Religion and Politics in the Punjab, 1200–1700: The Unity of Constructed Religious Boundaries through Mysticism, Music, and Local Practice

Sonya Pall

Distinction between Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims of the Punjab—referring to Northern India, parts of Pakistan and Bengal of today—have since modern times been the source of both pride and prejudice. The echoes of stories of the atrocities one group committed against the other during partition of Northern India of the mid-twentieth century still abound today, a frequent topic in films: for example, of train occupants of the “enemy” religion being murdered before reaching safety on the other side of the border; and of parents’ forcing daughters to commit suicide before they could be taken by the enemy’s side.1 More recently, Hindu-Muslim riots took place in the city of Bijnor of the state of Uttar Pradesh in the late 1980s and early 1990s and in Gujurat in the early 2000s.2 Activists of the Shiv Sena party of Maharastra were implicated in the deaths of Muslims during the riots in Mumbai of the early 1990s.3 It is a culture that in many ways draws official lines of separation and exclusion that antagonize followers of other religions—specifically the

1 Khamosh Pani (Silent Waters), DVD, directed by Sabiha Sumar (Turner Classic Movies), 2003.
3 An influential Hindu-nationalist party founded in 1966, “Shiv Sena,” or “Army of Shiva”, refers to Shivaji, a late-medieval Hindu king who resisted the Islamic Mughal rulers. ... [Members of the party believe] native Maharashtrians deserve more rights than the state's many immigrants from other parts of India.” According to Bal Thackeray, founder and editor of the party’s official newspaper Saamna, “Islamic terrorism is on the rise in India and in order to counter Islamic terrorism, we should match it with Hindu terrorism.” Joe Leahy, “Anger as Hindu militants call for suicide squads,” Financial Times of London (UK), June 20, 2008.
lines separating Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims. Nonetheless, especially in the diaspora those from the region in question are more often prone to identify themselves first as Punjabi than as Muslim, Sikh or Hindu; or as coming from Pakistan or India—all possible identities contained within the over-arching term Punjabi. Although this controversy has many facets, I will focus on the emergence of Sikhism in the sixteenth century, on its interactions with Hindu and Islam, and on the antagonistic relationship it eventually developed with Islam.

Many Sikh families and the community itself still teach their children popular stories of how a few hundred years ago the Sikh gurus made religious martyrs of themselves in the face of Mughal rulers forcing them to convert to Islam, often on pain of death. Such stories seem to justify a negative view of Muslims as the natural enemy of Sikhs. Indeed, Muslims ruled Punjab and much of what is today Northern India from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Islamic empires during their early conquests, however, did not officially follow a policy of forced conversion of the peoples they conquered. Furthermore, for much of the Mughal period in Indian (1526–1857), the Muslim rulers did not impose a policy of discrimination against non-Muslims. Of note, the sixteenth-century Mughal ruler Akbar kept Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh officials on his administrative staff; he even applauded the philosophy that guided the holy book of the Sikhs. A monotheistic religion, Sikhism emerged during the sixteenth century out of a less orthodox Islamic culture of music, mysticism, and saint-worship that had by then become woven

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4 One of these very relevant facets that I am not at liberty to develop in this paper is the way the Islamic arrival to the subcontinent was largely presented in official terms as oppressors of Hindu culture. See Engineer, “Gujurat Riots.”


6 Early Arab-Muslim conquest entailed the imposition of the jizya (poll tax) over conquered non-Muslim populations) and non-Muslims were not in a position to attain political power while they remained non-Muslim, and so conversions were more likely sought than forced; indeed, the Muslim warrior elite would likely be hostile to conversions of nobles lest they compete for competitive power. Such was the case, too, in South Asia: converts sought to further their livelihood by tapping into a network unified by Islam; although, on the whole there were not many Muslim converts in the region perhaps in part because in general the Muslim rulers (the Mughal rulers, significantly) tolerated other religions and allowed non-Muslims to gain government and administrative positions. See Ira M. Lapidus, A History of Islamic Societies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 40–44, 53, 358, 361–362.

into the fabric of Hindu social practice. At its outset, its founder Nanak encouraged individuals to be steadfast and sincere in the religion to which they adhered and, in this way, their devotion would reach the one transcendental divine. He himself prayed at the shrines of Muslim saints as well as Hindu temples.

The scope of this paper is to present this particular era as one of fluid boundaries that solidified into an “us versus them” mentality in the face of political conflict. Through such discussions, I ultimately wish to show that these religious groups have more reason to recognize and appreciate one another’s affinity to a shared overarching culture than to focus on differences that the politics of religion have constructed that still lead to bloodshed in modern times. If we examine the history of the culture of the region, we discover that there was less disunity of religious thought than the quarrels today imply. We find instead that the religions were contained within one culture of shared local practice and customs with little reason for conflict. Such customs and ways of living were linked together strongly by mysticism—in particular, Muslim Sufism—music, and a perpetuation of pre-Islamic celebrations and the idea of divinely-ordained class divisions of Hindu society. Local communities and the majority of the Muslim rulers did not completely replace the existing Hindu way of living with orthodox Islamic religion and culture. In part because such a course of action encouraged the locals to accept the Prophet Muhammad as a religious figure, facilitated peace and economic prosperity, and allowed the conquerors to enjoy local customs and styles, they instead inserted Islam into the framework of the existing Hindu way of living—a framework wherein ritual worship (often including idols and annual celebrations) as well as social and political order remained more or less intact across religions. In the countryside and farther away from central Sunni Islamic authority, locals incorporated Shi’ia Muslim saints.

8 The term “Hindu” as used in this paper in reference to the period when Sikhism emerged refers to a set of practices and traditions serving as a framework within which religion—Islam and Sikhism, for example—inserted itself. Hinduism in this context should be seen as a way of life, not as a religion, which explains why this framework was incorporated into or at least recognized by various religions of the subcontinent. While scholars like Brian K. Smith argue that the Vedas as religious texts form the basis of Hinduism as a religion, I would instead agree with Oberoi who points out: “By importing a Judeo-Christian and Islamic understanding of texts and scriptures into discussion of Indian religions, we could end up establishing religious identities that do not exist beyond the scholar’s imagination. Early Orientalist scholarship and administration fell victim to similar selective definitions,” and, as a result, the label “Hindu” has suffered as one having been attached by uninitiated outsiders. Harjot Oberoi, The Construction of Religious Boundaries (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 8–9, 14.

into their existing framework of temple worship. Furthermore, although the Mughal court was officially Sunni Muslim, non-Muslim officials and courtiers lived and worked side-by-side with their Muslim colleagues and shared their same dress, manners, and language. Several emperors, especially Akbar, were often at odds with the kingdom’s ulema (Muslim clergy), who felt that certain emperors’ policies and actions regarding Islam bordered on heresy. Indigenous (that is, pre-Islamic) local practice, mysticism, and music superseded religious boundaries in the Punjab and what is today Northern India. Furthermore, politics—not solely religious devotion—were vital in causing anti-Muslim feelings to become deeply ingrained in what became the dominant tradition of the Sikhs.

The time period 1200–1700 risks presenting itself as rather unwieldy without a brief outline of the history of Muslim rule of the region as a point of reference. Various Muslim military lords of Afghan-Turkish-Inner-Asian origin represented each of the Delhi Sultanates that spanned from 1206–1526 CE. After them came the Mughal Empire, founded by Babur in 1526 and ending with Bahadur Shah Zafar in 1857. These rulers brought with them Persian art, literary forms, administration, manners, and pre-Islamic ideas of kingship to the subcontinent. Rulers implemented Shari’a Law, exacted taxes and tribute from their non-Muslim subjects, and maintained centralized state power. Although Muslim converts were present on the subcontinent—coming mostly from the lower classes in areas where a local mosque or Sufi khanaka had been set up—the great majority of their indigenous subjects did not convert to Islam. One reason is that, unlike the earlier conquests in the Middle East, the conquest of the subcontinent had not been backed up by a large number of Muslim settlers. Secondly, scholars like Ira M. Lapidus have argued that “the Muslim emphasis upon loyalty to the ruler, patron-client relations, and the virtues of service and honor were consistent with Hindu political ideals,” thus perpetuating traditional Hindu hierarchies and castes.

Although the Delhi Sultanates were aggressively Muslim in the beginning—destroying indigenous temples and incorporating their fragments into new mosques—Muslim rulers generally allowed local lords to live as they had before, and simply forced them to recognize a new absolute ruler to whom taxes and other obligations were owed. As long as they received payment, the rulers left the locals to continue living

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10 Shi’a saint worship was introduced to the subcontinent by the Muslim mystics (Sufis) of Persia.
12 Ibid., 360.

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as they had in an effort to keep the peace. This made more sense than enforcing Muslim policies and interrupting the indigenous way of life, which might alienate non-Muslims and cause them to rebel. Furthermore, many of the Muslim rulers appreciated indigenous culture and, in their adopting indigenous practices and manners, encouraged a fusion that became a new Indo-Muslim culture. Muhammad b. Tughluq (1325–1351), one among the Delhi Sultans, was “the first sultan to appoint non-Muslims to military and government offices, participate in local festivals, and permit the construction of Hindu temples.” The Mughal Emperor Akbar “The Great” (r. 1556–1605), significant for having arguably set the most solid foundations of an Indo-Muslim society, styled himself as “protector of his subjects regardless of their religion.” He had a rajput wife, made a point of celebrating the non-Muslim indigenous holiday Diwali, and for many years presided over a court of theological discussion and debate at Fatehpur Sikri. Debaters included Muslim Shi’a, Sunni, and Ismailis; numerous Sufi orders; Saiva and Vaishnava (Hindu) devotees; naked Jains; wandering ascetics and saints; and even Christians. Through his rajput wife Akbar achieved key political and military support from her powerful family, the Kacchwaha rajput rulers of Amber (near modern Jaipur). He inducted members of the Kacchwaha rajputs into the Mughal nobility and had some serve as high-ranking officials. By 1580, nearly half of the Mughal nobility were Indian: “All benefited from this arrangement: the Mughals secured the services of a respected elite plus their warlike followers, while the rajputs gained access to high rank and wealth within the pan-Indian empire.” The resulting presence of non-Muslim members of the elite supported a cultural policy that “created a cosmopolitan Indian-Islamic rather than an exclusively Muslim culture.” Muslim and non-Muslim members of the elite were respected alike and thus came to express a unity in manners, dress, and artistic expression—a fusion of Hindu and Persian ways.

As mentioned earlier, forced conversion was not typically the policy of Islam in the case of Southeast Asia, just as in the earlier Arab conquests, including the Umayyad Caliphate of Andalusia. In Islamic Andalusia, Christians, Jews, and Muslims lived together in relative harmony under official Muslim rule, and—just as in the Delhi Sultanates and the Mughal Empire—their manners, art, literary, and architectural

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13 Ibid., 358.
14 Ibid., 371–372.
16 Ibid., 314.
17 Lapidus, Islamic Societies, 372.
18 From about the ninth to the eleventh century CE.
forms did not reflect a strictly religious identity but a unique regional one. Each person was a member of an overarching framework of culture and local practice that encapsulated more than one religion, a framework associated with a geographically-delineated cultural unit recognized as “Andalusian.” Granted, Muslims were given legal privileges—like being able to advance a political career and not having to pay a tax for being a non-Muslim—that members of the other religions did not have and which served to entice one to convert to Islam, but conversion was not forced. According to Islamic religious thought, Muslims were not to force Christians or Jews to convert to Islam because they were “People of the Book,” who were allowed the right to worship freely because of this special status as adherents of earlier revelations. Although the peoples of South Asia were not “People of the Book,” after the conquests of the second Caliph ‘Umar (r. 634–644), the Muslim conquerors generally tried to disturb the conquered population as little as possible by allowing them to continue to practice their own local customs and religions. This was done in order to facilitate rule over those provinces that were distant from central authority, a policy which also kept the Muslims apart as a privileged elite which gleaned taxes and tribute from non-Muslims. Muslim rulers destroyed indigenous temples when they first invaded, but they nonetheless allowed their non-Muslim subjects to worship at existing non-Muslim sites of worship. On conversion, Lapidus tells us that:

> The old landowners, chiefs, and headmen kept their authority in the villages and assisted in collecting taxes. The whole of the former social and religious order was left intact... When conversions [to Islam] did occur, they were an embarrassment because they created status problems and led to claims for financial privileges.

If we compare the policies of early Arab Muslim conquerors in the Middle East, later Arab Muslim conquerors of Andalusia, and Turkish-Inner-Asian-Muslim conquerors of Persia and Southeast Asia, we see that it was not such simplistic stipulations as the protection of the “Peoples of the Book” that ruled the day. Instead, avoiding antagonizing a majority population of conquered peoples, the smooth running of the Empire and its finances, and the maintenance of Muslim privilege dictated to what extent a particular religious group would be persecuted. We might call

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20 Lapidus, Islamic Societies, 36.
this the “convenience factor” in persecuting (or not persecuting) certain communities.

In the Punjab under the Delhi Sultanates and under Mughal rule, hierarchical castes and other Hindu local practices were also largely perpetuated through Muslim rule’s patron-client system. Such relationships existed in religious centers around religious teachers and their disciples, notably gaining momentum around Sufi masters. Fluidity between the boundaries of Hinduism and Islam increased through the merging of Islamic mysticism (Sufism) with Hindu mysticism’s poetic and musical tradition. Hinduism, a term that came to be used by Europeans in modern times to identify the religion of the majority community of South Asia, is based on an extensive pantheon of divine beings, stories and their lessons as recounted by ancient scriptures known as the Vedas, the earliest parts of which date back to 2500-2000 BCE. As is the case with stories composed hundreds of years before being set down in writing, the lines of the Vedas were put to verse, rhyme, music, and precise melodies known as ragas by the peoples on the subcontinent at the time in order to facilitate memorization and transmission. Principal themes are Hindu devotionals of the god Krishna and the splendor of nature, as well as themes from the two major epics of Hindu tradition: the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Such stories support the hierarchical caste system of Hindu tradition, from the highest and most privileged to the lowest: Brahmins (priests, counselors, teachers), Kshatrias (rulers, warriors), Vaisyas (merchants, traders, farmers), and Shudras (servants of all). These are categories into which each individual was believed to be born and from which there was no escape except through death and rebirth into either a higher or lower caste—depending on how well one had lived in his previous life.

As evidenced by the nature of the Vedas’ composition and transmission, the pre-Islamic peoples of the subcontinent had for thousands of years been using musical and poetic expression as the foundations of local practice and their understanding of the world around them. The adherent demonstrated religious piety through singing and listening to

21 “The [Muslim] concept of clientship was inherited from pre-Islamic Arabia, where a client was an inferior associate of an Arab clan. . . The client was almost a member of the clan; his heirs were clients. . . The protection of the powerful was exchanged for the loyalty of the subordinates” and could harness considerable political power. A similar relationship of hierarchy, loyalty and protection existed in pre-Islamic South Asia between Hindu lords and his associates. Lapidus, Islamic Societies, 42, 360.
such devotional music, a practice which continues today and which employs similar lexical terms; thus, it becomes useful to refer to India’s musical and poetic traditions of today in order to understand premodern Punjab. Indigenous instruments as the dholak (drum), sitar (stringed instrument), harmonium (resembling a small organ), and tabla (small pair of drums) are used in the performance. The bhajan, for example, is a simple song in soulful language expressing love for God and a complete submission to him through the act of singing. Its fixed tunes and its repetition of words and of phrases result in a kind of tonal mesmerism. Themes come from the Vedas, anecdotes and episodes from the lives of Gods, the preaching of saints, and descriptions of God’s glories. Such loving songs to the divine, set to music, are known in Hindu tradition as kirtan.

This tradition harmonized easily with the poetic tradition of Islamic mysticism when it arrived on the subcontinent via itinerant Persian Sufi masters during the thirteenth century. In Islamic mysticism, known as Sufism, the goal of the devotee is for him to attain mystical union with God through such intense personal demonstration of love for God so as to reach a point of ecstasy. The devotee reaches such ecstasy by being subjected to tonal mesmerism not very different from the kind that the bhajan provides. In Sufi tradition, this point is known as fana, the “annihilation of the self,” in order to reach the desired union with God. Such a state generally came to be achieved through rhythmic recitation known as sama’—that is, poetry and singing often accompanied by music. Literally “audition,” in Sufism, sama’ means listening with the “ear of the heart” with the intent of increasing awareness and understanding of the divine object.

Elements of mysticism had existed in Islam since its founding by the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century CE and, for just as long, the notion of sama’ remained a point of controversy. While making music in itself was considered against Islamic tenets, Sufis who have defended sama’ have argued that the performance of music can be permitted if it is used as a medium of spiritual advancement. From the ninth century onward there have been sama’-khanas dedicated to the performance of mystical musical concerts. In the Punjab, where a Sufi master (known as a pir or saint) died, his followers built a shrine to him called a durgah

24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 96.
28 Khan is derived from the Persian word for “house.”

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which would be maintained by the pir's descendants, known as pirzade. The durgah was the site of mystical musical concerts that employed the same indigenous instruments as Hindu ragas did. Singing was not in Arabic but in Farsi (Persian), the vernacular (Punjabi) and Urdu, which under Mughal rule developed as a fusion of the other two.

This particular form as it emerged in the durgahs of Punjab came to be known not as kirtan but as Qawwali, its singers known as qawwals who sang gauls—an Arabic word which refers to the sayings or statements attributed to a Muslim religious authority, especially the Prophet Muhammad. The qawwals were servants of the pirzade who inherited the durgah and maintained it and their families with donations that devotees provided in the name of the Sufi saint associated with the durgah. The qawwals, associated with a lineage of pirzade, until recently formed part of a lineage that taught succeeding generations the art of Qawwali (today it is not strictly an inherited role).

A good example of a durgah boasting a line of pirzade and qawwals is the durgah of the pir Nizamuddin Auliya (1238–1325), located in Delhi. Nizamuddin, born east of Delhi, came to Delhi where he gained a following for whom he became a spiritual guide or pir. There, he began a lineage of pirzade which became associated with his shrine. One of his disciples, the qawwal and poet Amir Khusrau (1253–1325), subsequently trained a group known as the Qawwal “Bachche” (children) from whom sprung a lineage that became known as the Qawwal Bachche ka “Gharana” (household, that is, lineage). The following is an example of a Qawwali song by Amir Khusrau, expressing his utter submission to his pir Nizamuddin:

The distraught supplicants of love, we have come
to your threshold,
To perceive God’s subsistence from the beauty of
your face.
The ka’ba of my heart, and the direction of my
prayers is your face:
For lovers the place of adoration is your
presence.
We, the humble and poor, pray at the i’id
assembly of your threshold
All the joy of i’id, I see it at your threshold
I offer up a thousand crescent moons of i’id
For us the crescent moon is the curve of your
eyebrow
O Nizamuddin, Beloved of God

39 Qureshi, Sufi Music.
All the beloveds in the world are nothing as compared to your face.  

Significantly, the language of the poet resembles the more intimate and subservient divine love expressed in the Hindu bhajan and kirtan. More borrowing and overlap can be seen by the use of the term “gharana,” whose reference to qawwal lineages is along the same lines as the Hindu tradition of gharana of musical performers. The borrowing of the term gharana reveals how the two separate religious groups shared not only poetic form and the notion of the divine as the beloved, but also language. Indeed, when we look further into the religious practices of this era, we find more than just a shared linguistic culture, but a shared culture of devotional practice that blurred the lines between constructed religious boundaries. Significantly, Qawwali was performed at the durgah during not only the anniversaries of the deaths of Sufi pirs and Muslim saints, but also during local celebrations such as Basant, the Hindu festival of spring. It is also significant that not only Muslims, but also Hindus and Sikhs made regular pilgrimages to Sufi shrines to provide donations and to listen to devotional music which might make references to the Imami Saints Ali and Husayn. Furthermore, converted Muslims would often continue to partake in local idol worship and offerings and retain their caste identities. Muslims and Hindus would follow Guru Nanak (the founder of Sikhism) who would himself attend services at mandirs (a generic term for “temple,” often Hindu) and make pilgrimages to Sufi shrines. One British observer and court-appointed trustee of the Muslim shrine of the Muslim Saint Sakhi Sarvar, commented that there “men, women and children, Sikhs, Hindus and Mohammedans alike, come from all districts in the Punjab. There are traditions to suit each, and all are welcomed by the Mohammedan servants of the shrine.”

All of this remained true from the beginning of the Delhi Sultanates through the fall of Mughal rule to the British, when fluid boundaries seemed to solidify. The way the Sultans and later Mughal rulers had been ruling at a distance for the sake of political stability—that is, trying not to meddle with the practices of the conquered peoples—trickled down to the lower classes. For most of the Mughal period, Muslim rulers were not enforcing Muslim Law or practice over the masses but instead mirrored Hindu caste inequalities through their own patron-client system and

30 'Id-ul-fitr is a joyous Islamic festival which marks the end of the fasting month of Ramadan. Qureshi, Sufi Music, 28, 234.
allowed non-Muslims to join the elite at court. We see that one could be a part of Muslim society while retaining old Hindu social structure and practices. Many Hindus basically expanded on their regular devotional practices by incorporating pilgrimages to local Muslim shrines and listening to qawwals. The indigenous peoples incorporated foreign religious concepts that came into contact with them into their existing local custom to create a new “religion” which grouped Sufi saints in the same category as Hindu gurus as well as Gods who would ensure their good health and good harvests if the correct offerings and prayers were given. The common people lived their daily lives and maintained social order in a way that was compatible with a Hindu spiritual system: that is, the people were accustomed to providing offerings and prayer in exchange for good fortune, in having their fortunes told, and in idol worship. Consequently, devotees came to expect Muslim saints and Sikh gurus alike to perform miracles and cure diseases because this is what deities did according to Hindu tradition. Devotees wanted to pay homage to the Mother Earth, to the local Bhoomia (village god) shrine which protected the village, and highly respected the all-powerful goddess Durga, who was celebrated in bi-annual fairs by Hindus and Sikhs alike.32 To draw in worshippers, pirzade would allow such loose interpretations of their Muslim saints and notions of God, thus putting on Qawwali performances during local Hindu festivals.

The Muslim Saint Sakhi Sarvar (d. 1174), referenced above, provides a good example. According to the story, he was born in Punjab as Sayyid Ahmad. At one point in his life he made a trip to Baghdad, the native city of his father, where he received the gift of prophecy from three illustrious saints. On his subsequent travels and pursuit of learning throughout the subcontinent, he became so famous for his power to work miracles that his family killed him from envy. Stories of these miracles abound. In one, “to quench his thirst, [he] struck the ground with his staff and a well came into being” whose waters, located in Dhaunkal, were said to cure leprosy.33 In another, he cured the broken leg of a caravan-leader who had prayed to him to help him with his ailing camel. According to believers, “the supernatural powers possessed by Sakhi Sarvar could cure any illness or affliction: blindness, impotence, fever, or boils. His curative and thaumaturgic abilities ... continued even after his death.”34 As already mentioned, both Hindus and Sikhs made pilgrimages to Sakhi Sarvar’s shrine.

32 Oberoi, Religious Boundaries, 162–168.
33 Ibid., 149.
34 Ibid., 150.
Finally, in addressing the figure of Guru Nanak as a saint/pir/guru and the Sikh religion he founded, it becomes apparent that religious boundaries in this case were weakly constructed out of a more solid foundation of shared local practice and identity. Nanak was born of the Kshatria caste in Punjab in 1469. The Janam-sakhi (literally “birth stories,” hagiographic tales of the life of Guru Nanak) tell us that even as a child he was spiritually inquisitive. For example, the Janam-sakhi recounts how during Nanak’s caste initiation ceremony, he questioned the holy man and embarrassed his father. In a key episode of his life story, one day in 1499 Nanak was bathing in a river, submerged himself, and did not re-emerge for three days. His hagiographers believe that he had been in communion with God, for thereafter he abandoned his settled married life to travel and preach the message not of an explicitly single God, but of the unity of a single God evident in all. He did not believe in the caste system and considered a ritual to be empty if it distracted one from the idea of the unity of God. He traveled throughout the Punjab with his Muslim companion Mardana, who played the rebec (a bowed, stringed instrument) while Nanak sang songs of love for the Divine One. He went to mandirs and made pilgrimages to Muslim shrines and, “when he met Muslims, he adjured them to be faithful to the teaching of their faith; when he met Hindus, he urged them to abide by the tenets of their own tradition.”

Guru Nanak’s followers became known as “Sikhs.” Derived from Sanskrit, some say the word comes from the verb “to follow,” while others say it comes from the verb “to learn.” Nanak compiled devotional poetry, some of which are known as the Japji and were meant to be recited at dawn; while other compositions were taken down by the fifth Guru in the Adi Granth, the Sikh holy book he compiled. In revering the infinite glory of the unity of the one God, the Japji makes references to the significance of the Hindu pantheon as contained within the Unity of God in observance of its greatness:

Wind, water, and fire sing Your praise . . .
Shiva, Brahma, and the Goddess, radiant with splendor
bestowed by You, sing Your praise,
Indra, seated upon his throne in a circle of gods,
sings Your praise.

36 “Teacher.” One might consider it synonymous with the term “pir” for its religious context. With no other context the term defaults in meaning to refer to the leaders of the Sikh community.
37 Kaur Singh, Verses of Sikh Gurus; Oberoi, Religious Boundaries. Both meanings may be linguistically derived from the same root in North Indian languages.
According to Nanak, then, a devotee's prayers were directed to the same unity of God regardless of one's faith. After Nanak (1469–1538), nine other gurus took up the reign of Sikh Guru in succession until the tenth one, Gobind Singh, formalized drastic changes to the religion. He codified doctrines of Sikh ritual, bestowed upon the religion the title Khalsa, proclaimed this sect as the only legitimate form of Sikhism, and ended the line of human Gurus by conferring the title forevermore to the Adi Granth, the Sikh holy book, which became known as the Guru Granth Sahib. Contributors to the poetry of the Adi Granth were the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, and ninth Gurus; some Hindu bhaktas and Sufi pirs also contributed. For, prior to such orthodox gurus as Gobind Singh, if something a Hindu or Muslim said was in harmony with the Transcendental One in Sikhism, it was in theory to be revered by Sikhism.

The Adi Granth is a book of pure devotional poetry—with neither history nor politics—set to particular ragas and meant to be listened to. Today, the performance of Sikh devotional poetry from the Adi Granth is set to the music of the harmonium and tabla or dholak in Sikh places of worship known as gurudwaras (literally, the walls of the guru). Followers have come to call this music kirtan after Hindu musical tradition. Sikh devotional hymns, like Sufi qaul and Hindu bhajan, contain analogies that resemble the love between a man and a woman. It is often the case that the bride is a metaphor for the devotee, and the bridegroom is the Divine Being that one seeks to please, as in the following Sikh hymn:

This body of mine is steeped in illusion,
the clothes I wear are dyed with greed.
My beloved does not like my dress,
how then can this bride enter the nuptial bed?

I offer myself to You, Compassionate One,
I offer myself to You.
I offer myself even to those who remember Your Name.

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38 Japji, section 27 in Kaur Singh, Verses of the Sikh Gurus, 57.
39 Kaur Singh, Verses of the Sikh Gurus, 244.
To those who remember Your Name,
I offer myself a hundred times.  

Just as the above Sikh hymn expresses the idea of self-annihilation and release of Hindu moksa and Sufi fanā, the idea of a single unity of the divine as expressed by the three religious categories is evident in the above passage. Such ideas wove their way through the religions of Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism of premodern Punjab. The idea of the one "which is not multiplied by the multiplicity of the manifestations but... is one in the totality of manifestations" in (Sufi) Islam mirrors Nanak's vision of a transcendent unity.  

It also mirrors the following anecdote in Hindu thought:

Just as by one piece of clay everything made of clay may be known—the modification is merely a verbal distinction, a name; the reality is just clay. Just as by one copper ornament everything made of copper may be known—the modification is merely a verbal distinction, a name; the reality is copper.

Mysticism united the three religions through not only devotional music but also through the philosophy of a single divine unity that may be manifested in multiple ways. Before Sikhism, similarities between Islamic and Hindu philosophy were discovered by Muslim scholars who had been translating Hindu works into Arabic and trying to understand the peoples of the region since they had first conquered them. Such a scholar was Dara Shikoh, great-grandson of Akbar and brother to the next Mughal ruler Aurangzeb. As the eldest son of the ruler Shah Jahan, Dara was the designated heir and thus presented the ambitious prince Aurangzeb with a practically unbeatable rival, except for one flaw: suspicion amongst orthodox Muslims of Dara's irreligiousness, for it was known that "he consorted with Sufis, Hindus, and Christians; [and that] he had translated the Upanishads (Hindu Scriptures) into Persian." Furthermore, through his studies, Dara came to the conclusion that "between Hindu and Muslim mysticism there exists only verbal differences." This in part could allude to words in different languages between the communities which actually conveyed the same meaning. Thus, a discovery of similar strains in religious thought between the two

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40 Tilang Mahalla, Shabad Hazare, Guru Granth, section 1, in Kaur Singh, Verses of the Sikh Gurus, 69.  
42 Chhandogya Upanishad, VI. 1. 4–6 in Subhan, Sufism, its Saints, and Shrines, 144.  
44 Subhan, Sufism, its Saints, and Shrines, 136.
communities has been recognized before, but power and identity politics drew sharp lines of separation. Dara published this idea in his work *Majma 'ul-Bahrayn* ("meeting of the two seas"), for which Aurangzeb swiftly denounced him as a heretic, proclaimed himself the savior of Islam and of the Mughal Empire, and declared war against him. In February 1658, their ailing father and then ruler Shah Jahan sent an army in vain to intercept Aurangzeb's forces; after his brother had defeated his army, Dara then fled to Lahore. Thereafter, "dropping all pretence of rescuing Shah Jahan from the infidel influence of Dara, Aurangzeb besieged and then confined the ailing emperor amongst the marble terraces of his Agra fort; the emperor would die there eight years later." Aurangzeb then eliminated other rivals to the throne, hunted down Dara, and had him publicly condemned and executed.

Unlike his liberal-minded great-grandfather Akbar—who had approved of the Adi Granth, provided the Sikhs with land for their Golden Temple and commissioned the translations of Hindu epics—Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707) ruled with less tolerance. He reversed the more flexible policy of his predecessors and implemented aggressively Muslim supremacy in the Punjab:

> In 1664 he forbade *sati*, the Hindu sacrifice of widows, and abolished taxes that were not legal under Muslim law. In 1668 he banned music at court, imposed the poll tax on non-Muslims, ordered the destruction of Hindu temples, and sponsored the codification of Islamic laws... He also founded Muslim colleges to promote the study of Shari'a.

The message was clear: Islam must show its difference and superiority to the traditions of its conquered peoples and punish those who did not see this difference and Muslim superiority. While such a policy might appear to be pure, albeit aggressive religious rule, the scholar Barbara Metcalf alerts us that we should not exclude political factors contributing to Aurangzeb's behavior. According to her:

> [Aurangzeb's] destruction of temples in Benares, Mathura, and Rajasthan had less to do with iconoclasm, since he continued to patronize other Hindu temples, than with the presumed disloyalty of the nobles associated with these sites... Similarly, Aurangzeb's accusation of the Sikh Guru Tegh Bahadur (r. 1664–1675) of blasphemy, and his subsequent execution, must be seen in the context of imperial politics. Tegh Bahadur was an active military organizer and proselytizer with family ties to a supporter of Dara; his execution mingled Islamic justifications

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45 Ibid., 136–137.
with imperial politics, as had Jahangir's execution of the fifth guru, on similar grounds, before him. To the end, Aurangzeb depended on non-Muslim courtiers. More than a quarter of the mansab holders along with his leading general were Hindus.48

Metcalf refers to the Mughal ruler Jahangir who, after killing his brother as a rival to his power, subsequently killed the fifth Guru Arjan who was suspected of supporting his rival brother.49 Similarly, Metcalf tells us that there were political reasons behind Guru Tegh Bahadur's execution. Beginning with the successor of Guru Arjun, the gurus began pushing the idea of retribution for unjust martyrdom to further the community's strength and unity through sanctioning violence; nonetheless, evidence shows that their martyrdom was more political than religious. The fifth Guru Arjun put forth the idea that the Sikhs could feel righteous in taking up arms against such wrongful oppression, and henceforth, the Sikhs under the gurus became increasingly militaristic in response to perceived threat.

It is significant that of the gurus after Arjun, the compiler of the Adi Granth, only the ninth Guru (Tegh Bahadur) contributed hymns to the Sikh holy book. It appears as though the rest of the gurus were more interested in militarism and codification of ritual as a means of promoting a distinctive religious identity. Again, it is helpful to take into consideration the European and Islamic influences on Sikhism concerning the idea of distinct religious communities. For, by this time, the European misunderstanding of the meaning of "Hindu" was spreading—that is, the idea of Hindu as a distinct religious community that could not overlap with Islam or Sikhism. Furthermore, orthodox Muslims were demanding that adherents of their faith desist from participating in non-Muslim practices such as worship at mandirs and Hindu festivals.

In the interest of the preservation of identity in the face of contested political power, leaders of communities sought to distinguish themselves politically by enforcing categories and by imposing rituals of inclusion and of exclusion of things that were not "orthodox." It was the age of solidifying religious boundaries over a framework that had for a long time been naturally fluid. In 1699, the tenth Guru Gobind Singh created the Khalsa (literally "pure") sect of Sikhism.50 Initiation into the Khalsa required baptism from sacred water dripped from a double-edged sword. Men were to take the surname:

49 Oberoi, *Religious Boundaries*.
Singh [lion] and were ever after to wear the emblems of the Khalsa, popularly known as the Five Ks. These were: kesha or uncut hair; kangha, a comb tucked into the kesha to keep it tidy in contrast with the recluses who kept it matted as a token of their having renounced the world; kara, a steel bracelet symbolizing strength and unity; kaccha, short breeches worn by the soldiers or the time; and kirpan, a sword.\textsuperscript{51} The Khalsa also forbade Sikhs from worshipping at non-Sikh temples.

In the generations leading up the creation of the Khalsa, repeated efforts had been made to separate Sikh identity from those of the other religions of the region. In cases where local custom called for giving offerings and prayers to local Gods and worshipping idols, Sikh leaders told adherents that simply reciting and listening to the verses of the Adi Granth would cure all ills, would help yield crops, and, in other words, protect them in ways that they had expected the "old" traditions to do but ways in which Sikh worship was better. Still, because of the pluralistic way in which Sikhism had emerged, leaders had difficulty solidifying boundaries until a clear need (like defense against a perceived threat) for codification arose. When the Khalsa sect was formed, those Sikhs who refused to undergo its initiation and to restrict themselves to Sikh places of worship came to be known as Sahadjaris.\textsuperscript{52} Sahadjaris continued to practice along fluid religious boundaries but, like other Sikh sects, they came to be excluded from Sikh discourse by those who dominated it: that is, by the voice of the Khalsa.

Between 1200 and 1700, then, Muslims ruled over a Punjab of constructed religious boundaries that even the rulers did not fully enforce. The result was a culture that shared a basic sense of philosophy, personal devotion to a transcendental divine, respect for the miracles of pirs/saints/gurus in general, and a poetic musical tradition describing a more intimate relationship with the divine. Thus, we can use the culture of premodern Punjab to better understand today's hint of fluidity and overlap of religious boundaries, which might be better described as a mutual acknowledgment of tradition and local practice. We see that through what Islam and Sikhism have both officially and unofficially incorporated from Hinduism—musical forms, terminology, festivals, epics, and their certain prominent figures—that Hinduism was more accurately a framework for social practice than a bounded religious category. This framework lay at the heart of the everyday activities and livelihood of the family and community and so were not necessarily abandoned; people did not so much "convert" as incorporate the new

\textsuperscript{52} Oberoi, \textit{Religious Boundaries}, xxii.
religion into their Hindu way of life. This in part explains the ease with which either Islam or Sikhism was accepted in an unorthodox way by members of the indigenous communities; how such adherents of Islam distant from the center of Islamic power and early Sikhs alike saw no contradiction in combining visits to Sufi shrines and mandirs with reciting the Japji in the mornings; and how this confused British censustakers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

It was only when Sikh leaders become involved in politics that antagonized them, and when they pushed the idea of oppression in the face of tyrannical Muslim rulers, that the more militaristic and dominant force of the Sikh community created a strict code to distinguish itself from other religions of the region, including the community that had by then come to be labeled as Hindus. John Keay writes that, while Aurangzeb’s aggressively Muslim policies did antagonize and cause protest among non-Muslims:

The idea that Aurengzeb intentionally set about the persecution and forced conversion of his non-Muslim subjects is absurd. He was too shrewd; they too numerous. More reasonably he wanted to create a moral [Muslim] climate ... in which non-Muslims would be aware of their subordinate status and of how they might improve it by conversion.53

What in fact happened was that the leaders of the Sikh community repeatedly chose to support the losing side of Mughal succession crises—first by angering Aurangzeb in their support of Prince Dara, and later by angering Jahangir by supporting Prince Khusrau in the succession crisis of 1605. It is because of this latter incident that Guru Arjan Singh is believed to have been martyred; and yet his martyrdom was political and not solely religious.54 The next (ninth) guru, Tegh Bahadur, can more accurately be described as a religious martyr; nonetheless, it is important to recognize that Tegh Bahadur’s demise began as a political issue. The Mughal ruler had in fact inducted into his own court the person whom he presumed to be the heir to the eighth Sikh Guru, thus giving the Sikhs his official sanction. However, in part because of this induction into the Mughal court, the Sikh community decided to recognize a different guru instead: Tegh Bahadur. Guru Tegh Bahadur traveled and preached to large crowds throughout Northern India, and the fact that he had proselytized and converted Muslims to Sikhism outraged Aurangzeb to such an extent that he had the guru brought to Delhi where, unable to

54 Ibid., 345.
convince the emperor and refusing to abandon his beliefs when pressed to do so, he was condemned for blasphemy and executed.

So it was in 1675, “at one fell stroke Aurangzeb earned the bitter hatred of thousands of . . . Sikhs.” This was a pivotal move from political antagonism to a form of antagonism that, though it did not begin as such, became a point of contention that later (Khalsa) Sikhs forever associated with religious persecution. It also provided the impetus for the Sikh community to codify, distinguish itself, and retaliate; leading to the subsequent creation of the Khalsa by the tenth Guru Gobind and the call to armed and divinely justified retaliation.

Thus, we can understand how the political climate which saw the emergence of a more militaristic Sikhism and the Khalsa sect also helped to develop the idea of Islam as the enemy, an image other non-Muslims of the subcontinent in the modern age also came to adopt in the name of a distinct identity and heritage. Scholar Asghar Ali Engineer writes:

The Moradabad riot in 1980 was essentially caused by economic competition between the Punjabi Hindu traders and upcoming Muslim artisans challenging the Punjabi monopoly of brassware business. The Bihar Sharif riot took place on account of land dispute between the yadavs and the Muslims. The Meerut riot of 1982 was the result of land dispute again at Shahnathan. . . The riots in [the] late 1980s—the Meerut riot of 1987, Bhagalpur riot of 1989—and scores of riots in 1990–1993 (the Mumbai riots included) were directly a result of Ram janambhoomi-Babri masjid controversy which was . . . essentially political in nature. It was BJP’s serious bid to mobilize the Hindu vote on a massive scale to capture power at the center.  

The conflicts to which Engineer alludes are couched in religious terms, yet at heart they are plays for political or financial gain. The simple religious distinction is, it seems, used as an acceptable excuse to target rivals who would not otherwise be able to be harassed and possibly removed. There is an anti-Islam element inherent in Sikhism, and yet Sikhism’s founder preached a more basic tenet of all faiths directing worship to one transcendental divine. Sikhs today will celebrate Diwali and Holi, both of which can best be described as popular (Hindu) celebrations. Many inhabitants of the subcontinent, regardless of religion, are familiar with and often respect the stories of Krishna and Radha, and of Rama and Sita. All over the subcontinent people are familiar with the epic the Mahabharata and the notions of karma, caste,

and reincarnation; and if she is miles away from her brother, a sister will try to mail her brother a rakhi for the annual celebration of Raksha Bandhan.\footnote{57}

Such practices and the original philosophy of Guru Nanak transcend the idea of strict religious boundaries. The apparently paradoxical “fluid-yet-antagonistic” relationship among these religious groups today, especially between Muslims and Sikhs, can be more accurately located in politics than in pure religious ideology; a relationship which, as it is inherited from one generation to the next, becomes in itself a reflection of contingent political climate. Much like Andalusian culture in Spain, Punjabi culture cannot be properly understood as either Sikh, Muslim, or Hindu as distinct categories but through an examination of their shared framework of arts, manners and local practices—of a people with similar forms of dress and social mores and who were familiar with similar legends of saints, deities or actual people as conduits to a single transcendentental divine. One may conclude that the three religious systems examined here shared ideas about mysticism and key philosophies recurrent in other religions, that between religions there exist mainly verbal differences that obscure at times very telling similarities, and that political imperatives more often than not direct the way devotion and social practices are codified in the name of identity.

Sonya Pall is a Graduate Student in the History Department of San Francisco State University. Her areas of interest are identity, gender, and cultural exchange in the regions spanning from Mediterranean Europe and the Middle East to South Asia.

\footnote{57} Literally “the binding/bond of protection,” it is an annual ritual during which a sister offers and ties a special woven bracelet called a “rakhi” to her brother and, in exchange, the brother gives a gift to the female relation. The tying of the bracelet symbolizes the sister’s respect and for her brother, while the gift symbolizes the brother’s pledge to protect and provide for her. In the absence of a brother or sister, another relation (usually a cousin) or close friend may substitute.