

Sikh Politics and Religion: The Bhasaur Singh Sabha

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Contemporary religious and communal conflict in India is in large part the result of processes and issues that have occurred over the last century. This is particularly apparent in the conflict existing among Sikhs and between them and those outside who are portrayed as hostile to the Panth. The old minority status of Sikhs in India and the recent turbulence in Punjab have strengthened distrust of criticism of accepted traditions or the claims of would-be leaders. Religion and politics have been entangled, and produced a mixture of feelings and responses that influence how Sikhs view both daily life and intellectual activity. The interpretations of the past by Sikh scholars, such as Khushwant Singh and Fauja Singh, and the research of a Western specialist, W.H. McLeod, have helped stimulate a variety of reactions from Sikh scholars and other observers. Some of them have raised the question of 'who can legitimately speak for Sikhs' and the issue of relationship between research and religious tradition.¹

One way of understanding what has transpired is to see such debate as symptomatic of ongoing intellectual and political discussions within the Sikh community. At the heart of the matter is politics, defined in a broad sense not as agitation but the efforts of organized groups with specific interests to control resources and to be seen as legitimate leaders. Such a struggle has been a perennial pattern in Sikh history over the last century. The Singh Sabha period produced a range of institutions and ideological positions, but the organizations did not resolve key issues. By briefly examining some of the earlier efforts to define what constituted Sikhism and

the appropriate boundaries of Sikh thought and action, perhaps one can better understand the current debate among Sikhs and between them and scholars interested in comparative research.

The focus of this paper will be the evolution of one radical organization, the Panch Khalsa Diwan (PKD), and its struggle with two larger and more central associations, initially the Chief Khalsa Diwan (CKD) and subsequently, the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee. Formed in 1893, the Bhasaur Singh Sabha (later calling itself the PKD) stood for radical interpretation of Sikh tradition. Its tracts and public meetings discussed most of the major issues facing Sikhs today. My review is based primarily on PKD documents, with occasional reference to newspaper accounts and opposing tracts and edicts. The work should be seen as research in progress rather than a final analysis, particularly with regard to the rather complicated events in the 1920s. Hopefully, even this survey of the history of the Diwan can open discussion about the nature of doctrine, the decision-making process within the Panth, and the relationship between religion and politics.

The rise of the Singh Sabha movement after the 1870s initiated a turning point in the evolution of modern Sikhism. In the previous century, there existed a variety of customs, local usages, and interpretations of Sikh theology loosely associated with the Sikh tradition. In the pre-Ranjit Singh period, for example, large groups of Sikhs did gather occasionally and issued joint decisions, *Gurmata*s, but that generally ended during the reign of the Sikh monarch. With the advent of British rule, authority and the right to speak for Sikhism became even more diffuse. There were occasional *hukamnamas*, edicts issued by the four Takhts, but these tended to be pro-British and reflected the orientation of the managers of the shrines and their close connection with the colonial power, which in turn had legitimized their control of the holy institutions. Other Sikhs, most notably leaders from the lineage of the Gurus (Bedis and Sodhis), or Sikh Rajas such as the ruler of Patiala, spoke out on specific issues and on occasions sponsored research and publication of texts and histories. The most notable was the detailed exegesis of the Guru Granth Sahib, under the patronage of the Raja of Faridkot (the *Faridkot Teeka*). As Harjot Singh Oberoi has so clearly demonstrated, clan, caste, sect, and local tradition helped frame the daily life of most Sikhs.²

One section of the Singh Sabha movement, the Tat Khalsa,

increasingly challenged the status quo. Using public meetings, tracts, and journalistic efforts, this group of Sikhs attempted to consolidate tradition by emphasizing distinctly Sikh rituals, festivals, and celebrations of the Gurus' birthdays. They also championed the Adi Granth as the primary source of truth, the rightful heir to the chain of Gurus ending with Guru Gobind Singh. Attention was paid to rewriting history, saving manuscripts and publishing old sources, and eliminating non-Sikh elements.

The Singh Sabhas affiliated with the aggressive Lahore Sabha fought for their programme in the press, social organizations, and in sacred space controlled by Sanatan Sikhs, especially the Takhts, historic Gurdwaras and the Golden Temple in Amritsar. Sanatan Sikhs, aligned with traditional leaders and religious figures who shared the Tat Khalsa's concern with education and revitalization but who rejected its insistence on defining Sikh identity, countered with their own tracts and social ostracism. Leading Tat Khalsa Sikhs such as Gurmukh Singh and Teja Singh Bhasaur were ejected from shrines and Gurdwaras, and the courts became a battlefield for libel suits and attempts to alter administration of Gurdwaras and other Sikh shrines. *Hukamnamas*, edicts from the Takhts, occasionally were issued against the Tat Khalsa reformers, as for example in 1905 when that group successfully removed idols from the Golden Temple. Religious administrators also occasionally prevented worship in shrines by Tat Khalsa or in one instance, an entire conference (the 1910 Sikh Education Conference which had supported lower caste reclamation).³

The ascendancy of the Tat Khalsa as the leading spokesman for Sikhs became institutionalized with the founding of the Chief Khalsa Diwan in 1903. That organization coordinated Singh Sabha activities and consolidated gains over the last two decades. It championed strengthening Sikh cultural boundaries, such as festivals and distinct rituals, and continued the past pattern of open discussion of issues ranging from doctrine and ritual to historical fact and printing of the Guru Granth Sahib. Through its fund-raising prowess and expertise in influencing the new print culture of the Punjab, the Diwan soon came to be seen as a central authority on ideology and institution building. The CKD also provided political leadership as the colonial government began to transfer power rapidly to the Indian population. Appreciating the permanent minority status of Sikhs, the Diwan pursued a dual policy of

cooperating with the government in order to ensure patronage and support as well as defending Sikh interests in elections and constitutional discussions.⁴

Challenges to the CKD came from many sides. The Singh Sabhas represented individual interests and sub-regional concerns, and coordinating pan-Punjab and even international activities proved difficult. The major sources of difficulty were radical Sikhs and organizations, such as Teja Singh Bhasaur and his Sri Guru Singh Sabha, Bhasaur, which had a quite different agenda. Bhasaur, a small village located near Patiala, had a reputation for stringent Tat Khalsa principles.⁵ Three individuals shaped its programme. Sant Attar Singh Mastuana, a prominent saint and activist who supported missionary activities and religious commitment, served as the Jathedar for the Bhasaur Singh Sabha and later the Diwan. His agent, Randhir Singh had been a thorn in the British side in controversies over the Gurdwara Rikabganj in Delhi and through support of the Ghadar movement. Much of the intellectual prowess of the Diwan came from Kahan Singh Nabha, who attended meetings and provided information and guidance in the preparation of documents and the evolution of ideology. The controversial secretary of the Sabha and Diwan, Teja Singh Bhasaur, was a totally committed activist known for his strident oratory and determined efforts to resist opponents. One story demonstrating Teja Singh's personality involved his walking away from an accident in which his son had been injured in order to carry out a preaching schedule. He supposedly replied to shouts that his son was in pain with the retort that while the boy was only one person, 'many people are crying for baptism'.⁶

The PKD's commitment to the revitalization of Sikhism combined an extreme Tat Khalsa agenda with an almost fanatical attempt to convert or confront opponents. Teja Singh and his group had a vision of a small but pure Sikh community. No compromise was possible: The numerous tracts and proceedings of the Diwan were filled with provocative words such as *milgobhi* (mixed up doctrines, filled with hot air), *dhillar* (lazy, back-sliding), *patit* (fallen, sinner) and *tankhahia* (literally one who is fined on account of a breach of religious principles, but in the PKD parlance, a reprobate, to be rejected by the community of the pure). Virtually every page contained a judgment as to whether an action or idea was *Gurmat* (according to the Gurus, truth) or *manmat* (arrogant, self-willed,

not following the path of the Gurus). A major goal was to remove any taint of Hindu or Muslim influence from custom, ritual and theology. Special criticism was reserved for those who pretended to be *gurus* or leaders of the community without meeting the criteria of purity and commitment. Marriage and social conduct based upon caste was considered totally against the Gurus' teachings.

In essence, the Diwan provided some of the front-line or shock troops for the Tat Khalsa movement. Their large annual *diwans* drew many notables for extended discussions up to five days. Issues received full debate, and consensus was the rule. Often the Diwan could not take a position because all attending could not agree. Teja Singh envisioned a small but totally committed *panth*. The Diwan also proved to be masters at propaganda and aggressive pamphleteering. Sometimes print runs of tracts exceeded 10,000, supported by local funds but also occasionally through special appeals for large contributions to a Pustak Fund. Diwan proceedings and tracts generally were printed at the Sri Gurmat Press, Amritsar (Budh Singh proprietor, and later by his son, Giani Mahinder Singh Ratan). Despite its outreach, however, the Diwan frequently worked in isolation. Teja Singh distrusted larger organizations and compromise, and felt strongly that city life tended to corrupt morals and purpose.⁷

The Panch Khalsa Diwan's relationship with the larger Sikh community and Punjab culture in general went through three phases. From 1894 until approximately 1905, the organization tended to be accepted as a radical but necessary part of the Tat Khalsa movement. Leading in dramatic activities as mass conversion of Muslims, the Diwan evoked threats of reprisal and violence from more conservative elements within Sikhism. For example, in its first annual *diwan*, thirteen Jats, six water carriers (*jhiwars*), two barbers, one Khatri and a Muslim (Miran Bakhsh, renamed Nihal Singh) received baptism. At the most controversial ceremonies, at the village of Bakapur close to Phillaur (13-14 June 1903), an entire Muslim family became Sikhs in a much publicized event. The hostile responses of more conservative Sikhs only reinforced Teja Singh's sense of duty and his vision of a purified Sikh faith. The only real Sikhs were those who had undergone *amrit* and who followed not only the teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib but the discipline demanded by Guru Gobind Singh. The organization sponsored *anand* or Sikh marriages stripped of Hindu influence

long before the passage of the Anand Marriage Act in 1908. Similarly, Teja Singh spoke out incessantly against Hindu festivals and control of Sikh shrines by those he judged to be apostates and actually only Hindus in disguise. Aggressively demanding equality within the Panth, the Diwan encouraged female education, no wearing of ornaments (judged to be a Hindu practice), and a major role for women in worship services. All Sikhs were to have long hair and wear turbans, and therefore girls at the PKD school or women in the congregation wore turbans rather than scarves draped over their heads.

From 1905 to 1920, the radical ideas of the Diwan became less acceptable to many Sikhs. The organization became alienated intellectually and organizationally from the network of Singh Sabhas and institutions associated with the Chief Khalsa Diwan. Although many of Teja Singh's former associates were prominent in the central Sikh association, he felt that they had sold out and become lazy, tainted with power, willing to compromise, and to accept *milgobhi* ideas. Despite frequent invitations to join the Diwan's many committees, Teja Singh stayed on the outside and heaped hot coals upon the CKD in the form of a series of challenges.⁸

At least three major issues separated the Panch Khalsa and the Chief Khalsa Diwan. First, from the perspective of Teja Singh, the Amritsar-based organization had misused its authority in trying to resolve details concerning Sikh *rahit* or practice. The Chief Khalsa Diwan attempted to promulgate a document that delineated 'legitimate' Sikh practices in worship and other public activities. The draft came under heavy attack from the Panch Khalsa Diwan, which pointed out the compromises and 'non-Sikh elements' in the draft. Unable to reach a consensus, the CKD in typical fashion backed away from the issues.⁸

In addition, the Panch Khalsa Diwan denounced the Chief Khalsa Diwan's approach to a perennial problem, the relationship between Sahajdhari and Amritdhari Sikhs. Although the Amritsar associations' leaders were all Amritdhari, in order to widen the influence of the Diwan and to be inclusive of a variety of interests, provisions were made for clean-shaven Sikhs to serve as advisers and to even have their own separate conference at the annual meetings of the Sikh Education Conference. This infuriated Teja Singh. Only those Sahajdharis who clearly were on the path to being real Sikhs, preparing to undergo baptism and the Khalsa

discipline, should play any role within the Panth. Inter-marriage and social contacts with Sahajdharis were judged to adulterate the purity of mind and action of other Sikhs and therefore should be rejected. Only true believers, the Khalsa, could act together even though this meant rejecting the help of others who nominally considered themselves to be Sikhs.¹⁰

The last and increasingly major difference involved the Gurus and Sikh scripture. The PKD totally opposed any Hindu influence. Dramas about the lives of the Gurus supposedly mirrored Hindu practice and should be avoided. Similarly, no pictures of the Gurus should be permitted because that could lead to idolatry. The spread of printing presses had led to the widened circulation of popular Sikh art, a development labelled sacrilege by the PKD.¹¹ Not only were Sikhs to participate only in festivals at the time of the birthdays of the Gurus, but these were to be celebrated in very specific and pristine ways and only at major shrines.

The Panch Khalsa Diwan struggled with the potential tension between Sikhism as a set of theological precepts and an orthodox style of life with set rituals and symbols. Increasingly it emphasized the primacy of Guru Gobind Singh's call to arms and sacrifice. Although acknowledging that the Dasam Granth, or the collection believed to be of the Tenth Guru's writings, was not equal to the Guru Granth Sahib, the Diwan still tried to incorporate sections of Guru Gobind Singh's message in services. With regard to the Granth Sahib, the PKD stressed stringent rules concerning its presentation and place within the community. Any writing such as the detailed *Faridkot Teeka* (exegesis) should be relegated to a secondary place and not even associated with worship because of the danger of its being viewed by some as having a position similar to the Guru Granth Sahib.¹²

Acknowledging, as all Sikhs did, the primacy of the holy scripture, the Diwan was so consumed with eliminating non-Sikh elements that it began to debate whether parts of the Granth in fact had been mistakenly included at a later date. One question involved the *ragmala*, associated with a Muslim poet Alam. The Diwan held large meetings and attempted to argue that that portion of the scripture was not authentic and therefore should be eliminated from printed volumes. In 1916, the Diwan's initial printing of a Guru Granth Sahib without the controversial section led to a massive uprising against the Bhasaur group. Interestingly, opposition grew

slowly, and not until late 1917 were substantial meetings on the issue held throughout India and abroad. A likely reason for the growth of hostility involved the continual warfare between Budh Singh and his paper, the *Panth Sewak*, and the spokesman for the CKD, the *Khalsa Samachar*. The *Sewak* used the issue to try and discredit the opposing newspaper and the Diwan, which countered with fiery editorials and a call for mass protests. Finally, the Maharaja of Patiala, with whom the Diwan had been fighting over a variety of issues, promulgated an order in the spring of 1918 that the Diwan should turn in all copies of the controversial volumes and send copies of the *ragmala* to all those who had bought the scriptures. The princely government did not discuss whether the *ragmala* was *Gurbani*, but rather it acted on the basis that the Diwan had created enmity and disrupted law and order by challenging 'a trusted belief and our tradition that no page should be omitted or removed from the Sacred Guru Granth Sahib'.¹³ The Chief Khalsa Diwan loudly denounced the Panch Khalsa Diwan, and the two organizations exchanged tracts and denunciations in large public meetings.

Typically, Teja Singh did not back off, and the orders from Patiala were not obeyed. Several factors probably contributed to the stalemate. First, much of the Sikh attention was focused on the new constitutional proposals that would set up elected legislatures in the provinces. Sikhs became more concerned over their minority status and tried to enlarge their role within the legislative arena. Also, the PKD still commanded a residue of respect because of its strident efforts to confront *pujaris* and managers of various shrines who undercut the Tat Khalsa programme. The Diwan was involved in several court cases and instances of direct action involving Gurdwara administration. Ultimately, however, the radical programme from Bhasaur went unchecked because no central Sikh body had either the authority or the will to deal with Teja Singh. The Takhts had issued resolutions over the *ragmala* episode (and sporadically on other matters raised by the PKD), but no one implemented the theological denunciations.¹⁴ Patiala was enmeshed in the war-effort and probably did not want to become a major enforcer of resolutions against the Diwan. Similarly, the Chief Khalsa Diwan did not pursue the matter after 1918. The organization had internal divisions, struggles, competing Sikh groups, and differences over cooperation with recruitment and wartime

propaganda. Several leaders also probably hoped, vainly as it turned out, that Teja Singh could be brought into the fold and convinced to compromise. Some went so far as to try and cooperate with him in publishing the Guru Granth Sahib in tract form. This committee included Bhai Vir Singh, Giani Thakur Singh, Pandit Variam Singh, Giani Sher Singh, and others representing a diverse perspective on many issues. Eventually, CKD members abandoned the project and again attacked Teja Singh.¹⁵

The turbulent events between 1919 and 1925 overtook the two Diwans, and led to a new phase of Sikh politics and religious debate that left both on the periphery of public life. The 1919 Punjab disturbances helped undermine the legitimacy of the CKD which attempted to find a middle ground between supporting the British and joining with militant Sikhs and other Punjabis in opposing repression. Similarly, the Diwan, which had led the struggle to wrest control of the Gurdwaras from managers who often associated with Hindu elements, shied away from militant confrontation with those who controlled the shrines and their often times supporter, the colonial government. The result was a rapid transition from being seen as the premier Sikh organization to being identified as conservative and pro-British. Alternative to the Diwan were the militants associated with the newly formed SGPC and the Akali Dal.¹⁶

Initially the Panch Khalsa Diwan supported aggressive action to free the Gurdwaras and gave tacit approval to the Akali Jathas. Actually the Bhasaur group played a role in a series of confrontations leading to *pujaris* of the Akal Takht labelling Teja Singh and his followers *chuhars*, outcastes, because they associated with untouchables. *Pujaris* refused to let members of the Diwan worship in the Golden Temple, and subsequently did the same with other groups, actions leading to the takeover of the sacred complex.¹⁷ There is abundant evidence that the militant Bhasaur group also was prominent in several Jathas and openly called on true followers of Guru Gobind Singh to take up the sword against repression.

As the SGPC and Akali dominance increased, however, Teja Singh felt that the new leaders were self-serving and even more irreligious than the Chief Khalsa Diwan advocates. Labelling the SGPC a *manmat* organization, the Bhasaur group asserted that many Akalis still respected caste differences and often were after personal gain and prestige, being fundamentally an association of

shopkeepers and Baniyas.¹⁸ The discussion about a pending Sikh Gurdwaras Bill in 1925 only aggravated the situation. The proposed legislation stipulated that all those who signed an oath that they were 'Sikh' would be considered 'Sikh' for the purposes of elections and administration. This was a compromise which aimed at maximizing the size and influence of Sikhs and avoiding major divisions over the Bill. Teja Singh and his associates were furious. They considered Akali leaders cowards who only supported such a move to get out of jail or to curry favour with the British. The only real Sikhs for the PKD were Amritdhari Sikhs, and the legislation therefore undercut the Panth, the existence of the Khalsa Panth arose only from the *amrit* of the *khanda*.¹⁹ A final issue grew out of the SGPC's attempts to convert untouchables, long a practice of the Bhasaur group. The difference was that Teja Singh insisted that all being brought into the fold should undergo *amrit*. Numbers meant nothing, *amrit* meant everything. No Sikh couple could be legitimately married without taking *amrit* prior to the ceremony.²⁰

The Panch Khalsa Diwan also struck out more sharply at aspects and practices considered dangerous to the Sikh religion. Passing a series of resolutions on caste associations, the Diwan claimed that recognizing social differences undercut unity and was against the teaching of the Gurus. Similarly, the organization issued challenges to Jathedars of the four Takhts, while at the same time claiming that Damdama Sahib should be recognized as a fifth Takht. From 1919 onward, the Diwan insisted that all Gurdwaras were not personal property but belonged to the community. Questioning the legitimacy of the Takhts, Teja Singh argued that Jathedars should be democratically elected and not appointed for political reasons.²¹ Real leaders should be based solely on adherence to firm principles and the will of the Panth and not derived from family background or the manoeuvres of 'secular' politicians.

The increasing militancy quickly led to a fresh confrontation with the Maharaja of Patiala. At the end of the war, the Diwan had awarded Patiala the title Bir Jung, and the Maharaja denounced the move on the grounds that the Diwan, which now also called itself the Khalsa Parliament, had no legitimacy or right to give titles. This synchronized with a personal affront to Maharaja Bhupinder Singh. At a *diwan* in 1919, Jathas representing most of the Sikh girls schools gathered, and in typical fashion, Patiala made promises of grants to the institutions, including the one at Bhasaur. However,

during the worship service, Teja Singh instructed the *panj piaras* not to give *karah parshad* to the Maharaja because he was said to be impure and a sinner. The insult led to an immediate cession of funds. Tension increased when the Diwan resolved that all Rajas should be considered servants of the Panth and were personally accountable to Sikh organizations for their decisions and overall conduct. No Brahman ministers should be appointed was almost a direct attack on Pandit Kishan Kaul, the Prime Minister of Patiala state.²²

In 1922, Patiala passed new orders against Teja Singh and imprisoned him for over a year. The charges ostensibly were sacrilege and creating disturbance. The assets of the Panch Khalsa Diwan were seized, as was the library and all its publications. A new management committee was appointed, in collaboration with the SGPC, which sent a Jatha to take over the Diwan. Supporters of the Bhasaur group countered by organizing their own Jatha, and bloodshed was prevented only when the SGPC disavowed any connection with those trying to abolish the Diwan and left all punitive action to the Patiala state. Teja Singh finally was released, as were the assets of the Diwan after a ten-year period. No publications judged profane or anti-Sikh, however, were returned, and some remained in a locked warehouse in Patiala till as late as 1969.²³

After another round of confrontation with Patiala over the forced abdication of the ruler of Nabha, who had given the Diwan some support, Teja Singh focused most of his limited resources and unlimited verbal attacks at the SGPC and religious opponents. The Diwan renewed publication of Gurmukhi lessons consisting of sections of the Guru Granth Sahib, with deletions and commentary, an action which coincided in 1927 with a fresh publication of the Granth minus the *ragmala*. The SGPC responded to pressure from supporters by issuing a series of questions to the Diwan. Why had Teja Singh begun using *Satinam* in place of *Bhagauti* in public prayers? Why did the Diwan replace *Wahiguru* with *Wahuguru*? Why had *bani* been removed in publications and in Gurmukhi courses? The Diwan caustically replied by issuing a series of tracts that dealt with each issue, and giving them to the SGPC as a printed *saropa*.²⁴

The SGPC then launched its final attack in coordination with the Takhts. On 15 July 1928, an announcement circulated that the

organization and the Takhts had reached a common decision. The Panch Khalsa Diwan had altered the *bani* of the Gurus and changed ceremonies. No Sikh should buy any book published by the Diwan, and if found, should send them to the Akal Takht. Babu Teja Singh and his wife, Bibi Niranjan Kaur, were suspended from the Khalsa Panth, and members of the PKD could not make *ardas* at the Takhts and Gurdwaras unless they begged pardon. A total boycott of Bhasaur was mandated. Attempting to muzzle the Diwan, the SGPC declared the manager of the Sri Gurmat Press, Budh Singh, *tankhahia*, but he subsequently appeared before the Akal Takht and upon agreeing not to publish sacreligious literature in the future, obtained a pardon.²⁵

The official ostracism infuriated Teja Singh, who declared that the resolution, which he burned publicly, was not worth a single pie, and was strictly non-*Gurmat*. The Panch Khalsa Diwan refused to see itself as separated from the Panth. 'If anybody is mistaken or does faulty things, they should be made *tankhahia* and punished, but it is against *Gurmat* to suspend anyone from the Khalsa Panth for minor mistakes. The Sikh Gurus never used these words to suspend anyone'.²⁶ The Diwan also resolved that all orders and *hukamnamas* from the Takhts were invalid unless they had been elected according to *Gurmat* customs. The Jathedars, the Diwan charged, had been appointed by the SGPC and, therefore, issued rulings for political and not religious reasons.

No more serious reprisals occurred. The Diwan continued to issue edicts, including its own set of rules of daily practice and worship (*rahit*). The flow of funds from supporters dwindled quickly, however, as Teja Singh lamented in his correspondence with Bhai Takht Singh of Ferozepur: 'We are doing poorly'. Nevertheless, the Panch Khalsa Diwan feared no one. A true warrior performed his duties until death, and once a game had begun, one must stand fast.²⁷ Actually threats of death were made in the form of a death notice against 'the notorious mischief maker of the Panth, Teja Singh, and also against his major contributor, Kahan Singh'. Both were ordered to come to the Akal Takht and apologize. Teja Singh characteristically replied that he would be glad to become a martyr for true religion, nothing greater could happen to a worker of the Panth.²⁸

The 1928 edicts and threats had the long-term effect of muzzling some of the Diwan's advisers. According to the PKD account,

Kahan Singh Nabha had several manuscripts that raised questions about various editions and copies of the Guru Granth Sahib. He supposedly felt that *kachian*, unripe, writings should be removed from the Guru Granth Sahib. Only pure *Gurbani* was permissible. Fearing reprisals, he postponed revising several earlier treatises which could have led to more trouble, and concentrated instead on preparation of his major work, the encyclopaedic *Mahan Kosh*.²⁹ The intellectual vitality of the Diwan accordingly diminished after 1928. It became known as a blasphemous organization, in no sense representative of true Sikh thinking and research. After the death of Teja Singh in 1933, Lal Singh provided leadership but the organization gradually sank into obscurity. Just as in the case of the Chief Khalsa Diwan, an organization that had once been at the centre of Sikh activism, lost support and withered away, rising only occasionally to write its history or to pass resolutions that perpetuated the Bhasaur creed: *amrit pahul* for men and women, turbans for women and no veils in worship services, celebration of only Sikh festivals, and finally, only *amritdhari* Sikhs to be considered true Sikhs and worthy to lead the community. Conversely, all connections with Udasis, Nirankaris, and Sahajdharis must end.³⁰

In retrospect, though castigated for tampering with Sikh doctrine and ritual, Teja Singh represented the vitality and single minded concern with boundaries that gave birth to the Tat Khalsa movement and today helps shape Sikh concerns in North America and the Punjab. His insistence upon a radical interpretation of Sikh tradition went beyond what most Sikhs were willing to accept, but there are echoes of his message in the rhetoric and themes of current polemical literature.³¹

Impatience with dissent and critical scholarship has been a common theme in the Singh Sabha period as well as now. Conspiracy theory linking perceived enemies of the Panth to particular research, whether Christian, British, or Hindu, have appeared sporadically over the last century, and in the intense political debate among Sikhs today, often dominates analysis of research and writing. If one examines the various strands of scholarly research on Sikhism, however, a different story emerges. Most Sikh historiography on the work of Ernest Trumpp, for example, suggests that the former German missionary published his notorious translation and commentary on the Guru Granth Sahib (1877) in an effort to destroy Sikhism, whereas a study of official documents shows that

his research involved far more complex themes and focused on problems of preparing a linguistically accurate version of the scripture.³² The individual usually juxtaposed with Trumpp, is a former civil servant, Max Arthur Macauliffe, who in 1909 published a tome on Sikhism, *The Sikh Religion*. This was not a thorough and independent study of sources but rather a reflection of the themes and concerns championed by his Singh Sabha supporters.³³ Similarly, Bhai Vir Singh's scholarship and literary accomplishments receive accolades, while the work of his contemporaries, such as Karam Singh Historian and Kahan Singh Nabha, tend to be ignored or criticized if their ideas did not fit the general mould.³⁴ Teja Singh Overseer was only one in a series of individuals who were seen as dangerous to the Panth and whose ideas tended to come under sustained attack.

The Bhasaur Singh Sabha episode also highlights the obstacles in the way of independent research. The Chief Khalsa Diwan admittedly had a research and history committee, which remained basically inactive and did little to rescue manuscripts or support critical study. To be very specific in terms of Sikh tradition meant creating disturbance, *garbar*, and also potentially drawing lines that could have endangered support from those outside the Amritdhari camp.³⁵ As a result, no major *rahit-maryada* was published, and the *ragmala* debate did not lead to fresh study of sources and the evolution of the Granth, but to heat and acrimony. The CKD's successor, the SGPC, contributed little to creating an intellectual atmosphere. Caught up in administration of Gurdwaras and politics, the organization collected a research library but made few positive contributions to Sikh scholarship and religious debate.³⁶ This pattern continued after 1947 with the SGPC, in league with the Akali Dal, becoming embroiled in various political issues.

Recent events as well as the challenge of Teja Singh underline the marked degree to which politics and religion have been intertwined in modern Sikhism. Edicts from the Takhts prior to the Gurdwara reforms tended to reflect a conservative ideology, and those after 1919 mirrored a Tat Khalsa perspective or the views of specific factions controlling the central institutions. By the mid-1920s, the SGPC had control of substantial resources and could influence decisions about politics and religion in numerous ways. As in the past, legitimacy and the perception of leading the Panth hinged upon being able to shape discourse and to use all means,

including public opinion, mass movements, and religious sanctions, to carry out a programme.

There is hardly any change. The SGPC does not function basically as an intellectual or religious institution, but rather as one deeply involved in politics and addressing the broad issues facing the community. Disunity within the community and its permanent minority status combine with a sense of constantly being under attack. Responses to concrete events, whether charges about its morality and policies, or the need to develop fresh coalitions over matters such as elections and Khalistan, have influenced the tone and degree of its involvement in the management of religious organizations. One only has to review the 1987 events surrounding controversies over the Sarbat Khalsas and the authority of the Jathedar of the Akal Takht, for example, to see the degree to which politics, *hukamnamas*, and religion have become fused.³⁷

There remains the primary issue raised by the Singh Sabhas and by Teja Singh in his strident fashion: Who speaks for the Sikhs? How can the Panth reach decisions? What tenets are legitimate, debatable or beyond acceptance? There is no clear answer today. The Sikh community does not have a priesthood or a defined religious hierarchy that can claim the loyalty of Sikhs of different backgrounds and persuasions dispersed throughout the world. The contemporary debates reflect that fact, and also the concerns of many Sikhs either to resurrect or develop new mechanisms for resolving conflict.³⁸ Resolution of such matters in a fashion acceptable to many if not most Sikhs requires compromise and extended debate, and until that occurs, controversies and conflicts will persist, particularly in time of threat or crisis. The sanctions against the Panch Khalsa Diwan did little to address the insecurities of Sikhs trying to defend themselves intellectually and politically. Similarly, denunciations and charges of betrayal or anti-Panthic action today will have little long-range effect on the fate of the Sikh community and its faith.

NOTES

1. Reviewed in J.S. Grewal, *Guru Nanak in Western Scholarship* (1992). Sehgal, *Western Perspective on the Sikh Religion*. Hawley and Mann (1993: n. 31 below).
2. Barrier (1970). Oberoi (1994).

3. Barrier (1988) 159-90; (1992), 200-26.
4. Evaluation of CKD policies in Barrier (1988); also (1989), 189-220.
5. Standard works on the PKD include its official history and *Aduti Jivan Britant Panth Ratan Babu Teja Singh Overseer*. Amritsar: n.d.
6. *Aduti Jivan Britant*, 76. On Teja Singh's life and role as a propagandist, Barrier (1992), 217-19. Also the correspondence between Bhai Takht Singh and Teja Singh in Lal Singh, *Kalmi Taswir* (1964); Harbans Singh (1975), 322-32.
7. Letters in *Kalmi Taswir*, 42-62, and discussions with Nahar Singh M.A., who knew Babu Teja Singh in the late 1920s.
8. *Panth Benati*. Bhasaur: n.d.
9. *Salana Diwan*, Bhasaur, 1916. *Gurmat Prakash Bhag Samskar* (1908).
10. PKD, 52-59.
11. Oberoi (1994). McLeod (1991).
12. PKD, 54-59.
13. *Ragmala Nirnaya*. Bhasaur, n.d., *Khalsa Samachar* (KS), (October 1917-June 1918). PKD, 30. Kohli (1976), 93, 96, 105-11.
14. Several KS editorials noted this point, questioning the relationship between edicts and their acceptance by members of the Panth.
15. PKD, 30. On earlier attempts to incorporate the PKD, minutes of the CKD executive meetings, June 1905-July 1907. These include resolutions and discussions about how to involve Teja Singh in the review of doctrinal issues and *rahit-maryada*.
16. Barrier (1988). Mohinder Singh (1978).
17. PKD, 77.
18. *Kalmi Taswir*, 79-80.
19. PKD, 79-80.
20. *Kalmi Taswir*, 62-64. PKD, 67, 80.
21. PKD, 34, 83.
22. PKD, 32-33.
23. *Samjhauta Prakash*. Panch Khalsa Diwan: n.d., 22-23. *Salana Report*. Panch Khalsa Diwan, 1927, 21-39. PKD, 37-48.
24. PKD, 80-82.
25. *Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee Da Ailan* no. 82 (n.d., c. August 1928).
26. PKD, 82.
27. *Kalmi Taswir*, 79-80; also 90.
28. PKD, 157-58.
29. PKD, 118-21.
30. PKD, 190-95.
31. Detailed review of the problems of critical research and Sikhism is found in a new volume, edited by John Hawley and Gurinder Singh Man, *Studying the Sikhs: Issues for North America* (1993). For examples of

references to use of force, basing all actions on the words of the Gurus or the Guru Granth Sahib, and refusal to compromise over basic principles, editorials and articles in *World Sikh News*, speeches by Sant Bhindranwale, translated and analysed in Joyce Pettigrew, 'In Search of a New Kingdom of Lahore', 1-25. The other articles in this special issue on the Punjab, by Harjot Singh Oberoi, Andrew Major, and Robin Jeffrey highlight the role of rhetoric and symbols in recent Sikh history.

32. Barrier (1981), 1-23.
33. The British felt that the scholarship was erratic and refused to reward Macauliffe beyond purchasing a few sets of the work. Correspondence in *Govt. of India Home-Books and Publications*, June 1910, 145-151A, NAI. Barrier (1981), 14-15.
34. Karam Singh, for example, often came under attack, and most of his scholarship tended to be funded privately by Bhai Takht Singh and the Sikh Kanya Mahavidyala, Ferozepur.
35. Barrier (1988), 174-82.
36. Attar Singh (1988), 226-32. Mohinder Singh (1988), 139-53.
37. Dilgeer (1980). Gurmeet Singh (1992). *World Sikh News* (1993).
38. *World Sikh News* (1993).