru as spiritual and political leader in the wider cosmological and competitive sociopolitical field of the time and as a result, to strengthen the foundations of the articulation of Khalsa Sikh identity, which was central to Kuir Singh unlike other authors of gurbilās texts.65

Although the historical value of gurbilās texts has been debated in scholarship about the Sikhs, the reception of these texts amongst today’s readership has overwhelmingly focused on the political aspects of the texts based on an understanding of today’s political landscape. Murphy has argued that the understanding of the text has commonly been “profoundly shaped by interest in the articulation of Sikh political power in the eighteenth century”66 which has led to overlooking ways in which non-political concerns and priorities are articulated in the text.67 Kuir Singh’s description of Guru Gobind Singh’s travels and his mapping of the Tenth Guru’s encounters with the community, illustrates, in broad terms, the intersectional priorities of the tenth Guru as imagined by Kuir Singh.

65 Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks, chapter 7.
66 Murphy, “Thinking beyond Aurangzeb,” 544.
67 Murphy, “Thinking beyond Aurangzeb,” 544.
4.9 Gifting practices in Sikh contexts: Rethinking the religious and the secular

Gifting practices in the context of early modern India have recently drawn scholarly attention by scholars such as Gordon, Murphy, Dhavan, and Fenech. The important study of the khil’at ceremony or the giving of robes of honour, for instance, has contributed to enrich our understanding of the intricacies of gift exchanges in South Asia, and Murphy relates this practice to Sikh contexts. According to Gordon, the khil’at ceremony is a symbolic exchange of an ‘honourific object’ denoting power between a giver and a receiver. Although the respective roles and anticipated responses and behaviours from the giver and receiver vary within the space of the exchange, the exchange always establishes a relation of power between the giver and the receiver: “to accept a khil’at was an honour, but also an acknowledgement of subordination to the donor.” However, the power relation implied in gift rituals was more complex than an exclusive relationship of power and servitude. As Aitken as argued, gifting rituals were ingrained in Mughal and Rajput diplomatic relations with nobles, officials and servants and the main purpose of the exchange was to “establish a political relationship between giver and receiver.” The ceremony of khil’at as well as other gift exchange rituals were part of the royal symbolism that marked the world of cultural exchanges and the circulation of idioms of power in the eighteenth century in which the Sikhs actively participated. Among royal gifting practices,

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68 Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks; Fenech, The Darbar of the Sikh Gurus; Stewart Gordon, ed., Robes of Honour: Khil’at in Pre-Colonial and Colonial India (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), and Murphy, The Materiality of the Past.

69 Gordon, Robes of Honour. Also discussed in Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks; Murphy, The Materiality of the Past, and Fenech, The Darbar of the Sikh Gurus.

70 Gordon, Robes of Honour, 127.

71 Gordon, Robes of Honour, 140.
exchanges of turbans were especially prevalent in Punjab in the eighteenth century,\textsuperscript{72} “as a means for expressing political and social equivalence and collaboration among Sikh chiefs and other martial groups.”\textsuperscript{73} But gift exchanges in Sikh contexts were not necessarily hierarchical nor political, as is exemplified by the politico-religious exchange of bheṭ and prasād. This also exemplifies Murphy’s argument that gift-giving rituals were central to Sikh community-building\textsuperscript{74} and that “we cannot simply differentiate exchanges as “religious” or “non-religious” (…..) “just as the power of the king was articulated alongside other forms of power through the gift, religious and nonreligious mode of engagement were intermingled in such practices.”\textsuperscript{75}

There is more to be said about the various ways in which gifting practices and courtly activities operate in Kuir Singh’s gurbilās but my goal here is to open window into the Sikh and Punjabi world that highlights ways in which the interaction between the political and religious can unfold in such an early modern text. These shared gifting practices also indicate close cultural connections between the Sikh and Punjabi world and other worlds of early modern India. In political, religious, and cultural domains, Guru Gobind Singh’s court also illustrates the dynamic between the Mughal empire and local groups in the eighteenth century.

There is something more to be said about the political nature of the Tenth Guru’s travels. Wherever the Guru goes, he marks a sacred landscape beyond the region of Punjab and he also gains authority and legitimacy. I have discussed this in relation to

\textsuperscript{72} Murphy, \textit{The Materiality of the Past}, 48-49 and Dhavan, \textit{When Sparrows became Hawks}, 19.

\textsuperscript{73} Murphy, \textit{The Materiality of the Past}, 48-49.

\textsuperscript{74} Murphy, \textit{The Materiality of the Past}, 49.

\textsuperscript{75} Murphy, \textit{The Materiality of the Past}, 50. For a discussion on the limits of the use of categories of “religious” and “secular” in colonial India in regards to the debate about the administration of Sikh religious sites, see Anne Murphy, “Defining the Religious and the Political: The Administration of Sikh Religious Sites in Colonial India and the Making of a Public Sphere,” \textit{Sikh Formations} 9, 1 (2013).
Guru Gobind Singh and his *darbār* in the previous chapter. The adaptation of idioms of power – appropriation of Indo-Persianate courtly standards, the use of Braj and its associated body of cultural representations – as well as their adaptation to reflect local histories, suggest an aspiration to establish authority locally and gain legitimacy externally.

The same can be said of his travels and the dual religious and political purposes they serve. Veronique Bouillier has argued in this sense in relation to the Siddha Ratannāth who is an important figure for the yogis of the Dang Valley in Nepal. According to her, a large part of the hagiography about Ratannāth is about his travels which he spent most of his life doing. Bouillier notes the dual nature of his travels and the places he visited: “the holy places linked to Ratannāth’s story form a political and religious geography (…)”. The political and religious nature of his travels are one of many such examples in early modern North India within various Sufi communities. Thomas de Bruijn has shown the intricate relationship between power and religion/culture in the Sufi context:

> The poem subtly underlines the worldly rulers’ need for legitimation of their power and the role of the spiritual guide in providing this. For both, independence is crucial. The ruler will serve an overlord, but only if he retains his honour as a free political agent. The spiritual guide needs to maintain a semblance of independence from worldly matters to maintain the moral high ground. Rulers and powerful Sufi *shaikhs* – leaders of the congregations – in Jāyasi’s context were involved in the exchange of legitimation and support for land grants and other forms of patronage. The role of the Sufi poet in this context is that of mediator between the two realms of power.

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77 Bouillier, “Ratannāth’s Travels,” 268.

While Guru Gobind Singh’s role in Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* extends the role of the Sufi poet in Jāyasī’s *Padmāvat* into the political realm, his adoption of the language of power during his travels can be read as a way to be recognized as a powerful figure within both religious and political realms. Almost everywhere the Guru goes, he is described in regal terms and his journey described as royal processions. For example, immediately following Guru Gobind Singh’s birth, Guru Tegh Bahadur receives the news from Punjab that he must return.

The order of the Guru came in Madar Des also came with it, you must come, Don’t delay, we will remain there as auspicious guests,

79 Kuir Singh, *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das*, 17. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
Hearing the words that were written, his mind was soothed, so much withering from the pain of separation,
The Guru got ready, and packed his things that could not be counted,
Lovely within the tent walls, playing chess on the adorned carpet,
A chariot, a sedan chair, horse and camel, saddled with provisions of all kinds,
Golden weapons of different kinds: a dagger, sword, long knife, and waist dagger,
Endless value, countless: canon, pistols, shield, waist dagger.
Muskets and other things from foreign markets, they all prepared in the city,
They all came with hands joined and made a request, speaking with heads bowed down.
Oh, ocean of compassion, the child Mukand, you are a resident of the city of Patna.
We are ashamed, but we entreat you to leave one thing as a sign or your presence here.
We care for you, oh Prabhu, all those in residence in this city,
Seeing your beautiful form, we, in this way we are reminded of the unique Guru,
Now take this, resplendent in the Harimandir, with the incense placed in worship,
Praising the high and the low, and placing the garlands of flowers.\(^{80}\)

In this passage we see royal and religious vocabulary so eloquently articulated. Guru Tegh Bahadur is depicted as both a powerful political and religious figure. At the very moment when Guru Tegh Bahadur hears the news of his son’s birth, he is playing chess on an adorned carpet inside a royal tent, an image vividly evocating miniature paintings of Mughal kings or other royal figures.\(^{81}\) Guru Tegh Bahadur is also portrayed as travelling with countless riches and other objects and symbols of power such as a chariot, a pallanquin, horse, and camel, and countless weapons from foreign markets of

\(^{80}\) Kuir Singh, *Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das*.

\(^{81}\) Kuir Singh, *Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das*. 
immense value. At the same time, Guru Gobind Singh’s beautiful form is compared to that of his father, representing both Gurus as divine figures (taha sarūpa lakhai hama jī asa tau gura vāhida yoga citāhīl Seeing that Sarup, we, in this way we are reminded of the unique Guru.). And Patna’s status, here too, depicted as sacred, is reiterated by its qualification by Kuir Singh as the hari mandara (the temple of Hari/God) and as being the residence of God (prabhu). The community surrounding the divine baby is also described as being filled with devotion while waiting for their Guru Tegh Bahadur to arrive, and he himself is portrayed as suffering the pain of separation.

As we can see in this above passage and in the passage that follows, the descriptions of the ninth Guru’s travels are narrated in a similar manner as the travels of Guru Gobind Singh: wherever he goes, the Guru is welcomed by a warm community of men and women eager to have darsan with their Guru and to shower him with gifts (dāna):

\[
\begin{align*}
tīratha koṭa gurū pada māṅhī, &\text{ karata su pāvana tīratha tāhēi/} \\
diāla bahuta dina tāhi bitāe, &\text{ puna kurakhetra pahūce āe/} \\
tīratha saraba pagana tiha nānā, &\text{ jaṅgama tīratha kīna payānā/} \\
dharaṇī dukhata nirakha taba sārī, &\text{ rahaim udāsa nātha avatārī/} \\
sarīkana kī gati lakha tiha āe, &\text{ matasara (gata/rāt) sukha dāika bhāe/} \\
\text{ bhagati joga dina rainā kamāvai, mahāṅkāla kau hiradai dhiavai//} \\
tāṃ te agra kūca taba kīnā, &\text{ puna haridvāra darasa jāi dīnām/} \\
tīratha saraba jahāṃ cali āvais, &\text{ bhānti bhānti ke dāna karāvaim/}\text{82}
\end{align*}
\]

[At] millions of sacred places, the Guru reached sacred places on foot, The compassionate one spent many days there. Then he went to Kurukshetra.

---

82 Kuir Singh, Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das, 17. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
All of the sacred places of different kinds, he moved and departed for any pilgrimage sites,
Enduring difficulties, they examined the all; then all the Nath avatars remain in *udaas*.
They see the ways of their companions, envious, they please the giver of happiness,
They earn day and night the bhakti of yoga, concentrating on Shiv in their hearts.
Then as they marched, they gave darshan at Hardwar,
Wherever he came to, in all the holy places, in every way he caused *dāna* to be made.\(^83\)

In this passage, we see an illustration of how the Sikh world is mapped based on the “connection between the Guru and the community.” And while this connection may not necessarily be manifested by the physical presence of the Guru at a place (ex. *hukammāmas*), it constitutes the basis of how this connection is articulated in Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* and how sacred geography is shaped. We also see the articulation of intense emotions within the community and of sensations.

### 4.10 Ayodhya and the meeting with the community

Mapping the travels of Guru Gobind Singh from Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* is evocative of how much the world which Kuir Singh imagined extended far beyond the boundaries of today’s East Punjab. Let’s look at one additional example in Kuir Singh which portrays the Tenth Guru as both a religious and political figure, and an emotional and inclusive community desiring to connect with their Guru. This vignette, which depicts the travels of Guru Gobind Singh to a place already perceived as sacred by

\(^{83}\) Kuir Singh, *Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Dās*. 
various streams of Hindu communities in premodern India, shows how this emotional connection between the community and the Guru contributes to making Ayodhya a part of the Sikh landscape.

In the third chapter of his *gurbilās* entitled *kāśī toñ ajuddhyā* (Kashi and Ayodhya), Kuir Singh describes the Tenth Guru’s travels after he departed from Patna and stopped in Benares (Kashi), Ayodhya, Mathura, Haridwar, and Lakhnaur:

*savaiyā*

ādi anādi agadhi gurū tiha ke pada paṅkaja ādi manānūṃ/ kānsī payāna su audha paravesahi nānaka jū so matai dhara cāū/ pai hariduāra majhāra tabai laghanaura dayānidha jo ṭhahirāū"/84

I invoke the Primal Being, at his lotus feet, the unfathomable, first and without beginning Guru

He departed to Kashi and entered Ayodhya, Nanak established his mat.

And then the Treasury of Compassion stayed in Hardwar and Lakhnaur,

The chapter begins with a brief description of the Guru’s brief stay in Benares, the city of Sasi Bhal, a devoted Shaiva. The procession is once again described in regal terms. The Guru is seated on a royal chariot, a palki and is adorned with jewelry and the rarest diamonds:

*ketaka kāla purī sasi bhāla dayāla base mana ānanda pāī/ bhūkhana cīra su hīra anūpama bheṭa carai bara āyadha āī/ asa pālakī aura rathotama cija disāvara kī atihī adhikāī kauna kamī tina ko mrīga nāika rūpa anūpa dharyo jaga sāī/85*

For many years, Sasi Bhal the Compassionate lived in the city and obtained bliss in his mind,

84 Kuir Singh, *Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das*, 22. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.

85 Kuir Singh, *Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das*, 22. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
Leaving the jewelry, garments, diamonds, and rare secrets, he came to Ayodhya,
This way, the palanquin and the best chariot, and things from great foreign countries,
He took form in the world as the leader of the deer-like minds of the people.

āīsa pāi su ṣaṅgati kī puni kūca karyo ati ānansa pāi/
tokha pratokha bhalī bidha saṅgati ṭāṅḍhi karī mana dhīra dharāī/
nākhata desa naḍī nada sundara āvata hai mana moda baḍhāī/
rūpa anūpa biloka hoi pāvana darasa karai joī āna lokāī/\(^{86}\)

He got the order of the sangat and then made and obtained joy,
Satisfied and fully satisfied, the sangat kept well to the path, the mind held steadfast,
As they passed through the country and crossed river upon beautiful river, the mind swelled with joy,
Those people who have come see the unusual form and gained darshan.

sesa suresa nisesa dinesa kidho jaga dekhana ko dehu dhārī/
pūra dijesa jalesa kidho hara nandaja ke griha jo avatārī/
raghava inda gubinda kidhau bara hai avatārana ko avatārī/
deha dhare aba jāvata hai disa pasacama ko aba rūpa murārī/\(^{87}\)

Having seen the world, he takes the body of Shesh, Suresh, Naresh or Dinesh,
Who has taken avatar as the lord of the brahmans, or Jalesh or Hari or the house of Nand,
Or he is the avatar of excellent avatars Gobind, Indra, and Raghava,
He took the body and now they went in the direction of the West, now (with) the form of Murari.

And a little further:

sundara bāga tarāga su lachana, sura nara lakhe khela nija cachana/
bāpī kūpa sarovara bhārī, pacha pasū bicarata sukhakārī/

\(^{86}\) Kuir Singh, *Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das*, 22. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.

\(^{87}\) Kuir Singh, *Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das*, 22. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
These marks/qualities of this beautiful garden and sarovar, men and gods see and play with one's own eyes,
Flowing water in the wells, tanks, and lakes with animals and birds wandering giving happiness.

**sundara vaisa sakala nara nārī, nāna dāna rati hari adhikārī/**
**apramāna vaha nagara suhāī, veda purāna jāsa chabi gāū/**

All is beautiful with the men and women, with many kinds of gifts with the lord Hari,
They sing the fame and splendor in the Veda and Purana.

**utare tāhīṃ āi jaganāthā, nirakha purī kahaiṁ ati guna gāthā/**
**nirakha purī adabhuta sukhadāī, kīne caritra tāhīṃ adhikāū/**

The lord of the earth descended there and seeing the city praised its qualities.
Seeing the wondrous city and made a great story/biography/description there.

**srī gura ke darasana kī dhārī, umaḍī audha purī barasarī/**
**saṅgati saraba sahara kī āī, pada paṅkaja lakha sīrāūī/88/**

Coming to the city for darshan of the Guru, in Awadh, the city of Awadh overflowed with people, as if with rain,
The whole sangat came to the city, seeing the lotus feet of the Siarrai.

**jo jo tahi darasana ko āyo, manasā pūra adhika bigasāyo/**
**so ina lahā turata phalu aī, jo muna pāvata kara kaṭhanāū/**

All those who came there for darshan, the minds of the whole were very happy.

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88 The use of “Siarai” to refer to the Guru here is interesting. “Rai” is the old honorific used in both the Sultanate and Mughal period for non-Muslim kings, and could be an indication of a multi-lingual play on the concept of mīrī-pīrī. Thank you to Purnima Dhavan for sharing this observation with me. Personal communication with Purnima Dhavan.
All of them got the fruit that the sage received with great difficulty.\textsuperscript{89}

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{āīsa lai gura kī sikha saṅgatī dauṛa parai saba sevani kājai/} \\
\text{koṭa prakāra kī sauja anūpama lyāvata haiṁ mana ānada sājai/} \\
\text{pūjata haiṁ mana te tana te saba dīna diāla garība nivājai/} \\
\text{hota khusī tina pai karanānīdha jāṁ jasa caudaha loka birājai/}\textsuperscript{90}
\end{align*}
\]

Taking the order of the Guru, all the congregation ran to perform service, 
Bringing many kinds of incomparable provisions, their minds are adorned with 
bliss, 
Honouring him with all their minds and bodies, the protector of the poor and the 
compassionate, 
They are happy near that one, the treasurehouse of compassion, whose fame 
shines in the fourteen worlds.

In this long passage, we see how the interaction between literary representations 
of sacred space, emotions, and bodies unfold. First, the sacred geography of the Sikh 
landscape is extended to the land of Rāma, in the region of Awadh. The landscape is 
described in idyllic terms. Regal imagery is used to describe the Tenth Guru in kingly 
terms and to give him an analogical importance to Rāma. He is transported on a royal 
chariot and is adorned with the most precious gems and jewels. The arrival of the Guru in 
Ayodhyā transforms the landscape into a sacred space as Kuir Singh slowly describes his 
entrance in the wondrous city of Ayodhyā. The emotional landscape too changes as the 
community sees the Guru approaching and as they feel the possibility of having \textit{darshan} 
with the Tenth Guru. The city of Ayodhyā is described as being the most beautiful city

\textsuperscript{89} Kuir Singh, \textit{Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das}.  
\textsuperscript{90} Kuir Singh, \textit{Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das}, 23. Here the transliteration reflects the passage in the manuscript 605.
without equal because of the presence of the Guru (*sundara purī adhika bara sohai*). The very presence of the Guru in Ayodhyā marks its sacredness.

4.11 **Embodying the spiritual and royal personae: a comparative example from the Dadupanth**

A central part of my argument has been that the landscape of the Guru was comprised of meetings with communities, sacralizing places through that interaction and the emotional registers it enabled. I end here by opening a conversation between the Sikhs and the Dadupanthis who underwent a parallel community formation in Rajasthan in the same time period. In this broader world, Sikhs were not alone. The Dadupanth is one example of a community that followed a similar trajectory, within a physical landscape that they shared. The boundary between Punjab and Rajasthan is today perceived as relatively impermeable, but there have in fact been, in the present and in the past, dynamic, multiple connections between the two on many levels (and of course beyond, to Sindh in present-day Pakistan). The parallels between cultural developments occurring in early modern Punjab and those occurring across northern India make Rajasthan a natural location for comparison especially given its numerous and broad connections with Punjab.

Scholars have highlighted encounters that occurred between Sikhs and Dadupanthis since as early as the 17th century. Here I will examine broad intertextual as well as historical ties between two branches of these traditions: Dadupanthi Nagas, an

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eighteenth century martial religious group within the Dadupanthe community in Rajasthan, and the Khalsa Sikhs, also an eighteenth century martial religious group within the Sikh community in Punjab, through a broad comparative discussion of two texts exemplifying two genres of literature associated with the Dadupanthe Nagas and the Khalsa Sikhs: Kuir Singh’s Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das (c.1751 CE) (which exemplifies the gurbilās genre) and Santdās Mārū Galtānī’s Kaṛakaḥ (which exemplifies the genre of vīr gīt, or heroic songs). The goal of this brief comparison is to give the contours of this wider world shared by both communities.

While gurbilās literature is associated with the expression of Sikh identity, vīr gīt literature (or heroic song), in similar ways, is associated with the expression of the Dadupanthe Naga identity. We will see in a moment an example of how both genres can interact but let me first say a word about the context surrounding the formation of the Dadupanthe Naga identity and its relation to vīr gīt literature.

4.12 Dadupanthe Nagas, identity formation and vīr gīt literature

The militant Naga branch of the Dadu Panth is said to have been formally organized in 1734 CE during the reign of Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II of Amer, (Jaipur) close to two centuries following the early formation of the wider Dadu Panth, providing a striking parallel to the formation of the Khalsa in relation to the time of Guru Nanak. According to James Hastings, although the formal organization of the Dadupanthe Nagas is dated back to 1734 CE, the wider Dadu Panth is believed to have initially formally

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93 Hastings, “Poets, Sants, and Warriors,” 306. Monika Horstmann argues that the Dadupanthe Nagas had probably been organized later than 1734 CE. According to her, the Dadupanthe Nagas “constituted themselves officially” in 1756 CE, during the reign of Maharaja Madhav Singh of Jaipur (1750-1767), who supported them. Horstmann also suggests that since the Dadupanthe Nagas had great difficulties in following Jai Singh II's vaishnava reforms “it
organized earlier, during Mahant Jaitram's tenure. Mahant Jaitram was the Mahant of the Dadu Panth from 1693 to 1732 CE. It is believed that Jaitram followed orders from Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II, who wished to unify all branches of Vaishnava traditions into one homogenous group conforming to a similar set of beliefs and practices. It is also during Jaitram's tenure that the Dadu Panth became divided on the basis of whether everyone should shave their head and facial hair. However, the Dadupanthi Nagas resisted Jaitram's reforms as they wished to keep their "distinctive Rajput facial hair and locks" in order to maintain their ties with their Rajput caste heritage. Hastings also suggests that it was during Jaitram's tenure that interactions between the Dadu Panth and the Sikhs increased. There had been numerous instances of battles in the eighteenth

would have been very unwise on the part of the Dadupanthi Nagas to display condescension towards the orthodoxy while Jai Singh was alive.” Horstmann, “On the Dual Identity of Nāgās,” 268.

94 Hastings, “Poets, Sants, and Warriors,” 40. While there are sources available about Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II, it is not so much the case regarding the figure of Mahant Jaitram. Hastings mentions that Monika Hortsmann translated the only textual sources discussing the tenure of Mahant Jaitram called Jayatprakash, by the Dadupanthi named Jnandas. Jaitram is portrayed in the chapter titled Panthapaddhati in which we find the rules that would have put forward Jaitram. The problem with this text, according to Horstmann is that it appears in a 1986 publication of Swami Kaniram who neither mentions the manuscripts he used nor the date that appeared in the manuscript. Even though the text is undated, Hastings claims that the text "provides a valuable glimpse at the problems plausibly faced by Jaitram and the measures he took to create a more cohesive community of Dadupanthi ascetics.” Hastings, Poets, Sants, and Warriors, 46.

95 Hastings, “Poets, Sants, and Warriors,” 47.

96 Hastings, “Poets, Sants, and Warriors,” 159.

97 Hastings, “Poets, Sants, and Warriors,” 46. Also see Purnima Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks, 172, for a parallel between the early Khalsa Sikhs and Rajput values. According to Dhavan, the early Khalsa Sikhs' asserted an elite warrior status “on the basis of mythical Rajput ancestors, references to the goddess Chandí's boon to the Khalsa, but most important, through the daily soldiering activities of the Khalsa rank and file. In other words, the Khalsa Sikhs became warriors through their actions - their karma - as much as by dharma, or dharam the normative moral order to which they ascribed. These trends within the Khalsa tended to strengthen caste ties rather than dissolve them. Although historians of the Sikhs emphasize the egalitarian nature of the Khalsa, it is clear from the historical record that Khalsa identity was created both in relationship to Jat kinship patterns and an emphasis on the new warrior orientation of all Khalsa Sikhs. Khalsa culture did not negate the existing caste identities of its Jat members, but rather offered a higher ritual status, both through rituals like pahul and also by creating a martial culture that modeled itself on the Kshatriya values of Rajput castes.”
century in which Sikhs and Dadupanthis were involved side by side. For instance, the Dadupanthi Nagas and Sikh mercenaries fought together in the armies of Jawahar Singh of Bharatpur in 1767 “as well as in the armies of Jaipur during the reign of Maharaja Sawai Pratap Singh (1778-1803 CE).” In addition, Hastings notes that Guru Gobind Singh and Jaitram would have met twice according to the Dadupanthi lore, the first time in 1706 when the Tenth Guru would have stopped in Naraina to visit Jaitram and a second time the following year in Burhanpur. This suggestion is also supported by Balwant Singh Dhillon who claims—in his edited edition of the nineteenth-century gurbilās text Śrī Guru Panth Prakāś, authored by Rattan Singh Bhangu—that Guru Gobind Singh would have met Mahant Jaitram in the early eighteenth century and would have been responsible for convincing Jaitram that taking up arms to resist evil forces was legitimate. Dhillon suggests that Guru Gobind Singh was a major influence in making the Dadupanth transition from a pacifist movement to a more militarized armed group.

While this encounter cannot be historically corroborated, its narration within a gurbilās text indicates at least that the Dadu Panth was known to the authors of the gurbilās. It is also striking that in Bhangū’s Śrī Guru Panth Prakāś, Guru Gobind Singh is described as visiting a dadūdvāra (a Dadu place of worship):

\textit{dohara}

\begin{center}
\textit{jaba satigura dakkhaṇa puje jahiṃ tho dadū dvāra}
\end{center}

\footnotesize


When the True Guru arrived in the Deccan, he went to the dadūdvāra. After seeing it, he took residence there with his 5000 or 7000 Singh.

After describing the joyous local community as celebrating the Guru’s visit by playing music, reciting bāṇī, and bowing to his feet, Rattan Singh Bhangū goes on to describe for over 50 verses a friendly and cordial interaction between Guru Gobind Singh and the Mahant Jaitram who warns the Guru about the dangers of meeting Banda Singh Bahadur.

In his dissertation about the Dadu Panth, James Hastings traces transformations that occurred within the Naga branch of the Dadupanthis between 1660 and 1860 on the basis of three texts: Naga Swami Mangaldas’ Bansadipika and Sundaroday and, Raghodas’ Bhaktamal. According to him, these texts exemplify how the Dadupanthis transitioned from an ascetic community predominantly composed of Kacchwaha Rajputs actively involved in literary activities in the seventeenth-century state of Amer to a militarized group of armed ascetics involved in mercenary activities that made them a rich and powerful branch within the Dadu Panth in eighteenth-century Jaipur. We observe a similar trajectory in regards to the developments and divisions that occurred within the larger Sikh Panth in the early eighteenth

101 Rattan Singh Bhangū’s Śrī Guru Panth Prakāś.
102 Rattan Singh Bhangū’s Śrī Guru Panth Prakāś.
104 Hastings, “Poets, Sants, and Warriors,” 5. “(…) a clear picture emerges of the shifting values of the Dadupanthis Naga as they responded to changes within the sociocultural milieu of Amer. Deriving its heritage from ascetics who belonged to the royal families of Amer and Bikaner, this branch was throughout its history dominated by Rajputs belonging primarily to the Kacchwaha clan. Initially, during the seventeenth century when Amer was a cultural and political refuge within the Mughal empire, they engaged in the literary activities appropriate to Rajput nobility of the time. Later, when Jaipur became engulfed in increasingly chaotic social and political conditions, they developed a distinctly militaristic ethos that exhibited more traditional Rajput traits of pride and glory in battle.”
century when the order of the Khalsa was formed. At the end of seventeenth century and early eighteenth century, Guru Gobind Singh was active in patronizing art and literature at his court or darbār, and in 1699, the Tenth Guru is believed to have created the Khalsa in order to assert his authority “over a divided Panth”\(^\text{105}\). Over the course of the eighteenth century, the Khalsa Sikhs not only became an important warrior group active in the military labour market, but also, similarly to the Dadupanthi Nagas within the larger Dadu Panth, came to be a powerful branch within the larger Sikh panth. It is also worth noting that, as Horstmann and Hastings have shown, it was not the entire Dadu Panth that had transitioned from a nirgua bhakti group to a militarized armed band. The Dadupanthi Nagas represent one specific branch of the wider Dadu Panth, a branch comprised of mostly young men employed in the military force who probably did not perceive any contradiction between their militant and nirgua bhakti nature. Monika Horstmann has noted that for the Dadupanthi Nagas even today, such a binary appears to be contradictory.\(^\text{106}\)

Hortsmann has suggested that expressions of Dadupanthi Naga identity can be found in the Dadupanthi scripture, the Dādū-vaṇī, and in guṭkās which are collective manuscripts recorded and kept in of Dadupanthi Naga monasteries.\(^\text{107}\) In addition, Dadupanthi Nagas and

\(^{105}\) Purnima Dhavan, 2011, p. 171. This period was marked by hostilities with “the masands, schimastic Sikh groups, the Rajput rulers of the Panjab hills, and the Mughals.” (Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks, 172) which effected divisions within the larger Panth. As Dhavan argues, numerous high-caste groups, especially the Khatri Sikhs, did not accept the new Khalsa culture “and broke marriage alliances and other social contracts with those who became Khalsa Sikhs.” (Dhavan, When Sparrows became Hawks, 47). A decade after the creation of the Khalsa, the Khatri had already embraced distinct interests from the Jat-dominated members of the Khalsa. See also, Alam, “Sikh Uprising under Banda Bahadur 1708-15,” in Grewal and Banga, The Khalsa over 300 Years, 40-47.


their ties with Rajput identity are also articulated in *vīr-gīṭ* literature.\(^{108}\) *Vīr-gīṭ* is part of the larger genre of *vīr-rasau* which consists of poetic descriptions of battles. *Vīr-gīṭ* are usually short praise songs of heroes and warriors in battles. The length of these poems is short compared to *gurbilās* texts (between 4 to 12 couplets according to Horstmann whereas *gurbilās* texts can be as long as 3000 verses). Horstmann illustrates the presence of this expression of identity in *vīr-gīṭ* through the analysis of the late-eighteenth century text called *Kaṛakha*, attributed to Santdās Mārū Galtānī, a direct disciple of Dādū, and written in Rajasthani Braj.\(^{109}\) In the *Kaṛakha*, we observe striking thematic similarities with *gurbilās* literature such as the presence of puranic elements, the valorisation of weapons and martial culture, the description of battles, the presence of the Devi, appraisal of heroic virtues and “Rajput valour,”\(^{110}\) a description of “Dādū's court”\(^{111}\), the presence of Vaishnava elements (such as the hero represented as an avatar of Vishnu) and the presence of multiple encounters between the world of the Dadupanthis and the world of Mughals and Rajputs. To illustrate broad connections between the two worlds, I will focus on one brief example from Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* and from Galtānī’s *Kaṛakha* regarding the description of Dadu and Guru Gobind Singh depicted as heroic avatars of Vishnu.

### 4.13 Kaṛakha

In the *Kaṛakha*, Dadu is portrayed as an avatar of Vishnu whose mission is to restore the dharma and to destroy evil and duality in the Kaliyuga. In this case, the association with Vishnu may be connected to the context of the consolidation of the Dadu

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Panth under Mahant Jaitram in the 18th century. According to Horstmann, the presence of strong Vaishnava elements such as Dadu's representation as an avatar of Vishnu, reflects the strong influence of orthodox Vaishnavism on the Dadu Panth. As already mentioned, Jaipur between 1700 and 1743 was under the rule of Maharaja Sawai Singh II who made significant efforts to unify all branches of Vaishnavism. The way through which Dadupanthis expressed their distinctive identity from the mainstream Dadu Panth was to tie their past to their claimed Rajput origins, which is illustrated with the use of Rajput imagery in the Karakha. Dadu's association with Vishnu in the Karakha can be seen as a way for the author of the Karakha to legitimize the distinctiveness of the Naga branch in the eyes of the wider Vaishnava-oriented Dadu Panth.

As discussed in previous chapters, Guru Gobind Singh's association with Vishnu may have helped to assert his position as spiritual and political leader in the wider cosmological and political world of the time and as a result, strengthen the foundations of the articulation of Khalsa Sikh identity. In a similar way, Dadu’s association with Vishnu may have allowed the Dadupanthis to be accepted in the wider politico-religious field while at the same time asserting their own distinctiveness by connecting their past to Rajput origins.

This suggested comparison with the Dadupanthis has the potential to enrich our understanding of the wider context of mobility, political alliances and cultural exchanges in which both Panths participated. Not only did both Panths share a literary language for the production of their literature, but they

also shared cultural representations connected to imperial as well as regional political and religious contexts of the eighteenth century. More parallels can be drawn and more questions asked of both textual traditions. How do both Panths interact with the idea of court or darbār or other social formations? How do both Panths interact and imagine their ties with Rajput ethos and symbolism? How do both communities imagine state power and martiality in the shared militarized context of eighteenth century, marked by a widespread participation in the military labor market and increased political instability in North India? These are only preliminary suggestions of possible questions that can be asked to the two traditions.
Conclusion

The early modern period in Punjab was a time of thriving literary and cultural production, connected in complex ways with cultural production in both distant and near cultural centres. Gurbilās literature represents a powerful example of a body of texts clearly associated with the Sikh tradition that do not only reflect a Sikh representation of the past,¹ but also the existence of active networks of cultural exchanges in the period. In this dissertation, I have explored a few examples that illustrate why it is important to think about this Sikh material in comparative terms with other traditions or knowledge systems: not only were the social transformations taking place in Punjab within the Sikh community parallel to those occurring elsewhere in North India, but the agents producing the texts associated with these transformations also, for the most part, were a part of a dynamic exchange with other parallel social formations.

This dissertation is part of a wider and ongoing effort by scholars such as Murphy, Dhavan, and Rinehart, to build connections and create rapprochements between the Sikh cultural world and other worlds. The goal has been to provide a comprehensive study of Kuir Singh’s Gurbilās Pāṭshāḥī Das and to examine how it interacts with other worlds, more specifically with the Braj world. By choosing to write their texts in Brajbhasha, the authors of gurbilās literature chose to participate in a broader network of Brajbhasha literary activities that was not confined to Punjab. How and why this was the case is most fruitfully understood through comparison of these works with other parallel works. Reading gurbilās literature together with other Braj literary texts opens up new dimensions of our understanding of the past and has the potential to significantly enrich our understanding of the history of early modern Punjab.

¹ Murphy, The Materiality of the Past, 76.
The overall goal of this project has been to look for broad connections between the Sikh and Braj worlds through a close reading of a primary text in Brajbhasha and in the Gurmukhi script. A careful analysis of Kuir Singh’s use of literary forms, themes, vocabulary, and meters, has allowed me to locate Kuir Singh and gurbiläs literature more generally in their historical contexts, and to reveal their relationships with other worlds such as Braj courtly and pastoral milieus, warriors traditions, Mughal visual art, and the Vaishnava world. It has also allowed me to sketch a religious and political geography and to reflect on the category of emotion in relation to the Guru’s saṅgat. Like many other texts of the period, Kuir Singh’s gurbiläs is evocative of the saying gāgar meṅ sāgar (the ocean within a small jar)\(^2\) which exemplifies how the broad worlds and connections are contained within the details.

The first chapter located gurbiläs literature in the context of early modern Punjab and more specifically, within the context of the “long” eighteenth century. We have seen that the changes occurring at the political and social levels deeply shaped Sikh identity and the literature produced in the period such as gurbiläs literature. The second chapter provided context surrounding the production of Kuir Singh’s gurbilas and discussed the manuscript 605 of the Gurbilas Patshahi Das with the authoritative 1968 edition of the text by Shamsher Ashok. The chapter also draws connections between Kuir Singh’s text with other gurbiläs texts by examining the episode of the battle of Bhangani. It also gestured at possible interactions with the wider world of Braj martial poetry by a look at the meters used by Kuir Singh, such as the dohā, caupāī, savaiyā, and chand meters. The third chapter was concerned with thinking about gurbiläs literature in relation to the textual world of Vaishnava imagery as well as the visual world of painting. The fourth and last chapter mapped literary geographies described in Kuir

\(^2\) Busch, Poetry of Kings, 86.
Singh's text that allows a reflection on the relationship between sacred geography, place, and community. The goal of these chapters and of this dissertation overall has been to explore ways in which the Sikh world can be imagined beyond Punjab, and the ways the Punjabi and Sikh world must be imagined in contact with broader traditions.

In the future, it would be fruitful to locate, copy, transcribe, and digitize different variants of Kuir Singh's *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das* and use a combination of available softwares such as Antconc\(^3\) to compare and analyze qualitatively as well as quantitatively these variants of the text and eventually compare them with other *gurbilās* texts. Not only will this digitization project of *gurbilās* texts contribute to providing access to a literary genre little known by scholars outside of Sikh studies but also, it will allow a fruitful comparative conversation to begin with other Indic texts written in Brajbhasha in the early modern period. Whereas early Sikh texts were produced in Sant Bhasha/Old Punjabi, the authors of *gurbilās* texts chose to write in one of the most prominent literary languages of the time in North India (alongside Persian and Sanskrit.)

A comparison with other *gurbilās* texts would perhaps allow for a deeper reflection on the issues of genre, linguistic variants, and audience. Another issue that would benefit from a comparison with other *gurbilās* texts is that of performance. In chapter 2, I discussed how the use of the *chand* meter for the description of battle scenes in *gurbilās* texts allow us to open to connect *gurbilās* literature with the world of Braj martial poetry and to think about the context of performance of these texts. In chapter 5 entitled *rāja sāja* (Maker of the kingdom) and other places in his text, Kuir Singh talks about poets reading and hearing poetry in *kabitta, chand*, and

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\(^3\) Antconc is described by its designer as "A freeware corpus analysis toolkit for concordancing and text analysis." [http://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antconc/](http://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antconc/). The work of Sara Brumfield constitutes a good example of how this software can be used to analyze qualitatively and quantitatively non-english texts. Sara Brumfield, *Imperial Methods: Using Text Mining and Social Network Analysis to Detect Regional Strategies in the Akkadian Empire* (PhD diss., University of California in Los Angeles, 2013) Thank you to Émilie Pagé-Perron for the reference.
savaiyā meters and about the Tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, as talking in meters: *ya bidha tīna svaiye guru jī kahai/* In this way, Guru jī spoke in these savaiye meters: *kavi kovida ādi kabitta paṛai suna chanda savaiyan ke bidha lāī/* expert-poets read *kabitta*, listen to *chanda*, and apply the rules of *savaiyan* meters. This example suggests that the choice of meters as much as the choice of language appears to be evocative of Kuir Singh’s representation of his own place within the wider community of poets. Given that there is still a lot to be known about Kuir Singh’s context of performance, a study of prosody, meters, and patterns of rhythm could tell us more about the context of performance of *gurbilās* literature.

There are many more connections to be made and much more that can be learned about the wider cultural, religious, and social landscapes in which Sikh participated. There is also something to be gained today with projects that seek to build bridges between the many religious and cultural worlds of early modern North India. It can initiate, and perhaps facilitate, communication between scholars working within various subfields of South Asian Studies and foster a network and a community of researchers engaged in the sharing of knowledge and ressources and in the production of scholarship.
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