

The Sound of Religious Architecture: Using Sikh Musical Traditions and Postmodern  
Technologies to Produce Space in Northern Virginia

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, to Megan, to Emma, and to the sangat of the Sikh Foundation of Virginia.

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## ABSTRACT

### THE SOUND OF RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE: USING SIKH MUSICAL TRADITIONS AND POSTMODERN TECHNOLOGIES TO PRODUCE SPACE IN NORTHERN VIRGINIA

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This thesis explores kirtan as a musical practice that travels across a variety of geographically unbounded cultural landscapes (“-scapes”) with the aid of global social networks, postmodern transportation technologies, and technologies of space-time compression. The research employs the use of participant observation, participant interviews, literary analyses, and media analyses to determine how the kirtan brought to Fairfax Station (re)produces no fewer than three spatial identities associated with the gurdwara in Fairfax Station: a Sikh religious space, a Punjabi/Indian ethnic space, and a space of social (gender) (re)production. The author concludes with a discussion about how the kirtan practices (re)produced at the Sikh Foundation (and other gurdwaras) travels outward into new spaces, expanding the global Sikh religiouscape and Punjabi/Indian ethnoscape, influencing the gender expectations and hierarchies that dominate those spaces, and informing the production of new educational spaces.

## INTRODUCTION

### *A Trip to the Sikh Foundation of Virginia (Research Questions)*

Just off of Ox Road in Fairfax Station, Virginia, between the intersections of Canterbury Road and Clipper Drive and across the highway from Burke Lake, there stands a large, white building that might be invisible to drivers were it not for the golden dome resting atop its roof. On windier days, the brick walls and metallic dome are partially obscured by an orange flag that waves atop a four-story pole. The building's parking lot is made accessible by a small, gated road connected to the highway. Next to the entrance is a sign that reads "Sikh Foundation of Virginia: *Gurdwara Sahib* (Sikh Temple)." Should you drive down the steep access road on any given Sunday morning, you will likely find the paved lot to be filled with cars and offering few available spaces. Walk through the doors of the busy gurdwara (literally, "the residence of the Guru"), and you are sure to hear music quietly emanating from an in-house speaker system. In accordance with the rules of the Sikh temple, you place your shoes within a wall of cubbies, wash your hands in the foyer, and cover your head before ascending the staircase on your right-hand side. The stairs lead you to the second floor diwan hall, the designated space for religious services and ceremonies.

Step through the open portal to the diwan hall, and you enter an expansive room where the music is now louder and clearer, undistorted by the electric buzz of the downstairs speakers. The space is filled with people, all of whom are seated facing the

“back” of the diwan hall (the north-eastern wall nearest Ox Road). You pass by the cross-legged congregation as your bare feet carry you down the center aisle and toward a throne (or “takht”) located a few feet from the back wall. Lying atop the takht is a copy of the Guru Granth Sahib – the holy book of the Sikh religion – draped in a silk cloth known as a “rumalla.” The throne of the Guru Granth Sahib is spectacular by design; its golden form is lined with colorful flowers and shaded by an ornate canopy (or “chanani”) hung from the ceiling. After a few strides, you reach the takht, deposit a few dollar bills into the golak (a wooden donation box attached to the front of the throne), bow in reverence to the Guru Granth Sahib, and return to your standing position.

Should you then gaze about three feet left of the throne (from the perspective of the congregation), you will see a small stage of about two feet high. Several members of the sadh sangat (“true congregation,” a term used to refer to a group of Sikhs) are sitting atop the stage, singing, and playing different instruments. These sangat members are the architects of the soundscape, the deciders of all intentional rhythms and melodies heard throughout the building. They are performing kirtan, a sacred genre of music that informs the religious, ethnic, and social lives of faithful Sikhs. You graciously leave a second donation to the performers before taking your seat among the crowd of people. For the next hour or so, you listen attentively to the sounds of kirtan.

As you sit and listen to the music in the diwan hall, you may get the sense that a change is occurring – not only within yourself, but also within the Sikh Foundation of Virginia. You may feel as though the practice of kirtan is doing something to transform the identity of the space. And you would be right to feel this way; as this research intends

to illustrate, musical practices are indeed powerful cultural forces that have an incredible impact on the built environment. Musical practices can help determine which spaces are religiously significant, or culturally “authentic,” or socially equal. And in some cases, a single musical practice can inform multiple spatial identities simultaneously. Such forces can be particularly transformative when they enter “new” cultural and geographic landscapes.

This thesis defends each of these arguments by analyzing kirtan’s impact on the space of the Sikh Foundation of Virginia. Throughout the proceeding chapters, I address the following research questions: How did kirtan come to the Fairfax Station from a different geographic and cultural landscape? How are those “foreign” kirtan practices reproduced within the Sikh Foundation of Virginia? How do those practices transform the temple into a Sikh religious space? How do they transform the temple into a Punjabi/Indian ethnic space? How do they transform the Sikh Foundation into a space of social (re)production that subverts and/or reifies gender relationships? And finally, how do the kirtan practices of the Sikh Foundation (and other gurdwaras in the Washington, DC metropolitan area) travel outward to inform entirely new geographies and landscapes?

### *Background*

Though my fascination with diasporic places of worship has been lifelong, I was not properly introduced to Sikhism until 2019, when I was earning my BS in Sociology & Anthropology at Towson University and working for an audio/visual recording company



in Baltimore, Maryland. A group of Sikh musicians came to the studio one afternoon to record a few songs for a kirtan album they were putting together. I found the unfamiliar style to be unlike any that I had worked with prior. The tabla (a set of hand drums) was as tonal as it was percussive; the harmonium (a type of reed organ) and sitar (a lute-like stringed instrument) produced complicated semitones that are entirely absent from the Western compositions that I am accustomed to. The vocalist sang in a language that was entirely unknown to my coworkers and me. And their entire ensemble recorded their tracks sitting down – not in chairs, as some visiting artists preferred, but on the carpeted floor of the recording booth. At this time, my work was fulfilling enough, but it did not introduce me to many genres that felt quite as unique as this. Impassioned, I took to the internet that night to learn as much as I could about kirtan and its origins. Considering the topic of this thesis, it appears my passion for learning about the genre has continued to this day.

Come March of 2020, a global pandemic had ended the regular flow of business at the recording studio. With more time to focus on my ethnomusicological interests, I reached out to several Sikh temples in my area in the hope that I might be invited to witness a live kirtan performance. In hindsight, it was not the best time to ask; most temples were closed in an effort to end the spread of COVID-19, though some continued to upload recorded services to their social media accounts. Nevertheless, I did eventually receive an invitation from the Sikh Foundation of Virginia, and thus I enthusiastically drove from Baltimore to Fairfax Station to attend diwan (religious services that incorporate both prayer and kirtan) and langar (the community meal that follows diwan)

at the temple. I was even fortunate enough to have several members of the sangat speak with me about their beliefs and practices.

This marked the beginning of my independent research at the Sikh Foundation; over the course of a year, I visited the gurdwara about twice a month to attend diwan and langar, peruse the publications available in the temple's library, and strike up informal conversations with members of the sadh sangat (or "sangat," as they often refer to themselves). From home, I began keeping up with the temple's social media posts. Over time, I found myself increasingly invested in learning more around the space of the gurdwara – so invested, in fact, that when I decided to attend George Mason University's Master's in Anthropology program in August of 2021, my choice was partly influenced by the fact that the Sikh Foundation is located only ten minutes down the road. And since being accepted to my two-year program at George Mason University, the Sikh Foundation of Virginia has remained the focus of my research projects, as have the practices associated with that space.

### *Literature Review: Musical Practices Inform Spatial Identities*

My thesis research is predicated, in part, upon the notion that spaces within the built environment have multiple overlapping and intersecting identities. It is an idea supported by a number of social scientists. In "The Berber house or the world reversed," Pierre Bourdieu (1977) illustrates how a single space (in this case, the Kabyle house) can be divided into several sub-spaces (i.e., the upstairs and downstairs, the left side and right side). Though the primary space (the dwelling as a whole) is given a feminine identity, its

sub-spaces are given alternate – and sometimes conflicting – spatial identities. For instance, the side of the house with the hunting rifle is given a masculine spatial identity, and the side with the loom is given a feminine spatial identity. The masculine sub-spatial identity of the house conflicts with the feminine sub-spaces, as it does with the primary feminine identity of the house. Nevertheless, those intersecting identities continue to exist together (Bourdieu 1977, 135-149).

Intersecting, overlapping, and conflicting spatial identities were also recorded by Gordon Mathews (2011) when he was visiting Chungking Mansions in Hong Kong in the late 1990s. For some tourists, the marketplace is an utterly shocking “hellhole of vice.” Other tourists, in contrast, describe Chungking Mansions as an “exotic third world in a safe first-world city.” To traders and entrepreneurs from South Asia and Africa, the building is a site of economic possibility. For Indian temporary workers, it is a space of social mobility. And for asylum seekers, Chungking Mansions is a new home space, both alluring and dangerous (Mathews 2011, 195-196). As these examples suggest, spatial identities are (re)produced by public perceptions; they emerge when “mental realities” come to define the physical qualities of the built environment (Lefebvre 2007, 25-28 and 36).

Public perceptions of the built environment are partially determined by assemblies of spatial practices (de Certeau 1980, 117). In the case of the Kabyle house, the feminine side of the dwelling is given a feminine identity because it is a space of weaving. Weaving is perceived of as a feminine activity, and thus the weaving side of the room becomes the feminine side (Bourdieu 1977, 141-149). Sexual intercourse and childbirth

take place in the lower section of the house, and thus that section is perceived of as a space of intimacy, sexuality, and procreation (Bourdieu 1977, 135-138). Following the work of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel de Certeau (1980) asserts that “there are as many spaces as there are distinct spatial experiences” (de Certeau 1980, 117-118). That is to say, there are as many *spatial identities* as there are different spatial practices.

Musical practices are especially powerful producers of spatial identity. In *My Music, My War: The Listening Habits of U.S. Troops in Iraq and Afghanistan* (2016), Lisa Gilman explores how soldiers’ “aggressive” musical practices (i.e., singing vulgar lyrics, playing heavy metal compositions over the loudspeaker, taunting others’ taste in “girly” music) coproduce the masculine identities of military spaces. Alternative practices – such as listening to “Britney Spears type stuff” and discussing emotional connections to music – do the opposite; they (re)produce sub-spaces of empathy and kindness within the barracks (Gilman 2016, 87-88). Because musical practices are ephemeral by nature, the spatial identities and mental realities created by those practices are constantly multiplying and changing (Massey 1994, 7). Each musical practice, then, becomes an opportunity to (re)produce or (re)negotiate spatial identities (Lefebvre 2007; Low 2017; Massey 1994).

Applying the findings of Bourdieu (1977), Mathews (2011), Lefebvre (2007), de Certeau (1980), Gilman (2016), Massey (1994), and Low (2017) to my own research, I examine how kirtan practices at the Sikh Foundation of Virginia inform the sangat’s perceptions of the gurdwara. I argue that kirtan produces not one spatial identity, but three: the Sikh religious space, the Punjabi/Indian ethnic space, and the space of

social/gender (re)production. Here, I define *religious spaces* as spiritually animated or “enchanted” (to use Schwenkel’s [2017] phrasing) environments in which occupants may learn about the divine, receive religious instruction, and experience feelings of “ritual effervescence” (to borrow Durkheim’s [1915] terminology). Like Gordon Mathews (2011), I identify *ethnic spaces* as environments in which occupants may preserve, transform, and negotiate their ethnic identities and notions of cultural belonging (Mathews 2011, 198-207). Lastly, in reference to the works of Tuan (1977), Lefebvre (2007), Low (2017) and Mueggler (2001), I define *spaces of social (re)production* as the environments that contribute to, or subvert, structures of dominance and power. Like Massey (1994) and Badruddoja (2008) my analysis of the Sikh Foundation as a space of social (re)production will focus on gender and the ways in which unequal relationships between men and women are challenged and/or reified in the kirtan-filled temple (Massey 1994, 2-12; Badruddoja 2008, 164).

#### *Literature Review: Globalization, Space-Time Compression, Translocality, and -Scapes*

The world has always been an interconnected space in which many different individuals and societies exchange cultural products (including, but not limited to, distinctive musical styles) (Wolf 1982, 4-5). For centuries, Indian musical genres have traveled along global networks, (re)producing the spaces in which they find themselves. But in our contemporary landscape, postmodern transportation technologies (i.e., airplanes, boats, trains) carry people and practices across the world at unprecedented speeds. Such technologies, we are told by Schivelbusch (2014), contribute to the

phenomenon of *space-time compression*; they reduce travel time, thus reducing the perceived distance between places. For all intents and purposes, technologies of space-time compression bring the world closer together and pull distant locations into each other's immediate vicinity (Schivelbusch 2014). As those locations collide, so too do the cultural products and practices associated with those spaces. Applying Schivelbusch's research to my own, I consider how postmodern technologies of space-time compression accelerate the movement of kirtan to Fairfax Station and, extensively, effect the production of the Sikh Foundation's spatial identities.

In addition to technologies of space-time compression, there are postmodern technologies that completely annihilate the distance between spaces. These technologies (i.e., smart phones, laptop computers, tablets) allow people to “transcend [their] physical bodies” and enter one space – in the form of a text message, an image on a screen, or a disembodied voice – while located elsewhere. This experience of spatial transcendence is a phenomenon that Low (2017) refers to as *translocality*. With access to postmodern technologies of translocality, people may circulate their cultural practices across new environments without having to physically move from one location to the next (Low 2017, 174). Thus, if my analysis of kirtan's journey to Fairfax Station is to be comprehensive, then I must also consider how the musical practice moves to and from the Sikh Foundation of Virginia with the aid of devices that facilitate translocality.

Due to technologies of space-time compression and translocality, cultural landscapes are no longer bound to specific geographic regions and spaces. To borrow Arjun Appadurai's (1990) terminology, the world is now occupied by “-scapes,”

unbounded and (for the most part) unmapped landscapes determined by global movements and flows rather than geographic barriers and national borders (Appadurai 1990, 297-301). Using Appadurai's work as a guide, I consider how technologies of space-time compression and translocality carry kirtan practices across the Sikh religiouscape (the global "-scape" that includes Sikh people, beliefs, cultural expressions, and spaces) and the Punjabi/Indian ethnoscape (the global "-scape" that includes Punjabi and/or Indian people, cultural expressions, and spaces). I also consider how the boundaries of these "-scapes" expand and take new shape as kirtan is carried to and from Northern Virginia.

As cultural products and practices move about the world, new social networks are formed between once independent "nodes" (individuals, groups, and spaces). Consider, for example, the international network of "low-end, goods-based globalization" studied by Gordon Mathews (2011). As cheap cellphones, knockoff handbags, and imitation wristwatches are manufactured in one space, purchased in another, and re-sold in a third, connections are formed and strengthened between political territories, businesses, and individual entrepreneurs. Some nodes are more central to their networks than others. For instance, Chungking Mansions – a shopping complex and dormitory in Hong Kong – is one of the most central nodes within the network of low-end, goods-based globalization. It is, among other things, a stopping point for replica sunglasses moving between Chinese factories and Nigerian marketplaces. It is a space where American tourists purchase dinner from Indian-owned restaurants, where Kenyan traders bunk with Pakistani businessmen (Mathews 2011, 106-107, 170, and 207). Following Mathews' example, I

consider the social networks that are (re)produced when postmodern technologies carry kirtan practices across the Sikh religiouscape and the Punjabi/Indian ethnoscape, and I attempt to determine the centrality of the Sikh Foundation in this network.

### *Methods & Timeline*

Four methods – participant observation, interviews, literary analysis, media analysis – are used to collect data regarding (1) the movement of kirtan (2) the role of kirtan in producing the Sikh Foundation of Virginia as a Sikh religious (Sikh) space, (3) the role of kirtan in producing the Sikh Foundation as Punjabi/Indian ethnic space, (4) the role of kirtan in producing the Sikh Foundation as a space of social (re)production that subverts and/or challenges hierarchical relationships between men and women, (5) the movement of kirtan away from the Sikh Foundation of Virginia, and (6) the role of the kirtan in producing spatial identities outside the Sikh Foundation of Virginia. All data was collected between April 2022 through April 2023.

For my participant observation research, I travelled to the Sikh Foundation of Virginia several times a month to attend religious services (diwan) and community meals (langar). Additionally, I served as a volunteer-intern under the supervision of the Sikh Foundation's Management Committee, as well as a volunteer with Asian Indians for Community Service (AICS, formerly known as the Asian American Inter Community Service), a health organization committed to connecting Asian Americans and other groups with vital health resources. I was offered both the internship and the volunteer opportunities by Inderpal, the Director of the Management Committee. Inderpal is also



the Chairman of the AICS's Board of Directors, and he is a man with whom I have developed a strong working relationship and friendship. In addition to the regular diwan services, langars, and volunteer hours, I went to the Sikh Foundation to attend special events including holiday celebrations, candlelight vigils, and concerts. On rare occasions, special events (i.e., the National Sikh Day Parade and the Sikh Gurdwara, DC's poetry and kirtan showcase) brought me away from the gurdwara in Fairfax Station and into Washington, D.C.

"Listening to the voices" of the Sikh Foundation was another primary means of data collection throughout this project. In some cases, I *literally* listened to the voices of the sangat when conducting interviews. Interview participants were selected for structured and semi-structured structured interviews on both a convenient and purposive basis. Purposive interview participants were recruited via email, and convenient interview participants were recruited as I engaged in participant observation research at the Sikh Foundation. Though my interviews were be oriented around specific topics, I kept dialogues open-ended, encouraging participants to go "off- topic" and discuss the topics that are most important to them (Davis & Craven 2016).

Some of my interviews with the sangat occurred spontaneously. In her essay "Wearing Identity: Chicanas and Huipiles" (2020), Norma E. Cantú investigates the folklore surrounding the huipiles worn by Chicanas in South Texas. A bulk of Cantú's research "is based on pláticas (informal conversations) rather than on strict ethnographic interviews" (Cantú, 26). Following Cantú's example, I also draw conclusions from the informal and unplanned conversations that organically emerged during my time

volunteering at the Sikh Foundation and Asian Indian Community Service. To protect the privacy of the interlocutors, all participants have been assigned pseudonyms. If any names in this thesis are similar to those of people who attend the Sikh Foundation of Virginia, this is entirely by accident. The majority of my interlocutors were bridge-generation immigrants over the age of fifty. This, too, is not by design.

While I literally listened to the voices of the *sangat*, I also *figuratively* listened to the voices of the Sikh Foundation by reading the literature provided by the gurdwara library. The Sikh Foundation library is a collection of books, essays, and pamphlets that have been brought to the temple by the congregation and approved by the Management Committee. The authors of the literature have, in a sense, been invited into the Sikh Foundation and permitted to stay. Through the page, they “speak” to the *sangat* with unique “voices” and opinions. It goes without saying that at least *some* members of the congregation and Management Committee agree with the opinions being “voiced.” Thus, my research treats these textual, disembodied voices as though they were audible and embodied.

Three texts from the Sikh Foundation’s library have proven especially valuable to my research. The first is *Why Am I Here: The soul, the Guru and the path* (2020) by Tarsem Singh, which is required reading for those enrolled in the Gurmat School, the Sikh Foundation’s youth group. The second is *Sikhs and Sikhism: A View With a Bias* (2004) by I.J. Singh, a collection of essays written about the author’s experience as a North Indian Sikh living in New York City. And the third is *Community Kitchen of the Sikhs* (1994) by Parkash Singh, a book regarding Sikh practices and beliefs pertaining to

the gurdwara langar hall. My research has also benefitted from the various pamphlets and newspapers (i.e., *India This Week*, *India America Today*, *Punjabi Writers Weekly*) made available to the sangat via a small rack in the foyer. And finally, the data for my media analysis was collected while visiting the Sikh Foundation's official website (sfova.org), Facebook profile, and YouTube account.

### *Contents*

The next chapter of this thesis, "The Arrival of Kirtan," explores kirtan's journey to the United States. I focus on the bridge-generation who carry the musical practice with them to the United States, their motivations for leaving North India, and the postmodern technologies of space-time compression that facilitate their migration. I describe the significance and history of kirtan, the instruments incorporated in its performance, the performers of the music, and the spectators who consume kirtan at the Sikh Foundation of Virginia.

The third chapter focuses on the processes by which kirtan produces the Sikh Foundation of Virginia as a Sikh religious space. I focus on kirtan's ability to transmit cosmological information, provide meaning to the lives of the faithful, communicate religious expectations, spark religious debate, and inspire feelings of ritual effervescence. I conclude the chapter by examining how kirtan practices – and the beliefs associated with those practices – allow for the continuous and infinite production of new religious spaces.

The fourth chapter of this thesis describes kirtan's role in producing the Sikh Foundation of Virginia as a Punjabi/Indian ethnic space. I focus on how the musical practice evokes comfortable memories of Punjab. I then discuss kirtan's role in teaching the American-born members of the sangat about their Punjabi and/or Indian heritage. Finally, I examine the ways in which kirtan has turned the Sikh Foundation into a cosmopolitan space that promotes the merger of musical styles and challenges notions of cultural authenticity.

Chapter five focuses on the ways in which kirtan practices transform the Sikh Foundation of Virginia into a space of social (re)production that subverts and/or reifies unequal gender roles, relationships, and expectations. I analyze Gurbani – the lyrics of kirtan – to determine what equal and/or unequal gender relationships are (re)produced throughout the musical performance. Additionally, I explain how kirtan listening practices and performance standards (re)produce gender relations.

The conclusion of this thesis focuses on the movement of kirtan outward and away from the Sikh Foundation. I posit that, as kirtan enters new geographic and cultural landscapes, the Sikh religiouscape and Punjabi/Indian ethnoscape expand, and social networks are (re)produced between individuals, groups, and spaces. My analysis considers how the expansion of the musical practice is accelerated by modern technologies of translocality. I synthesize these ideas by asserting that religious practices are more than spiritual; they are also a means expressing identity, celebrating cultural heritage, negotiating social relationships, generating social networks, and educating the

public. Finally, I examine the utility of sound and music as an architectural feature of space.

## THE ARRIVAL OF KIRTAN

### *The Sadh Sangat & The Sikh Foundation*

The Sikh Foundation of Virginia was founded in 1978 when, according to the temple's website, "about a dozen like-minded Punjabi families explored the idea of building a gurdwara in Northern Virginia to meet the religious, cultural and social needs of their community" (Sikh Foundation of Virginia 2023). The Sikh Foundation existed as a spatially decentralized organization until the Fairfax Station gurdwara was inaugurated on Vaisakhi Day, 1989. Since opening its doors, the temple has served its sangat "by holding regular *diwans*, and catering to various religious, spiritual, and cultural needs of the community" (Sikh Foundation of Virginia 2023).

Many founding members of the Sikh Foundation sangat immigrated to the United States from Punjab, India in pursuit of economic opportunity. Consider Hardeep, a Punjabi man of about seventy-five years old who has been with the Sikh Foundation since its inception. From what I am told, Hardeep is something of a tech genius. He taught at the Indian Institutes of Technology – one of the top technical universities in the nation (and in the world, for that matter) – before receiving an elite scholarship to continue his "technical work" with the US Department of State. Hardeep is too humble to boast of his academic and professional accomplishments (of which there are many), so I did not receive this information directly from him. Rather, it was given to me by Inderpal

– the Director of the Sikh Foundation and a long-time friend of Hardeep – during a conversation that took place in late 2022. There are a many technical specialists at the Sikh Foundation who, like Hardeep, entered the United States after traversing the *technoscape*, the global cultural landscape of technological innovation (Appadurai 1990, 297-298). This form of long-distance wage-labor migration is not unique to Punjab; on the contrary, the American tech industry has benefitted from imported South Asian labor since the 1960s (Low 2017, 174; Emon & Garlough 2015).

Today, first-generation Sikhs work in a variety of fields in Northern Virginia. Simran, for example, is a first-generation woman of about forty years old who immigrated to Fairfax Station when she was hired to work for an Indian-owned pharmacy. It may be said, then, that both Simran and her employer(s) crossed the global *medicalscape* to arrive in the United States. When speaking to Hardeep in late 2022, I was told that there are several members of the *sangat* who came to Virginia seeking work as contractors and real estate agents. Using Appadurai's (1990) framework, it may be said that these first-generation *sangat* members entered the United States by crossing the *developmentscape*, the global cultural landscape of urban development. And there are others (albeit not many) who made their way across the *governmentalscape* – the global cultural landscape of governmentality – when they received an offer to work for one U.S. agency or another (Appadurai 1990). One must conclude, then, that the Sikh Foundation sits at the intersection of all of these global cultural landscapes; it is a site of convergence for the *technoscape*, *medicalscape*, *developmentscape*, *governmentalscape*, and any other “-scape” that brought its *sangat* to Fairfax Station.

While the East Coast of the United States does offer a variety of financial opportunities for its Punjabi/Indian immigrants, I.J. Singh, author of *Sikhs and Sikhism: A View With a Bias* (2004) reminds readers that not every Sikh in America has come “in search of the economic pot of gold.” There are many Sikh immigrants, he tells us, that “did so out of political necessity” (Singh 2004, 121). In the 1970s, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suspended India’s Constitution, effectively handing herself complete control the national government. Viewing this as an injustice, Sikhs in Amritsar – the religious capitol city of the Sikh diaspora – launched what I.J. Singh (2004) describes as an “agitation from the Golden Temple to redefine state rights within India’s Constitutional framework” in 1982 (Singh 2004, 109). As part of this agitation, Sikhs began stockpiling weapons in the Gold Temple. To squash what was viewed as a separatist movement, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi launched Operation Blue Star on June 1, 1984. For a week, the Indian military attacked the Golden Temple while the government commenced a nation-wide media blackout. By June 8, four-hundred and ninety-two civilians and eighty-three military personnel had been killed. The Golden Temple and the Akal Takht, two of the Sikhism’s holiest places, suffered devastating damage. The operation is described in *India Today* as “the biggest internal security mission ever undertaken by the Indian Army” (India Today 2023). After Operation Blue Star, many Sikhs (such as I.J. Singh) justifiably felt unwelcome and prosecuted in their own country (Singh 2004, 112).

On October 31, 1984, Indira Gandhi’s bodyguards – two Sikh men – assassinated the Prime Minister in retribution. The government responded with a series of “repressive



policies... directed solely against the Sikhs” (Singh 2004, 112). Politicians such as Rajiv Gandhi called for Sikhs’ relocation to Pakistan (although it is unclear whether or not this was a genuine policy suggestion). I.J. Singh (2004) reports that Hindus were attacking Sikhs in the streets for years following Indira Gandhi’s assassination (Singh 2004, 111-112). Reflecting on post-1984 violence against Sikhs, the acclaimed author and politician Khushwant Singh declared that “being a Sikh in India was like being a Jew in Nazi Germany” (Singh 2004, 126). Thus, in the months and years following Operation Blue Star and the assassination of Indira Gandhi, there was a mass migration of deterritorialized Sikhs from India to the United States, Canada, and Great Britain (Appadurai 1990, 301). Many immigrants to the United States were even granted political asylum (Singh 2004, 121).

Whether their journey is motivated by economic opportunity or political necessity, Sikhs’ arrival in the United States has effectively expanded the *Sikh religioscape* (which I define as the global cultural landscape of Sikh people, beliefs, cultural expressions, and space) as well as the *Punjabi/Indian ethnoscape* (which I define as the global cultural landscape of people, practices, and spaces associated with Punjab and/or India) (Appadurai 1990). By coming to Fairfax Station, the first-generation members of the Sikh Foundation sangat brought not only their bodies, but their religion and cultural heritage. Extensively, one should conclude that the Sikh religioscape and the Punjabi/Indian ethnoscape expanded into Northern Virginia.

Traveling between vast geographical distances (i.e., the seven thousand miles between Punjab and Fairfax Station) was once an expensive, time-consuming privilege

available only to the well-resourced. In many contexts, this is still the case, but there is no doubt that postmodern technologies of space-time compression have reduced the burden of long-distance travel (Schivelbusch 2014). Planes, buses, and cars make it comparatively easy for people to travel between India and the United States. In the Fall of 2022, I was visiting the Sikh Foundation and picked up the October 14 edition of *India This Week* from a rack in the foyer. I flipped through the text until I found a page advertising “CHEAP AIRLINE TICKETS” through Worldwide Travel, Inc. Emirates, British Airways, Air India, Air France, Lufthansa, Brussels Airlines, Delta Air Lines, United Airlines, Singapore Airlines, Etihad Airways, and Qatar Airways were all offering inexpensive and convenient services to and from South Asia (India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, specifically), as well as Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East (India This Week 2022, 7). Advertisements like this illustrate how, in the postmodern era, once expansive distances are, for all intents and purposes, shrunken dramatically. Not only do these technologies of space-time compression facilitate the sangat’s journey to the United States, but they also allow the sangat to return to India with relative ease (Schivelbusch 2014).

When one considers the contemporary motivations to leave Punjab and the postmodern accessibility of technologies of space-time compression, it should come as no surprise that the Sikh population has grown considerably in the United States over the past century. According to a pamphlet released by The Sikh Coalition, (a Sikh advocacy group and media agency based in New York City, Fremont, and Washington, DC), there were about twenty-five million members of the global Sikh diaspora in 2022, making

Sikhism just about tied with Judaism for the fifth-most populous religion. Over five hundred thousand of those Sikhs live in the United States, with the largest concentrations of Sikhs living in California, New York, and New Jersey (The Sikh Coalition 2022).

On February 23, 2023, Dr. Robert Carle, a professor of religious and theological studies at The King's College in New York City (and my paternal uncle), hosted a lecture about Sikhism for his undergraduate students. Three men from the Sikh Foundation – Hardeep, Inderpal, and Tejbir – attended the lecture via Zoom. I sat in on the lecture as well from my home in Towson, Maryland. According to Tejbir, a first-generation man of about forty years old, the number of global Sikhs has risen to twenty-six million in the 2023. Though Tejbir did not have the total number of Sikhs living in the United States in 2023, he did assert that there were one million Sikhs across North America (Carle 2023).

I remind my readers that Punjabi/Indian Sikh migrants to the United States – like other migrant groups – introduce “new” (relative to the geography) cultural products to the American landscape. Among these are a variety of musical stylings, from contemporary Punjabi rap songs to classical North Indian folk music. As illustrated by scholars such as de Certeau (1980) and Gilman (2016), those musical stylings inform the production of the built environment, altering preexisting places and creating entirely new locations. In Fairfax Station, the arrival of Sikh music (kirtan, specifically) actively (re)produces the intersecting identities of the Sikh Foundation of Virginia, transforming a single building into a Sikh religious space, a Punjabi/Indian ethnic space, and a space of social (re)production that informs gender relations and hierarchies. To understand how

kirtan contributes to the production of these specific spatial identities, one must first understand how kirtan differs from other forms of music.

### *Kirtan & The Guru Granth Sahib*

Kirtan is the performance of the musical “hymns” recorded in the Guru Granth Sahib, the most sacred of all Sikh texts. To understand kirtan and its ability to (re)produce spatial identity (or identities), one must have some introduction to the Guru Granth Sahib and the wisdom contained therein. Here, I explain the Guru Granth Sahib and the practice of kirtan as they have been explained to me by the “voices” (literal and figurative) of the Sikh Foundation.

Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism and first Guru (spiritual teacher) of the Sikhs, was born in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century in Talvandi (now named Nanakna Sahib and located in present-day Pakistan) (Singh 2004, 130-131). Throughout his lifetime, the Guru traveled to various spiritual leaders, lecturing to them, and collecting their wisdom. According to Tejbir, Hardeep, I.J. Singh (2004), and others, Guru Nanak also recorded, throughout his travels, the Shabads (poems) of about thirty different saints. These saints belonged to a variety of regional faiths including (but not limited to) Islam, Hinduism, and Sufism. Guru Nanak went on to compose a wealth of original Shabads that combined elements of the different religions he came into contact with, and this method of synthesizing, recording, and transmitting belief through poetry became a literary tradition that was later adopted by his successors (Carle 2023; Robert Singh 2004).

In 1604, Guru Arjan Dev – fifth Guru of the Sikhs and another prolific poet – began compiling the works of his predecessors (Guru Nanak, Guru Angad, Guru Amar Das, and Guru Ram Das) into a single text known as the Adi Granth. He added the works produced by non-Sikhs, such as Kabir, whose literature either inspired or aligned with that of the Gurus. Before his death, Guru Arjan Dev had himself produced an abundance of Shabads that made their way into the Adi Granth (Singh 2022; Singh 2004, 130-131).

The Adi Granth was later expanded upon by the sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth Gurus: each contributed the Shabads of “saintly souls” (Singh 2020, 99), and the ninth Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur, added over one hundred of his own compositions. By the time the Adi Granth reached its final form under the Guruship of Guru Gobindh Singh (the tenth Guru who held the title from 1675 to 1708), the compilation had reached an extraordinary length of one thousand four hundred pages (Singh 2022). When speaking to the students of the King’s College in February of 2023, Inderpal posited that “maybe twenty percent, thirty percent of the... writings are from Muslim saints, Hindu saints” (Carle 2023). “These writings are mystical, profound and enlightening since all of the writers of Gurbani had met God,” writes Tarsem Singh. “Many Shabads describe that meeting” (Singh 2020, 43).

Shortly before his death in 1708, Guru Gobind Singh made the unprecedented decision to end the line of human Gurus. Instead of a person, the Adi Granth would succeed Guru Gobind Singh as the eleventh and eternal Guru, the “repository of all spiritual knowledge” (Singh 2004, 97). In cosmological terms, the “Jot of Guru Nanak” – the “Light” or “Truth” given to Guru Nanak by God and passed down to each Guru –

would come to reside within the Adi Granth. And so it was, when the tenth Sikh Guru eventually passed away, the Adi Granth became the Guru Granth Sahib. The Shabads contained therein became collectively known as Gurbani (the Bani – “sound” or “word” – of the Guru) and Gurmukhi (which translates to “spoken by the Guru”) (Singh 2020, 99-100). It should be clarified to the reader, as it was clarified to me, that it is not the materiality of the Guru Granth Sahib that carries the Jot of Guru Nanak – not the pages, ink, or spine which can all be destroyed. Rather, the Light is forever present in the book’s eternal wisdom – the Gurbani imparted on humanity by the Gurus and “saintly souls” who wrote the Shabads. It should also be pointed out that, by empowering the Guru Granth Sahib with Guruship, Guru Gobind Singh also empowered the sangat; for the first time, the laity were entrusted with the power to interpret the Guru’s wisdom as they saw fit.

As the undying Guru, the Guru Granth Sahib cannot be altered; its nine hundred seventy-four Shabads may never be edited or removed, and no additional Shabads may be included (Singh 2022). The holy text remains, to this day, at “the center” of all Sikh ethics and morality and “the most sacred icon of the Sikhs” (Singh 2022). And as such, the holy book is “given the same respect as if it were a living Guru” (Singh 2020, 43). However, while the holy book is worthy of respect and reverence, it is not a subject of a Sikh’s worship; that level of devotion is reserved only for God (Singh 2004, 21).

The Sikh Gurus knew that the sacred knowledge of the Shabads was not especially accessible if kept contained within the pages of a book (Carle 2023). This was, of course, a time before the Internet or the widespread availability of printed media. So,

to spread the Guru's wisdom to a wider audience, the Shabads of the Guru Granth Sahib were each assigned a raga, a melodic framework or "mode" unique to Indian Classical Music. There is a total of thirty-one primary ragas and twenty-nine secondary ragas within the Guru Granth Sahib, making for a grand total of sixty musical modes (Singh 2020, 99). The practice of kirtan is the art of singing Gurbani and playing music in accordance with the ragas assigned to the chosen Shabads. It should go without saying, then, that the Guru Granth Sahib – the container of all Gurbani and accompanying ragas – is absolutely necessary for the performance of Gurbani at the Sikh Foundation of Virginia. To draw an overly simplistic analogy, the Guru Granth Sahib is to the kirtan performer what the book of sheet music is to the symphony performer: without it, the performer is at risk of becoming lost (although it should be acknowledged that the advanced performer of kirtan will, like the symphony performer, come to learn the lyrics and melodies by heart).

Like the sadh sangat who founded the Sikh Foundation of Virginia, the Guru Granth Sahib is an immigrant to the United States. In late 2022, I asked Hardeep how the book had come to reside in its current Northern Virginia home. Hardeep explained that there is only one place – a single publishing house in Amritsar, Punjab – where official copies of the Guru Granth Sahib may be printed. Only the publishers at the Amritsar location can "do it correctly," he told me. The Sikh Foundation's sangat can rest assured that their copy of the Guru Granth Sahib is indeed legitimate because it bears the publisher's seal of approval. And for those wondering, the seal is indeed a literal one; Hardeep describes it as a "stamp" that can be found on the inside of the front cover.

When a new copy of the Guru Granth Sahib is ordered to the Sikh Foundation (which is something that needs to happen whenever the previous copy begins to deteriorate), the publishers in Amritsar arrange for the text to be sent overseas. Like any important passenger, the book flies in a comfortable, private jet. Upon arriving in the United States, the Guru Granth Sahib is placed in the seat of a respectable car and driven to its final destination. Thus, like any immigrant, the Guru Granth Sahib uses technologies of space-time compression (planes and automobiles) to travel across global cultural landscapes. But unlike the *sadh sangat*, the Guru Granth Sahib traverses the Sikh religiouscape in luxury.

### *Tablas & Harmoniums*

In Punjab, where the largest and “most traditional” Sikh ensembles congregate, kirtan performances often incorporate the use of the tabla, harmonium, sitar, veena, ektara, mridangam, pakhavaj, karatalas, and/or flute. An ensemble of this size is, however, a luxury rather than a requirement or expectation. Though the lyrics (*Gurbani*) and melodies (*ragas*) may not depart from their written form, the Guru Granth Sahib does not specify which instruments should be used, or how many. To illustrate this point, let us consider the work of singer-songwriter Snatam Kaur, a Gora Sikh from Colorado who performs kirtan on the acoustic guitar. At the Sikh Foundation of Virginia – a gurdwara with few resources compared to, say, the Golden Temple in Amritsar – kirtan is typically played using three specific instrument types: the voice, the tabla, and the harmonium.



Though it can be “played” in a variety of unexpected ways, the voice is an instrument familiar to all, and thus an in-depth description of the vocal instrument is not required at this point. The tabla is a single instrument comprised of two hand drums, the baya and daya. The hand drums visually resemble the bongos, but the tabla is far shorter in height – only a couple of inches – and thus requires the player to be seated throughout the performance. The tabla can be made of a variety of materials; at the Sikh Foundation, the body is lined with metal (though I suspect that the interior is made of wood), and a small (possibly synthetic) skin is pulled across the tops of each drum. One plays the instrument by rapidly tapping the palms and the tips of the fingers against the skins of the baya and daya simultaneously.

The sound produced by the tabla is primarily percussive, as should come as no surprise to the spectator. But there are also subtle (and sometimes rather explicit) tonal sounds woven into the percussion. The small daya, played with the dominant hand, produces higher notes compared to its larger, bass-heavy counterpart, the baya. These tones are so prevalent, in fact, that the daya and baya must be constantly tuned and retuned according to whatever key a particular raga has been assigned. This might not seem significant to many but, when one considers that most percussive instruments common to Western music (i.e., the standard five-piece kit) can only be “tuned” to achieve percussive sounds (sounds vaguely described in terms of timbre), it becomes clear that a “drum” of such tonal capacity is rather uncommon to the American soundscape.

The tradition of playing the tabla is, like the practice of kirtan itself, an import to the United States. Though the history and origin of the tabla are a matter of dispute, there is no doubt that the modern tabla was in use throughout North India by the mid-eighteenth century (Phinney 2023). The instrument had been associated with courtesan dance traditions in India and present-day Pakistan long before any documented use in the Americas (Encyclopedia Britannica 2023). Furthermore, the specific tabla used at the Sikh Foundation was purchased from an Indian company and shipped overseas to the United States. Thus, like the tradition of playing the tabla, the instrument itself arrived in Fairfax County through both the Sikh religiouscape and the Punjabi/Indian ethnoscape.

The harmonium (referred to by some as a “reed organ”) is a short, boxy instrument that – like the tabla – is intended to be played while seated. Players of the harmonium use the dominant hand (usually the right hand) to depress piano-like keys while the non-dominant hand gently squeezes the wooden frame. The compression from the non-dominant hand sends air through a series of internal reeds to produce a sound that I describe as a combination of the accordion and the bagpipes.

Like the tabla, the tradition of harmonium-playing has been imported to the United States. The history of the harmonium is, however, a bit more complicated compared to that of the tabla. The original foot-pumped harmonium was designed in Vienna before spreading throughout Europe, and European immigrants had brought the instrument to the United States prior to its arrival in India. Though moderately popular for a time, the “European harmonium” fell out of favor with American and Indian audiences by the end of the nineteenth century. But in 1875, Dwarkanath Ghose – founder of the

Indian music company Dwarkin – redesigned the foot-pumped harmonium, moving the lower bellows to the back of the body. This new design allowed players to sit on the ground while accompanying a Classical ensemble. The “Indian harmonium” was an instant success in Northern India, swiftly becoming the region’s most popular instrument. Since the early twentieth century, immigrants from North India have been bringing their Indian harmoniums to the United States. And for over a century, India has remained the leading global manufacturer of the harmonium (Vadya 2023). Therefore, nearly every Dwarkin-style reed organ in the United States (including the harmoniums at the Sikh Foundation) was constructed in India and shipped across the global Indian/Punjabi ethnoscape.

#### *Granthis & The Management Committee*

There are three groups of people who typically perform kirtan at the Sikh Foundation of Virginia. The first are the granthis, the “curators of the Guru Granth Sahib” (Sikh Foundation of Virginia 2023). They are, among other things, the resident experts of the “traditional” or “Indian” method of performing kirtan. Since I began visiting the Sikh Foundation of Virginia in 2020, there have always been three granthis: a “head granthi” who sits in the middle, plays harmonium, and sings the majority of the vocal parts; a second granthi who sits to the left of the head granthi (speaking from the spectators’ perspective), plays the harmonium, and sings a few supporting vocal parts; and a third granthi who sits on the right, plays the tablas, and sings a few supporting vocal parts. They, like all groups

of kirtan-playing groups, sit atop the raised stage in the diwan hall throughout their performance.

Until recently, all three granthis were first-generation immigrants who entered the United States through the Sikh religiouscape and the Punjabi/Indian ethnoscape. The head granthi is a graduate of Khalsa College Higher Secondary School and Sikh Missionary College Amritsar. He performed kirtan at Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha in New Delhi for seven years before moving to a gurdwara in Australia, then Canada, and finally Virginia. The second harmonium-playing granthi received his vocal and tabla certifications from Prayag Sangit Samiti in Allahbad and Sri Guru Granth Sahib Vidya Kendra in Delhi, respectively. He played in various gurdwaras across India, England, Canada, and the United States before coming to the Sikh Foundation of Virginia in 2014.

The Sikh Foundation's resident tabla player was, until recently, an Indian man who graduated from Sangeet Visharad Pratham Khand in Chandigarh. He played kirtan in India, England, Canada, and across the United States for over twenty years before coming to Northern Virginia. About a year ago, the granthi left Northern Virginia in pursuit of a work opportunity. I am not sure if he found employment with another gurdwara. Since his departure, the position of tabla player has been filled by a man of about twenty-five to thirty years old. In contrast to the other granthis at the Sikh Foundation, the newest member of the ensemble was born and raised in Fairfax Station.

Since the time of Guru Gobind Singh (the tenth spiritual leader of the Sikhs), there have been the Jathedars – five members of the sangat responsible for managing all “worldly matters.” They can be considered the leading political agents the global Sikh

diaspora (Carle 2022). Centuries later, in 1920, an elective council known as the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) was founded to oversee the management of all gurdwaras across the globe. To this day, the five Jathedars lead the SGPC from the five Takhts – the five “Throne of Power” – located throughout Northern India (Singh 2004, 90-91). Among other things, SGPC should (theoretically) have the power to employ granthis as the Vatican assigns priests to different churches around the world (Singh 2004, 96-97).

In practice, however, the Jathedars have very little political influence outside of India, and “the SGPC is of only remote and academic interest” to Sikhs living in the United States (Singh 2004, 96-97). Thus, most American gurdwaras have the agency to decide which granthis they want to hire (Singh 2004, 94). The Sikh Foundation of Virginia is no exception: when the previous tabla-playing granthi moved away in 2022, it was up to the gurdwara’s Management Committee – not the Jathdars – to find a new granthi and sponsor his journey to the United States. When speaking with the Director of the Management Committee in late 2022, I was made aware of all the challenges and stressors attached the task. Inderpal became noticeably flustered as he explained to me that, although a good granthi had been found, the Sikh Foundation was struggling to secure a working visa for him. I got the impression that the entire process was a bureaucratic nightmare – and a seemingly lengthy one at that, for the new granthi has yet to arrive after about six months.

The Management Committee’s administrative structure is yet another import to the United States. It is not an Indian import, however; on the contrary, the Management

Committee's organization was initially implemented in British gurdwaras by Sikhs attempting to manage their temples in the absence of the SGPC. Thus, the Sikh Foundation's administration of elected officials is ultimately modeled off of British cultural institutions, not the Indian SGPC (Singh 2004, 90-94).

### *Gurmat School*

It was about noon when I entered the diwan hall in late 2022. There were three members from the sangat performing kirtan, none of whom were granthis. In the center of the group sat a young man, tall in stature, playing the tablas while wearing a turban, striped polo, and blue jeans. To the right of the stage (again, from the audience's perspective) sat another young man who sang and played the harmonium. To the left of the stage sat an older woman in a saree; she, too, played the harmonium and sang. When they finished their performance, the players rotated around the stage; the boy in the middle moved to the back, the man to the far right slid to the middle, and one of the granthis (the tabla player) took over the percussion section. This new ensemble played one final song before leaving the stage, bowing to the Guru Granth Sahib, and finding their seats among the rest of the sangat. Just five days later, I entered the diwan hall again to find the same talba-playing granthi performing next to two young women who both sang and played the harmonium. Sitting behind the three instrumentalists were two older women, both of whom were singing along to the kirtan.

The young people in these examples are representatives of the Sikh Foundation's Gurmat School, the second group of resident kirtan performers at the Sikh Foundation of

Virginia. The older women on stage were the instructors of the youth group. Most students of the Gurmat School are children, teenagers, and college-age adults who – unlike their parents and grandparents who immigrated to the United States – were born in Northern Virginia. Though dedicated and skilled, these young people are still honing their expertise with help from the older generation. As these examples show, it is not unusual for granthis (especially the tabla player) to accompany the youth group’s performances. When not performing on stage, the members of the youth group (and their instructors) are among the spectators.

#### *(Inter)national Touring Artists*

Diwan had just concluded on the evening of Thursday, September 11, 2022, and I was walking toward the staircase. An elderly couple from the sangat spotted me and walked over with excited looks on their faces. They eagerly informed me that a popular kirtan performer from the United Kingdom, Bhai Veer Manpreet Singh, would be coming to the Sikh Foundation in two weeks’ time. It would be a huge event, and this couple had volunteered to provide langar (the public meal proceeding the diwan service). They asked if I could help them, and I told them it would be my pleasure. After all, they had helped me out on numerous occasions over the previous two years. Two weeks quickly passed, and I found myself back at the Sikh Foundation on September 25. The couple’s prediction had proven accurate, for Bhai Veer Manpreet Singh did play to a packed house that night. In addition to the usual kirtan spectators (most of whom are older members of

the first-generation), there was a bevy of younger, second- and third-generation sangat members in attendance.

This performer from the United Kingdom represents the third group to play kirtan at the Sikh Foundation: national and international touring artists. Unlike the granthis and the members of the Gurmat School, these performers do not belong to the Sikh Foundation's sangat; rather, they traverse the Sikh religiouscape while using several gurdwaras as temporary "bases of operation." Bhai Veer Manpreet Singh was born in Uttar Pradesh, learned kirtan in Himachal Pradesh, improved his skills in Punjab, and now lives in the United Kingdom where he also works as a Minister of Religion. From what I can tell from his website, he is not especially tied to any single gurdwara; rather, he visits temples across the UK and, on occasion, the United States (veermanpreet.com 2023).

Some events at the Sikh Foundation attract multiple touring kirtan artists simultaneously. On Thursday, March 16, 2023, the Sikh Foundation of Virginia hosted an exceptionally larger event featuring nine "renowned" kirtan performers from India, the UK, and all corners of the United States. Their performance at the Sikh Foundation was part of a five-stop tour organized and presented by the Sri Harmandir Sahib Academy, USA.

### *Schedules & Spectators*

Kirtan is played for many occasions, but it is mostly associated with the standard diwan service. At the Golden Temple of Amritsar, the busiest gurdwara in the world,



diwan occurs every single day (goldentempleamritsar.org 2023). At the Sikh Foundation and many other smaller gurdwaras located throughout the United States, diwan only takes place twice a week. While diwan tends to have a loose end time at the Sikh Foundation, most Sunday services run from 10:00 am to 1:00 pm. Kirtan is usually performed from 11:20 am to 12:30 pm, making it a bit over one third of the entire program. On Thursday evenings, diwan is hosted from 7:00 pm to 9:00 pm, and kirtan is performed half of the time (from 7:30 pm to 8:30 pm) (Sikh Foundation of Virginia 2023).

Because kirtan is a feature of the standard religious service, most spectators of the musical practice are members of the Sikh Foundation's religious congregation. In the diwan hall, the spectators of the musical performance are expected to sit facing the granthis and Guru Granth Sahib throughout the service. They are allowed to come and go at their leisure, but they must do so respectfully, avoiding "extraneous conversation and activity" that could prove distracting to those around them (Singh 2004, 16). While needless talking is considered a distraction, the sangat are encouraged to sing along with the kirtan (though most people choose to remain silent or hum along quietly). To assist the sangat's participation, the words of the Shabads are projected against the back wall in both Punjabi and English. Occasionally, spectators will find a third body of Punjabi text that provides a lengthier interpretation of the poem. The visual aid comes from two projectors – one on the left side of the room, one on the right – that are hung from the ceiling and connected to a single laptop. The laptop itself is operated one member of the sangat stationed against the northeastern wall of the diwan hall. In a sense, the computer

operator (a different person almost every time) is both a spectator and an unsung contributor to the musical practice.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

This chapter not only describes the practice of kirtan, but it illustrates how nearly every element of kirtan – its origins, its composition, its instrumentation, its performers, and the structures of bureaucracy surrounding the practice – has been imported to the United States from elsewhere. Several global cultural landscapes (including, but not limited to, the Sikh religioscape and the Punjabi/Indian ethnoscape) form pathways and connections between India, the United States, and elsewhere. In the following chapters, I discuss how kirtan, the product of globalism, informs the production of no less than three spatial identities associated with the Sikh Foundation of Virginia.

## SIKH RELIGIOUS SPACE

### *Sikh Theology: Waheguru & The Soul*

When kirtan is performed, Gurbani transcends the page and fills the soundscape, soaking the sangat in Sikh theology. From anywhere in the room (and from anywhere inside the building, for that matter), a person can hear and internalize the wisdom of the Guru Granth Sahib. Through the practice of kirtan, the empty space of the diwan hall is filled with sacred sentiments, and the Sikh Foundation is transformed into a religious space – a space in which the sangat can learn about God, the soul, and the afterlife. It is a place where people are told that life is meaningful, and that salvation from suffering is achievable; where the devout receive instructions for living a holy life, and where religious debates are encouraged. It is also an affective space, one in which a person's emotional connection to the divine becomes tangible.

To better understand exactly how kirtan is capable of producing the Sikh Foundation's identity as a religious space, one must be familiar with the wisdom contained within the Guru Granth Sahib – the wisdom that transcends the book and fills the space when set to music. First, let us consider the information pertaining to God and the soul. For many members of the Sikh Foundation's sangat, Gurbani is indeed a primary source of cosmological knowledge. The Guru Granth Sahib establishes Waheguru as the One God of the universe – an “imminent and transcendental” deity “free

of birth and death” (Singh 2004, 25-27). God is described as a creator – a “tinkerer,” as Hardeep likes to say – whose “divine spark” gives life to all humans and living creatures (Singh 2004, 140). Though “He” is often referred to in the Guru Granth Sahib as a male father figure, Waheguru is said to have “no gender, race, lineage, or form.” In fact, according to the Shabads, God is entirely “free of all physical attributes that man can conceive” (Singh 2004, 25-27). In addition to God’s capabilities and attributes, Gurbani also describes the temperament of God, asserting that Waheguru is “righteously just but also merciful” (Singh 2004, 25). He is the “forgiver of sins” and “one who protects the weak” (Singh 2020, 99).

The opening Shabad of the Guru Granth Sahib – the Mool Mantar – covers most of these descriptions rather succinctly. Here, I present the Mool Mantar, as it was read and translated by Inderpal when he spoke to the students of The King’s College in February of 2023: “*Ik Onkaar*: There is one God, one universal God. *Satnaam*: Truth is God’s Name. *Kartaa Purakh*: God is the Creator. *Nirbhau*: God has no fear. *Nirvair*: God has not hatred, no enemy. *Akaal Moorat*: God is eternal, timeless, and has no physical form. *Ajooni Saibhang*: God is beyond birth and beyond death. That is, God is self-existent, the Enlightened One. *Gurprasaad*: God can only be known by Guru’s Grace, by meditating on God’s name” (Carle 2023).

Through kirtan, these descriptions transcend the pages of the Guru Granth Sahib and enter the minds of the sangat. Sikh notions of divinity become accessible to a wide audience (that is, everyone within the space). And it is clear to me that the sangat have, for the most part, accepted and internalized Gurbani’s description of God. On November

17, 2022, I was speaking with Inderpal about his perspective on Waheguru. The Director of the Management Committee stated, “There is only one God. He is the Creator of this world. His name is Truth... that means Goodness” – a description matching that provided by kirtan.

As the Shabads describe the nature of God, so too do they describe the human soul and its relationship to the divine (Singh 2020, vii). The Shabads teach that the soul is “a part of God... [j]ust like a drop of water is part of the ocean” (Singh 2020, 5). Take for example, this passage from the Guru Granth Sahib written by the poet Kabir (also spelled “Kabeer”) and translated by contemporary Sikh scholar Tarsem Singh (2020): “Says Kabeer, this soul is of the same essence as the Lord. Like permanent ink becomes part of the paper which nobody can erase” (Singh 2020, 5). Again, as kirtan is performed, the soundscape is filled with this information about the soul, and the diwan hall is transformed into a religious space in which one can expand their comprehension of Sikh theology.

### *Sikh Theology: Liberation & The Meaning of Life*

No matter who you are, life can be chaotic. For many, religion offers the sense of order and meaning that can be missing from a secular life. In fact, following Weber’s (2012) assertion that religions are “system[s] of meaning aimed at explaining the existence of suffering and evil in the world” (Weber 2012, 137), Geertz (1966) concluded that religion is ultimately a search for order in the midst of chaos (Keyes 2002, 243).

Sikhism, like many religions, provides this much-needed relief from suffering and instability.

Like many at the Sikh Foundation, Tarsem Singh (2020) believes that the soul is reincarnated countless times, stuck in a seemingly endless cycle of death and rebirth. For the Sikh Foundation's sangat, Gurbani is the origin of this belief system. Knowledge of reincarnation is transmitted to the sangat through passages in the Guru Granth Sahib. Consider the following written by Guru Nanak and translated, once again, by Tarsem Singh: "O Nanak, by the Hukam of God's Command, we come and go in reincarnation." (Singh 2020, 2).

Taken in isolation, this passage alone might lead one to believe that existence is rather futile. What is the point of *this* lifetime if there will always be a *next* lifetime? Is the stress of life really worth it? Thankfully, Gurbani also provides the answer to these questions: the soul is indeed reincarnated countless times, but salvation from the cycle can be achieved. The Guru Granth Sahib teaches that, of all living forms, man is the "pinnacle of creation," the final incarnation that the soul must assume before it can merge back into God (Singh 2020, 2; Singh 2004, 53). But one's status as a human does not guarantee liberation. In fact, most humans will not be freed – at least not in this lifetime.

So, then, what determines whether a person can be liberated from the cycle of death and rebirth? Well, Gurbani has an answer to that too. The Guru Granth Sahib teaches that liberation will only be achieved by those who have accumulated enough Amrit – "the divine inner nectar which enlightens us in this world and is our wealth for the next world" – over the course of several lifetimes (Singh 2020, 11). It should be noted

that this Amrit nectar is supposed to be a metaphor for one's personal divinity or holiness; it is not a literal substance that exists somewhere in the body. With the guidance of the Guru, a Sikh may accumulate enough Amrit to transcend the cycle of reincarnation and return to the Oneness of God.

Thus, the Guru Granth Sahib does provide meaning to a life that might feel otherwise meaningless. As Tarsem Singh excitedly declares in his book *Why Am I Here?* (2020), “We have come to this earth for a reason!” (Singh 2020, 1). We are here to collect Amrit, escape the cycle of death and rebirth, and merge back with Waheguru. Liberation, says the Guru, should be the ultimate goal of life. Such a notion is communicated in several passages of the Guru Granth Sahib, including the following verse written by Guru Arjan Dev and translated by Tarsem Singh: “This human body has been given to you. This is your chance to meet the Lord of the Universe. All other efforts are of little use to you” (Singh 2020, 5).

Passages such as these are hopeful; they provide Sikhs with a true sense of purpose. But as long as this information is kept within the pages of a book, those feelings of hope and purpose may not reach most of the sangat. After all, most sangat members (with the exception of a few ritual specialists) do not regularly engage directly with the Guru Granth Sahib. This is why kirtan is so important: when the music is played, the hope of liberation – the source of meaning for the faithful Sikh – is freed from the book. The sangat is sonically bathed in sentiments of purpose as Gurbani enters the soundscape. Having internalized those sentiments in the religious space of the Sikh Foundation, members of the sangat remember their purpose even after the kirtan has ended.

It is of critical importance, perhaps now more than ever, that people are provided with a sense of hope and purpose. In 2020, I attended a mental health workers' training session hosted by Asian Americans for Community Service (known at the time as "the Asian American Inter Community Service"). The training session had been arranged by Inderpal, Director of the Sikh Foundation's Management Committee and Chairman of the AICS Board of Directors. The world was in quarantine, and for many, it was a time of loneliness. Through the training program, I learned that rates of depression and suicide had risen among Asian Americans (South Asian Americans included). Around that same time, I picked up a September-October issue of *India America Today* from the Sikh Foundation's foyer. In it, there was an article by journalist Rituparna Mahapatra listing the newfound (and often crippling) anxieties felt by healthcare workers, teachers, and students, stating that "there will be a growing need for support on mental health issues" (Mahapatra 2020, 7). Over two years later, in July of 2022, I attended another virtual training session jointly hosted by the AICS and the Asian American Health Initiative. It was during this meeting that I learned that suicide rates are still rising among South Asian youth. For many, attaining a sense of religious purpose may help stave off depression and loneliness. As Tejbir explained to the students of The King's College in February of 2023, reading Gurbani and following the Guru's instructions can provide "that mental stability that people are now looking for through all these different programs out there for mental health" (Carle 2023).

*Instructions for Life*



As the Guru Granth Sahib informs the sangat's beliefs about God, the soul, and reincarnation, so too does the text inform their way of the life. It would be a bit unfair, after all, if Gurbani instructed Sikhs to improve their souls yet provided no means of doing so. Thankfully, "like a qualified teacher," Gurbani – the wisdom of the Gurus and saints – can guide Sikhs in their mission to accumulate Amrit and achieve liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth (Singh 2020, 42). The Guru's role of liberator and teacher is explicitly discussed and celebrated by the saint Kabir in the following verse from the Guru Granth Sahib: "By Guru's Grace, I have found the Path. Birth and death have both been erased" (Singh 2020, 5).

So, then, what instruction does Gurbani offer the student in search of liberation? To start, the Guru Granth Sahib states that a person can gain Amrit by keeping his consciousness trained on Waheguru at all times. Faithful Sikhs are advised to keep their minds "attuned to the infinite reality within," remembering Waheguru until God becomes an integral part of their lives, "one who is never forgotten even for a moment" (Singh 2004, 20 and 27). To draw an analogy, observant Sikhs are taught to see God in everything/everyone like the Zande are "trained" to find evident of witchcraft in any misfortunate event (Evans-Pritchard 1937, 32). This practice is described in the Guru Granth Sahib by the Guru Arjan Dev: "Wherever I look, there I Him present; He is never far away. He is all-pervading, everywhere; O my mind, meditate on Him forever" (Singh 2020, 95).

Of course, keeping the mind focused on Waheguru at all times and recognizing God in all things is no easy task. In a world of work, responsibility, and temptation, "it requires

a great deal of effort and focus.” Gurbani recognizes that there are several personal vices that can disrupt a Sikh’s attention to God (Singh 2020, 25, 47, and 64-65). Hardeep discussed these vices when speaking to the students of the King’ College in February of 2023:

“In Sikhism, also in our Guru Granth Sahib, Gurbani, it comes again and again: there are five vices which create all the problems and sufferings. They are: number one, lust. Second is anger, and third is we are greedy. Fourth is we have got attachment to something which we should be not attached; if we want be attached to something it should be only God. And the last one, or the fifth one, is that ego. So, these are the things through which all the sufferings come. If we can conquer these five things, the sufferings will be a history. We’ll not have the impact of suffering on us if we just stay clear from all these five vices. That’s the main thing which is repeated in Gurbani several times” (Carle, 2023).

When suffering as a consequence of our own vices, we cannot maintain our focus on the divine. And to complicate the matter further, the secular world is full of temptations – drugs, alcohol, tobacco, sexual infidelity, gambling – that stoke our vices further (Singh 2020, 101-102). And for this reason, one might assume that Gurbani advocates for the type of “outer-world asceticism” practiced by monks, hermits, yogis, and others who aim to escape worldly distractions by retreating into special places (monasteries, deserts, mountaintops, etc.) (Erickson & Murphey 2021, 69). After all, these methods are practiced by members of other Indian religions as a means of connecting with the divine; Tarsem Singh (2020) asserts that that “in India, even to this day, many traditions regard renunciation as the path to spirituality and liberation” (Singh

1994, 54). But, in fact, Gurbani communicates an entirely different idea: “Truth is higher than everything, but higher still is a truthful life.” (Singh 2020, 57)

This statement, written by Guru Nanak, carries a lot of weight at the Sikh Foundation. It was repeated by Tejbir when he spoke to the undergraduates of the King’s College (although he translated the verse slightly differently: “Truth is high; still higher is truthful living”). Here, the first Guru communicates the notion that the *sadh sangat* must focus on God *and* “be active participants in the struggle of life” (Singh 2020, 57). That is to say, one should have a family and maintain a job all while embodying the virtues of truth, contentment, compassion, faith, and purity (Singh 2004, 135-137; Singh 2020, 101-102). There is no honor in becoming a “renegade ascetic” whose isolated devotion to God is merely self-serving. After all, what is a person’s renunciation really worth if it means abandoning the people who rely on you? What is it worth if the ascetic functions as little more than a burden to the society that must support him? I.J. Singh (2004) summarizes this principal rather beautifully: “Do not drop out of the complex and infuriating demands of this world. Instead, be like a lotus that can emit beauty and fragrance and remain untouched by the stagnant water in which it may be found. Do not drop out to seek God on a mountaintop. Do not drop out to seek peace as a hermit or an ascetic. Live an active, productive, family life to serve God and society” (Singh 2004, 138).

Gurbani teaches that, with an unshakable, infinite awareness of God, any chore is made sacred, no matter how secular or mundane (Singh 2004, 27; Singh 2020, 11, 21, and 54). When the Sikh does as instructed and focuses on God while remaining engaged in the secular world, *Amrit* is attained within the soul, and the student becomes one step closer to

being emancipated from the cycle of death and rebirth (Singh 2020, 12 and 42). This is a principal known as *Kirat Karō* (Carle 2023). The Guru Granth Sahib contains multiple passages that celebrate the ability of the householder – the inner-world ascetic – to achieve liberation. Consider the following Shabad from Guru Nanak: “Such is the Glory of the True Guru; in the midst of children and spouses, they attain emancipation” (Singh 2020, 54).

If Sikhs can stay involved in secular life while remembering God, overcoming their vices and temptations, and embracing the virtues, the flow of Amrit never needs to stop. But what are Sikhs to do during the most difficult of times? In the midst of extreme tribulation, even saintly people can lose faith, abandon hope, and lose sight of God. Many religions prescribe methods of addressing illness, injury, death, the destruction of property, professional setbacks, financial losses, and acts of violence. For example, when somebody dies unexpectedly, the followers of Zande religion are taught to communicate with an oracle to determine the cause of death. If another member of the community is determined to be guilty of witchcraft, then magic rites may be used to exact revenge on the offender (Evans-Pritchard 1937, 20-25).

Like the Zande, the Sikhs of Northern Virginia have prescribed ways of addressing tragedy and grief. The Sikh approach is, however, decidedly more passive. Gurbani reminds Sikhs that all things – misfortunes included – are part of God’s Hukam, God’s Will. We might not understand God’s Will, but we can trust in His grand design. And thus, Gurbani instructs those suffering to accept God’s plan, even during the worst moments. Faith in God’s Hukam makes one resilient and contented. With resilience, one has no need for vices; with contentment, one returns his attention to Waheguru (Singh

2020, 33). This ceaseless awareness and acceptance of God's Will is known as *Naam Japo* (Carle 2023). This principle is discussed in the following verse by the poet Kabir: "[D]o not weep at the sight of suffering and adversity. As is wealth, so is adversity; whatever the Lord proposes, comes to pass" (Singh 2020, 33).

Sometimes, it is perfectly clear your suffering is a result of another's wrongdoing. Perhaps the offender carelessly (albeit accidentally) causes the destruction of a prized family heirloom. Maybe the offender has intentionally stolen from you something using tactics of violence or intimidation. In times like these, you may feel entitled to compensation or revenge. But Gurbani teaches that anger is just another vice that will take the faithful away from God. So, the Guru Granth Sahib instructs the sadh sangat to embrace their Godly qualities and practice forgiveness. "Forgiveness," I.J. Singh writes, "helps heal deep wounds from the past and is the perfect antidote for anger" (Singh 2020, 63). Forgiveness reforges a person's mental union with Waheguru. Such an idea is briefly but effectively summarized in the following Shabad by Kabir: "Where there is forgiveness, there is God Himself." (Singh 2020, 63).

By accepting God's Hukam and extending forgiveness to those who commit acts of harm, Sikhs can keep their minds trained on God in spite of tragedy. In the midst of tribulation, Amrit can still be attained, and the faithful can still move toward their goal of liberation. So writes Guru Ram Das, "If His humble servant believes and acts according to the Words of the Guru's Bani, then the Guru emancipates him" (Singh 2020, 44).

To summarize, Gurbani defines a Sikh's purpose for living (to achieve liberation from the cycle of reincarnation and reunite with God), describes the means of achieving

that goal (attuning the mind to God at all times while living a secular life), and helps the sangat navigate the various potholes (vices, temptations, and misfortunes) that they may encounter on the road to emancipation (Singh 2004, 16 and 53). But as it is with Sikh theology, the Sikh way of life cannot be effectively communicated to the sangat so long as Gurbani is trapped within the pages of the Guru Granth Sahib. Again, this is why kirtan is so significant. When the Shabads are set to music, the religious instructions of the Guru come to occupy the soundscape, and those instructions become accessible to all. Through the musical practice, the Sikh Foundation becomes a religious space in which visitors may learn, absorb, and internalize the Sikh way of life. And the Sikh lifestyle is indeed internalized; consider, for example, what Tejbir said to the students of King's College:

“Everything is happening around us in a divine order, and your job is to accept it and not fight with it, not argue with it, and simply just say..., ‘Whatever You do pleases me. I’m happy with it. I’m, you know, in submission to it.’ So, that way, your mind is never with conflict that, ‘Oh, this should have happened this way,’ ‘Oh, this could have happened this way,’ ‘Oh, if this happened, then I would have been in a better situation.’ There’s no regret; there is no wishful thinking. There’s no expectation of the future. It’s like I am living in... the constant state of mind where I know that, you know, everything is happening, it was going to happen this way.... My job is just to accept it and live with it” (Carle 2023).

Here, Tejbir describes the practice of *Naam Japo*, the awareness and acceptance of God’s will. Were it not for the kirtan that Tejbir regularly consumes in the religious

space of the Sikh Foundation, it is quite possible that he may not have internalized the practice of Naam Japo to such a degree. Were it not for kirtan, Tejbir and the other members of the sangat would have to learn about the Sikh lifestyle outside of the Sikh Foundation – perhaps online, where they would have to discover Shabads on their own (remember that few people actually engage directly with the physical copy of the Guru Granth Sahib during their time at the gurdwara).

### *Kirtan and the Ambiguity of Sikh Belief*

While the Guru Granth Sahib is a wellspring of theological information and a guidebook to Truthful Living, one should not be misled into believing that the Shabads are universally accepted across the Sikh diaspora. The verses are, after all, poetic in nature – ambiguous, mystical, and open to interpretation. This is intentional for, although Gurbani and does exist to explain the nature of God, the soul, and the afterlife, the Shabads also make it clear that humans are ultimately incapable of comprehending the Will of God or the intricacies of the Universe. Not even the ten living Gurus claimed to understand God completely or attempted to describe His essence entirely. To quote Tarsem Singh (2020), “It is impossible to learn everything about God, so we will always be behind the curve. But the point of learning is to destroy ego by recognizing how little we know” (Singh 2020, 58). So, when kirtan floods the soundscape of the diwan hall and trickles into the foyer and langar hall, occupants of the Sikh Foundation are reminded that even the wisest among them are still students, still Sikhs. As the Director of the Sikh Foundation’s Management Committee, Inderpal encounters and internalizes this message

on a regular basis. “We human beings are not in a position to describe who [the] Creator is,” he told me during a conversation in late 2022. “You could use all the ink in the ocean to write the description of that Lord. The ink will be gone, but you will still be describing the Lord.”

In this sense, the sangat’s attitude regarding Sikh cosmology shares some commonalities with the Azande attitude toward witchcraft. E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1937) reports that the Zande “do not profess to understand witchcraft entirely.” Although the Azande know that witchcraft exists, they have to “guess as the manner in which it works.” When searching for answers concerning witchcraft among the laity, Evans-Pritchard was referred to village elders and religious specialists but, upon discussing the topic with those specialists, he concluded that “the older men and the witch doctors can tell you little more than youth and laymen” (Evans-Pritchard 1937, 31). Because no single person or group serves as the ultimate authority, individuals among the Zande are allowed to develop their own interpretations of witchcraft. Though most agree that witchcraft is real, there are often disagreements concerning which misfortunes should be attributed to the supernatural, and which misfortunes are simply “natural.” Evans-Pritchard (1937) gives this example: “When a potter’s creations break in firing witchcraft is not the only possible cause of the calamity. Inexperience and bad workmanship may also be reasons for failure.... The potter himself will attribute his failure to witchcraft, but others may not be of the same opinion” (Evans-Pritchard 1937, 28). These disagreements are, in most cases, not a cause of tension in the community.



Similarly, the sangat of the Sikh Foundation know that God exists as a force for good, but God's plan is unknowable, as are the exact cosmic mechanisms that determine one's fate after death. The granthis may seem to display a higher knowledge of God than the majority of the sangat (they have at least read the Guru Granth Sahib more than most), but even they are left to their many speculations. Because the Gurus and the sangat recognize that there is no one definitive interpretation of Gurbani, the people of the Sikh Foundation are generally allowed to develop their own (within reason). People can even disregard some major theological teachings without having any consequences imposed upon them by the religious community.

When speaking to the students of The King's College, Hardeep, Tejbir, and Inderpal revealed that they have a lot in common in terms of religious belief; they agree that there is one God, that the Guru Granth is the eternal Guru, and that all humans are created equal. But deviations in belief began to emerge when one student asked the question, "What happens to people after they die?" Hardeep gave the answer that one might expect of an avid Gurbani reader and kirtan listener: he stated, quite simply, that he believes in reincarnation. But Tejbir and Inderpal had very different responses. Tejbir was the next to answer.

"The physical body is gonna' merge back with the elements it's born from," he said. "The water will go in water, the dust will go in dust, and the air will leave with the air. But... the spirit – that we call it – I personally believe it very differently than my friends along with me might believe. That, ultimately, there is the one Light that had been reflecting through us. It's just, like..., the direction changed, and the light has switched

off.... So, I personally believe there's only one soul living through all of us. So, there's no, like, one soul living and dying and reaching back sometime and staying somewhere in the Heaven or Hell. I, personally, do not believe in those concepts" (Carle 2023).

The professor hosting the class showed signs of confusion and asked, "You believe in reincarnation?" (The question was delivered as if to say, "You believe in reincarnation, *right?*") Tejbir began to chuckle, and he responded, "Personally, I do not believe that we have any kind of reincarnation happening.... That's my personal belief.... Our scriptures do have very detailed information about [reincarnation] in this way" (Carle 2023). Tejbir went on to explain that, despite his personal beliefs regarding the afterlife, he chooses to follow the instructions of the Guru Granth Sahib because living a Sikh lifestyle makes him a better member of society. Tejbir follows the instructions of the Guru Granth Sahib for the sake of his community, not for the purposes of spiritual liberation.

It was at this point that Inderpal politely injected his thoughts about the afterlife into the conversation. "Of course, we all can have our own perceptions," he said. "But at times, I think that soul is God's creation. It's pure. When we take a birth, our actions dirty that soul and then we have to do the right things – or the right bad – to transform that soul, so when we go back to God's sanctuary, we get a good place over there. But this is just, you know.... Everybody can have their own perception, their own thoughts" (Carle 2023). Here, Inderpal is describing his belief in a heavenly realm which he refers to as "God's sanctuary." Like Tejbir, Inderpal accepts some parts of the Guru's wisdom while rejecting others. In this specific case, he accepts the notion that the soul is a creation of

Waheguru, but he rejects the idea that the soul is either reincarnated or merged with God upon death.

The difference between Hardeep's, Inderpal's, and Tejbir's answers is indicative of the sangat's tolerance for individual beliefs that deviate from the written word. Hardeep believes in the afterlife described in the Shabads, but that does not mean that he reads the Guru Granth Sahib (or that he listens to kirtan) any more than Tejbir or Inderpal. Tejbir clearly acknowledges that his "personal belief" departs from the cosmology described in Gurbani, thus indicating that he is very aware of the information contained within the scriptures. And Inderpal is the Director of the Sikh Foundation's Management Committee, so we know that he is no stranger to the conventional wisdom that echoes throughout the halls of the temple. All three men are incredibly devout; they simply belong to a religion which allows them to pick and choose the Shabads that work best for them. Because the sangat is open to individual interpretations of Gurbani, no friction occurs as a result of Tejbir's vision of the afterlife deviating from that of Hardeep. And, as far as I can tell, Hardeep and Inderpal have a very friendly relationship that seems in no way hindered by their theological differences.

So, while kirtan *does* unify the beliefs and lifestyles of the sangat by spreading the wisdom of Gurbani throughout the soundscape, it would be wrong to conclude that the sangat's religious beliefs are entirely homogenized within this space. Kirtan does *not* create what Émile Durkheim (1915) might refer to as a universalized "collective consciousness." It is more accurate to conclude that, after listening to kirtan over a series of years, one member of the sangat will adopt certain Sikh beliefs and practices, and

another member will adopt a different set of beliefs and practices. The two members will likely have some core ideas in common, but there will always be variations in belief, even within the same temple. This is not a failure of kirtan; again, Gurbani is intentionally poetic and subjective.

### *Feeling Connected*

Thus far, my analysis of kirtan has focused on its lyrical foundation – Gurbani – at the intellectual level. It is the intellect which internalizes Sikh theology and agrees with the Sikh lifestyle. But the Shabads of the Guru Granth Sahib are more than intellectually stimulating; they are also appealing to the soul, to the emotional core of a person. On October 27, 2022, I attended a virtual panel discussion entitled “The First Sikh: The Life and Legacy of Guru Nanak.” The featured presenter was Nikky-Guninder K. Singh, author of *Guru Nanak: Poems From The Guru Granth Sahib* (2022). During her presentation, Singh explained that the Shabads – especially those written by Guru Nanak – have a unique aesthetic intended to make the reader *feel* something while they think. She stated that, in her experience, “Ultimate Truth” (a phrase often used in reference to God) is experienced “as a feeling, not a knowledge,” and that said feeling is realized when she reads (or hears) the Shabads of Guru Nanak, specifically. In other words, Singh experiences God through the *affective qualities* of the Guru’s poetry (Singh 2022.). At the Sikh Foundation of Virginia, the process of connecting to God on the emotional level is referred to as “feeling connected.”

I remember the first time that I heard the phrase. It was Sunday, January 24, 2021; the Sikh Foundation was celebrating Guru Gobind Singh's 354<sup>th</sup> birthday, an event which had just passed four days prior. I was still a fairly new face at the Sikh Foundation, and Hardeep (the man acting as my Punjabi language tutor) had signed me up to give a speech regarding the Mool Mantar, the first Shabad of the Guru Granth Sahib. I quickly came to understand this was Hardeep's way of initiating me into a community that might otherwise be wary of my presence. I read the Shabad and delivered the speech in the diwan hall with little incident. Afterward, Balvinder, a first-generation woman of about forty years old, approached me and introduced herself (apparently proving Hardeep's method of initiation to be a success). She asked me, "Do you feel connected?"

"Oh, yes," I answered with a smile. Balvinder's eyes illuminated, and her face produced a wide grin. I admit now, long after the fact, that I did not understand Balvinder's question as intended. I thought she was asking, 'Do you feel connected *to the sangat*?' And I did – I had just made a significant (and somewhat nerve-racking) step toward my integration. But that is not what Balvinder was asking. I know now that she meant, 'Do you feel connected *to God*?'

My confusion, of course, came from the vague nature of the phrase "feeling connected." Perhaps an affective union with the divine can only be described in such abstract terms; after all, the connection exists on the emotional level, not on the intellectual level of verbal interpretation. But this has not stopped some of the sangat from attempting to put the experience into words. When speaking to the students of The King's College, Inderpal did his best to elaborate upon what is ultimately indescribable.

“We really feel God in us,” he said. “It helps us to attain the highest positive state of mind.... Such feeling becomes our beacon, our streetlamp that brightens our path.... Once we bond with God, we bond with self. We feel elated.... That’s the time it puts a smile on our face, and that radiating smile reaches others” (Carle 2023).

Several authors in the Sikh Foundation’s library have also attempted to capture these feelings of connectedness. In *Sikhs and Sikhism* (2004), I.J. Singh refers to the feeling as an “altered state” in which the soul can commune with “the infinite” (Singh 2004, 15 and 133-134). When communicating with God (here referred to as “the infinite”) on a level that his intellect cannot perceive, I.J. Singh experiences a deep sense of peace that is “undiminished by joy or sorry, loss or gain, unaffected by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” (Singh 2004, 23). He reports feeling as though his physical, mental, and spiritual selves are in perfect harmony and working unison. He describes an “intrinsic high, a glow from within” due to the release of natural pain killers and “magic chemicals” throughout his body, and he compares this “altered state of being” to the those experienced by the users of mood-altering drugs. But unlike a mood-altering drug, the connection to God does not produce low emotional valleys when the euphoric “high” has worn off. And I.J. Singh notes that enjoying Gurbani carries with it no risk of addiction or dependency (Singh 2004, 133-134).

In *Why Am I Here: The soul, the Guru, and the path* (2020), Tarsem Singh describes the feeling of connection as the process of “seeing” God with the “inner eyes.” “When the inner eyes see God,” Singh tells us, “they are wonderstruck by the image of God, which is beautiful and perfect. By seeing God, we experience joy, peace, and bliss

that is unlike any outer experience, even though it is impossible to put this experience into words” (Singh 2020, 70). Singh reports that his “inner-energy” is replenished when “seeing” God this way. Singh even describes a few intellectual benefits of feeling connected; for example, he writes that his connection to God improves his creativity and allows him to find solutions to problems at work and home (Singh 2020, 19).

Even the Guru Granth Sahib contains some descriptions of the feelings that are produced when one is connected to God. Guru Arjan Dev writes that, through his connection to “the Lord” (another name assigned to God), all his anxieties are eradicated (Singh 2020, 98-99). And Guru Nanak famously spoke “of being constantly inebriated” when connected to the divine (Singh 2004, 139). The Guru Granth Sahib’s most comprehensive description of “feeling connected” may be contained within the Anand Sahib – the “Song of Eternal Bliss and Joy” – written by the third Guru, Guru Amar Das. The Anand Sahib is the final Shabad performed by the granthis at the end of each diwan service. The poem is forty verses in length and describes the “bliss” of connectedness. Take, for example, the following lines: “God’s Name, which has taken abode in my house within my body and mind has fulfilled all my ambitions and had bestowed upon me peace and bliss” (verse 4); “Nanak says, that this is the True Bliss, which is known through the True Guru (verse 7); “My soul is overjoyed, on hearing about God’s arrival in my heart” (verse 34); “I have realized God, the Supreme God; and all my grief’s have vanished” (verse 40); and “My sorrows, pains and suffering have left me on hearing the True Word” (verse 40) (Sikh.org 2023).

These descriptions of “feeling connected” – positivity, elation, peace, euphoria, relief, wonder, inebriation, bliss – closely match what Émile Durkheim (1915) describes as *ritual effervescence*, “a sense of ‘effervesce’... that can be accounted for only by reference to a greater power existing beyond the individual” (Erickson & Murphey 2021, 65-66). For members of the Sikh Foundation’s sangat, these feelings of ritual effervescence are intensified many times over when Gurbani is performed as kirtan. There are two reasons for this intensification: first, as I have discussed previously, kirtan pulls Gurbani from the page and into the soundscape, making it accessible to a wider audience. And thus, because of kirtan, more people can “feel connected” at a single time. This is not a new concept in the context of this analysis.

The second reason has little to do with Gurbani but, rather, has everything to do with the ragas, the sixty musical modes assigned to the Shabads of the Sikh holy book. Each raga is said to evoke a specific emotion that is relevant to its given text. For example, the “Song of Eternal Bliss and Joy” – a song of joyous praise for God’s grace – is set to the Ramkali Raga, a fast-paced and energetic musical mode that evokes feelings of excitement and happiness (Sikhs.org 2023). To use Christina Schwenkel’s (2017) terminology, one could say that the Word of the Guru becomes “affectively charged” by the ragas (Schwenkel 2017, 422).

Speaking to the students of The King’s College in February of 2023, Tejbir described the ragas as a medium that “injects the message [of the Shabads] directly into your soul, into your mind” (Carle 2023). When the ragas sonically and emotionally “inject” Gurbani into the listeners, the Shabads are internalized faster. As a result,



listeners experience a “spiritual high” that brings them even closer to God. In turn, that improved connection with the divine intensifies the feelings of ritual effervescence that are shared by the listeners (Singh 1994, 70; Singh 2004, 29-30; Erickson & Murphey 2021, 65-66). Thus, for the sangat of the Sikh Foundation, ragas are not some trivial interchangeable melodies; on the contrary, they are an intentional and important means of absorbing Gurbani, connecting to God, and experiencing bliss.

According to the voices of the Sikh Foundation, the affective power of kirtan – the “high,” the connectedness, the effervescence – is greatly determined by the quality of the performance. If the words are sung with proper diction, and if the instruments are played accurately, in tune, and in rhythm, then the affective qualities of kirtan will grow stronger. Conversely, if frequent mistakes are made throughout the performance, then it is believed that the kirtan will not evoke the spectators’ emotions as intended (Singh 2020, 47). It is for this reason that the granthis are the primary performers of kirtan at the Sikh Foundation of Virginia; they have spent years earning kirtan certifications and honing their talents. Their diction is perfect; their skills on the harmonium and tabla are unrivaled by any among the sangat. The granthis’ unique abilities are key to an affectively powerful kirtan experience. Of course, it is wonderful to have members of the Gurmat School perform from time to time; after all, these young people could be the granthis or kirtan teachers of the future. But for all their tenacity and enthusiasm, the folks of the youth group – like the majority of the sangat – simply cannot play as well as the experienced granthis, and thus their performance does not evoke the same emotions.

The performers are not the only ones who can determine the affective intensity of a kirtan performance. Indeed, the spectators also play a vital role. By paying close attention to the sounds of the kirtan, the spectators empower the Gurbani and ragas. And there is no better way to pay attention than to sing along. In his book *Why Am I Here?* (2020), Tarsem Singh encourages his readers (which include the students of the Sikh Foundation's Gurmat School) to "[s]ing, read, and chant praises with all of [their] love." If they do, then they will feel uplifted and comforted by their improved connection to God and the sangat (Singh 2020, 94). When the spectators are participating together, the feeling of ritual effervescence becomes a shared group experience (Erickson & Murphey 2021, 65-66).

There was one time, in late 2022, when the head granthi of the Sikh Foundation interrupted his kirtan performance and began addressing the sangat by speaking into the microphone. I had never seen this happen before, and I have not seen it since. The granthi spoke in Punjabi, and thus I was unsure as to the reason for this irregularity. After diwan, I followed the sangat to the langar hall. Inderpal sat next to me, and I asked him about the odd occurrence. The Director of the Management Committee chuckled, remarking that the granthi had disrupted the kirtan for the "first time ever" (though I am not sure if this was meant to be taken literally). So, what was the justification for his disruption? Well, according to Inderpal, the granthi felt inclined to explain why "the kirtan wasn't working." As it turns out, the granthi had been irritated by the spectators' lack of involvement; they had been inattentive and disinterested and, as a consequence, they were not bringing the Gurbani and the ragas "into their hearts." I do not know if the

sangat ever increased their participation to the extent that would satisfy the head granthi, but the ritual specialist did not interrupt the service again.

This incident speaks to the reciprocal relationship between the granthis and spectators of the kirtan performance. Such reciprocity is not entirely unique to the kirtan performance or the Sikh Foundation; rather, it is true that in a variety of musical practice, performers and spectators often depend on one another, whether it be for encouragement and support, or to fulfill the expectations of the performance (Emon & Garlough 2015). Take, for example, Yoni Ki Baat performances discussed by Emon and Garlough (2015). During the Yoni Ki Baat performance, the cast and audience work together to meet everyone's expectations of a "high energy" show (Emon & Garlough 2015). Similarly, in the context of the Sikh Foundation, the performers and spectators depend on each other to fill the soundscape of the diwan hall – and the hearts of the sangat – with the emotional resonance of kirtan.

Like the cognitive theological information that floods the soundscape during a kirtan performance, the sangat's experience of ritual effervescence is important to the religious spatial identity associated with the Sikh Foundation. Émile Durkheim (1915) argues that the experience of group effervescence creates the distinction between the "ritual" and the "everyday," between the "sacred" and the "profane" (Erickson & Murphey 2021, 65-66). Applying this idea to the built environment, one can conclude that feelings of sacred effervescence determine which spaces are "sacred" or "religious," and which spaces are not. Therefore, in the context of the Sikh Foundation, the music that facilitates feelings of "connection" surely contributes to the sacred identity of the temple.

### *Infinite Reproduction of Religious Space*

When Inderpal, Hardeep, and Tejbir concluded their lecture to the students of The King's College in February of 2023, the students were given an opportunity to ask any remaining questions they might have about the Sikh religion. One student raised his hand and asked, "How has the loss of Lahore effected your religion?" The student was referencing the 1947 Partition of Punjab. As a result of the Partition, the city of Lahore was given to the new nation of Pakistan. Today, the holy sites located within the city of Lahore – including, but not limited to, the Gurdwara Dera Sahib where Guru Arjan Dev was martyred – remain inaccessible to most Sikhs residing in India. They are even less accessible to Sikhs living in the United States. The student's question was a good one – how exactly does the global Sikh diaspora respond to the distance that is placed between them and their religio-historical sites of significance? It was Tejbir who responded.

"Pakistan had been the place where Guru Nanak was born, and all the historical gurdwaras – the Sikh temples – remain there. We have been gracefully, you know, fortunate enough to visit those gurdwaras... but, in the end, it's not the place we tie ourselves [to]. Yes, our sentiments live there and, when we go there, we see that history living there but, at the same time, it's the Shabad – the hymns, the Word, the spiritual wisdom we carry with us. The Guru Granth Sahib is basically the universal source for our bonding to the religion. So, it's never a place. Yes, those places do inspire us or do help us understand our history and connect us with our Gurus when we... visit these places,

but the idea [that]... you are going to receive any kind of holy rewards for visiting some of your historical places, that idea doesn't exist in Sikhism" (Carle 2023).

Not every religion allows for the production of new sacred spaces. Take Pueblo religion as an example; Pueblo beliefs and practices are tied to specific, spiritually animated sites throughout the geographical landscape. Sacred mountains, lakes, springs, and caves are sites where the Pueblo commune with the underworld and channel healing life energies. Tunnels in the earth are said to be home to a variety of supernatural beings, and *sipapus* – small “earth navels” – are believed to be mythohistorical sites of emergence, the spaces from which humans first entered the world (Masco 2006, 103-105). Once these landmarks are damaged, destroyed, or deconsecrated, they cannot be repaired or replaced. The landscape cannot become home to new mountains, lakes, streams, and caves. It is for this reason that the Pueblo have lived in the same localities and tended to the same sacred spaces for over a millennium, and it is for this reason that the Pueblo are devastated by changes to their physical environment (Masco 2006, 110).

But there are other religions – such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism that *do* allow for an infinite production of sacred space through the consecration of the built environment (Masco 2006, 110). Sikhism falls into this latter camp. As Tejbir's response suggests, historical temples are imbued with historical and religious significance, but Sikhs are not “tied” to a place. They can – and do – go anywhere in the world and produce new religious spaces (such as the Sikh Foundation of Virginia). This is because, from a Sikh perspective, it is not history that makes a space sacred. Rather, any space can be made sacred so long as there is Gurbani, the word of the Guru. So long as

the Shabads are present, God is never out of reach. And thus, the performance of kirtan – the means of delivering Gurbani to a space – is a key method of consecrating the built environment.

By pulling Gurbani out of the Guru Granth Sahib and into the soundscape, kirtan “enchants” the Sikh Foundation, filling the space with knowledge of the divine and feelings of the uncanny (Schwenkel 2017, 415). One could say that, through the musical practice, the diwan hall becomes a “haunted” space, a space in which the urbanized built environment and the “spirit world” encounter one another (Schwenkel 2017, 413). The Sikh Foundation’s status as a relatively new building does not prevent the space from being enchanted or haunted by the sacred sounds. Through kirtan, the divine is made portable; as long as the music is played, the sangat can be made aware of God’s presence. And if I broaden the scope of my analysis and view the Sikh Foundation as a part of Fairfax Station, then it becomes clear that the gurdwara is, like the many other religious spaces in the area, contributing to the production of an “enchanted modernity,” a modern and urbanized world occupied by the supernatural (Schwenkel 2017, 415). Thus, it is only right to conclude that kirtan not only produces the Sikh Foundation as a religious space, but also (and to a lesser degree) contributes to the enchantment of Fairfax Station.

## PUNJABI / INDIAN ETHNIC SPACE

### *Ethnic Space & Place Attachment*

Though I am confident there are exceptions to the following statement, it is generally true that individuals and groups feel connected to their places of origin (the places in which they were born, the places in which they grew up). This connection – which Deborah Pellow (2019) defines as *place attachment* – is often more affective than it is intellectual; it is the “emotion and feeling that one associates with certain places, such as childhood haunts” (Pellow 2019, 357). For many immigrants to the United States, feelings of place attachment are often experienced as a longing for home. Colloquially, we refer to this longing as ‘feeling homesick.’ It is an experience familiar to many individuals and groups – such as the Sikh Foundation’s original founders – who find themselves in “communities very different from the ones they grew up in, where they are exposed to culturally heterogeneous populations” (Pellow 2019, 356). Punjabi author I.J. Singh (2004) states that his feelings of homesickness became rather intense when he moved to New York City and experienced “the cultural shock of a wholly different, somewhat alien environment” (Singh 2004, 35). For people from Punjab and its surrounding regions, feelings of homesickness can be compounded by the discrimination from the broader American public. Finding employment can be difficult, racism poses a true threat to the wellbeing of the community, and feelings of isolation are common. In

this hostile environment, homesickness worsens until it becomes emotionally exhausting (Singh 2004, 86).

The work of Arjun Appadurai (1990) shows that, to combat the uncomfortable effects of homesickness, discrimination, and despair, “deterritorialized” groups (such as Punjabi immigrants to the United States) produce their own unique spaces in which they can be reminded of their homeland. These spaces – which Appadurai calls *ethnic spaces* – replace feelings of longing with familiar memories (Appadurai 1990, 303-304). In this chapter, I describe kirtan’s role in producing the Sikh Foundation of Virginia as ethnic space, focusing on how the musical practice evokes comfortable memories of Punjab and/or India. I then discuss kirtan’s role in transforming the Sikh Foundation into a space where those born in the United States can learn about their Punjabi culture and heritage. Finally, I look at the ways in which kirtan has turned the Sikh Foundation into a space that promotes the hybridization of musical styles, and how those hybrid styles in turn produce the Sikh Foundation into a cosmopolitan space that reflects the intersectional identities of the second- and third-generations.

### *Music & Memory*

Throughout her book *My Music, My War: The Listening Habits of U.S. Troops in Iraq and Afghanistan*, Lisa Gilman (2016) illustrates how music can be used as a powerful tool for transporting people from one location to another through memory. For those members of the Sikh Foundation’s sangat who were born and/or raised in Punjab (or its surrounding regions), the sound of kirtan is sure to invoke memories and feelings



of home. This is, after all, because there are so few opportunities to hear kirtan in the Northern Virginia (at least when compared to the number of performances in Punjab). The ragas, the musical modes that structure the performance of kirtan, are rarely heard in any American composition (if they are heard at all), perhaps due to the fact that the melodies are so dissimilar to – and typically incompatible with – most found in popular Western genres. In fact, describing the ragas in Western terms such as “modes” or “melodies” is a disservice (though they are still the closest phrases the English language has to offer). Furthermore, very few Western ensembles incorporate the use of the tabla, though exceptions can be recognized. And in the context of Western music, the harmonium is rarely used outside of British, Canadian, and American New Age compositions which hardly resemble kirtan beyond their instrumentation. So, for the Punjabi immigrant, the tones and rhythms of kirtan are a rare privilege – a uncommon means of connecting with their remembered homeland. As familiar culinary aesthetics have the ability to “[recreate] the fragrances of ‘home’” and temporarily conjure familiar homelands “through fragrant whiffs of memory” (Williams-Forson 2010), so too do the sounds of ragas, tablas, and harmoniums conjure the sangat’s memories of Punjab and Indian.

Kirtan’s ability to evoke the memories of home is magnified many times over by the Gurbani that is sung atop the ragas. When discussing her new book, *Guru Nanak: Poems From The Guru Granth Sahib* (2022), to a panel of scholars in October of 2022, Nikky-Guninder K. Singh explained that authors of the Guru Granth Sahib – Guru Nanak in particular – wrote their Shabads in a colloquial Punjabi vernacular. Using a PowerPoint

presentation, Singh explained that the language of Gurbani is “essentially archaic Panjabi” that “draws upon a variety of regional and local dialects” and “adamantly utilizes vocabulary drawn from Persian, Sanskrit, and Arabic” (Singh 2022). The language of the Guru is, Singh told her audience, the same language that her mother used to speak. Singh reports that, when she reads Gurbani, she is reminded of her late mother. She is reminded of her homeland – not her homeland as it is now, but as it was in the past before the country had become “so Westernized” (Singh 2022). So, when kirtan is performed at the Sikh Foundation of Virginia, the colloquial and Punjabi dialect enters the soundscape and envelopes the sangat. The gurdwara becomes an ethnic space in which older members of the first-generation may – like Nikky-Guninder K. Singh – journey across space-time to emerge in an idealized Punjab where past traditions are maintained and passed loved ones speak again (Singh 2004, 86).

Even the bodily practices associated with kirtan are capable of evoking the first-generation’s memories of home. When listening to kirtan in the diwan hall, spectators are expected to sit cross-legged on the carpeted floor. The same expectation – to sit cross-legged – applies to the performers on the elevated hard-wood stage. For those who have spent extensive time in India (particularly those who were born and raised there), the posture of sitting cross-legged is incredibly familiar. “It is a posture of intimacy,” writes Rashmi Sadana (2021) in her book *The Moving City: Scenes from the Delhi Metro and the Social Life of Infrastructure*. It is a posture used “to sit and talk with friends and loved ones. It is a posture of rest” (Sadana 2021, 163-164). In an Indian context, there are plenty of places in which an individual or group may sit cross-legged; in fact, one could

say that it is almost required in spaces of waiting (government offices, protests, railway platforms, etc.) (Sadana 2021, 163-164). But in Fairfax Station, there are few spaces in which sitting cross-legged on the floor is considered appropriate; for the most part, a person is expected to either stand on their feet or sit in a chair (or some other platform). So, when listening to kirtan in the diwan hall of the Sikh Foundation, the Indian immigrant is given an opportunity that is not offered in the majority of Virginia's public spaces: the opportunity to rest in a familiar posture and immerse herself in affective memories of past people and places.

As the work of Appadurai (1990) illustrates, the importance of these ethnic spaces – spaces that, among other things, evoke memories of remembered homelands – cannot be understated. I.J. Singh (2004) writes that, as a newcomer to the United States, his intense feelings of homesickness and rootlessness were only assuaged in his local gurdwara, where “transported culture” from the Punjab filled the spaces like a “hypnotic aroma” (Singh 2004, 85). For those Punjabis who feel isolated or even trapped in an unfamiliar landscape, the sounds of kirtan offer a reminder that “there is a different world out there” (Gilman 2016, 108). Through the musical practice, the Sikh Foundation becomes what Singh (2004) describes as a “nursery” for “new arrivals” (a name affectionally given to those Punjabi immigrants who, like newborns, are still acclimating to a new cultural environment) (Singh 2004, 35). When the gurdwara is filled with the sounds, sights, and smells of India and Punjab, the Sikh Foundation becomes one of the few public spaces in Fairfax Station where struggling members of the first-generation sangat can “preserve their sanity” (Singh 2004, 87).

*(Re)producing First-Generation Place-Identities*

Both Pellow (2019) and Massey (1994) assert that, as migrants evoke memories of their homeland, they strengthen their *place-identities* – the identities that are constructed with reference to affective memories of cherished places (Massey 1994, 8; Pellow 2019, 357). As Punjabi immigrants to Fairfax Station sit in the gurdwara, listen to kirtan, and return to an idealized homeland from their past, their Punjabi and Indian place-identities are emboldened. When speaking with Hardeep, I asked if he considered this a relevant function of the Sikh Foundation.

“This is very important,” Hardeep stated. “Had [the Sikh Foundation] not been there, would I become part of the Western culture in a much sooner time rather than the larger time. Because our environment would be deprived of Indian culture. Suppose the gurdwara was not there, we were not meeting, we would start forgetting those things very quickly and, after fifteen, twenty years, we forget everything about from where we came, what we were doing.”

Part of me believes that Hardeep is not giving himself enough credit. I doubt that he and other Indian immigrants to the United States would entirely forget their culture in a couple of decades if they did not have this ethnic space. But the point remains that the Sikh Foundation is vital to the reproduction of Punjabi/Indian culture in Virginia. If the first-generation cannot evoke their memories of home, then their Indian/Punjabi place-identities cannot be maintained properly. And thus, because kirtan fills the soundscape of

the Sikh Foundation, the gurdwara becomes an ethnic space which reproduces the first-generation's Indian and Punjabi place-identities.

*(Re)producing Punjabi/Indian Identity for the Second- and Third-Generations*

As an ethnic space, the Sikh Foundation is also a place where second- and third-generation Punjabi Americans – the children and grandchildren of the first-generation who were born in Northern Virginia – can develop their own Punjabi/Indian identities. Many first-generation sangat members deliberately bring their children and grandchildren to the gurdwara as a method of sharing their heritage. I recall a conversation that I had at the Sikh Foundation in late 2022. I was sitting in the foyer, waiting to speak with Inderpal about something, when a first-generation Indian immigrant of about sixty-five years old stepped through the front doors with her twin grandchildren. The grandchildren – two European-looking boys of about twelve years old – began fussing and giggling as their grandmother struggled to tie their *patkas* (bandana-like headscarves). Having covered their heads according to the temple's requirements, the boys began eagerly guessing as to which presents they might receive that upcoming Christmas. Looking a bit flustered from the twins' refusal to stay still, the woman instructed the children to speak with me. I was quickly approached by all three.

The woman introduced herself as Ishwin and explained that she was the boys' maternal grandmother. She brings the twins, Ben and Tim, to the Sikh Foundation from time to time so they can learn about their Punjabi heritage. But teaching them is hard, she told me, because the boy's father is "American" (which I suspect means "Christian

European American” in this context), and because the boys are always surrounded by “American culture.” I ask Ben if he enjoys coming to the temple. “No,” he responds while shaking his head. “I hate it.” Bored with the conversation’s current trajectory, Tim began describing his passion for American horror movies. Upon hearing that his favorite movie was *Hellraiser*, a 1987 cult favorite featuring the diabolical villain Pinhead, Ishwin scoffed and rolled her eyes. Her face bore a subtle grin; though temporarily defeated in her effort to connect with her grandchildren on the cultural level, she was not without a sense of humor.

As readers are informed by the work of Roksana Badruddoja (2008), identity “is not just about *who* you are but *where* you are” (Badruddoja 2008, 179). Ethnically speaking, Ben and Tim are at least half-Indian, which I assume does inform their identities to some degree (after all, Ben reports that he “hates” coming to the temple and, though this is not an especially kind comment that he made, it is nevertheless a sentiment shared by many Indian children living in the United States). But compared to their ethnic heritage (*who* they are), the twins’ upbringing in the United States (*where* they are) has clearly had the greater impact. They watch American horror flicks and talk about Christmas. They speak only English and require their grandmother’s assistance when donning Punjabi regalia. Like many young sangat members who were born in the United States, Ben and Tim may never receive an opportunity to travel to India and create new affective memories in their grandmother’s homeland.

Although this exchange illuminates the challenges of passing Punjabi/Indian culture on to the second- and third-generations, it also illustrates the first-generation’s

determination to preserve and (re)produce their ethnic heritage in spite of those obstacles. The first-generation's desire for cultural continuity is described by I.J. Singh (2004) who is himself a Punjabi immigrant to the United States. "We have a new generation of Sikhs who were born and raised outside India and may have only the weakest of links to the old country," writes Singh. "While traditions accommodate new needs and adapt to them, a sense of continuity must remain" (Singh 2004, 38).

During a conversation I had with Hardeep, I was told that it is the duty of the "the older generation" (older folks such as himself who grew up in Punjab/Indian) to pass on their traditions to "the newer generation" (younger folks like Ben and Tim who were born in the United States). Emon and Garlough (2015) conclude that an "eagerness for teaching their children about their cultural heritage" is common to all first-generation Americans belonging to the South Asian diaspora (Emon & Garlough 2015). Though I doubt that this claim can be faithfully applied to all South Asian groups, I do believe that their conclusion applies to Ishwin, Hardeep, and many other first-generation members of the Sikh Foundation's sangat.

It should be noted that, generally speaking, the first-generation's desire to preserve, (re)produce, and celebrate Indian culture may not reflect their attitudes toward the Indian government. Even in 2023, Punjabi Sikhs who came Virginia in the wake of 1984 are "are not sure of their place in India." Some may refuse to "give any recognition to a symbol of India or to any representatives of its Government" (Singh 2004, 111-112 and 119). But as I.J. Singh writes in *Sikhs and Sikhism* (2004), "One can love the heritage

of India of which we are proud products, and yet not identify all that much with the bureaucracy and the government of India” (Singh 2004, 124).

Musical practices are especially powerful producers of “communal identity, friendship, and belonging” (Gilman 2016, 86). Applying this notion to my research, I posit that the kirtan practices of the Sikh Foundation help transform the gurdwara into an ethnic space where Punjabi/Indian identities are (re)produced in the second- and third-generation members of the Sikh Foundation. But how, exactly, does the music of the gurdwara (re)produce those identities? This is a question with several answers.

First, let us consider how kirtan helps the sangat learn and practice the Punjabi language. Recall that, during the average diwan service, the lyrics of the kirtan are projected along the wall in both English and Punjabi. When speaking to the students of The King’s College in February of 2023, Hardeep discussed the educational value of this practice. “So, you see the kind of [Punjabi] text on the screen [and] you find [English] transliterations as well,” Hardeep explained. (He uses the word “screen” to refer to the two pull-down projector screens on either side of the central takht. These screens are used infrequently; in many cases, the images are simple projected on the eggshell-white wall). “So, the youngsters start by doing that. They start reciting the hymns and scripture using that transliteration” (Carle 2023).

Speaking from my own experience learning the Punjabi language, I agree with Hardeep’s analysis. Kirtan is repetitive by design; the same phrases are often said over and over again within each composition. Extensively, Punjabi and English transliterations of Gurbani are repeatedly displayed through the projectors. When I sit in the diwan hall,



listen to kirtan, and read the projected texts, I begin to make connections. Certain sounds connect to Punjabi characters, and my knowledge of the alphabet is strengthened and internalized. Entire Punjabi words and phrases become recognizable when placed next to their English counterparts. For example, when I see the word “ਵਾਹਿਗੁਰੂ,” I instantly know that the word is “Waheguru.” I no longer need to sound out each individual character, though that is how I started. And when I read the word “ਵਾਹਿਗੁਰੂ” or “Waheguru,” I instantly associate it with its English translation (“True Guru”) while knowing that the term is used in reference to God.

The experience of listening to kirtan has also improved my pronunciation in ways that reading alone cannot. For example, when I was preparing to recite the Mool Mantar to the sangat years ago, I listened to a musical recitation of the Shabad on repeat until I began to pick up on linguistic subtleties that cannot be transcribed. For instance, the word “ਵਾਹਿਗੁਰੂ” is sometimes Romanized as “Vaheguru” because the first Punjabi character makes a sound that resembles a combination of “Wa” and “Va.” This sound does not exist in the English language, so I had to hear the word sung in kirtan to understand the correct pronunciation. Therefore, when kirtan is being performed, the diwan hall becomes not only a religious temple, but also an ethnic space where the Punjabi language is taught and where the second- and third-generation members of the sangat can, by extension, embrace the Punjabi/Indian identities of their parents and grandparents.

While diwan provides countless opportunities for non-Punjabi speakers to improve their language ability, connect with the music of their heritage, and develop their Punjabi/Indian identities, it is not the only context in which the youth of the Sikh Foundation are exposed to kirtan. If you walk into the langar hall on a Sunday morning, you will likely find a group of young people sitting and chatting with one or two older members of the sangat. You may have entered the dining space expecting to find some snacks that would hold you over during diwan, but you have unwittingly encountered the Sikh Foundation's Gurmat School, a gurdwara- and sangat-sponsored youth group for students between the ages of six and twenty-one. Of the twenty to thirty students currently enrolled in the Gurmat School, most are about six to twelve years old. The students of the youth group meet in the langar hall at 10:30 am and typically stay there until about 11:15 am, at which point they make their way up the stairs to the diwan hall for the end of the Sunday service (Sikh Foundation of Virginia 2023).

Students of the Gurmat School are taught a variety of lessons from Darshan, a “young, energetic, [and] tech-savvy” man who has held the title of Gurmat School Coordinator (one of the fourteen Coordinator positions that comprise the Management Committee) since 2021. Darshan does not teach alone; rather, he is assisted by “a team of experienced and dedicated teachers” (Sikh Foundation of Virginia 2023). The team includes a woman named Kavita (a Punjabi immigrant of about fifty years old who is typically found on stage with the students of the Gurmat School while they perform kirtan during diwan), a man named Gurjas (a Punjabi immigrant and Khalsa initiate of about thirty years old who also serves as the gurdwara's Security Coordinator), and Tejbir

(the same Tejbir who spoke to the students of the King's College in February of 2023). In addition to Darshan and his team, there are a few parent-volunteers who show up nearly every week (Sikh Foundation of Virginia 2023).

Some lessons of the Gurmat School are taught with the intention of developing the students as *individuals*. They focus on the youth's leadership, debate, and public speaking skills, and they provide mentoring and volunteering opportunities for the older students. But for the most part, the curriculum is explicitly designed to develop the students' *group* identities. To this end, kirtan lessons have become central to the Gurmat School's lesson plan (Sikh Foundation of Virginia 2023). During their Sunday meetings, students of the Gurmat School are divided into different groups according to their age and prior knowledge of Punjabi. By playing and singing kirtan together as a single unit, the students not only familiarize themselves with the religious values contained within the Shabads, but they also rapidly improve their Punjabi reading and speaking abilities. As a group, they explore Punjabi and Indian traditions (i.e., the playing and singing of ragas, the use of the tabla and harmonium) that predate the life of Guru Nanak and the founding of the Sikh religion. Through their discovery of their musical heritage, the students learn about the regional (Punjabi) history that is so intertwined with the history of Sikhism (Sikh Foundation of Virginia 2023). When students become older, more competent kirtan players and Punjabi speakers, they may enroll in a three-day Summer Camp that the Sikh Foundation organizes every July. It is an experience typically reserved for students around the age of thirteen or older. The intensive overnight structure of this summer camp

is explicitly intended to accelerate the production of students' Sikh and Punjabi/Indian identities (Sikh Foundation of Virginia 2023).

The Gurmat School has been very successful according to many first-generation members of the sangat. When speaking with Hardeep, I was told that “the kids, when they come, they see [what] the others are doing, they ask the questions, they mingle with others, and then they adopt that kind of culture.... When they meet to the other kids of their own age, they adopt and learn much faster compared to reading through books.” Now, it is true that the students of the Gurmat School may never acquire the kirtan skills required of the granthis who enchant the diwan hall and inspire feelings of divine connectivity with their performances. But the youth group is not designed to produce ritual specialists. Rather, youth group is simply intended to produce more second- and third-generation sangat members who are connected to their heritage. And because the Gurmat School has successfully gotten so many students to take an interest in their Punjabi/Indian identities, the youth group is described on the Sikh Foundation's website as one of the institution's “key achievements” (Sikh Foundation of Virginia 2023).

By exposing themselves to kirtan in the diwan hall and honing their musical abilities through the Gurmat School, the second- and third-generation members of the Sikh Foundation's sangat develop “a collective nostalgia” for Punjab and its surrounding regions. Even those who have never left the United States may come to view India as “a site of tradition and authentic identity” that is both “longed for and romanticized” (Badrudjoja 2018, 160-161; Massey 1994, 10). Extensively, those feelings of ethnic

longing and romanticism are sited throughout the Sikh Foundation – the ethnic space where many young people come to embrace their Punjabi and/or Indian identities.

### *Hybridized Playing Styles & Cosmopolitan Spaces*

In late 2022, the Sikh Foundation of Virginia hosted Bhai Veer Manpreet Singh, a renowned kirtan performer from the United Kingdom. He is a man of about forty, give or take a couple of years. He arrived at the Sikh Foundation with nothing but an electronic keyboard, and he sat alone atop the stage in the diwan hall. Neither the granthis nor the students of the Gurmat School accompanied him on the tabla or harmonium. His performance was unlike any other that I witnessed at the Sikh Foundation.

The electronic keyboard was programmed to replicate all the sounds associated with a full kirtan ensemble, and then some. With the push of a couple of buttons, Bhai Veer Manpreet Singh's keyboard produced a wave of percussive beats that incorporated not only the "authentic" timbre of the tabla, manjira (a small pair of brass clash cymbals), and wooden shaker, but also the "unauthentic" or "Western" sounds the Roland TR-808 Rhythm Composer (commonly known as the "808 drum"), piccolo snare, and muted floor tom. In addition, I identified sounds resembling both the six-string rhythm guitar and the electric bass guitar. Atop the pre-programmed percussion and rhythm string sections, Bhai Veer Manpreet Singh played the ragas on his keyboard. For some compositions, the live keyboard produced the tones associated with a standard grand piano. With the flip of a switch, the keyboard could mimic a sitar, or a six-string lead guitar, or a harp, depending on what the melody called for. Curiously, the sound of the harmonium was

altogether absent from his performance – perhaps his electronic keyboard is not able to faithfully reproduce the tones of a reed instrument.

Though Bhai Veer Manpreet Singh sang the ragas as expected, his vocal melodies included flamboyant flourishes akin to those projected from the mouths of Bollywood actors. Some vocal notes were so loud and intense that the microphones failed to pick them up altogether (in these moments, the sound of the ragas was briefly replaced with static from the speakers). Between Shabads, Bhai Veer Manpreet Singh would address the sangat in Punjabi, eyeing individual spectators and speaking in a voice that was both gentle and inspirational. Every now and then, the player even addressed the sangat in English before moving into his next song.

Because they are interested in preserving Punjabi/Indian heritage at the Sikh Foundation of Virginia, an “authentic” playing kirtan playing style is typically expected (Singh 2004, 87). Here, I use “authentic” as would Brandi Thompson Summers (2019) and Doreen Massey (1994): to describe an historically preserved aesthetic form that “draws on an idealized vision of the of the past” and represents a specific moment in space and time (Summers 2019, 12-13). At the Sikh Foundation of Virginia, the practice of kirtan is deemed “authentic” if it resembles the music performed in Punjabi gurdwaras at the end of India’s post-classical era (when Guru Nanak first introduced the kirtan tradition to his followers). But of course, in our postmodern world of mass transit and mass migration, contact between “different social, cultural and geographically located groups” is an inevitability, as is the production of hybridized cultural forms (Pellow 2019, 359). The continued emergence of new hybridized cultural forms – including hybridized

musical styles – contributes to what Anna Tsing (2004) refers to as “cosmopolitanism” (Tsing 2004, 121-122). When ethnic spaces like the Sikh Foundation foster the production of hybridized cultural forms, it may be said that they are cosmopolitan spaces.

The music of Bhai Veer Manpreet Singh is a brilliant example of a hybridized cultural form. He plays the ragas and sings Gurbani, never deviating from the strict boundaries which define kirtan as a genre. His keyboard produces the sounds of the tabla, the manjira, and the shaker. He speaks Punjabi when addressing the sangat. All of these make for what Summers (2019), Massey (1994), and the sangat would describe as an “authentic” kirtan performance. But “Western” instruments – i.e., the 808 drum, the acoustic six-string guitar, the grand piano – are also heard throughout the performance, and the electric keyboard is the only true music-making device on stage. Bhai Veer Manpreet Singh stops his performance between songs to address his audience (a practice that is more commonly associated with American and British pop music concerts), and he occasionally uses the English language. Through the inclusion of these Western elements, authentic kirtan is turned into hybridized musical practice. By financially supporting and hosting Bhai Veer Manpreet Singh (and others who perform hybridized kirtan styles), the Sikh Foundation of Virginia becomes a cosmopolitan space – a space that contributes to cosmopolitanism on the local, national, and international scales (Tsing 2004). It is a space where the conservative elements of Punjabi/Indian culture may be “re-invented” (Emon & Garlough 2015).

Some older members of the Sikh Foundation (members of the first-generation in particular) seem to take issue with the cosmopolitanism of the gurdwara. Or perhaps it is

more accurate to say that they are slightly irritated by it. During Bhai Veer Manpreet Singh's performance in the diwan hall, some older folks were seen leaning against the walls with crossed arms and expressionless faces. It is likely that they are more accustomed to – and appreciative of – the “authentic” performance style of the granthis and the Gurmat School. This may be especially true for the first-generation sangat members who are committed to (re)producing their Punjabi and/or Indian heritage. Of course, cosmopolitanism may not have been the only object of their dissatisfaction. Some scowls may have been a response of the occasional feedback and distortion emanating from the speakers; some looks of irritation may have been caused by the length of the performance (the kirtan ended around 9:30 pm, rather than 9:00 pm as expected).

Having said that, there were many older, first-generation sangat members who displayed a great appreciation for Bhai Veer Manpreet Singh's performance. After all, it was the Sikh Foundation's Management Committee – a group mostly consisting of Punjabi immigrants – who booked Bhai Veer Manpreet Singh in the first place. The Director of the Management Committee was exceptionally pleased with the evening's kirtan; after the performance, Inderpal approached me in the langar hall, commented on Bhai Veer Manpreet Singh's expertise, and reported that the passionate musical practice had really made him “feel connected” to God and the sangat. Inderpal's comments indicate that, at least in his opinion, kirtan does not need to be ethnically “authentic” in order to be affectively powerful and spiritually engaging.

Hardeep and his wife, Lakhbir, were also among the first-generation sangat members to enjoy the kirtan that evening. Their enthusiasm came as no surprise, for they



were fans of Bhai Veer Manpreet Singh prior to the artist's arrival in Fairfax Station. But as pleased as they were with the cosmopolitan playing style, I suspect they were even more excited by the fact that their daughter and son-in-law had accompanied them to the performance. I had met Chetana and Balwant before, but they were not regular attendees like Hardeep and Lakhbir. As I walked about the langar hall that night, I realized that there were many second- and third-generation sangat members who, like Chetana and Balwant, do not typically attend the temple's more "authentic" religious services.

While the kirtan of Bhai Veer Manpreet had possibly frustrated some first-generation members of the sangat, the hybridized musical style had also transformed the Sikh Foundation into a cosmopolitan space that was extraordinarily appealing to the second- and third-generations. Throughout the kirtan performance, many young sangat members were seen bobbing their heads, rocking from side to side, and singing along to the Shabads. A young man of about twenty years old had even volunteered to operate the projector that day. After the performance, I spoke to a woman in her mid-twenties who enthusiastically declared that the kirtan was "So good!"

It is not particularly surprising that the younger generations are more interested in hybrid kirtan styles (as opposed to the "authentic" style performed by the granthis and the youth group). The kirtan of Bhai Veer Manpreet Singh is reflective of their own identities: a hybridization of Punjabi/Indian and Virginian/American/Western culture. Under normal circumstances, the ethnic space of the Sikh Foundation does appeal to the second- and third-generation's desire to practice and explore their Punjabi/Indian heritage; however, it does *not* directly appeal to their American identities. When

hybridized musical practices take place in the Sikh Foundation, the explicitly ethnic space (a Punjabi/Indian space) becomes a cosmopolitan space in which all of the second- and third-generation's identities (Indian, Punjabi, American, Virginian) are nurtured simultaneously. In this cosmopolitan space, American-born members of the sangat can “belong to the currents of American life and culture” (listen to the Western instrumentation that they have grown accustomed to as Americans) while expressing their Indian heritage (Badruddoja 2008, 182).

### *Concluding Thoughts*

It would seem as though, under average circumstances, the “authentic” kirtan performance (the style associated with the granthis and the Gurmat School) contributes to the production of the Sikh Foundation as a Punjabi/Indian ethnic space – a space that evokes affectively charged memories of home and temporarily relieves the Punjabi/Indian migrant of his worries and stress. It becomes a space where Punjabi/Indian identities are not only strengthened in the first-generation, but also produced in the second- and third-generations. But when a hybridized style of kirtan is performed at the Sikh Foundation, the ethnic space becomes a cosmopolitan space where new cultural forms may emerge and thrive (Pellow 2019, 359). As a cosmopolitan space, the gurdwara reflects the intersectionality experienced by ethnic Punjabis/Indians born in the United States.

## SPACE OF SOCIAL (RE)PRODUCTION

### *Musical Practices (Re)produce & Subvert Gender Relationships*

It is not unusual for speakers to address the sangat in the diwan hall following the performance of kirtan at the Sikh Foundation. In most cases, the Treasurer of the Management Committee will give community announcements. On occasion, however, another member of the sangat will approach the lectern with a short speech or poem that they have prepared. November 6, 2022 was one such occasion. The sangat was celebrating Guru Nanak Jayanti – the *Gurpurab* (birthday) of Guru Nanak – and several folks had volunteered to speak about the life of the first Guru. One speaker was a long-time member of the sangat, a woman of about seventy named Sangita. She spoke – in Punjabi and in English – about the Sikh religion’s dedication to gender equality, and how this appreciation for equality had been a part of the religion since its founding. She asserted that she is grateful to have a space such as the Sikh Foundation where she feels respected as a woman. “If I did not feel like I was treated like a first-class citizen,” she said, “then I would not be here.” In this case, “treated like a first-class citizen” meant receiving the same treatment as her male counterparts; “here” refers to both the Sikh Foundation and the Sikh faith.

Is it possible that the practice of kirtan has contributed to way that Sangita feels about the Sikh Foundation? According to Henri Lefebvre (2007), Eric Mueggler (2001),

Judith Butler (1996), Daphne Spain (1993), and others, spatial practices have a profound ability to both (re)produce and challenge conventional social relations. Of all the social relationships that are reproduced by spatial practices, those between people of different gender identities are among the most common (Butler 1996, 1-2). Furthermore, as Lisa Gilman illustrates in her book *My Music, My War* (2016), musical practices are especially powerful tools for the (re)construction and (re)definition of gender identities and relationships (Gilman 2016, 88). How exactly, then, does the practice of kirtan contribute to the Sikh Foundation's identity as a space of social (re)production where gender relationships are made equal and/or unequal?

Gilman's (2016) research concerning music in military spaces explores how the dissemination of misogynistic lyrics – lines that depict women as deserving subjects of domestic violence, or as the subjects of manipulative, heterosexual sex – contributes to the production of hypermasculine spaces in which women (and men who do not fit the hypermasculine ideal) are subordinate to hypermasculine men (Gilman 2016, 82 and 87-88). Following Gilman's example, this chapter includes an analysis of Gurbani – the *lyrics* of kirtan – to determine what equal and/or unequal gender relationships are (re)produced throughout the kirtan performance.

Gilman's (2016) work also examines how *listening practices* – the actions performed by the spectators of a live performance or the listeners of a musical recording – can inform the gender relations that are normalized in a particular space. For example, in military barracks, it is not uncommon for hypermasculine men to seize control of the music from women (and from men who do not fit the hypermasculine ideal), thus

asserting their superordinate positions in the gender hierarchy (Gilman 2016, 87-90). Similarly, Roksana Badruddoja (2008) explains that, by wearing revealing outfits and dancing provocatively in New York City dance halls, women can inadvertently contribute to spaces of social (re)production where they are viewed only as objects of heterosexual desire (Badruddoja 2008, 160). Continuing the work of Gilman (2016) and Badruddoja (2008), this chapter considers how kirtan listening practices (re)produce and/or challenge hierarchical gender relationships.

Finally, this chapter analyzes how the *granthis* – the standard *practitioners* of kirtan at the Sikh Foundation – contribute to the (re)production and/or subversion of gender relationships at the gurdwara. Combining these analyses, I conclude that Gurbani encourages and reifies equal gender relationships. I also posit that kirtan listening practices complicate this issue; on the one hand, they facilitate the equal distribution of religious capital among men and women of the laity. On the other hand, those same practices create more opportunities for men to accumulate economic and social capital. Lastly, I posit that, while traditional *granthi* hiring practices provide men with opportunities to improve their social status, those same opportunities are not as accessible to women.

### *Gurbani & Gender*

Across the Sikh religiouscape, there are those who consider the Guru Granth Sahib to be feminist text. It is a notion that is repeated by Sikh scholars (i.e., Nikky-Guninder K. Singh), by members of the Sikh Foundation's *sangat* (i.e., Inderpal and Tejbir), and by

the authors whose works have made their way to the temple library (i.e., I.J. Singh) (Singh 2022; Carle 2023; Singh 2004). To tests these claims, one must understand exactly how women are depicted in the Sikh holy book.

First, let us look to the numerous Shabads within the Guru Granth Sahib that describe women as worthy of physical safety, respect, and reverence (Singh 2004, 93 and 144). Consider, for example, the following verse written by Bhai Gurdas (Sikh theologian and Jathedar of the Akhal Tahkt from 1606 to 1636): “With incredible gifts, her marriage is commenced. At her in-laws’ home, she is celebrated and accepted as the reformer. She enjoys life: marital relationships, savory foods, and a nice lifestyle. From a temporal and spiritual point of view, women, half of the population, are the doorways to freedom” (Kaur Life 2023). In this passage, Gurbani depicts the ideal marriage as one in which a wife is provided for, respected, and even revered for her intellectual and spiritual attributes. Through the practice of kirtan, these messages are sonically freed from the pages of the Guru Granth Sahib, and they enter the soundscape where they become accessible to all within earshot. As a recurrent feature of the Sikh Foundation’s soundscape, kirtan transforms the gurdwara into a space of social (re)production where equal gender relationships are naturalized over time, where misogynistic gender hierarchies feel abnormal and problematic (Spain 1993, 139-141; Butler 1996, 1-3; Gilman 87-90).

An appreciation for women’s welfare can also be found in the several Shabads that address suttee (alternatively spelled ‘sati’), a Hindu practice whereby a widow self-immolates by throwing herself upon her husbands’ burning funeral pyre. Historically, this

was seen as a righteous act (the word “suttee” means “good woman” or “chaste wife” in Sanskrit). The practice was made illegal 1829, over one hundred years after the death of the final living Guru, but rare occurrences are reported throughout India to this day (Doniger 2023). In an effort to end the “abominable” custom that they found more akin to violent femicide than loyal suicide, the Sikh Gurus reinstated the institution of widow remarriage and criticized suttee in writing (Singh 2004, 144).

The Guru’s opinion of suttee is made clear in the following Shabad written by Guru Amar Das: “They cannot be called satis, who burn themselves with their dead husbands. They can only be called satis, if they bear the shock of separation. [T]hey may also be known as satis, who live with character and contentment and always show veneration to their husbands by remembering them” (Gateway to Sikhism 2023). Here, the fourth Guru explicitly states that widows maintain their honor by grieving their loss, not by ending their lives. Implicitly, the Guru is saying a woman’s life is valuable whether she is married or not, that a woman should not destroy herself for her marriage, and that she should not allow others to destroy her in the name of loyalty. When these Shabads are selected for a kirtan performance, their implicit, feminist messages fill the space. Such messages further contribute to the Sikh Foundation’s identity as a space of social (re)production where equal gender roles, relationships, and expectations are encouraged and naturalized (Spain 1993, 139).

In *My Music, My War* (2016), readers are told that sexually charged lyrics can normalize the notion that women are naturally objects of heterosexual desire (Gilman 2016, 87-90). Conversely, then, it should be true that verses advocating chastity and

sexual fidelity would subvert those unequal gender roles and expectations. Between the covers of the Guru Granth Sahib, one will find plenty of Shabads that do just that. For instance, the poet Bhagat Nam Dev, writes that “The blind-man abandons the wife of his home, and has an affair with another’s woman; He is like the parrot, who is pleased to see the simbal tree, but at last dies clinging to it” (Sikhs.org 2023). In other verses, Guru Nanak instructs his followers to “Burn all lust, grind it into ink” (Singh 2022), and Guru Arjan Dev advises his readers to “Conquer sexual desire, anger, greed and worldly attachment” (Singh 2020, 89). These verses promote the idea that both men and women are to be valued for their intellectual contributions rather than sexualized for their physical attributes. Through the kirtan performance, these messages are sent through the in-house speakers and into every corner of the Sikh Foundation, transforming the gurdwara into a space of social (re)production where the heterosexual objectification of women is problematized, where unequal gender roles and expectations are brought into question (Spain 1993, 141; Butler 1996, 1-3).

These are but a few of the reasons why Gurbani is heralded by Nikky-Guninder K. Singh (2022) and other Sikh scholars as a work of feminist literature (Singh 2022). By extension, kirtan – the musical genre which uses Gurbani as its lyrical foundation – may also be considered a feminist musical genre that encourages the production of equal gender relationships. But as the proceeding section will show, kirtan listening practices can complicate this conclusion: in some ways, these practices facilitate the equal distribution of capital along gender lines and, in other ways, they normalize the unequal roles and expectations that limit women’s access to capital.



### *Listening Practices & Gender*

At the Sikh Foundation of Virginia, kirtan is the primary means by which members of the sangat (the laity in particular) are taught the contents of the Guru Granth Sahib. Through the practice of kirtan, the diwan hall becomes what Daphne Spain (1993) calls a *knowledge/space*, a space in which knowledge – specifically, the knowledge that carries social value – is gained (Spain 1993, 147). Spain argues that, throughout the world and across history, women are restricted from entering knowledge/spaces. For instance, prior to 1921, literate women “represented the perceived threat to the social order” in Mongolia. “For a woman to look at a book,” the old Mongolian proverb goes, “is like a wolf looking at a settlement.” Thus, sacred books “were kept in the masculine part of the tent” – the dwelling known as a *ger* (or “yurt” outside of Mongolia) – and “women were forbidden to read them” (Spain 1993, 142).

Because they had access to sacred knowledge, men in these Mongolian societies were able to accumulate *religious capital*, what Tiwi Etika and Anne Schiller (2022) describe as the social resources “that can be accessed through participating in, acquiring expertise about, or having authority over [religious] praxes.” These resources are “deployed in varied contexts” by individuals to improve their statuses within the social hierarchy (Etika & Schiller 2022, 66). When men are the only ones with access to religious knowledge (and thus to religious capital), then unequal, male-dominated gender relationships emerge and become naturalized. It is no surprise, then, that when the sacred books were moved to the woman’s side of the ger after the Mongolian social revolution of

1921, the status of newly literate women become relative to that of men (Spain 1993, 42, 137-140).

In contrast to those spaces which limit women's access to religious knowledge (and other forms of socially valuable information), the diwan hall – the knowledge/space of the Sikh Foundation – is open to all members of the sangat, regardless of their gender identities. Both men and women have equal opportunities to listen to kirtan and receive Gurbani. And because individuals at the Sikh Foundation can acquire religious capital through their knowledge of Gurbani, kirtan provides both men and women with equal opportunities to elevate their social status (Etika & Schiller 2022, 66; Spain 1993, 42, 137-140). In this sense, the listening practices of kirtan do produce the Sikh Foundation as a space of social (re)production that equalizes gender relationships – a space where it is normal to think of men and women are religious equals, where one group's interpretation of scripture is not superior to that of another.

At the same time, kirtan listening practices also reify certain unequal gender roles and expectations. If you walk in to the diwan hall on any typical Sunday morning or Thursday evening, you will surely notice that the majority of adult men and teenaged boys are sitting on the left side of the room (from the perspective of someone sitting and facing the central takht), while the majority of adult women, teenaged girls, and young children (boys and girls) are sitting on the right side of the room. You will see what Daphne Spain (1993) might describe as *spatial segregation*, “the presence or absence of a real or symbolic division between male and female sides” (Spain 1993, 141). (I prefer the term “material division” to “real division” because cultural practices are “real” even if

they are symbolic, but I digress.) Those who are familiar with Sikh theology but unfamiliar with gurdwara practices might be surprised by this observation. After all, when it comes to criticizing gender inequalities (and all inequalities, for that matter), “Sikh teaching could not be more explicit and less ambiguous” (Singh 2004, 145). So how, then, do those at the Sikh Foundation justify the practice of spatial segregation in the diwan hall?

I asked that same question to Antar – a first-generation man of about sixty years old – during one of my trips to the Sikh Foundation. Antar explained that the practice of spatial segregation is an historical tradition, not a religious mandate. People could, by the rules of the gurdwara, sit wherever they like, but their familiar customs compel them toward one side or the other. This is similar to the explanation offered by I.J. Singh in his book *Sikhs and Sikhism* (2004): “If in a Sikh service men and women sit on separate sides, it is based on custom, culture and tradition not canon” (Singh 2004, 144). Though it has never been canonically required, and though the boundaries between men and women are porous (as Antar suggests, women will occasionally sit on the men’s side, and young children do sit with their fathers from time to time), the spatial segregation of the diwan hall still informs the production of the Sikh Foundation as a space of social/gender (re)production. Now, the division of men and women in the space does not explicitly suggest that one gender – one side of the diwan hall – is superior to another; both groups sit at equal distances from the takht of the Guru Granth Sahib, and both can hear the kirtan just as well thanks to the in-house speaker system. The men may have a slightly better view of the kirtan stage which is located just to the left of the central takht, but the

lectern for community announcements is located on the right side, providing women with a better view of the guest speakers. Implicitly, however, the spatial segregation of men and women reproduces and naturalizes certain gender expectations.

The works of Spain (1993) and Butler (1996) make it clear that men in American society (and beyond) are expected to socialize with other men in professional and public spaces while women are expected to care for young children. These ideas are so common that they have come to feel natural to the men and women who fulfill those expectations (Spain 1993, 138; Butler 1996, 10 and 14-15). These gender roles can be especially restrictive for women who wish to pursue a career outside of the home (Spain 1993, 138). With little income of their own, women are unable to accumulate their own financial resources. Lacking what Pierre Bourdieu (1979) and Tony Coles (2009) refer to as *economic capital*, wives become dependent upon (and subordinate to) their husbands and the other men in their lives (Coles 2009, 36). Worse still, maternal obligations prevent women from entering public spaces, meeting new people, and expanding their social networks. With fewer opportunities to accumulate *social capital*, the status gap between men and women only widens (Coles 2009, 36).

The spatial segregation at the Sikh Foundation does not challenge these normalized gender expectations; on the contrary, one can observe that these uneven gender roles are being reproduced. Sitting as a group on the left side of the diwan hall, young fathers have an opportunity to engage with people outside of their families and expand their social networks. Even while kirtan is being played, many men will find their friends and carry on whispered conversations throughout the performance. And while the mothers of young

children are sitting together on the right side of the room, they are not interacting with one another as much as they are cooing fussy babies and wrangling runaway toddlers. Therefore, while it is true – and noteworthy – that the listening practice of kirtan do not resemble the excessively misogynistic listening practices that one might witness in the military barracks studied by Gilman (2016) (there is no one aggressively seizing control of the power to select the music) or in the New York City dance halls discussed by Badruddoja (2008) (there are no overtly sexual dances that reaffirm men’s superordinate position in the gender hierarchy), and though it is true that the practice of kirtan provides the women and men of the laity with equal opportunities to collect socially valuable knowledge where other traditions might not, the spatial segregation in the diwan hall does reproduce and naturalize the same familial gender roles which give men greater access to economic and social capital. Therefore, one may conclude that the listening practices of kirtan turn the Sikh Foundation into a space of social (re)production where some gender inequalities are subverted while certain expectations are reproduced.

### *Granthis & Capital*

The granthis – the three men who serve as the primary kirtan performers at the Sikh Foundation – are neither worshipped as divine nor venerated as the “middle men” between God and the laity (Singh 2004, 28-31). But they do, nevertheless, have a privileged role with unique opportunities to accumulate religious, economic, and social capital. The granthis are qualified masters of Gurbani and Sikh theology; of the four granthis who have worked at the Sikh Foundation, three were educated and certified in

special theological academies. All four granthis are devout members of the Khalsa. For these reasons, the majority of laymen at the Sikh Foundation would agree that granthis should occupy their positions as the leaders of worship and ritual. In the words of I.J. Singh (2004), “Who else but the *granthi* should steer the religious service in the gurdwara? No one else is as well trained. He should coordinate the program, arrange the appropriate mix of *keertan* and *katha*” (Singh 2004, 94). Such sentiments illustrate just how much religious capital is attached to the title of granthi. Rooting his theoretical framework in the works of Bourdieu, Coles (2009) write that any influx of capital – be it religious, social, what have you – can elevate the recipient’s position in the social hierarchy. As if to visually represent the elevated status that comes from religious capital, the granthis of the Sikh Foundation are literally elevated on the stage throughout their performance. When the kirtan has ended and the granthis’ specialized knowledge is no longer needed, they sit on the floor behind the stage – once again on the same level as the rest of the sangat.

As far as economic capital is concerned, the granthis are some of the only people to receive regular payment for their services at the Sikh Foundation. Even the Coordinators and Director of the Management Committee offer their services voluntarily. According to I.J. Singh (2004), Sikhs “recognize that the person who dedicated his life to learning and teaching about Sikhism needs to be paid.... He too has a family to support and bills to meet; the world does not put food on his table” (Singh 2004, 89). In addition to their regular paychecks, granthis receive donations from the sangat. Any offering is accepted, but cash is thought to be the most convenient (Singh 2004, 37). On the

righthand corner of the granthis' stage (again, speaking from the spectators' perspective) sits a small wicker basket in which the sangat's cash donations are placed. Donations to the granthis are almost as common as the offerings placed in the takht of the Guru Granth Sahib. Now, being a granthi at the Sikh Foundation is no fast-track to enormous wealth; on the contrary, the granthis live modest householder lives from what I have been told. But again, the title of granthi offers one a rare opportunity to be paid by the temple.

Not unlike the religious officials associated with other faiths (i.e., the priests of the Catholic Church), granthis are expected to provide spiritual guidance to those who seek it. Because they are not considered spiritual middle men, "the expositions of the *granthi* are as best recommendations," and granthis will not speak with ultimate authority; nevertheless, the wisdom disseminated from granthis is often respected, and their directions are often followed (Singh 2004, 90). Through their advising sessions, granthis (the head granthi in particular) expand their social networks, a feat that is imperative to those granthis that have immigrated to the United States from India or elsewhere. Of course, many (probably most) members of the Sikh Foundation do not seek out the spiritual advice of the granthis. But most everyone knows and respects the granthis. Recall that one granthi – the previous tabla player – left the Sikh Foundation for a position elsewhere. On that granthi's last day, the gurdwara was twice as packed as usual. I was sure that the sangat was celebrating some holiday that I had not been made aware of. If a granthi's last day at the Sikh Foundation warrants the same crowd as a religious holiday, then there is no doubt that the granthi's position has earned him a considerable amount of social capital.

But what does all of this have to do with gender relationships? Well, to the best of my knowledge, no woman has ever been a granthi at the Sikh Foundation. I do know with absolute certainty that no woman has served as a granthi in the past three years. Now, there are no canonical rules that prevent women from being granthis; as I.J. Singh tells us, “There is no activity in the Sikh religion reserved exclusively for men” (Singh 2004, 144). Nevertheless, the masculinization of the granthi role seems to be a common trend in gurdwaras across the globe. What might explain this? Singh (2004) speculates that, like the spatial segregation between men and women, this gender-specific hiring practice is another product of Indians’ cultural heritage. Although Sikh doctrine clearly states that women may be the leaders of prayer, other religions in Punjab (i.e., Hinduism and Islam) prohibit women from reading religious scripture. Consequently, the image of the male religious official has become normalized in North Indian, and women from the region (Sikhs included) rarely consider working as religious officiants (Singh 2004, 143-144). Therefore, while kirtan – the primary reason for which granthis are hired at the Sikh Foundation – does allow certain men to accumulate status-affirming capital (religious, economic, and social), the same cannot be said for women.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

It is clear from this analysis that, lyrically, the practice of kirtan supports a woman’s right to a joyous marriage, respects a woman’s right to safety, and subverts the idea that women are merely objects of heterosexual desire. And for these reasons, one may conclude that the practice of kirtan produces the Sikh Foundation as a space of



social (re)production where equal gender relationships are fostered. Such a conclusion is made more compelling by the fact that kirtan listening practices should offer women the same amount of religious capital as it does men. But this conclusion is also complicated by practices of spatial segregation which reaffirm men's and women's gender roles and subsequently limit women's relative access to economic and social capital. This latter issue is compounded by the fact that women are, historically, not selected for the role of *granthi*, a role that offers additional opportunities to accumulate religious, economic, and social capital.

## CONCLUSION

### *Cultural Practices Refuse to Stay Put*

On February 4, 2023, I attended a poetry and kirtan showcase hosted by Sikh Gurdwara, DC, an aptly named temple located in the nation's capital. The showcase was held in the diwan hall and featured original poems, lectures, and kirtan performances from Sikhs between the ages of five and thirty. In the lead-up to the event, fliers were electronically distributed to several gurdwaras across the Washington, DC metropolitan area, including the Sikh Foundation. After learning that several students of the Gurmat School would be playing some of the kirtan they had learned, I was eager to witness the showcase myself.

As one might expect, most of the showcase participants were members of the Sikh Gurdwara, DC sangat. Nevertheless, I did recognize some familiar faces from the Sikh Foundation scattered throughout the large crowd of spectators. One of these familiar faces was Devendar, an involved member of the Sikh Foundation sangat who often sits next to me in the diwan hall during Sunday services. He was there with his daughter, Simran. At an age of about five to seven years old, Simran is one of the younger members of the Sikh Foundation's sangat and Gurmat School. Most of the showcase presenters were around the same age (though I did not stay for the duration of the event, the oldest

participants appeared to be around fifteen or sixteen years old, and most were between the ages of about seven and twelve).

The event had been going on for a few hours before the showcase organizer (a woman in her early twenties) called Simran to the stage. The young representative from the Sikh Foundation scurried across the carpeted floor and took her place behind the elevated harmonium with help from the event organizer. Simran's head was barely visible behind the box of reeds and keys. With confidence and determination, she began to play a raga, compressing the back of the harmonium with her left hand and depressing the keys with her right. After a few rhythmic beats, she began singing the Shabad that she had selected. Simran's performance ended and, for a moment, silence filled the room (it is not considered appropriate to clap after a kirtan performance, regardless of the context). The silence persisted until an older man in the back of the room shouted, "Bole So Nihaal!" ("Shout aloud in ecstasy!"), to which the rest of the attendees ecstatically responded, "Sat Sri Akal!" ("True is the Great Timeless One!"). Having been affirmed by the sangat's kind gesture of appreciation, Simran pulled herself off the stage and rejoined a smiling Devendar.

The poetry and kirtan showcase at Sikh Gurdwara, DC illustrates an important point made by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1992): that spatial practices do not "stay put" – they cannot be contained by geographic or political boundaries. Rather, kirtan and other cultural expression are destined to travel across territories, states, nations, and continents (Gupta & Ferguson 1992, 9). In this case, the compositions taught to Simran at the Sikh Foundation – the Shabads and ragas she learned in the Gurmat School – were

carried across county and state lines; the skills that she acquired in Fairfax Station, Virginia were transported to Washington, DC.

Thus far, my research has explored how postmodern migrations and technologies of space-time compression have brought kirtan – a musical practice considered native to Punjab – to the Sikh Foundation of Virginia in Fairfax Station. I have discussed how the practice(s) of kirtan produce at least three of the Sikh Foundation’s spatial identities: that of the religious space, that of the ethnic space, and that of the space of social (re)production. Sometimes these spatial identities cooperate well with one another, sometimes those identities seem to conflict, but they are all informed, to some extent, by the practice(s) of kirtan. In this concluding chapter, I discuss how the kirtan (re)produced in the Sikh Foundation (and in other gurdwaras) refuses to “stay put.” I posit that, as kirtan enters new geographic and cultural landscapes, the Sikh religiouscape and Punjabi/Indian ethnoscape expand, and social networks are (re)produced between individuals, groups, and spaces. My analysis also considers how the expansion of the musical practice is accelerated by modern technologies of translocality. I synthesize these ideas by asserting that religious practices are more than spiritual; they are also a means expressing identity, celebrating cultural heritage, negotiating social relationships, generating social networks, and educating the public.

#### *(Inter)communal Social Networks*

In his 2005 article “Two-Spirit powwows and the search for social acceptance in Indian country,” Brian Gilley describes the social networks that are formed when

culturally similar but geographically distant groups perform in musical practices together. For context, Two-Spirit individuals are often marginalized in Chickasaw Native American society. As an extension of their marginalization, they are excluded from traditional powwows (gatherings that incorporate overtly heterosexual themes). Gilley's research concludes that, by organizing their own powwows, Two-Spirit people are able to form emotionally affective and socially effective bonds with new individuals and groups – bonds that might not be formed otherwise (Gilley 2005, 226-227).

Similarly, events such as the poetry and kirtan showcase at Sikh Gurdwara, DC create rare spaces in which people of a common identity – be it Sikh, Punjabi, or Indian – can meet outside their usual social circles. Devender is a kind man who appears to have a lot of friends at the Sikh Foundation. But the Sikh Foundation's sangat is not growing at any quick rate, and thus the gurdwara offers Devender fewer opportunities to expand his social network as time goes on. By bringing Simran to Sikh Gurdwara, DC, Devender enters a space of potential, a space where new social networks and affective bonds can be formed over the practice of kirtan. The same can be said of Simran, who is given an opportunity to socialize with other children and make new friends. Not only does Simran's engagement with other children expand her understanding of the social world, but it also reminds her of her group identity. She is reminded that she is, like all those around her, a Sikh person of Punjabi/Indian descent.

I had an opportunity to speak with Hardeep about these gurdwara-sponsored social events in late 2022. "What is important is that we have a get-together here," Hardeep told me. He explained that "the young people" (the second- and third-generation

children/young adults among the Sikh Foundation sangat) need places to “mingle,” and that intercommunal social events create these necessary spaces of sociality. When families from a variety of sangats have an opportunity to “mingle,” social networks are constructed and strengthened between individuals, sangats, gurdwaras, and townships (Gilley 2005, 226-227).

On occasion, inter-gurdwara social events are hosted in spaces that are not typically associated with either the Sikh religiouscape or the Punjabi/Indian ethnoscape. Take for example, the National Sikh Day Parade, an annual celebration that takes place every April in Washington, DC (usually around Vaisakhi Day). These events are enormous; in 2022, I was told by one attendee – a Sikh political candidate who had traveled from New York City – that it is the second largest Sikh gathering on the East Coast of the United States. The event is highly anticipated by many members of the Sikh Foundation sangat. On the night of Thursday, April 7, 2022, a week before the fifth annual National Sikh Day Parade, I saw a group of older sangat members sitting and speaking in the langar hall. Among the group were Lakhbir, her husband Hardeep, and Inderpal. When the conversation eventually died down the group began to disperse, Lakhbir made her way over to the chai dispenser where I just happened to be standing. Lakhbir stated that she and the others were looking forward to the parade, but they had encountered a dilemma. While Lakhbir usually drives a bus full people from the gurdwara to Washington, DC for the parade, her eyesight was getting worse with age. Thus, in the interest of safety, the Sikh Foundation would have to find a new driver for 2022. I followed up with Inderpal shortly thereafter about the bus complication. He

casually waved off the issue, confident that the situation would be resolved and that the sangat would attend the event like every year. In the end, Inderpal was proven correct, and a bus did arrive at the Sikh Foundation on the morning of April 14.

Though I did not bus down from Fairfax Station, I, too, was fortunate enough to attend the 2022 National Sikh Day Parade. When I first arrived, I found that several Sikh chefs had established an outdoor langar operation in front of the United States Capitol Building. A large set of choral risers stood unfolded next to serving tables topped with open pots of rice and lentils. Positioned to the right of the risers was a small, black stage. I walked to the langar station, where I was handed a free slice of “Punjabi style” pizza (naan-crust pizza topped vegan cheese and tandoori vegetables) from couple of Sikh chefs in their mid-twenties. As I sat and ate in the lawn of the National Mall, a vocal choir of about a dozen Sikh men and women took to the risers. They began to sing kirtan in unison, accompanied only by a single tabla player. When the choir finished their performance and stepped off the risers, a DJ began playing Punjabi and Indian pop music through the outdoor speaker system. The pop songs went on for thirty minutes or so until a group of kirtan performers took to the small black stage. This new ensemble – four men with harmoniums and tablas – performed a rendition of kirtan that was more reminiscent of what I have heard at the Sikh Foundation.

Feeling satisfied by the different kirtan performances, I walked eastward across the lawn toward the National Gallery of Art. Almost at once, my stride was halted by the sound of resonant, percussive booms reverberating through the soundscape. I followed the rhythmic beating to Independence Avenue, where I came across the day’s main event:

a parade consisting of rolling floats and hundreds of barefoot Sikhs marching in vibrant blue and orange Khalsa regalia. The procession was led by a red pickup truck hauling a large, flat trailer. On the side of the trailer was a blue and yellow banner that read “SIKH CENTER OF VIRGINIA GURDWARA SAHIB MANASSAS.” (I am not sure whether this gurdwara was responsible for building all of the parade floats, or if they were just one of several contributing temples.) The flat trailer carried a total six nagaras – massive drums about two and a half feet in diameter – and a single percussionist. Carefully maintaining his balance as the trailer rocked beneath him, the percussionist struck the six nagaras with two rounded sticks. After a moment, I saw that the loud booms of the nagaras were intended to announce the coming of the Guru Granth Sahib.

The Sikh holy book was transported down Independence Avenue in a float that was decorated to resemble the Golden Temple in Amritsar. The structure stood at about fifteen to twenty feet high and bore a golden dome on its roof. Flower garlands of red, white, blue, and yellow hung from the dome to form a semi-transparent wall of pedals around the vehicle. In the shade of the dome and flowers, the Guru Granth Sahib rested upon an ornate takht, similar to (albeit smaller than) the one in the Sikh Foundation. The only human occupant of the float was a single granthi who reverently fanned the Guru Granth Sahib from behind the throne. Occasionally, the granthi would lay down his fan to adjust a pair of floor speakers that were stationed at his feet. While pre-recorded instrumental ragas emanated from the speakers, the granthi sang Shabads into a mounted microphone. The sounds of the ragas and Gurbani merged with the booming percussion of the nagaras to create a singular kirtan. For people (like myself) who did not know



where to find the procession of floats, the sound of kirtan – and the beating of the nagaras in particular – was a beacon guiding them to the Guru Granth Sahib. For the many spectators who had lined up along the streets, the growing sound of the drums and pre-recorded kirtan was also a cue to remove their shoes in anticipation of the Guru's arrival.

Because of these kirtan practices (the vocal choir, the four-piece kirtan ensemble, the Shabads and ragas coming from the parade floats), the Sikh religiouscape and Punjabi/Indian ethnoscape were temporarily expanded into the space of the National Mall (Appadurai 1990). The soundscape was filled with the words of Gurbani, the timber of tablas, and melodic patterns of the ragas. For one weekend a year, a space which often symbolizes American secularism is transformed into a Sikh religious space and a Punjabi/Indian ethnic space where social networks are developed and strengthened between musicians and sangats who might not otherwise have an opportunity to meet. It becomes a space where people from the Sikh Foundation can meet, for example, a Sikh politician from New York City – a space where the social networks are strengthened across the American Sikh diaspora (Gilley 2005, 239).

The (temporary) expansion of the Sikh religiouscape and the Punjabi/Indian ethnoscape also provided unique opportunities for Sikhs and Punjabis/Indians to form relationships with non-Sikhs and non-Punjabis/Indians (Appadurai 1990). Unlike the Sikh Foundation of Virginia, the National Mall is not a space exclusively designated for Sikh or Punjabi/Indian activities. And because of this, many non-Sikhs and non-Punjabis/Indians are there on any given day (especially in April, when the nice weather attracts tourists, joggers, sun-bathers, and dog-walkers to the lawn). April 14, 2022 was

an especially busy day for foot traffic along the National Mall because the very popular Cherry Blossom festival was being held on Constitution Avenue (opposite the lawn from Independence Avenue). So, when the National Sikh Day Parade was taking place, the National Mall was filled with Sikhs and Punjabis/Indians as well as non-Sikhs and non-Punjabis/Indians.

After hearing the music and seeing the large crowd of parade-goers, many inquisitive non-Sikhs and non-Punjabis/Indians left their monuments and cherry blossoms to walk across the lawn and watch the procession of floats. Some stopped by the langar tables to try some Punjabi and Indian food while others watched live kirtan performances. By expanding the Sikh religiouscape and the Punjabi/Indian ethnoscape, the parade opened the door for communication between people of different religious and ethnic backgrounds. The event's music provided an opportunity for Sikhs and Punjabis/Indians to form social networks (Gilley 2005). Whether those new relationships will prove fruitful for any individual or group is yet to be seen, but the potential is always present.

### *Spaces of Education*

When Sikh religiouscapes and Punjabi/Indian ethnoscapescapes expand into new environments, those locations can become spaces of education for non-Sikhs and non-Punjabis/Indians. As I was walking through the National Sikh Day Parade on April 14, 2022, I was approached by Sikh man of about sixty-five years old who, through a thick Punjabi accent, introduced himself as Kirpal. He asked if we could talk for a moment, to

which I eagerly agreed. He pointed to his wife, a Sikh woman of about the same age, and explained that they had come to the event not only to listen to the kirtan and celebrate the birth of the Khalsa, but also to spread the word about their religion and heritage. Kirpal proceeded to tell me about the turban he wore, about the vast Sikh population in the United States and Canada, and about his Punjabi background. He spoke about his faith and about his reverence for the Gurus. And when we had finished our conversation, Kirpal handed me a forty-seven-page booklet entitled “The Sikh Religion” (Moher & Nagi, 2022). The booklet is, according to the authors, written “primarily for inter-faith understanding” and “is especially intended for non-Sikhs” (Moher & Nagi 2022, 1). It details some of the Sikh values and directives previously discussed (i.e., “remember the name of God,” “regard women as equal”), recounts the lives and accomplishments of the Sikh Gurus, recapitulates the history of the Khalsa, and explains the significance of Vaisakhi Day and other religious holidays (Moher & Nagi 2022). From a distance, I watched as Kirpal and his wife attempted to distribute fliers and strike up similar conversations with other non-Sikhs and non-Punjabis/Indians. Their attempts were met with varying degrees of success.

As this conversation and booklet illustrate, Sikhs on the East Coast of the United States (including many of the individuals and authors associated with the Sikh Foundation) find it critical to share their beliefs and culture with non-Sikhs and non-Punjabis/Indians. According to I.J. Singh (2004), East Coast Sikhs “express considerable bewilderment, frustration, impatience and a sense of impotence between how [they] view [themselves] and how others see [them]” (Singh 2004, 149). In general, I do think it is

fair to say that non-Sikhs and non-Punjabis/Indians have a lot of misconceptions about their Sikh and Punjabi/Indian neighbors. Consider, for example, an exchange that occurred when Hardeep, Inderpal, and Tejbir spoke to the students of The King's College in February of 2023:

“We [the undergraduate religion class] have not done a lot of reading on Sikhism,” the professor announced at the beginning of class. “We’ve studied Hinduism and Buddhism.... And I think that many of them have also studied Islam.... Our impression is that Sikhism is a... combination of Hinduism and Islam.” Tejbir corrected this misconception by explaining that, because Sikhism developed in an area dominated by Hindu and Islamic culture, the Sikh faith did adopt some teaching from those dominant religions; nevertheless, Sikhism is an independent religion with many ideas that are not present in either Hinduism or Islam (Carle 2023). It is important to keep in mind that this was a misconception shared among people living in New York City, which has a substantially greater Sikh population than the Washington, DC metropolitan area. In an area like Fairfax Station with a much smaller Sikh population, there are bound to be even more misconceptions among the non-Sikh and non-Punjabi/Indian public.

While misconceptions about the Sikh population might seem trivial, there are moments throughout US history when public ignorance proved dangerous for the health and wellbeing of the American Sikh diaspora. Take, for example, the 1971-1981 Iran Hostage Crisis. When I spoke to Inderpal in late 2022, I was told that, after the American Embassy in Tehran was captured by a group of Iranian students, many people in the United States developed an irrational fear of “Arabs” – a term misused by Americans

then and now to describe people who appear “Middle Eastern” (a term which can, itself, be a rather problematic). Inderpal recounted a time when a white man on the street had called him an “Arab” and demanded he “go back to [his] country.” Inderpal noted the strangeness of the insult hurled at him; depending on the context, he may identify as an “Asian American” or an “Indian,” but never as an “Arab.” And he had been living in Fairfax and working as a college lecturer at Northern Virginia Community College for years at this point.

This incident was an expression of *ethno-nationalism*, a term used by Alex E. Chávez (2021) to describe ideologies that convey “(1) mistrust in government institutions, (2) anti-globalist and anti-cosmopolitan sentiments, (3) claims to represent working-class interests, and (4) animosity toward immigrants and ethnic Others” (Chávez 2021). Ethno-nationalism identifies immigrants to the United States (and their immediate descendants) as “primitive,” “violent,” and “forever foreign,” permanently outside the boundaries of national belonging. As such, those immigrant groups are perceived of as threats to the welfare and livelihoods of “real” Americans who were born in the United States. Fears surrounding the “browning of America” are not unique to the working class, as the “blue-collar myth” has led many to believe. On the contrary, ethno-nationalist sentiments are found in middle-class and upper-class dialogues just as frequently as they are found in working-class dialogues (Chávez 2021).

Ethno-nationalist sentiments were reinvigorated after in 2001, when Osama bin Laden’s bearded and turbaned image was plastered across the news in the wake of the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks. For many non-Sikhs in the United States, the turban and

beard were considered symbols of radical Muslim identity and sympathy for al Qaida. Tejbir commented on this social shift when speaking to the students of the King's College. "We are always perceived as Muslims in the country, especially after Nine-Eleven," he told the class. "They were showing the images of Talibans and, you know..., the terrorist outfits which always wore turbans and had long hair. So, there's a misconception that... you know, we are all coming from Muslims' countries, or... we are basically Muslims when they see us in turban. That's why they always shout names and slogans at us, or names as 'Osama' or somethings while we are walking. So, it's kind of the biggest hurdle we are trying to win, you know: the hate crimes that are happening against Sikhs for that reason" (Carle 2023).

It has been over two decades since the Nine-Eleven attacks, and ethno-nationalist and Islamophobic sentiments continue to threaten the status and safety of the American Sikh community. On August 5, 2012, a white supremacist with ties to several neo-Nazi groups invaded a gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin and fatally shot six Sikhs and injured several others in what U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder described as "an act of terrorism, an act of hatred, a hate crime" (Porter & Kesling 2013). It was an act of violence that still resonates through the American Sikh diaspora; on August 4, 2020, ten years after the tragedy, the Sikh Foundation of Virginia hosted a candlelight vigil in memory of the victims. And just last year, the October 14, 2022 issue of *India This Week* (available for free in the Sikh Foundation foyer) featured a front-page story about a man who had just been arrested for the kidnapping and murder of four Punjabi Sikhs (one of whom was only eight months old) in Merced County, California. With no clear link

between the suspects and victims, investigators suspect the incident of being a (ethno-nationalist and Islamophobic) hate crime (India This Week 2022, 1-10).

Ethno-nationalist and Islamophobic sentiments are also reignited from time to time by various governmental policies. In 2014, the United States became involved in the Syrian Civil War, reigniting the public's suspicion of their "Arab-looking" or "Middle Eastern-looking" neighbors. And in 2017, former-president Trump's Executive Order 13769 – more commonly known as the "Muslim Ban" by critics – "banned foreign nationals from seven predominantly Muslim countries from visiting the country for 90 days, suspended entry to the country of all Syrian refugees indefinitely, and prohibited any other refugees from coming into the country for 120 days" (ACLU Washington 2023). Though the order was condemned by the ACLU and other civil rights groups across the nation, Islamophobes and ethno-nationalists felt as though the Trump administration had given credence to their xenophobic ideas (ACLU Washington 2023; Chávez 2021).

So, to raise awareness about their religion and ethnic heritage, and to take sangat members out of the proverbial crosshairs, the Sikh Foundation hosts elementary and middle school fieldtrips. During a recent visit to the gurdwara that took place in February of 2023, students learned the basics Sikh belief, watched a kirtan performance, and had an opportunity to interact with some of the school-aged members of the sangat. By hosting these trips, the Sikh Foundation becomes a space of religious and cultural education for non-Sikhs and non-Punjabis. When you consider recent publications from The Sikh Coalition (2022) suggesting that sixty percent of turban- and patka-wearing Sikhs are

bullied in school, it would seem as though the Sikh Foundation has made a wise decision in prioritizing the education of young people (The Sikh Coalition 2022).

While the school field trips are an effective means of educating the non-Sikh and non-Punjabi/Indian public, there are many members of the Sikh Foundation's sangat who want to see more educational programs beyond the walls of the temple. Consider, for instance, a man named Navjot who drafted a petition to the Virginia Board of Education requesting the inclusion of basic Sikh information in the public-school curriculum. When Navjot went to the Sikh Foundation for Sunday diwan in August of 2022, he was able to collect pages upon pages of signatures from sangat members who praised his efforts.

When events like the National Sikh Day Parade bring the Sikh religiouscape and the Punjabi/Indian ethnoscape into spaces like the National Mall, those locations are transformed into spaces of education for the non-Sikh and non-Punjabi/Indian public. They become spaces that help fulfill Sikhs' desire for understanding in the United States. In combination with the smell of Punjabi food and the sight of North Indian dress styles, the sound of kirtan invites unsuspecting city-goers to explore the area. Non-Sikhs are encouraged to engage with unfamiliar cultural practices and strike up conversations with vendors, performers, and people like Kirpal who wish to spread the word about their religion. The nation's capital becomes a space where Sikh beliefs are introduced to non-Sikhs, where Punjabi/Indian customs are appreciated by non-Punjabis/Indians. Filled with the sounds and practices of kirtan, the landscape becomes a *space of resistance* to the xenophobia and cultural hegemony that has become so common in the United States – a



space where cultural hybridity is celebrated rather than feared (Spain 1993, 139; Bordo 1993, 27-28).

### *Technologies of Translocality*

During the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, many members of the sangat (the older members in particular) made the reasonable decision to stay away from the Sikh Foundation and all other public spaces. But the quarantine did not remove the sangat's need to feel connected to the divine or receive religious guidance, nor did it take away the need to exercise their Punjabi/Indian identities. To help bring kirtan to those in quarantine, a member of the sangat was enlisted to record diwan services with his smartphone and tripod. The performances were uploaded directly to the Sikh Foundation's Facebook page, where they could be viewed in real-time by those in quarantine (Sikh Foundation Virginia usa 2022). To use the terminology given to us by Low (2017) and Appadurai (1990), one could say that the Sikh Foundation began using technologies of translocality (the smartphone) to first capture "image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality" and then upload those "strip of reality" to the internet where they can be accessed across time and space (Low 2017; Appadurai 1990, 299). Before long, the Sikh Foundation began using other technologies of translocality (specifically, laptop computers and the application Skype) to keep the Gurmat School in session throughout the quarantine period (Sikh Foundation of Virginia 2023). Though the quarantine has since ended, the Sikh Foundation continues to upload new videos to its social media pages, and the Gurmat school still offers online classes.

I posit that the Sikh Foundation's online presence is ethnologically significant for three reasons. First, as the kirtan of the Sikh Foundation enters new environments (i.e., living rooms, automobiles, outdoor parks) through portable devices such as smartphones and tablets, those environments will begin to transform (to some extent). Those environments may become religious spaces that promote Sikh cosmology and feelings of ritual effervescence. Perhaps those new environments will turn into ethnic spaces where first-generation Punjabis/Indians feel at home, and where second- and third-generation Punjabi/Indians connect to the heritage. Maybe, after being introduced to kirtan, those environments will turn into spaces of social (re)production that subvert and/or reify gender inequalities. If enough recorded or live-streamed kirtan fills the soundscape, then perhaps that environment will even become like the Sikh Foundation of Virginia: a space with overlapping religious, ethnic, and social identities.

Second, as kirtan enters new environments, the Sikh religiouscape and the Punjabi/Indian ethnoscape expand and reshape their borders. When the Sikh and Punjabi/Indian cultural landscapes grow, more social networks are formed between people, groups, organizations, and geographic spaces (as was observed at the National Sikh Day Parade). And thanks to postmodern technologies of translocality, people do not even need to see or hear each other to develop their networks and connections; indeed, geographically distant individuals can form emotionally stimulating and intellectually productive relationships by exchanging messages on Facebook and YouTube. As more social networks are created between distant individuals, groups, and spaces, the world becomes a bit more unified, and people have a bit more access to social capital.

Additionally, the expansion of the Sikh religiouscape and Punjabi/Indian ethnoscape leads to the production of new space of education for non-Sikhs and non-Punjabis/Indians.

Third, when kirtan performances are recorded and posted on the internet, the *mediascape* – the global landscape of recorded sounds, images, and the technologies that make those recordings possible - is expanded to include not only the physical space of the Sikh Foundation (where the cameras are located), but also the virtual “spaces” in which kirtan recordings are located (Arjun Appadurai 1990, 299). And it is clear that the virtual spaces of the Sikh Foundation have indeed grown significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic; between 2020 and 2023, the Sikh Foundation has uploaded over two hundred kirtan performance to its YouTube channel (Sikh Foundation Virginia usa 2023). The gurdwara’s Facebook page is growing even faster at a rate of about one hundred recordings per year (Sikh Foundation Virginia 2023).

### *Concluding Thoughts*

Throughout this thesis, I have attempted – to the best of my ability – to describe kirtan practices, Sikh beliefs, Punjabi/Indian customs, and Indian American expressions of gender. But that is not to say that my findings are only relevant to research projects regarding those specific topics. On the contrary, I posit that these findings are extremely relevant to a variety of generalized ethnographic sub-genres. To start, all spatial anthropologists may benefit from knowing that, like people, spaces have multiple intersecting identities. And as it is with human identities, spatial identities will cooperate in some contexts, and they will conflict in others. For example, when the students of the

Gurmat School learn to play kirtan as a group, they strengthen both their Sikh identities as well as their Punjabi/Indian identities. In this context, the Sikh Foundation's religious and ethnic identities function in a complimentary way. I suspect that most spaces have more than one intersecting identity. Furthermore, I conclude that the identities of a space will, in most cases, reflect the identities of those who use it. The sadh sangat are Sikhs, and the Sikh Foundation is a Sikh religious space. The sangat are Punjabis/Indians, and the gurdwara is a Punjabi/Indian ethnic space. The sangat identify as men and women, and the temple is a space of social (re)production where binary gendered relationships are informed.

As it pertains to the general study of religion, I conclude that religious practices are often more than spiritual exercises. These practices help can evoke memories of home, embolden ethnic identities, and naturalize societal values. Then again, one must not think that religious practices always exist to achieve some ulterior, secular end. Some practices simply give people a sense of joy, or hope, or peace, or purpose. And then there are those are religious practices (like kirtan) that serve several functions simultaneously. It does not benefit us to believe that a religious practice has but a single purpose, nor does it benefit the discipline of anthropology to think that a practice can only do one thing at a time.

Finally, I ask ethnomusicologists and architects to consider where their studies overlap. Kirtan is just one of countless musical practices that produce the spaces we inhabit. So, when we design our ideal spaces – our religious spaces, our ethnic spaces, our spaces of social (re)production – we cannot limit our consideration to the material, to

those elements of design that we can see and feel. We must perceive sound as a vital part of spatial construction – as a necessary architectural consideration. We must analyze the words we put into the soundscape. We must recognize that specific melodies carry affective power. We must appreciate how musical practices influence the beliefs and perceptions that flourish in the built environment. If we are as intentional with sound as we are with other spatial aesthetics, then the spaces we produce will likely function as intended.

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