RELIGION & GENDER

Seeking the Image of 'Unmarked' Sikh Women: Text, Sacred Stitches, Turban

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Abstract

With the inauguration of the Khalsa in 1699 by the tenth guru of the Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh, a new understanding of 'being Sikh' was put in place. In examining the earliest prescriptive texts of the Khalsa, manifestations of Sikh religio-cultural identity and visual distinctiveness were deeply connected to the male Sikh body. This study locates Sikh women within a number of these early ritual and textual ordinances while also exploring how Sikh female religio-cultural materiality is contradistinct to the normative Khalsa male body. The production of *phulkaris*, a form of embroidered head covering (but having other uses as well) was historically associated with Sikh women and are here examined as alternate forms of religious belonging, ritual production and devotion. This study concludes with an examination of how the turban, for a small number of diasporic Sikh women, can be understood both as a rejection of traditional Sikh female ideals, as well as a novel form of Sikh women's identity construction that is closely aligned with Sikh masculine ideals.

Keywords

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One of the unique features of Sikhism in the history and material practices of world religions is the ideal and the uniform of the saint-soldier of the Khalsa, initiated in 1699 by the tenth guru of the Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh. The militarised Khalsa brotherhood was clearly defined by external, bodily accruements known today as the 5ks: *kara* (steel bracelet), *kangha* (comb), *kacchera* (breeches), *kirpan* (dagger) and *kes* (uncut hair). The visual, social and political ramifications of a militarised Sikh body were pronounced in light of the earlier ideals that stressed the interiority of religious devotion.

I am here primarily interested in visual and material religious identity for Sikh women within historical and contemporary realms in light of women's exclusion in the majority of textually proscribed identity markers associated with the Khalsa's early development. In the lacunae that ensued, Sikh women remained within alternate realms and forms of 'being religious'. Importantly, for our purposes, are questions about how gender, material religion and visuality have come to be defined, negotiated and manipulated over time. I use the term 'materiality' and religion following David Morgan's notion that religions' material forms often take the form of embodied practices and external signifiers (Morgan 2010). In terms of 'seeking the image of 'unmarked' Sikh women', I am here highlighting the lack of Sikh women's overt identity symbols throughout history, but also identifying ways by which Sikh women have traditionally utilized *alternate* forms of spiritual devotion and visual bodily practices, beyond those prescribed within texts and creeds. I examine Sikh women's identifiers such as clothing and head coverings, as means of signifying piety, honour, identity and religious practice. I explore how historically, and particularly in the 19th and early 20th centuries, *phulkaris* and other forms of head coverings like shawls both unified as well as distinguished Sikh, Hindu and Muslim women. These distinctions revolved around the use of colour, texture or themes in the making of phulkaris. Importantly, they also highlight practices that *defied* rigid boundaries and fixed categorizations between women of differing traditions. Lastly, I examine how a small number of Sikh women within diasporic contexts today, appear, through the wearing of turbans (historically tied to Sikh males) to be actively constructing through visual identity signifiers, their dissimilarity to women of other religious traditions.

Locating the Khalsa Sikh in History

While there is some discrepancy regarding the actual dating of the Khalsa inauguration and its forms (McLeod 2005: 112), it is clear that the Khalsa came with a newly designated, externally marked male Khalsa body and that it was formally and ritually put in place. These rites and external signifiers included the act of Khalsa initiation (*khande-di-pahul*), weaponry, uncut hair, breeches and the turban (Grewal 1999: 21). The name Singh, adopted by the Guru from Rajput warriors, completed these early signifiers. These material identifiers became central to the religiously-mandated warrior culture of the early Khalsa and in time, the normative, 'essential' Sikh body (Gell 1996: 55).

While the visually identifiable Khalsa male body can persuasively be put forth, this is decidedly not the case for women (Jakobsh 2003, see especially Chapter 6). This is not difficult to understand as the Khalsa brotherhood, 'the

latest in a long line of warrior dynasties', was put in place for the restoration of *dharam*, moral and (in this case) political order. Early textual evidence thus focused on deeply engrained notions of 'masculine honour and appropriate warrior culture' for males, while women's roles were put in place to *augment* that same warrior ethos (Dhavan 2010: 70–71).

Which textual ordinances can one then turn to in coming to an understanding of the location of Sikh women of the early Khalsa in terms of prescriptions determining external visibility and ritual inclusion? For males, injunctions regarding external signifiers were closely tied to initiation practices, yet the majority of the early *rahit* (code of conduct) were silent on the issue of female initiation, or, in the case of the *Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama*, were unequivocal in insisting that women *not* be initiated by *khande di pahul* (McLeod 2003: 199). Out of a total of six early *rahit*, the *Prem Sumarg* is the only one in which initiation into the Khalsa is clearly enjoined for females (McLeod 2006: 26). Of late, it has been argued that the *Prem* may be one of the earliest of these prescriptive texts (McLeod 2006: 3–6; Malhotra 2009: 179–180).[1] I would suggest that its unique gendered focus may raise questions regarding its authenticity as an early 18th-century text. Undoubtedly, these and other questions will be examined for some time among Sikh textual scholars. What is of greater interest, for the purposes of this study, is that the *Prem Sumarg*'s ordinances pertaining to women's initiation were largely ignored except among marginal groups. According to an early observations by Macauliffe in 1880,

> some Nihangs and Akalis have their wives baptized in the temple, but ordinarily Sikh women are not baptized. Gobind Singh appears to have been as uncertain regarding the future of women as the prophet of Makka was, and no orders have been left either in writing or tradition for their baptism or initiation (Macauliffe 1880: 634).[2]

The Nihangs were labeled as the 'fanatics' of the Sikhs by Leech in 1845, in light of the excessive weaponry they wore. Their women-folk too were armed (Leech 1845, cited in McLeod 2006: 2–3). Another group from the mid-19th century that was also outside of the Sikh mainstream, the Namdharis, also initiated women (Singh 1985: 45–49).

What is one to make of the discrepancies in regulations determining the external signifiers of male and female Sikhs, or the more normative silences surrounding female identifiers? Perspectives vary. The developing Khalsa of the mid-18th century 'was that of hyper-masculine men, while women served as symbols of the family's honour, to be guarded and defended by the men of their community', according to Dhavan (2010: 76). For others, women's inclusion in the *Prem* are clear indicators of the wider Sikh egalitarian ethos (Malhotra 2013:

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[1] Debates vis-à-vis the dating and importance of the *Prem Sumarg* are evident in looking to a recent article by Gurinder Singh Mann, one of the foremost textual scholars in Sikh Studies. Here he lists the earliest *rahit*, but does not even mention the *Prem Sumarg* (Mann 2005: 7). In a later article, Mann insists that the *Prem* is a much earlier work (Mann 2008: 249–50).

[2] Interestingly Macauliffe made a complete turn-around in his 1909 magnum opus, *The Sikh Religion* (Macauliffe 1990). There, heavily influenced by the newly established Singh Sabha reform movement, he insisted that female initiation took form during the very inauguration of the Khalsa (Macauliffe 1990: 143–144).

54). I would suggest instead that these inconsistencies regarding female ritual practices, ranging from silence vis-à-vis women's initiation (the majority) to outright rejection (*Chaupa Singh*) to inclusion – but with significant differences from their male counterparts (*Prem Sumarg*) –, point instead to a far more complex understanding of a heterogeneous community in flux, operating within a gendered, ritualised hierarchy.

Acknowledging the importance of the examination of prescriptive texts in coming to an understanding of the lives of Khalsa Sikhs in the 18th century, particularly with regard to the 'silences' surrounding Sikh women, Dhavan insists that the culture and identity of Sikhs needs to be examined on 'its own terms' (Dhavan 2011: 138). The Khalsa brotherhood identified with a clear call to sovereignty. Its anthem, 'the Khalsa shall rule', reflected the concerns of a group of warriors with a religio-cultural identity that was closely aligned with that of the Jat Sikh, the dominant Sikh caste. Thus, the virtually exclusive attention given to male trappings of a martial identity is highly reasonable. In the developing Khalsa, 'local borrowings from popular notions of honor and loyalty were as important to the Khalsa Sikhs' sense of honor as the religious strictures in *rahitnamas*'. On the other hand, the 'two primary repositories of family honour and prestige' were women and turbans (Dhavan 2011: 138–139). When important interactions or alliances took place between the Sikhs, they did so through marriage of their womenfolk (daughters) and through turban exchanges (Dhavan 2010: 72; 74). Within the warrior culture of the 18th century and beyond, women's central role was to augment that culture of honour.

The Singh Sabha Reform Movement and Sikh Women's Material Identity Markers, 1880s–1920s

The discrepancies or lack of 'prescribed regimen' delineating women's signifiers, the 'objects of the Khalsa' (Murphy 2012: 60) in the early *rahit*, were highly problematic in the late 19th and early 20th centuries for a new breed of middle-class, British-educated Sikh reformers, the Singh Sabha. Influenced by Victorian gender ideals, these reformers began advocating, demarcating and redefining an invented, novel version of Sikh history and religion (Oberoi 1994), especially with regard to women. Sikhism was presented as unparalleled in terms of women's equality with men (Jakobsh 2003). Yet, it had deteriorated over time, due to an influx of 'hinduised' practices by the uneducated Sikh masses, especially women. As such, their disdain of rural womenfolk was unrelenting (Jakobsh 2003, see Chapter 5).

Female initiation into the Khalsa, hitherto not in practice among the Sikh mainstream, was a significant platform of the reform endeavour. So, too, was a specific Sikh female naming practice, deemed as necessary to distinguish Sikh from Hindu and Muslim women. However, unlike clear prescriptions for the name 'Singh', there was little to turn to except for the *Prem Sumarg*, which ordained the name 'Devi' for Sikh females. It, however, was conveniently ignored as it clearly defeated the purpose of differentiating Sikh from Hindu women. The name 'Kaur', a derivative of the Rajput term *kanwar* (prince) had some associations with Sikh women (and men as well). By and large, and quite

understandably, it was closely linked to the Sikh aristocracy of the 18th and 19th centuries. Still, it was to the name 'Kaur' that the reformers turned their attention. Despite numerous attempts, however, it only came to be textually and ritually prescribed as a Sikh female identifier to be given to a girl at the time of her birth in the *Sikh Rehat Maryada* (code of conduct) in 1950 (Dharam Parchar Committee 1994: 13; Jakobsh 2003, Chapter 6).[3] Despite their relatively late incorporation into official textual ordinances, the sphere of Sikh women's inclusion into what had heretofore been male-focused and male-identified rituals, slowly began expanding. While women's initiation continued to be the exception rather than the rule, the tradition of female Sikhs identified through the name Kaur increasingly became normative practice.

It was with the emergence of the radical voice of Babu Teja Singh Bhasaur under the auspices of the Panch Khalsa Diwan in 1907, an offshoot of the Singh Sabha, that there is significant evidence of changes to women's external ritualised and material 'signs'. He insisted that women receive an identical initiation into the Khalsa and that both males and females were to wear turbans (Barrier 1997: 145). Women were restricted from wearing ornaments (deemed as a Hindu practice), despite observations that Sikh women were *particularly* identifiable by their layers of jewelry (Parry 1921: 22–26). In 1909, Bhasaur played a central role in the process of formulating and defining Sikh identity and behaviour through a more contemporary *rahit* that would be published in 1915 as *Gurmat Prakash* (Barrier 2000: 54). Teja Singh, however, rejected it as not going far enough in reform and established his own *Khalsa Rahit Prakash*. The *Gurmat Prakash* included female initiation, yet it steered clear of directives for women and turbans (Chief Khalsa Diwan 1952 [1915]: 11).[4] Bhasaur was eventually banished from the community in 1928 due to his divisiveness. Yet he continued to have some covert support and influence (McLeod 2003:174). In the *Sikh Rehat Maryada* of 1950, the final and authoritative version holding sway until today, it is stipulated that women are permitted to don turbans (Dharam Parchar Committee 1994: 4:10:XVI). Except for Bhasaur's Panch Khalsa Diwan, this female Sikh identifier was non-existent. Nonetheless, while for males the turban was a mandatory article of faith, for females it was (and remains until today) a matter of choice.

Teja Singh Bhasaur's influence can also be traced to other groups from the early 20th century, including Bhai Randhir Singh's Akhand Kirtani Jatha. Women of the AKJ wear small turbans (*keski*). Though seemingly growing in influence today, particularly with regard to its significant online presence, the AKJ generally has remained on the margins of the Sikh mainstream as it, too, rejects the official Sikh code of conduct, instead following its own *Rahit Bibek* (McLeod 2005: 167).

Increasingly, scholarship is stressing the need to go beyond religious narratives, prescriptions and texts to include performativity or other visual means to

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[3] While no historical textual evidence exists linking the name 'Kaur' with the inauguration of the Khalsa (as was the case with the name 'Singh'), scholarly works as well as popular sources continue, perhaps inadvertently, to further this important Singh Sabha legacy (see Murphy 2012: 56; Singh 2005: 66; see also Wikipedia's entry for Kaur, for instance).
[4] Significantly, the *Gurmat Prakash* did not attend to a distinctive form of naming for Sikh females.

understand the beliefs, ideologies, norms and values of traditions. For instance, religion can be understood as 'mapped' onto the body, particularly for Indian women (Derné 1995: 30; see also Fuller 2008). Nicola Mooney's important work on Jat Sikh women makes the connection between moral codes, women's bodies and notions of honour with regard to women's modesty vis-à-vis headcovering and social deportment in general (Mooney 2011: 59). As we have seen, for males, the visual manifestation of honour was that of the turban. Even within the contemporary realm, Mooney notes that religio-cultural aspects of clothing for both women and men signal propriety, community identity and continue to 're-establish hegemonic codes of honour' (Mooney 2011: 63; 2010: 62). The *dupatta* (headcovering), like the turban, is highly gendered: as a 'bodily extension of the restrictions of purdah, the manner in which the *dupatta* is worn, if properly demure, connotes the gendered expectations of modesty, respect, and humility… women are constantly reminded of the requirement of bodily attending to honour' (Mooney 2011: 63). Parry made remarkably similar observations on Sikh women's adeptness in adhering to prevailing practices of separation, noting that they are 'difficult to get a good look at, as at the approach of a stranger they disappear or hastily cover their faces' (Parry 1921: 24). It is to this aspect of 'covering' and the production of associated material objects that we will now turn our attention.

Sacred Stitches: Agency, Honour and Material Religion

Flora Anne Steel, a collector of Punjab's folk tales, in the late 19th century also produced one of the first studies on the textiles of Punjab called *phulkari*. While *phulkari* ('flowering work') can be applied to any form of embroidery, it was most closely associated with women's head coverings. For Steel, the production of *phulkaris* offered 'positive ethnographic value' in coming to an understanding of the 'peoples and tribes' of Punjab (Steel 1888: 71). They were created in three main forms:

> 1st, the true *phulkari*, where the pattern is diapered at intervals over the cloth; 2nd, *bagh*, or garden, where the whole surface is ornamented by a connected pattern; 3rd, *chobes*, where the edges alone are ornamented and the centre left plain. The distinctive feature of the original *phulkari* work, uncontaminated by exotic amendments, is the stitch, which is purely and simply a darning stitch, done entirely from the back (Steel 1888: 71).

These heavy, beautifully stitched textiles, though not exclusively, were long identified with Sikh women (Maskiell 2010: 135; Rond 2010). This is not difficult to understand as *phulkaris* were closely associated with women of the Jat caste (Rizvi 2006, cited in Malik 2011: 265); Jats then and today form the majority caste grouping of the Sikhs. Given the consistent reiteration of a distinct Sikh masculinity, Maskiell makes the connection that the 'crafting and re-crafting' of textiles were central to Sikh women as agents in the production of gender roles, 'both in daily life and within the ongoing processes of defining Sikh heritage in their gendered context' (Maskiell 2010: 135).

Steeped within the ancient traditions of Punjab, *phulkaris* are said to have first been mentioned in the love story of Hir and Ranjha by Waris Shah (1722–1798)

in the 18th century (Naik 1996: 103). Patterns were passed from generation to generation with each family having its own characteristic style. Canadian artist Timpy Aulakh notes that

> with time, the phulkãris became closely interwoven with the lives of the women of Punjab […] Many folk songs grew out of this expressive combination of skills and intense feelings […] It was not long before phulkãri folk songs became a part of the famous, pulsating folk dances of Punjab – giddha and bhangra (Aulakh 2011: 56–-61).

Indeed, folk songs of Punjab came to highlight the bonds between female family members, particularly between daughter and mother through *phulkaris*: 'This phulkari has been embroidered by my dear mother, I affectionately embrace it again and again' (Das 1992: 98; see also Rond 2010). Creating *phulkaris* were important communal activities for women. In groups known as *trijan* (or *trinjan*) women formed important bonds as they wove and embroidered together (Kaur and Gupta 2014: 36).

According to Bayly, there were (and still are) three basic uses of cloth in Indian rural traditional societies. First, cloth can be utilised in symbolising status or in recording a change of status. Secondly, it has a supernatural, magical or transformative use, in which the 'moral and physical being of the wearer/recipient was perceived to be actually changed by the innate qualities of the cloth or the spirit and substance it conveyed', and thirdly, its use as a pledge for future protection (Bayly 1986: 291). All three uses are evident in the creation of *phulkaris*. Originally, the women made them solely for personal and domestic use. Young girls, mothers and grandmothers produced them for dowries (Beste 2000: 1–4). In the hopes of fertile unions, begetting sons in particular, stylised shapes of cowries or shells in *phulkaris* known as *Kaudi Bagh* were depictions of female genitals and thus symbols of fertility (Jain 2015). Specific types of *phulkaris* were also created as material commentaries of social and cultural practices. Sainchi *phulkaris*' 'motifs were usually symbolic of the socio-economic and cultural landscape of the Punjab'. They also depicted scenes from folklore, highlighted customs and included social commentary – 'realities, critiques and approbation – through the embroidered narratives' (Hitkari 2014; see also Westfall and Desai 1986: 86–87).

Phulkaris were also clearly aligned with notions of modesty and thus male honour; the three-cornered *ghunghat bagh* served as veil for the new bride, but also more generally to cover her face in the presence of elderly males (Naik 1996: 105). Beyond idealised acuities of modesty, *phulkaris* were also extensions of the engrained culture of prestige and honour in the stitching of *phulkaris* for public displays of trousseaux in preparation for upcoming marriages (Maskiell 1999: 369). Among the upper middle class, fifty *phulkaris* and *baghs* could be presented in dowry to the women of the bridegroom's family (Pal 1955, cited in Gupta and Mehta 2014: 180).

Closely associated with Sikh history and preserved in Sikh shrines in Gurdaspur and Jalandhar, a small square *chamba* style *rumãl* is reputed to have been embroidered around 1500 by Guru Nanak's sister Bebe Nanaki as well as an embroidered shawl (*shamla*) from 1580 (Aulakh 2011). Historical artifacts often present material memory: while historically questionable, they may through their very existence highlight the significance attributed to an event or object within the popular imagination (Murphy 2009: 165). Clearly, the sanctity accorded to

this small specimen of embroidered cloth highlights its importance both within sacred material memory and as a gendered object of women's agency. While generally presented as quaint women's 'customs' that incorporated superstition, the stitching of *phulkaris* also incorporated aspects of religious discourse normatively associated with mainstream Sikhism. They included prayers and the distribution of *prasad* (sanctified food that is shared within *gurdwaras*) before commencing with a significant work of embroidery (Kaur and Gupta 2014: 36). The stitching of *phulkaris* is thus an important indicator of the complementarity of Sikh women's devotional (though alternative) practices with Sikh mainstream religious practices and ideology (see also Purewal and Kalra 2010).

Importantly, *phulkaris* (and other headcoverings such as the *dupatta* or *chunni*) played a similar role to turbans within formal and informal female rites of passage within family structures. Completing a *phulkari* was an important step toward adulthood for an unmarried girl in her natal home (Ismail 2004: 110), similar to the turban-tying rite of passage for adolescent boys. Similar to the exchange of turbans for males, *phulkaris* were ceremoniously exchanged between various members of the family during marriage festivities. These included the passing down of *phulkaris* from mother to daughter, or grandmother to granddaughter, or in the form of the highly particularised *vari da bagh*, a type of embroidery that was gifted by the groom's family as part of marriage arrangement (Maskiell 2010: 138, citing Dhamija 1964). While the turban was ritually tied in the course of a Sikh male's death rituals, the corpse of a woman was covered by a *phulkari* (Gill 1977: 24).

Phulkari creation offered additional roles in the performance of female agency and religiosity. An auspicious day would be determined for the starting of a *phulkari* which would be initiated by prayers, drumming on a *dholki*, a small hand drum, by women and the distribution of sweets (Das 1992: 97). This marked the movement from chronological time and space to sacred space and time. Women thus took on the role of religious mediator, a role generally reserved for men within Sikhism. By adding small patches or flowers of black or blue called the *nazar battu* in a corner or a hidden place, or through specific omissions in stitching patterns, *phulkari* designs were used to ward off the evil eye and other malevolent spirits (Graham 2004: 124; Malik 2011: 270) in a world where 'one always had to be on guard against the evil eye' (Gill 1977: 15). The *nazar battu* was understood as an added imperfection through which the 'perfect is made deliberately imperfect' (Bilgrami 2004, cited in Malik 2011: 271). Figures such as peacocks or cows, either invoking protection or good luck and well-being, were included in *phulkaris* called *chope* and were gifted to the bride on the occasion of her wedding by her grandmother, who had begun the work at the birth of her granddaughter (Jain 2015). The stitching of *phulkaris* could serve as a means by which to give thanks for boons received or to acquire merit and honour through their giving. Clearly, beyond their practical value as headcoverings for women, they served as 'markers of routines, rituals and life-course while also representing acts of belief, belonging and location at the household and community levels' (Purewal and Kalra 2010: 383).

Patterns and designs chosen could also communicate women's sense of belonging within their wider religious communities. Geometrical patterns in *phulkaris* were generally created by Muslims, while Hindu and Sikh women incorporated human figures, birds and animals, flowers, myths and legends in their work (Graham 2004: 121). While implicated within an alternate 'cosmology

of spiritual acts of beliefs' (Purewal and Kalra 2010: 384) through particular elements associated with *phulkari* design, Sikh women also utilised their creations to solidify their bonds *within* the Sikh mainstream. They made offerings of the ceremonial *darshan dwar phulkari* ('the gate through which *darshan* is received') to a *gurdwara* or temple, created special pieces to adorn the walls of the room containing the sacred scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, or presented a *phulkari* as a covering for Guru Granth Sahib (Aulakh 2011). For women, each 'warp and weft' played a part in the 'sacred grid that overshadow[ed] their daily lives' (Mehta 2013).

Moreover, the colours used were also significant and connected women to their family histories, emotional states, changes in family structures, celebration and loss (Mehta 2013). Specific colours were instrumental in connecting and identifying women with a particular sense of location or region of Punjab (Kaur and Gupta 2014: 36) or to a specific religion (Jaitly 1990: 73). White-backed *phulkaris*, for instance, were largely associated with Sikhs and Hindus; green thread was closely aligned with Muslim women. Through the use of specific colours, aspects of the transcendent could be represented within the mundane, elevating time and space into the numinous (Finlay 2007: 399). As 'semiological forms', *phulkaris* were intimately intertwined with a 'conceptual network of metaphysical beliefs' for Sikh women (Gill 1977: 5).

Purewal and Kalra have recently noted that women's practices often highlight the tenuousness of the boundaries that too often distinguish categories such as Sikh, Muslim, Christian and Hindu as 'fixed notions of religious belonging' (Purewal and Kalra 2010: 383). Indeed, the stitching of *phulkaris* can best be understood as women's devotional and 'obligatory ritualistic' practices (Das 1992: 97) within the context of far-ranging and heterogeneous identities. Yet, during the Singh Sabha's active process of the 'systematization of Sikhism' (Ballantyne 2006: 34), many of these devotional and ritual practices were increasingly censured as devious and clearly anti-Sikh. Women became the site of a thorough reimaging and recasting into roles amiable to Sikh Sabha 'reformed' sensibilities. However, while the forces of increasingly rigid communalism did eventually come to dominate the religio-political context of Punjab, they were by and large restricted to the urban middle classes, particularly during the earliest years of the 20th century. The tendency of historians and scholars of religion to concentrate on the activities of male members of the upper castes/classes has been well documented (see Chakravarti 1996: 161–162). Yet the numbers of those subscribing to the reformed views and directly involved and affected by the communal antagonism in Punjab in the early 20th century, were only a small percentage of the population, according to Yadav, about 2% (Yadav 1986: 201–202). If his appraisal of the situation is correct, this left the vast mass of the population ascribing to a far more nuanced, heterogeneous ritual drama, one within which the women, particularly in rural areas, played no small part. Nonetheless, over time, through the specific targeting of women's religious practices, dress and social mores, some reforms were taking effect. In 1911, Latif observed that *phulkaris* were fast going out of fashion (Latif 1994 [1911]: 32); even in the Punjabi countryside, women stitched and wore *phulkaris* less frequently by the 1920s (Maskiell 1999: 366). In the 1930s, Darling noted that once 'so thick that nothing could be seen through it [the veil], and so full that it could envelop the whole head, it is becoming semi-transparent and, if it is long enough to be drawn across the face, it is sufficient' (Darling 1934: 309; Chowdhry 1994). Clearly, changes were taking

place regarding what were once considered 'essential' material and visual identity markers for Sikh, Hindu and Muslim women. It is not inconsequential that the textile tradition of *phulkari* making was virtually reduced to a lost art in the early 20th century, at the same time as Sikh reforms were most firmly put in place to demarcate Sikhs from Hindus, authentic from inauthentic tradition and ritual (Oberoi 1992: 365).[5] Sustained attacks on important aspects of women's religio-cultural lives, including all-women's gatherings and their participation within alternate devotional and ritual practices, began to have an effect (Naik 1996: 108; Purewal and Kalra 2010). With their repeated censure, women lost important ritual, devotional and community avenues to their own ways and means of creating sacred space and time.

Dress codes, clearly, are not fixed entities. Changes in Sikh women's religio-material culture, from choices of heavier head coverings to lighter ones, or radical changes imposed on women, the turban for instance as put in place by Teja Singh Bhasaur, cannot be viewed within a vacuum. There is instead within these codes 'a constant incorporation of new ideas' (Maynard 2004: 8). Clearly, clothes can be strategically employed in the marking of the body especially when they are closely aligned to religio-cultural taxonomies of gender ideals. They offer important windows into how identity is defined, disputed, communicated and legitimised (Tarlo 1996: 7–8). Gurnam S.S. Brard offers a delightful description of this process of negotiation, particularly between males and females regarding women's apparel, in his memoirs of life in Punjab in the 1930s and 1940s:

> Some variation was possible, but every time the women started wearing a slightly different style, the older and religious men were outraged. If the cuff of the salwar changed from six inches to thirteen inches, or the shirt would change from mid-calf length to knee length, some people would think it was an outrageous attention-getter. If the hem of the shirt was high above the knee so that the dangling end of the *nala* (drawstring) of her salwar was showing, it might be considered a provocation to men. But after a few years when the new fashion would become the norm, some other variation in dress style would displease the older generation (Brard 2007: 330–331).

From *Phulkari* to Turban: Contemporary Diasporic Sikh Women's Material Identity

As we have seen, dress codes underwent significant changes in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Sikh women's dress codes and other aspects of religio-material culture are continuing to evolve, namely through the donning of

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[5] There are, undoubtedly, other reasons for the decline of *phulkari* as well. Under the British, *phulkari* came to be showcased at international exhibitions, eventually bought up as treasured items within western contexts. At this point, what was a primarily domestic craft took on additional commercial attributes and was bought up by traders to be sold at much higher prices (Gupta and Mehta 2014: 180). Moreover, after Punjab's partition and the ensuing trauma experienced by women in particular, *phulkari* production was literally lost (Graham 2004: 124). Nonetheless, vestiges remain, especially among the land-owning classes in Punjab, with the tradition of giving away the bride covered in a traditional *phulkari* (Kaur 2003).

turbans by a small number of largely young Sikh women. As noted earlier, this practice has existed, though historically undeniably on the margins of the Sikh tradition. Within the contemporary diasporic milieu, women of the 3HO, or Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere – converts to Yogi Bhajan's brand of Sikhism in the 1960s counterculture USA –, also wear white turbans (Elsberg 2003). Importantly, the flagship 3HO website (www.sikhnet.com) is the most accessed Sikh site today (Singh 2014); it is for this reason that online images of female converts to Sikhism abound. Yet, it would appear that the phenomenon is moving beyond the margins into the mainstream (Jakobsh forthcoming). An image search on the WWW for Sikh women has a predominance of turbaned North American and British Sikh women. While there are no statistics available on Sikh women donning turbans, this small but highly visible contingent are making their mark, at least in diasporic contexts. If one looks to that repository of all things Sikh online, SikhiWiki, for information on 'Sikh' clothing (*bana*), inquirers are informed that 'the long hair of a Sikh is tied up … and is covered with a turban … the turban of a Sikh is his or her primary feature. It is a statement of belonging to the Guru, and it is a statement of the inner commitment of the one who wears it' (Bana 2014). So, too, under an entry at Sikhism.about.com, 'Introduction to the Traditional Dress of Sikhs', (Khalsa 2014) the accompanying images depict Sikh women wearing turbans. Although worn by a very small number of women, these images have contributed to the turban becoming part of Sikh women's religious 'materiality of the diaspora' (Werbner 2000: 5).

One of the reasons for Sikh females wearing turbans revolves around a perceived need to move beyond traditional gender norms and Punjabi Sikh traditions (Singh 2010). Clearly, however, the turban, as the ultimate Sikh male 'sign', unequivocally is not representative of Sikh female identity. When hair is covered, whether by women who are Khalsa initiates or not, it is generally done with a scarf (*chunni* or *dupatta*). In the re-gendering of the turban, these women appear to be either subverting or negotiating symbolic boundaries (Crane 2000: 1) within the religio-social structures of diasporic Sikhism.

A recent and informal online survey of turbaned Sikh women offers fascinating glimpses into this novel phenomenon. The largest number of turbaned women began wearing the turban (*dastar*) between the ages of 18 to 21 years, here identified as 'College Age'. Clearly, it is within the hallowed halls of post-secondary education that young Sikh women are negotiating their identities through visual identity markers.[6] Of the forty-one young women interviewed, the majority noted that no other women in their families wore turbans. Moreover, over half of the respondents noted that their parents discouraged them from donning one (Kaur 2013). This is largely a youth-centred phenomenon, with mothers, aunts, grandmothers, whether of the first, second or third generation Sikh diaspora, rejecting this process of reconstructing Sikh female identity (Gayer 2007: 15). These young women's decisions have led to disapproval and

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[6] This informal survey, along with Jasjit Singh's (2010) important ethnographic research, does not identify class as a variable in coming to an understanding of the dynamics undergirding this novel phenomenon. Here, it would seem that higher education (with possible class implications) may play a role in young women's choosing to don turbans. The question then arises, who represents or speaks for the majority of (rural Punjabi) Sikh women?

sustained tension between the generations, as their elders grappled with their own understandings of gender normativity, notions that clearly excluded their female offspring wearing turbans!

Yet, clothing, particularly among minority groups, plays a significant role in the forging of identities, with women in particular acting as cultural brokers in multifaceted negotiations (Bhachu 2004: 4). From this perspective, the process of identity politics can be understood as Sikhs (here, female) negotiating their own distinct ethno-religious national identity within multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious diasporic contexts. One facet of this negotiation process stems from a perceived need of Sikh women, who have traditionally covered their heads with a scarf, to identify clearly as 'Sikh' as opposed to being misidentified as Muslims wearing the hijab, particularly in the post-9/11 context (Aulakh 2010). In a recent interview, a young woman who had initially covered her hair with a scarf after her Khalsa initiation was often mistaken as a Muslim wearing a hijab. Instead of the scarf, she began wearing a turban. 'That's *my* identity', she insisted (Aulakh 2010 [italics mine]).

Material and visual identity in the form of dress, particularly when associated with a particular religio-cultural group, can serve to insulate group members from non-group members while at the same time serving to bond members in affirming in-group loyalty. Unique dress forms, such as the turban or hijab, can both shield and isolate group members from outsiders and visibly define boundaries (Arthur 1999: 3–4). Women, hitherto largely excluded from being 'bearers' of the Sikh tradition within the Sikh mainstream, 'invisible' Sikhs in other words, have not been perceived as manifesting an ideal Sikh identity (Dusaj 2012). Moreover, while for Sikh males the turban has been the premier symbol of masculinity, for Sikh females, the turban may instead represent an obscuring, a 'de-feminizing' or 'de-gendering' of their female identity (Recasting Gender for Sikh Women 2008). This has lead, in some cases, to a disjunction and even rejection of expectations closely aligned with traditional women's head coverings. Women, as agents of change through the adoption of the turban, assume for themselves a deeper sense of belonging in the context of the wider Sikh ideal, an ideal historically denied to them. The uniform, according to Morgan, not only highlights what group members share, but also constructs a group image (Morgan 2013: 9). So, too, the turban. Sikh women thus exchange invisibility for conspicuousness, enabling them to become part of 'the Sikh look' (Gell 1996: 38).

Responses to the horrific shootings at a Wisconsin *gurdwara* in 2012 by a white supremacist highlight this desire for belonging. One young woman noted that after the tragedy.

'I watched stranger after stranger come up to the males in my family and offer their support and condolences. No one said anything to me, and eventually I realized it's because there's nothing about my appearance that's noticeably Sikh… That's when I decided to start wearing a turban' (Singh 2013).[7] However,

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[7] In a seminal work, Dr. Ganda Singh has insisted that hair is the 'indispensable, main essential of the Sikh faith' (Singh 2000: 39). This would appear not to be the case according to the woman cited here. The turban, not hair, may well be in a process of re-evaluation for Sikh women as indispensable.

as noted earlier, traditional head coverings for women, whether the traditional *phulkari* or *dupatta*, have long defined female Sikh identity. They have also functioned as 'visual references to actual or hoped for gender identities and roles'. At times, that image 'fits or is an idealized version of expected cultural norms [that]… reinforces historically linked identities' (Lynch 1999: 11–12). It is perhaps the traditional female Punjabi Sikh 'ideal' that turbaned Sikh women reject, implicated as it is within deeply held codes of submission, honour and modesty. For a minority of young, educated diasporic Sikh women, the turban, like the hijab, is a 'reconstructed emblem' (Afshar, Aitken and Franks 2005: 278) that offers 'new constraints as well as opportunities for "doing gender"' (Szczepanikova 2012: 476). There appears then, for this small number of Sikh women, a concise alignment with the ideal, male Khalsa-centric perspective, and, in large part, an extension of the middle-class, educated, urban vision furthered by male Sikh reformers of the early 20th century.

Conclusions

Identity is forged 'as much by the meanings [one] feels impelled to resist as by those that are tacitly embraced' (Thompson, Craig and Haytko 1997: 38). In other words, material identifiers are a means to both discard unwished for identities as well as establish new ones (Heinze 1990: 90). In the process, there may also be a rejection of that which has historically been an important aspect of Sikh women's devotional practice. Acting as agents through alternative expressions of religiosity throughout history, women, as creators of Sikh material culture like *phulkaris*, negotiated (at times subversively) important roles and women-centred rituals within their religio-cultural milieu. Importantly, the 'vernacular spiritual culture' underlying the production of *phulkaris* historically, continues in Punjab today, with women participating in rituals and expressions of religious devotion outside of the Sikh mainstream (Purewal and Kalra 2010: 383–384). It is indeed telling that it is largely within diasporic contexts that 'patriarchal formulations become even more stringent', according to Nikky Singh, with an amplified focus on 'beards, topknots, and turbans' (Singh 2005: 190; 193). With an increasingly male-dominated focus, many traditions and alternate ritual realms that have long been associated with Sikh women are dismissed or recognised at *best* as merely popular or quaint customs; generally, very much in line with Singh Sabha verdicts, they are maligned as devious and in dire need of replacement by hegemonic, male-aligned practices. Perhaps it is because the material identifiers of Sikhism are so closely associated with hyper-masculine ideals that some young Sikh women are turning to the turban, the critical symbol of Sikhism, for a sense of legitimacy and belonging.

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