

SIKH PRACTICE IN CONTEMPORARY
BRITAIN

An Analysis of the Relationship between Identity and Practice
amongst British Sikhs

By

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Dedications

For Mum (Geraldine), Dad (Patrick) and Sarah

In memory of my grandfather Aidan Dillon

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

1.1 Introduction

The relationship between religious identity, doctrine (as given by the Gurus) and actual practice has been a continuing issue for the Sikh community since its founding by a succession of ten human Gurus (teachers) – starting from Guru Nanak (born 1469) and culminating with Guru Gobind Singh (died 1708). During this period, Sikhism developed a strong sense of independence, identity and a sophisticated theology. For example, the Gurus tried to eradicate common cultural practices like caste and dowry, which they deemed to be counterproductive and abhorrent. Another component of this theology was the ‘Khalsa’ order, founded by Guru Gobind Singh, which gave Sikhs an external uniform known as the 5 Ks.

In the following centuries, Sikh religious practices changed, with many practicing a ‘hybrid’ Sikh religion, incorporating Hindu influences by the early 19th Century (Nesbitt, 2005b, p.68). The founders of the Singh Sabha reform movement attempted to purge the *panth* (Sikh community) of these practices, aiming to reinstate ‘true’ Sikhism.

In the 20th Century the Singh Sabha gave way to the *Akali* movement, which – by the 1920s – secured Sikh control of Gurdwaras and formalised several distinctive Sikh practices. The passing of the 1925 Sikh Gurdwaras Act led to the formation of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), which formally defined the ‘Sikhs’ and their religious practices. Despite these actions, Sikh religious practices have continued to change throughout the 20th Century, particularly as a result of migration.

Sikhs are a highly visible part of Britain’s multicultural society, having lived here in significant numbers since the 1950s. With the end of the Second World War in 1945, Britain

encouraged the recruitment of unskilled labour from its colonies to aid in economic recovery. More liberal immigration policies also made it easier for foreign workers to enter the country – an attractive prospect to Sikhs, given the impact of the partition of India. The expulsion by leaders of East African states (such as Idi Amin in Uganda) of South Asians in the 1970's also caused a further influx of Sikh migrants.

Migration to Britain has produced a significant Sikh community which has had to adapt to its new home, either by conforming to or confronting contemporary attitudes. The processes of assimilation and acculturation have had a profound effect on how the British Sikhs practice their faith – like other religions (particularly in the Diaspora) adherents' practice does not necessarily follow the teachings. This results in 'nominal Sikhs', who pick and choose which religious teachings to follow – a phenomenon highlighted by scholars such as Bhachu (1985), Ballard (1994) and more recently, Singh & Tatla (2007).

This thesis will focus on the Sikh community in the West Midlands county of England, highlighting the discrepancy between theological teachings and religious practices with relation to the 5 Ks, caste and dowry. A review of current literature will demonstrate that there has been little academic analysis of this relationship amongst those who identify as Sikhs (and, therefore, possess a 'Sikh' identity). What distinguishes this research from others that have made the same claim is that this is supported by ethnographic research, as well as primary and secondary source material.

1.2 Literature Review

Within the field of Sikhism, many academics have focussed upon the history and teachings of the religion. Even amongst those texts which discuss religious practices, there is often a historical discussion included. Some key texts that focus on the history of the Sikh

religion include William Hew McLeod's (1989) *The Sikhs: History, Religion and Society*, which analyses the origins and development of the Sikh religion and briefly touches upon the issue of Sikh 'practice'.

The Sikhs of the Punjab by J. S. Grewal (1998) provides a detailed account of the history of the Sikhs from the time of the Gurus through to the 'modern era'. Whilst there are discussions of Sikh theology in the text, it is primarily a historical account. A more recent historical publication *Sikhism: an Introduction* by Nicky-Guninder Kaur Singh (2011) devotes four chapters to; Guru Nanak and Sikhism's origins; the developments under Gurus Arjan; Guru Gobind Singh, and; 'colonial encounters'.¹

Gurhupal Singh & Darshan Singh Tatla's (2007) *Sikhs in Britain: the Making of a Community* focuses on the development of the British Sikh community, primarily from an historical perspective. However, it also touches on issues relating to the 5 Ks and caste in the UK – such as the development of caste-specific Gurdwaras – but these discussions are not prominent. As a relatively recent publication, this account is still essential reading, despite lacking ethnographic research.

Given the established nature of the Sikh community in Britain, texts specifically focusing on the Diaspora are incredibly important, and include works by Bhachu (1985) and Ballard (1994). *Twice Migrants: East African Sikh Settlers in Britain* by Parminder Bhachu (1985) provides not only a historical perspective but also looks at some of the religious and cultural practices around caste, arranged marriage and dowry, giving a comprehensive ethnographic account of East African Sikhs living in Britain – most of whom belong to the

¹ The findings of Clarence MacMullen's *Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Sikhs in Rural Punjab* (1989) would provide an interesting contrast to the conclusions of this thesis. However, as this thesis' focus is on the West Midlands, such a comparison is beyond its scope.

Ramgarhia caste. This focus on one group means that it fails to look at the whole Sikh community. It was also published over twenty five years ago.

Roger Ballard (ed.) (1994) in *Desh Pardesh: the South Asian Presence in Britain* provides an account of the practices of British Sikhs but is of limited use for this research as the relevant discussion is restricted to Ballard's own chapter 'Differentiation and Disjunction among the Sikhs'. In this chapter, he discusses various issues affecting the Sikh community at that time, including generational, sectarian and caste identity issues. Given its date of publication, it would be fair to assume that the Sikh community has changed over this time period.

The historical aspect of the religion is important – however, this thesis concentrates on how Sikh religious practices reflect Sikhism's theological teachings and doctrines. Whilst many texts have been written on the history and religion of Sikhs, there has been very little in the way of a serious analysis of observance of religious practices. Perhaps the most prominent author within this field is W. H. McLeod, whose study has particular relevance to discussion of the 5 Ks.

The issues involved with the observance of the 5 Ks are detailed extensively in numerous books by McLeod. In *Who is a Sikh? The Problem of Sikh Identity* (1989b), McLeod extensively analyses Sikh identity with a prominent emphasis on the differences in the observance of the 5 Ks. There is also a historical analysis of the development of the 5 Ks. The age of this publication however is one of its major drawbacks. McLeod's *Sikhs of the Khalsa: a History of the Khalsa Rahit* (2003) rejects the commonly held view of the Sikh *Rahit Maryada* and provides a detailed account of the development of the *Rahit* in reaction to historical developments.

The differences in the observance of the 5 Ks are also included in books such as *Sikhs in Britain: The Making of a Community* (Singh & Tatla: 2007) and Gurharpal Singh's (2000) *Ethnic Conflict in India: A Case-study of Punjab*.

Eleanor Nesbitt's 2005 publication *Sikhism: a Very Short Introduction* also discusses the discrepancies in religious practice. It looks at Sikh history and the development of the Diaspora and also touches on all three subjects that feature in this thesis. Nesbitt's analysis of contemporary caste practices and dowry however is limited to a single chapter alongside relations with other faiths.

Many of the general books on Sikhism fail to look at the specific issues of the 5 Ks, caste and dowry in depth. For example, the caste practices of Sikhs do not feature prominently in many texts and are usually referred to in a single chapter of a book.

Dowry is another practice of Sikhs which is seldom mentioned in any great detail. Often it is included in the Gurus' wider teachings on the equality of women. There are three books which mention dowry in detail, two of which are quite recent publications suggesting this is a continuing issue for the Sikh community.

The chapter 'Dowry among Sikhs in Britain' by Jagbir Jhutti (later Jhutti-Johal), featured in Werner Menski's [ed.] (1998) *South Asians and the Dowry Problem* analyses the contemporary practices of Sikhs in the Diaspora and the issue of dowry however, this text's applicability to this research is limited as it only deals with dowry. Given the age of this book, Sikh practices could have changed considerably. However, when cross-referenced with Jhutti-Johal's 2011 publication *Sikhism Today*, this does not appear to be the case.

Satwant Kaur Rait's *Sikh Women in England: their Religious and Cultural Beliefs and Social Practices* (2005) conducts a serious analysis of beliefs and practices. It discusses the practice of dowry and counters one of the claims made by Jhutti-Johal. Whilst the discussion

of dowry is limited and is only a part of the wider ‘Cultural Values’ chapter, its relatively recent publication makes it a valuable source – however, its focus on women limits its applicability.

The most recent publication that explores all three issues discussed in this thesis is *Sikhism Today* by Jhutti-Johal (2011) – whilst the discussion on caste is limited to a few references, issues arising as a result of dowry, such as female foeticide feature in a chapter discussing women in Sikhism in general. Jhutti-Johal also discusses issues surrounding the 5 Ks as part of the chapter ‘*Identity – Who is a Sikh...Continued?*’ Although this is a new publication, implying that its arguments and information are up-to-date, it lacks the support of detailed fieldwork. All discussions in this research will be based upon a mix of academic sources and detailed ethnography, although it needs to be noted that the ethnographical research will be limited by geographical location and in all probability by participant numbers.

1.3 Methodology

1.3.1 Approach

This research will utilise a ‘hybrid’ approach, combining elements of anthropology, phenomenology and sociology. For example, a prominent feature of this research is fieldwork, which was advocated by the anthropologist Malinowski (1884 – 1942). Fieldwork is vital, as any other account of a religion could be seen as ‘armchair’ testimony, with the researcher having no real knowledge of how adherents *actually* practice their religion. Geertz’s (1973) distinction between thin (simplistic; from the researcher’s perspective) and thick (in-depth and acknowledging the context; from the adherents’ perspectives) descriptions is also important to the study of religion, as ‘thick descriptions’ are more objective and detailed.

Phenomenology favours an unbiased and accurate account and has been advocated by such scholars as Van der Leeuw (1933).¹ Objectivity is essential to this research; therefore this ethos is of paramount importance. This research will utilise Smart's 'Methodological Agnosticism', which states that the scholar should not be concerned with the factual basis of religious claims. Phenomenology's contribution to objective research also includes the avoidance of pejorative and inappropriate terminology. The application of these techniques is essential for this research to remain objective.

This study acknowledges and explores the influence of societal and cultural factors on religious practices and, therefore, has a sociological component. Many sociologists provide 'definitions' of religion as some form of social construct. This research is not concerned with the truth-claims of any religion and will attempt no such definition, but merely provide an unbiased analysis of the influence of culture and society on religious observance.

This hybridised approach recognises the many intricacies involved in the study of religion. Without the acknowledgement of historical and sociological influences (anthropology and sociology, respectively) on a given religion's contemporary adherents, one is left with a statement of pure theology. Likewise, by incorporating the principles of impartiality, which Phenomenology outlines, this thesis avoids making value judgments. By combining the best features of each field, the weaknesses of the methodology are minimised, whilst maximising the strengths.

¹ Gerardus van der Leeuw's *Phänomenologie der Religion* was originally published in 1933 and was translated into English as *Religion in Essence and Manifestation: A Study in Phenomenology* in 1938.

1.3.2 Ethics

The raw data of this research was gained from ethnographic research. As this involved human participants a number of ethical considerations were required. Ethical considerations are important because they ensure that participants' rights are observed and that they are not in any way abused. These considerations also have the potential to cause serious problems for research (Kimmel, 1988, p.66). In this research, ethical guidelines on informed consent, withdrawal of participants and storage of data were observed in accordance with the University of Birmingham's *Code of Practice for Research* (2011 – 2012).

1.3.3 Quantitative/Questionnaires vs. Qualitative/Interviews

The data used in this research was collected during June 2010 – February 2011. After much deliberation it was decided to utilise two distinct forms of data collection – quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (interviews).

Whilst questionnaires provide a large amount of information, they do not provide great detail. Whilst this is of limited use when analysing intricate issues, it provides an excellent source from which to derive statistics. A questionnaire was used in this research, comprising fifteen questions – five for each of the three topics (observance of 5Ks, caste and dowry). Tick boxes were provided for as many questions as possible to make it easier for participants to complete them.¹ The statistics collected were used to generate tables and graphs for comparisons.

Qualitative research methods focus on detailed accounts of such things as events and discussions. The primary method of collecting this type of data is the interview. Unlike questionnaires, there is no limit to the amount of information participants can provide. When

¹ See 'Appendix 4 – Questionnaire' (p.86).

conducting this research, a decision had to be made as to which form of interview should be used – structured or open ended. The viability of both was studied to ascertain which was preferable.

Structured interviews limit the number of possible answers. The main weakness of this ‘closed-ended’ interview is that there is no freedom to explore unanticipated discoveries (Breakwell, Hammond & Fife-Schaw, 1995, p.231). However, open-ended interviews do not have a set format of questions and the interviewer is allowed to discuss the topics with the participant in a more informal manner, with the researcher gaining important information that was not directly asked for (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997, p.156). These responses may provide more information but require a great deal of time to analyse.

Having considered the pros and cons of the two approaches, a semi-structured interview was used, with the questions from the questionnaire acting as a guide during the interviews. This ensured the line of questioning was focused but provided the opportunity to ask spontaneous additional questions or to allow participants to elaborate upon specific comments. The interviews took place at a neutral location, so that participants would not feel intimidated – which may have inhibited their responses.

1.3.4 The Insider/Outsider Debate

In conducting this ethnographic research, the researcher will be an ‘outsider’ observing a different community. There are many advantages to research which comes from this perspective, but equally many concerns. O’Connell (in Hawley & Mann, 1993) states that there is always a tension between scholarly inquirers and those who wish to cultivate a religious life (p.125-6). An overarching theme of the insider/outsider debate is the agenda of the researcher.

Proponents of the ‘outsider looking in’ approach maintain that, at least theoretically, the researcher has no vested interest in presenting the religion’s ‘public image’, unlike the insiders. People who subscribe to this view would maintain that the only way for someone to be completely objective about a religion is to be an outsider. Insiders are seen as either biased or their objectivity is seen to be clouded (Hinnells, 2005, p.2).

In contrast, Tiele (in Waardenburg, 1973) feels that ‘insiders’ are perfectly capable of studying their own religion objectively. Other scholars argue that unless one comes from within the studied religion, then one cannot truly understand it. Theorists like Cantwell Smith argue that religious studies can only take place from an ‘insider’ perspective; that a religion can only be researched by its adherents (Arweck & Stringer, 2002, p.16). Whilst ‘insiders’ may accept that ‘outsiders’ have contributed greatly to the study of their religion, they may be “*suspicious of their motives...critical of their academic methods, and favour – by extension – the contribution of insiders to such studies*” (Hinnells, 2005, p.244).

This was demonstrated in ‘Perspectives on the Sikh Tradition’ (Singh [ed.], 1986), where several of its Sikh authors were critical of Western academic Sikh studies. They highlighted the colonial and racial bias of many earlier scholars and claimed that McLeod’s critical historical approach had undermined the Sikh faith (Hinnells, Ibid).

It is apparent that researching from either perspective presents difficulties. Outsiders may be accused of an inability to understand the subject religion. One way in which this can be overcome is with the inclusion of participants from inside the religion. This combines the (theoretical) objectivity of an ‘outsider’ with the credibility of testimony from ‘insiders’.

However, suspicion of an outsider may have a detrimental impact on the research – either in securing participants and subjective testimonies. This is particularly relevant in this thesis, as the researcher’s ‘outsider status’ may have played a role in the difficulties

encountered during recruitment. For example, an orthodox Sikh may suspect that, by investigating the (sometimes forbidden) practices of Sikhs, the researcher is seeking to label the community as 'hypocritical', despite the researcher's intention to highlight discrepancies in an objective manner, rather than to criticise. These factors might account for low proportion of baptised Sikhs in the sample.

1.3.5 Recruitment

To conduct the research, several well attended Birmingham Gurdwaras (Sikh places of worship) were approached with the intention of securing participants from two, so that the scope of the research was varied yet focused. This involved seeking permission to distribute leaflets/flyers to their congregation to gain respondents, which contained a basic outline of the research, along with the researcher's contact information (university email/post address).¹ There was a target sample size of twenty-five Sikhs from each Gurdwara, respectively. Ideally, it was hoped this sample would have an equal split for gender and baptised (*Amritdhari*)/non-baptised Sikhs.

Interested participants were to be provided with further documents, detailing the specifics of the research, their rights and a consent/declaration form.² The participants were asked to contact the researcher if they wished to arrange an interview. The consent form gave the participants the right to request a copy of the transcript from their interview to review/amend if they wished. Originally the intention was to conduct interviews exclusively to gather qualitative data, because of the depth and detail this would provide.

¹ See 'Appendix 1 – Recruitment Flyer' (Appendix 1, p.80).

² See 'Appendix 2 – Participant Information Form' and 'Appendix 3 – Participant Consent Form' (p.82 & p.84).

Although this methodology was well thought out and structured, it was unworkable due to difficulties in establishing links with Gurdwaras, which often did not reply to initial recruitment enquiries.¹ Attempts to recruit through Gurdwaras continued but an alternative was put into place, which was to approach individual Sikhs through various organisations and contacts. This necessitated the researcher broadening the demographic sample base to include Sikhs from the West Midlands County (such as Coventry and Wolverhampton).

Even after taking this action it was evident that sufficient numbers of respondents were unlikely to be recruited. As a result, the decision was made to incorporate questionnaires into the research; participants could choose to complete a questionnaire or be interviewed. By giving respondents the option to complete a questionnaire at their leisure, the researcher drastically increased the number of participants who volunteered. Despite these adjustments and additions, issues in recruitment continued. Due to the lack of co-operation of Gurdwaras and peoples' fears of talking to an outsider, the sample base of this research – and, consequentially, the scope of the study – is limited.

1.3.6 Sample Summary and Discussion

After an eight month recruitment period, during which the methodology had been revised, seventeen respondents had volunteered for the study – only 34% of the target size. The majority (70.58%) of these were non-baptised Sikhs who answered the questionnaires but not many took part in interviews (see Table.1). Such a relatively small sample made inferences and generalisations impossible, as it is not truly representative of the community. This reduced sample meant that this thesis has had to rely heavily on secondary sources – the

¹ Only one Gurdwara actually assisted by lobbying members to take part.

ethnographic data collated from the questionnaires and interviews has been used primarily to support or dispute these sources.

Table.1 – Interview-Questionnaire Overview

	Interviews	Questionnaires	Total
Baptised Participants (Bap.)	1	4	5
Non-baptised Participants (NB.)	3	9	12
Total	4	13	17

Another goal of this research was to have an equal representation of male and female respondents in the sample. However, this did not materialise. It may have been expected that the sample would be biased towards men, with women being uncomfortable talking to a male outsider. However, contrary to such expectations, the sample comprised of more women than men (58.82% of the sample), resulting in a gender discrepancy (Table.2).

Table.2 – Participant Age/Gender Overview

	Non-baptised	Baptised	Total
18-30 Male	1	1	2
18-30 Female	1		1
31-50 Male	4		4
31-50 Female	5	4	9
50+ Male	1		1
Total	12	5	17

The experience and views of women may differ drastically from those of men, especially with regards to dowry. Conversely, all of the interviewees were men; meaning that the most qualitatively significant data gave an exclusively male perspective. Taking this into consideration, it is fair to suggest that the findings of the research may be susceptible to gender bias.

Whilst gender was an issue so was age, with thirteen participants from *both* genders aged thirty-one to fifty and only three Sikhs under the age of thirty taking part. This presents the problem that, whilst other participants may refer to what ‘young’ Sikhs are doing, there is little in the way of direct testimony from this group. Similarly, the ‘older’ generation of Sikhs (over fifty) are represented in this sample by a single person: a man. This in turn means that the views of ‘older’ Sikhs are presented from an exclusively male perspective. Even though information indicating the economic standing of the participant was not asked for, it is possible that social class has also biased this research. The replies of participants may vary considerably amongst Sikhs from different class backgrounds. The differences in practice between affluent and disadvantaged Sikhs are a possible future avenue of research.

One of the issues being researched in this thesis is caste. With this in mind, it was important to ascertain the caste of each participant, so that one caste’s view did not dominate (see Table.3).

Table.3 – Caste/Gender Overview

Caste (occupation)/Gender	Bap. Male	NB. Male	Bap. Female	NB. Female
<i>Jat</i> (Farmers)		3		1
<i>Tarkhan/Ramgarhia</i> (Artisans)				2
<i>Saini</i> (Warriors)				1
<i>Kumhar/Kumar</i> (Potters)		1		
<i>Chamar/Ravidasia</i> (Leather workers)		1		
Unknown		1		
Not Stated				1
None/Sikh	1		5	

Of the non-baptised Sikh respondents, the largest caste groups represented were ‘*Jats*’, followed by ‘*Tarkhans/Ramgarhias*’. This is not surprising as the majority of Sikh migrants to Britain came from these castes. This sample reflects their numerical prominence but also presents a problem; both are considered ‘high’ castes. *Saini* and *Kumar* are less common castes but can also be considered as ‘high’. This means that the *Chamar* is the lone participant who is definitely from a ‘low caste’ background.

1.4 Structure

Having completed these preliminary discussions, the thesis will move on to analyse three issues: 5Ks, caste and dowry. Chapter Two will look at the observance of the five Ks. In 1699, Guru Gobind Singh commanded Sikhs to take ‘baptism’ and wear the *Panj Kakar* (often translated as 5 Ks or ‘five articles of faith’). The significance of baptism and these

articles will first be explained. An investigation as to the extent to which Sikhs in Britain (the West Midlands in particular) observe them will then take place.

Chapter Three will investigate the complex issue of caste. For Sikhs, caste is not a religious phenomenon – it is a cultural legacy originating in Hinduism. It is essential to understand what caste is, as well its effects on Indian society at the time of the Gurus. Following this, a synopsis of the theological teachings in Sikhism will be presented. This will culminate in an investigation of the contemporary caste practices and views of British Sikhs.

Chapter Four will focus on dowry. The discussion will follow a similar pattern to that of caste – definition, followed by its effects on Indian society and Sikh theological teachings. From this historical foundation, the factors behind the continuation and escalation of the practice will be analysed.

Chapter Five will conclude the study, presenting an overview of the analysis of the practices and attitudes of the UK *panth*. It will firmly establish that those who identify as Sikhs display a significant discrepancy between theological teaching and actual religious practice.

CHAPTER 2: OBSERVANCE OF THE FIVE KS

The year 1699 CE is a significant one for Sikhs, as it can be argued that this was when a (theoretically) uniform Sikh identity was firmly established.¹ At the festival of *Vaisakhi*, Guru Gobind Singh (then called Guru Gobind Rai) summoned the Sikhs to the city of *Anandpur*. In front of the amassed crowd, the Guru asked for a volunteer who was willing to sacrifice their head for the Sikh religion. After issuing this invitation three times, a volunteer came forward. The Guru disappeared into a tent with the volunteer and then returned with his sword dripping with blood; this sequence of events was repeated a further four times.

When the Guru returned to the crowd for the fifth time, the five volunteers (known as the *Panj Pyare* [five beloved ones]) exited the tent, unharmed and clad in new clothes. They were then anointed with a mixture of sweetened water (called ‘*Amrit*’ or ‘nectar’). The Guru declared that they were the first members of the Khalsa; the ‘pure ones’ – the order of Soldier-Saints – and was, in turn, initiated into the Khalsa by them, changing his name to Guru Gobind Singh. This initiation is often referred to as ‘baptism’ or ‘*Amrit Sanskar*’ (also referred to simply as ‘taking *Amrit*’).

The Khalsa – made up of these initiates and believed to have been reborn and freed from their cultural baggage – was required to strictly follow their Gurus’ teachings on how to live their lives; rejecting all distinctions and seeking equality for all. It is believed that, to differentiate them from their neighbours, members of the Khalsa was given five external symbols to wear – called the *Panj Kakar*; commonly known as the 5 Ks. This, however, is disputed by some academics. Singh (2005) describes the 5 Ks as the ‘*bana*’ (‘dress’) of all

¹ CE is often used as a less ‘culturally biased’ alternative to AD.

Sikhs (p.97). This chapter will discuss whether the Guru's teachings surrounding *Amrit* and the *Panj Kakar* are observed today. However, before this can be done, it is necessary to discuss the exact nature and development of the 5 Ks.

2.1 The Panj Kakar (5 Ks)

The *Panj Kakar* are five articles of faith (hence the use of the Punjabi word '*Panj*', meaning 'five') that all 'baptised' Sikhs (members of the Khalsa) are required to wear, irrespective of gender. They include; *Kesh*, *Kangha*, *Kara*, *Kachera* and *Kirpan*.

Kesh is 'unshorn hair', which includes facial and body hair. There are numerous beliefs surrounding the reason why hair should not to be cut, however the primary belief is that, as hair is part of nature (and thus, given by God), it would be disrespectful to 'interfere' with the natural order and God's creation (Teece, 2004, p.12).

Kesh can also be seen (either directly or indirectly) as a symbolic link between the Khalsa and spiritual strength – something which is evident in the history of India, where hair was a symbol of holiness (BBC, 2009). *Sadhus* (wandering mystics), having renounced the world to achieve salvation, let their beards grow long and many of them allowed their hair to grow long and matted (Nesbitt, 2005b, p.54). Hence, it is possible that *Kesh* symbolically suggested that Sikhs also possessed spiritual strength and wisdom.

However, as part of Guru Nanak's overall rejection of the *Sadhu* lifestyle of renunciation, Sikhs are required to keep their hair clean – hence the second *Kakar*: the *Kangha*. This is a wooden comb placed within the *Kesh*, whose primary function is to keep the *Kesh* clean and tidy. Sikhs are required to comb their hair at least twice a day and the *Kangha* reminds them that their lives should be kept neat and organised too (Penney, 1999,

p.8). It is also symbolic of the importance of looking after one's body – as a vehicle toward the ultimate goal of enlightenment and salvation/liberation (*mukti*), it should be cared for.

At this point, it is also important to discuss the role of the turban. As part of their commitment to keeping their hair clean and tidy, male baptised Sikhs are required to wear a '*dastar*' (turban), or, if the hair is not particularly long (as in young boys), a '*patka*' (often referred to colloquially as a 'top knot'). This is of vital importance to men, primarily because it provides a practical solution to keeping *Kesh* neat and tidy (McLeod in Singh & Barrier, 1999, p.61). Whilst particularly devout women may wear a turban, most tie their hair in braids and wear long scarves (*dupattas*) (Singh, 2005, p.97). The turban has become almost synonymous with *Kesh* amongst Sikhs. Singh (2005) argues that *Kesh* has been monopolised and presented from an exclusively male perspective due to the association between *Kesh* and the turban (p.99). The turban has therefore become a central symbol of Sikh identity indirectly through the 5Ks.

The third *Kakar* is a steel bangle, called the *Kara*, which is normally worn on the right wrist. The circular shape is multifaceted in its symbolism; reminding Sikhs of their connection to the rest of the Sikh *panth* (community) and their eternal link to the Guru. It also symbolises the eternal nature of God, who has no beginning and no end. There are also Sikhs who claim that the sound of it hitting a desk whilst they write is a reminder to only use their hands to perform 'good deeds' (Nesbitt, 2005b, p.53).

The fourth *Kakar* is '*Kachera*' – baggy underwear/shorts which symbolise chastity and moral restraint. The fifth *Kakar* is the *Kirpan*, a sword or dagger which is sheathed and worn over or under clothes. It can be anything from a few inches to three feet in length; however most Sikhs carry a shorter, dagger-like *Kirpan*. It represents a Sikh's commitment to justice, as well as defending the oppressed, the weak and their faith. These or comparable

situations are the only ones in which it is considered acceptable to draw the *Kirpan* from its sheath. The observance of these five articles of faith is an essential part of what could be called 'Khalsa identity'¹ – which is gained when one takes *Amrit*.

Although Sikhs believe the 5 Ks were bestowed by Guru Gobind Singh, there are academics (such as McLeod, 1989b) who suggest an 'evolution' of the modern 5 Ks, rather than an 'inception'. McLeod argues that the 5 Ks were adopted in the late 19th Century as a response to the British banning the wearing of five weapons (p.59 [footnote 61]).² Grewal (1998) counters this conclusion by stating that the 5 Ks were present from the founding of the Khalsa, being 'formalised' later (in Nesbitt, 2005b, p.54).

This 'formalisation' reached its climax under the Singh Sabha movement, with these symbols forming the basis of an external Sikh identity. The Singh Sabha Reform movement developed in the late 19th Century, seeking to counter the proselytising efforts of Christians and Hindus and purge Sikhism of Hindu customs (McLeod, 1989b, p.133). One of the tactics for accomplishing this purge was to systematically formulate Sikh identity around the Khalsa ideal again. It was this that led the 'Tat Khalsa' (Pure Khalsa) and Akali movements to emphasise a strict observance of the 5 Ks. To state that the 5 Ks developed and were institutionalised later is not to diminish their theological worth. Whilst the material objects may have changed over time, the theological purpose behind them (a distinctive uniform to promote and protect Sikh religious identity) has not.

The injunctions of 1699 ultimately constitute the core theological basis of the modern *Sikh Rehat Maryada* (Sikh Code of Conduct), the final approved version being published in 1950 by the *Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee* (SGPC) – the central Sikh religious

¹ This identity also requires the rejection of caste, creed, colour etc distinctions, as well as giving dowries.

² Sword, firelock, bow, arrow and pike.

authority.¹ The *Rehat Maryada* emphasises the importance of the Khalsa and, by proxy, the 5 Ks, defining a Sikh as any human being who faithfully believes in;

- i. One immortal being
- ii. Ten Gurus, from Guru Nanak Sahib to Guru Gobind Singh Sahib
- iii. The Guru Granth Sahib
- iv. The utterances and teachings of the ten Gurus
- v. The baptism bequeathed by the tenth Guru, and who does not owe allegiance to any other religion.

By incorporating the *Amrit Sanskar* (baptism) into the *Rehat Maryada*, there is an official recognition of the need for Sikhs to observe the 5 Ks. The *Rehat Maryada* also states that a Sikh man must wear a turban. It is clear that the Khalsa identity is of vital importance, though it has been criticised as being politically and class elitist (McLeod, 1989, p.47). The implication from the *Rehat Maryada* is that those who do not conform to the Khalsa identity are not *true* Sikhs. This invariably links the religious observance of the 5 Ks with external Sikh identity.²

2.2 Categories of Sikh

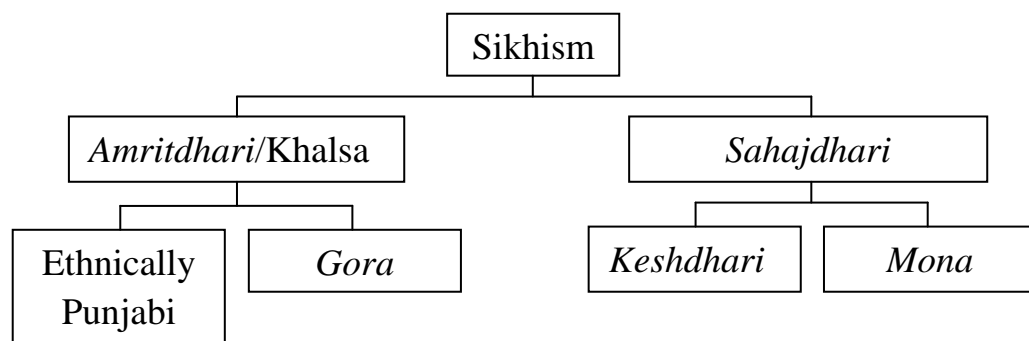
Despite the Singh Sabha's attempts to homogenise Sikh practice around the 'orthodox' Khalsa model, only a small percentage of the total Sikh population today are baptised. Today, whilst baptised Sikhs are relatively uniform in their practice, non-baptised

¹ The Khalsa and the 5 Ks are embedded within the Sikh *Rehat Maryada*.

² Sikhs in the UK have fought many legal battles to ensure their right to wear the 5 Ks.

Sikhs exhibit a considerable variation in observance of the 5 Ks, with most scholars recognising three distinct ‘categories’ of Sikh based upon this variation. It is possible to understand the connections between the forms of Sikhism by using a classification system based on the differences in observance (see Figure.1).

Figure.1 – The Taxonomy of Sikhism



Khalsa/baptised Sikhs are also called *Amritdharis* and are required to wear *all* of the 5 Ks. The name ‘*Amritdhari*’ derives from the ‘*Amrit Sanskar*’ ceremony; they are a ‘*dhari*’ (practitioner) of the ceremony’s theological ideology and injunctions. If an *Amritdhari* removes just one of the 5 Ks, they are considered a *patit* (apostate) and are required to perform a penance.

All converts to the Sikh faith are baptised Sikhs. The most common group of converts are known as *Gora* Sikhs: white converts, particularly associated with the ‘Healthy, Happy, Holy Organisation (3HO)’ established by Yogi Bhanan in 1969, or the ‘Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere’ founded in America. Whilst *Gora* Sikhs are *Amritdharis*, their practices differ in some aspects from the majority of the Sikh *panth*, due to their interpretations of the teachings. For example, women are permitted to represent the *Panj Pyare* in the *Amrit Sanskar* and many *Gora* Sikhs practice a form of yoga. *Gora* Sikh ‘organisations’ are

considered by some, such as Dusenbury (in Takhar, 2005), to be a parallel of the Singh Sabha Reform movement of the nineteenth century as they emphasised Khalsa/*Amritdhari* identity, which included a strict observance of the five Ks.

Over time various academics have used differing names/definitions for non-baptised Sikhs including; *Sahajdhari*, *Keshdhari* and *Mona*. During the time of Guru Gobind Singh, non-baptised Sikhs were called *Sahajdharis* ('slow adopters') – this is the definition used by scholars such as Macauliffe (Singh, 2004, p.13). This label has been applied inconsistently over the years and is now seen as synonymous with 'Mona' Sikhs (Sikhs who cut their hair). McLeod (1989b) defines them as non-baptised Sikhs who reject the importance of the Khalsa. This research applies the term '*Sahajdhari*' to all non-baptised Sikhs. They make up the majority of the *panth* and comprise two major subgroups; *Keshdhari* and *Mona*.

Keshdharis are generally described as any non-baptised Sikh who observes *Kesh*. This includes Sikhs who trim or shave body and facial hair (such as beards). Singh (2000) describes them as non-baptised Sikhs who are committed to the 5 Ks but especially to *Kesh*, implying that *Kesh* is of some particular (if unspecified) significance. In his 2007 publication alongside Talta, this is revised and *Keshdharis* are said to observe most of the 5 Ks – although most only observe *Kesh* and *Kara*.

However, as was stated previously, any non-baptised Sikh who does not cut their hair should be considered a *Keshdhari*, irrespective of whether they observe any of the other *Kakars*. This allows for a great breadth in potential diversity and might account for why, according to Singh & Tatla (2007), *Keshdharis* account for the majority of the Sikh community.

Mona Sikhs are often referred to as *Sahajdhari* Sikhs – however, as has been stated, this research differentiates between the two terms. The term ‘*Mona*’ means ‘shaven/shorn’ and indicates the main differentiation between these and other Sikhs; *Monas* do not observe *Kesh*. Singh & Tatla (2007), state that *Monas* are increasingly numerous and important in the Diaspora. Kuiper (2010) claims they are particularly common in countries outside of India, defining them as; “...those who have a traditional *Kesdhari* background but who cut their hair and wear distinctive turbans only when they attend a service in their *Gurdwara*.” (p.143)

These four Sikh categories are particularly evident in the UK, and have varying levels of commitment to the 5 Ks – mainly to *Kesh* or *Kara*. Very few respondents in the research sample were baptised, despite (according to one young baptised man) Britain being more accepting of *Amritdharis*. This was confirmed by a thirty-six year old *Keshdahri* man:

... [The number of *Amritdharis* is] not growing exponentially as it should...the elder generation, yes they are getting baptised – but the younger generation are not.

However, he then seemed to contradict himself by saying:

In our younger generation, the parents...feel that they are losing vision of where they are going and they're introducing their children into the Sikh faith a lot earlier...[who will then] obviously take baptism...

This man may be referring to his own generation (the thirty to fifty year olds) not taking *Amrit* and that their children – the under thirties – are undergoing baptism and wearing the 5 Ks.

As a result the views of all types of Sikhs are clearly disparate and vary even within the individual ‘categories’. It was clear from the respondents in this research that this proposed ‘plurality’ of Sikh identity is not readily acknowledged, especially by baptised

(*Amritdharis*) Sikhs (see Table.4). For example, two baptised women stated that there was only one type of Sikh, with one of them emphasising the uniformity of the Khalsa – as though they are *true* Sikhs.

Table.4 – Are there Different Types of Sikh?

Answer	Baptised	Non-Baptised	Total
Yes	2	5	7
No	2	4	6
Non-committal	1	3	4

However, the views of *Amritdharis* clearly vary. What was surprising is that those *Amritdharis* who acknowledge multiple Sikh ‘categories’ do not base this dichotomy on observance of the 5 Ks, as stated by a young *Amritdhari* man: *you could say that there are different types of Sikhs but it’s nothing to do with the 5 Ks. There are loads of other different ways that Sikhs... categorise each other...*

One baptised woman identified two kinds of Sikh; those who wear and explain the importance of the 5 Ks to non-Sikhs and; those who do not wish to appear ‘different’ and are content to conform to wider society. Whether her categorisation was based upon adherence to orthodoxy is unclear as it was not mentioned.¹ What seems more likely is that it is based upon whether one is vocal about being a Sikh.

The majority of the research respondents were *Sahajdharis*, with some suggesting that the wearing of all 5 Ks is only appropriate for the ‘super-devout’ who become *Amritdharis*.

¹ Such as *Amritdharis* and *Keshdharis* (with the distinctive image of the turban) being the former and *Monas* (who tend not to stand out from the general populace) being the latter.

Ten participants (both baptised and non-baptised) acknowledged this, although two conceded that technically *all* Sikhs should wear them. An *Amritdhari* woman stated that they are also worn by those who are ‘working their way up to baptism’ – to become used to the discipline involved.

A *Mona* man in his fifties emphasised that, when Guru Gobind Singh founded the Khalsa, he allowed the other Sikhs to ‘take their own journey’. Regarding the place of the 5 Ks within contemporary Sikh consciousness, another *Mona* man said: *Only some will attain and reach that image... Other than that, it's that individual's relationship with the Guru...* [emphasis mine].

The views of *Sahajdharis* were equally mixed, with two respondents simply replying ‘no’ to the question of whether there were different ‘types’ of Sikh. One young man said that there is only one type of Sikh, but acknowledged variations and differences by stating that the way an individual practiced their faith was at their own discretion. Another man felt that ‘a Sikh is a Sikh’:

The bottom line is [that if you] believe in the Guru Granth Sahib... the 10 Gurus [and follow their teachings to]...work hard, earn your crust, be good and helpful to your fellow man and so on...[then] you are a Sikh.

Amongst those who replied ‘yes’, there are a number of ‘inclusive’ views. For example, a non-baptised woman who felt that there should only be one type of Sikh (although she did not specify which kind) conceded that the *panth* is already divided – albeit along such lines as caste. Another *Sahajdhari* woman, who spoke about the differing levels of religious adherence, summarised this inclusive approach, demonstrating the view that all Sikhs are on a continuous ‘learning path’ throughout their lives:

Every family has different types of Sikhs in it, never mind the rest of society, and there is acceptance that members will be practising to different extents. Sikh society is very diverse anyway, as it has been throughout our history.

One *Mona* man in his fifties differentiated between Sikhs, basing it more on intentions than actual practice; those (presumably baptised Sikhs) who are ‘guardians of conservatism’ and wear the 5 Ks with no understanding of what Sikhism is ‘really about’; the *Amritdharis* and *Sahajdharis* who are trying to live by the teachings of Sikhism, and finally; those non-baptised Sikhs who only go to Gurdwaras for rites of passage.

Whilst this plurality of identity might not be readily acknowledged by all members of the Sikh community, or seen as irrelevant to one’s status as a Sikh, it clearly exists. Whilst there is uniformity of observance amongst *Amritdharis*, it is evident that, amongst *Sahajdharis*, this diversity of religious adherence also results in variations in knowledge and understanding.

2.3 Consequences of Plurality

Basic knowledge of the 5 Ks was present in virtually the entire research sample. Evidently their importance is common knowledge amongst most Sikhs, with *Sahajdharis* being theologically knowledgeable but religiously non-observant. Most participants knew about all of the 5 Ks, however there were some exceptions – particularly amongst the younger participants. For example, one young *Sahajdhari* man only knew about the *Kara*, the *Kirpan* and the *Kachera*.

A young *Sahajdhari* woman listed the 5 Ks as *Kesh*, *Khanga* (*Kangha*), *Kacha* (*Kachera*), *Kirpan* and *Khanda* but omitted the *Kara*. The *Khanda* is not part of the 5 Ks – it

is the symbol used to represent Sikhism.¹ This inclusion of the *Khanda* is interesting as it suggests that displaying this external symbol is seen as a religious requirement by some, possibly influenced by a reaffirmation of an external Sikh identity.² Her spelling of *Kangha* is also significant, as the *Gurmukhi* alphabet (used by Sikhs) has different letters for ‘KH’ and ‘K’. This suggests that she (along with other participants) is unfamiliar with the Punjabi language in its written form.

A *Mona* man (who wore the *Kara*, *Kangha* and *Kachera*) also spoke about his *Khanda* necklace. He felt that the necklace was his *Kirpan* (even though Sikh religious scholars do not recognise this) and that the *Kirpan* does not need to be an *actual* sword/dagger. His assertion was based on his belief that the 5 Ks are symbols that represent the values of Sikhism. He felt that, as such, there is no need for rigidity and that it should be seen as acceptable for Sikhs to remove particular items – such as the turban – for practical purposes. It may be argued that this view is due to this *Mona* Sikh not understanding the theological value of the symbols.

Apart from these three exceptions, there is a general level of knowledge and understanding about what the 5 Ks are, however changes in observance are apparent. There seemed to be differences of opinion amongst the views of *Amritdharis* and *Sahajdharis*, with one baptised (*Amritdhari*) Sikh merely stating that all baptised Sikhs observe the 5 Ks. Another two *Amritdharis* replied ‘no’ when questioned about changing observances. These replies are of limited use in any form of analysis – these participants may be expressing a form of ‘Khalsa exclusivity’ and stating that anyone who does not wear all of the 5 Ks is not a ‘true’ Sikh. Conversely, they may simply be stating that *Amritdharis* observe them all, that

¹ The *Khanda* comprises a *Chakkar* (a circular throwing disk weapon), a *Khanda* (a double-edged sword) and two *Kirpans*.

² This was also seen in the wake of the 7/7 bombings, with young Sikhs wearing shirts that read ‘Don’t freak – I’m a Sikh’.

Keshdharis observe *Kesh*, and so on. A young *Amritdhari* man felt that, even though the majority of the British Sikh *panth* are non-baptised today, most wear some of the 5 Ks, especially the *Kara*.

In stark contrast, a significant 75% of the *Sahajdhari* participants felt that there had been visible changes in observance, stating that the number of baptised Sikhs is low and that the 5 Ks – particularly *Kesh* – are not as prevalent as before. This decline in *Kesh* has been expressed as fewer men growing their hair long and/or trimming/shaving their beards, supporting the statements of Singh & Tatla (2007) that *Mona* Sikhs are increasingly common, particularly in the Diaspora.

Many Sikhs in the wider *panth* have noticed that more Sikhs (whether baptised or not) are wearing gold *Karas*, instead of steel ones. This was only referenced by one participant, but is discussed on websites such as www.sikhsangat.com, while www.sikhkaras.com sells plain and engraved *Karas* made of various materials, including ‘black gold’ with golden engravings. www.malanijewelers.com/goldkaras.aspx displays many ornate *Karas*.

This may be due to increased wealth, although one woman attributed it to vanity. The wearing of a gold *Kara* goes against the original Sikh teachings – steel was seen as a material that everyone could afford, making distinctions based on wealth impossible. It is possible, with so many Sikhs wearing the *Kara*, some may also be wearing ornate *Karas* to distinguish themselves from the group and assert their own individualism. Given the increase in *Mona* Sikhs, it also seems that the *Kara* has become the basic foundation for Sikh identification, with one man saying: *every Sikh...wears a Kara... One thing is the standard; they all wear the Kara, without a shadow of a doubt.*

Other respondents mentioned the turban when discussing the 5 Ks, with one woman commenting that more females are wearing this optional item. Without further research it is

difficult to gauge just how common turban-wearing women are, given that only one participant mentioned this phenomenon. Despite this, it is clear from first hand observations of the Sikh community that there are more women (mostly baptised) wearing blue or black turbans. The fact that all *Gora* Sikh women wear a white turban may be influencing this practice. With Singh (2005) arguing that men have monopolised *Kesh* due to the turban, it is possible that women are attempting to assert their right to an external Sikh identity comparable to men's by wearing this highly visible symbol. One Sikh woman who appeared in the BBC documentary '1984: a Sikh Story' demonstrated this view: "[*Before I started wearing a turban*]...*I was just another...face in the crowd...Now I walk with a presence...that...is only there because of my turban.*" (BBC, 2010)

With regards to the fact that most Sikhs do not wear all the 5 Ks and that observances are changing, the Sikh community in the West Midlands is divided in its views. One man – a *Mona* Sikh in his fifties – was not particularly worried about the lack of people taking baptism and saw it as an example of the world 'moving on'. A thirty-six year old *Keshdhari* man spoke about two divergent views with regards to a lack of observance. On the one hand, there are those who feel that a Sikh should be baptised irrespective of their situation, whilst there are others who feel that you should be baptised 'when the time is right'. Nonetheless however, he felt that it is every Sikh's goal in life to get baptised.

Some respondents felt that the *panth* is becoming polarised in some fashion. One *Mona* man was apprehensive about a form of 'false orthodoxy' developing in Sikhism. His main concern seemed to be that 'orthodox' values are, to some extent, being imposed on the wider *panth*, although they are not necessarily appropriate to everyone. In his mind, this is against the teachings of Guru Nanak that there are many paths to the same destination;

*[Being baptised] shouldn't bestow any more power to the individual – I don't think that was [what the Guru] intended...one of the difficulties in attacking orthodoxy, for me personally, is that the people who are orthodox practice it with true Sikh values. But they're **their** values, it's **their** journey – the Sikh values are shared but it's their personal practice and journey to faith.*

One young non-baptised woman felt that the *panth* was becoming segregated. She believed younger Sikhs are being turned against Sikhism because the ultra-observant *Amritdhari*s see themselves as 'superior' to those who are not as devout or baptised and 'looked down their noses at them'.

This view was not accepted by one young *Amritdhari* man who felt there was no discrimination, as it is the duty of a Sikh to treat a *Sahajdhari* the same as an *Amritdhari*. This sentiment was echoed by another *Sahajdhari* woman who stated that in her opinion, non-baptised Sikhs are not *overtly* criticised by the *panth*. She links this to the strong emphasis on personal freedom in Sikhism and the belief that the 5 Ks were: *an expression of choice to begin with when they [were originally] proposed as a uniform*. She also felt that it was the responsibility of each individual to research their religion and to decide upon their own priorities.

Other Sikhs are worried that the perceived decline in observance of the 5Ks might dilute the discipline of Sikhism, or that future generations might forget the origins of various aspects of Sikhism. A female *Amritdhari* felt that Sikhs in general are trying to make the 5 Ks more 'discrete' and are 'giving them up' due to other communities not understanding their religious significance. Her main concern was that future generations will not become baptised or wear the 5 Ks because it is: *easier than being put in the spotlight*. She lamented this trend in light of the original purpose of the 5 Ks; that Sikhs stood out in the crowd as symbols opposing intolerance and tyranny. This indicates that she is possibly concerned that

Westernisation will cause the Sikh community to abandon baptism and the 5 Ks in favour of 'fitting in', meaning that future generations of Sikhs will be less distinctive in their religious identity.

2.4 Future of the 5 Ks

There are mixed views for the future of the 5 Ks amongst the Sikh community. One non-baptised woman, unconcerned by the lack of Khalsa observance, felt that the long term effects for Sikhism would be similar to other religions. She felt that the cultural norms of contemporary society, which 'discourage individuality', were the reason behind this 'drop off' in adherence. This sentiment was echoed by one interviewee (a non-baptised man in his fifties) who felt that faith in general is becoming largely irrelevant to many people, including some British Sikhs.

This man was also critical of Gurdwaras, feeling that the existing Sikh religious institutions are not doing enough to ensure the transmission of the Sikh faith. He felt that they are doing a great disservice to the majority of the community, which is growing up having to find its 'own way'. He could have been alluding to a perceived language barrier, as demonstrated by those participants who are illiterate in written Punjabi.

A number of respondents strongly felt that, as many young British Sikhs cannot speak Punjabi, a language barrier exists. This would be crucial, as it poses a direct challenge to young Sikhs in their attempts to understand the significance of the 5 Ks. This sentiment was expressed by another *Mona* man who felt that many youngsters are being given a 'sound bite' faith due to this language barrier. A *Keshdhari* man felt that the biggest issue facing the Sikh community is a lack of religious understanding due to language issues – feeling that the community still relies upon the scholars to translate certain texts. He feels that the efforts of

things such as the ‘SikhiToTheMax’ website – where full English translations are made available – will assist the next generation in understanding Sikhism.

The aforementioned *Mona* man felt that eventually a Gurdwara would open where English was the primary medium for religious services. In his view, this would be an effective means of communicating the message (including the importance of the 5 Ks) of the Gurus: *...if someone’s trying to sell you a product, even if it’s a faith, and you can’t understand a word...chances are you’re going to go [with someone you can understand].*

These views were also shared by some of the baptised respondents. A young *Amritdhari* highlighted the ability of young Sikhs to preach in English as crucial to the long-term viability of preserving religious practices like the 5 Ks.

Many respondents seem optimistic that the Sikh youth will ensure the future of the 5 Ks and the practice of getting baptised. One *Mona* man said that he had ‘great faith in the young’. Another man, a *Keshdhari* also spoke about the effects of parents introducing their children to Sikhism at an earlier age than they were;

The long term effect is that Sikhism will get stronger in this country. There’ll be a better understanding and the younger generation will enhance it; their children will enhance it again if they understand it right.

However, this optimism was not shared by two respondents who were concerned that the youth might become estranged from their faith. Nonetheless, the presence of Sikh student groups, youth services and online forums are clear indications that there are many young Sikhs eager to learn about their religion – including the 5 Ks.

It is clear that observance of the 5 Ks is varied. This is as true for Sikhs today in the Diaspora as it has been throughout history. Sikhs are attempting to realise the internal spiritual injunctions of their faith whilst cultivating their own uniquely British Sikh identity. The Sikh community of the Midlands would, on first glance, appear to be rejecting baptism and the strict observance of the 5 Ks. Yet many still feel that baptism is the ultimate aim of Sikhism – even though they may never reach it. It is impossible to say for certain whether the Sikh youth will ensure the continued observance of the 5 Ks and baptism, although there is some indication that the community can be optimistic about its future. Given the great variety in the observance of the 5 Ks, it seems clear that West Midlands Sikhs are polarised between externally ‘observant’ and ‘nominal’ Sikhs.

CHAPTER 3: CASTE

Caste is a controversial practice which is observed by many Sikhs, despite the Gurus' explicit condemnations. An oft-sighted example of this denunciation is Guru Nanak's refusal to undergo the *Janeau* (the sacred thread worn by the three 'higher' castes) ceremony, which was a significant rite of passage.¹ Similarly, Guru Gobind Singh's Khalsa was also designed to eradicate caste distinctions, principally by replacing the initiate's family name with a 'Khalsa name'. The Gurus' views are also evident in the Guru Granth Sahib. Despite these denouncements, caste continues to be practiced by most Sikhs in India and in the Diaspora.

This chapter will analyse the contemporary place of caste amongst British Sikhs, as well as its future. Before this can be done, one must understand the importance of the caste system in the South Asian consciousness.² From here, the theological position accorded to caste by the Gurus will be outlined. This will then proceed to a discussion of caste amongst British Sikhs, including the ways in which it is still practiced.

3.1 The Hindu Caste/Varna System

Traditionally, the *Varna* system divided society into two major groups; 'twice born' and *Panchama* ('Untouchables', now called *Dalits* or 'scheduled castes') (Stern, 2003, p.60).³ The presence of these 'Untouchables' is one of the distinctive features of Indian social hierarchy (Ghurye, 2005, p.162). Within the 'twice born' *Varnas*/castes there are a further three sub-groups. Distinct *Varnas* were traditionally associated with broad occupational areas

¹ Guru Nanak and all the subsequent Gurus were from the same 'high caste' group – the *Khatri*s.

² A detailed explanation of the Hindu system is beyond the scope of this study. However, the account given will be sufficient.

³ 'Twice born' Hindus were the 'highest' three castes and were the only ones allowed to study the Vedas (the religious texts of Hinduism).

(see Table.5). The ‘Untouchable’ super-group was outside the *Varna* system entirely, due to their spiritually ‘polluting’ occupations. They could not worship in the temples, draw water from the same wells as ‘higher castes’ and were often segregated from the main village.

Table.5 – Varna System¹

<u>Name</u>	<u>Occupation</u>
<i>Brahmins</i>	Religious leaders/teachers
<i>Khsatriyas</i> (rendered <i>Khatris</i> in Punjabi)	Kings/warriors
<i>Vaisyas</i>	Landowners/merchants
<i>Sudras</i>	Cultivators/menial tasks
<i>Panchama/Dalits/Untouchables</i>	Various

Twice Born

Varna System

There was also the system of *Jatis* (*Zat* in Punjabi), which can be seen as ‘subdivisions’. *Varnas* are linked to generic occupational areas – *Jatis* are linked to specific occupational guilds or professions (Editors of Hinduism Today, 2007, p.131). For example, the occupation of priest was a *Jati* of the *Brahmin Varna*.

Deol (2000, p.60-1) and Pruthi (2004, p.95-7) make the case that the contemporary caste system lacks any universal model of stratification, with socioeconomically dominant castes often being considered the ‘highest’. This only applies to modern urban areas – in rural settings, as in antiquity, the hierarchy is rigid.

¹ As produced in Pruthi, 2004, p.89.

In the context of Indian society, caste can be understood to mean a complex social system which combines *Varna*, *Jati* and the ‘outcast’ super-group of *Dalits*. There are theological/ritual implications for different castes, such as the notion of ‘spiritual pollution’. It was the different hierarchies and notions of pollution that made the Gurus speak out against this practice.¹

3.2 The Sikh Gurus and the Singh Sabha Reform Movement

Guru Nanak was born into this segregated society and spoke out against it – arguing, in one *shabad* (verse/hymn of the Guru Granth Sahib), that one should: “...*recognize the Lord's Light within all, and do not consider social class or status; there are no classes or castes in the world hereafter.*” (Guru Granth Sahib, p.349, from www.sikhs.org).

The abolition of caste distinctions was a significant part of Guru Nanak’s and the succeeding Gurus’ mission. One way in which they attempted to do this was through the *langar* (the Gurdwara’s communal meal) – designed to promote equality, requiring everyone to eat together regardless of caste, gender or religion. The Guru Granth Sahib is also a major testament to the Sikh Gurus’ anti-caste ideology, combining the teachings of the ‘high-caste’ Sikh Gurus with those of Bhagat, Kabir, and Namdev (all from ‘low castes’) into one book (Nesbitt, 2005b, p.118).

Guru Gobind Singh also sought to eradicate caste distinctions through establishing the Khalsa, with the *Panj Pyare* being drawn from different castes (see Table.6).

¹ Historically, caste distinctions were also rejected by Hindu movements, such as the *Bhakti* movement (Sadangi, 2008, p.161). Similarly, the Hindu *Arya Samaj* movement also rejects caste.

Table.6 – The Panj Pyare

Name	Caste	Caste Occupation
Bhai Daya Singh	<i>Khatri</i>	Warrior
Bhai Daram Singh	<i>Jat</i>	Farmer
Bhai Himmat Singh	<i>Jhinwar</i>	Water carrier
Bhai Mohkam Singh	<i>Chhimba</i>	Tailor
Bhai Sahib Singh	<i>Nai</i>	Barber

Up until this time, it was possible to tell the caste of an individual by their ‘clan’ name (roughly equivalent to European surnames). However, with the creation of the Khalsa all those who joined were commanded to take one of two names; *Singh* (Lion) for men and *Kaur* (Princess) for women, making it impossible to determine their caste heritage.

Despite the Gurus teachings, Sikhs still fully recognise caste distinctions – although, at baptism into the Khalsa (and theoretically afterwards as well) all Sikhs are equal (Hastings & Selbie, 2003, p.510). McLeod (1989b) states that, during Nanak’s Guruship, caste identities were still recognised amongst the Sikhs within the wider society (p.23). Caste endogamy (marrying within one’s own caste) was even observed in the Gurus’ marriages, as well as the marriage arrangement of their children (McLeod, 2003, p.216). The suggestion is that, despite a theoretically caste-neutral community, in practice many caste distinctions remained.

One argument put forward by McLeod (cited in Nesbitt, 2005b, p.53) implies an influence of caste practices on the development of the 5 Ks. McLeod argues that specific articles of the 5 Ks, such as *Kesh*, were a common feature of the *Jat* caste, who made up a substantial portion of the Sikh community by the time of Guru Gobind Singh. The implication

is that this caste-specific practice was adopted into the Khalsa in response to this preponderance of *Jats*. Whether this was to placate the numerically dominant *Jats* or assimilate the outward appearance of this 'high caste' for all Sikhs, it clearly demonstrates that caste relations and designators were at the forefront of the minds of early Sikhs.

Whilst McLeod could be correct in this assertion, the theory seems implausible – it would have effectively rendered mute all of the teachings of the previous Gurus and left the Sikhs open to accusations of hypocrisy, with 'low-caste' Sikhs seemingly masquerading as 'high-caste' *Jats*. To the wider Indian population, it would have appeared that 'Khalsa Sikhism' was a *Jat*-specific phenomenon, rather than asserting the fallacy of caste practice (as was its intent). Therefore, the notion that a caste-specific 'social norm' would be made compulsory for everyone seems to contradict the anti-caste purpose of the Khalsa. Nonetheless, McLeod's argument does call into question the extent to which the Khalsa was (and is) truly 'caste-neutral'.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (although enlightened for the time) caste distinctions were accepted by the *panth* (McLeod, 2003, p.215). In place from the *Chaupa Singh Rehat-Nama* onwards, these were expressed in the following ways (Ibid);

1. There are four castes (excluding the *Dalits*) which may take *Amrit* and can partake of *karah prasad*.
2. The *Dalits* are to be kept out of the *langar*, and generally a distance from them should be maintained.
3. All Sikhs are to marry within their own caste.
4. Specific castes are recognised, such as *Brahmin* and *Khatri*.

The *Rehat Maryada* lists ‘caste and descent untouchability’ among those beliefs which Sikhs do not hold. However, it acknowledges that some Sikhs still practice this, blaming it on the influence of Brahminism (SGPC, 1994).

The main difference between caste practices in Sikhism and Hinduism today is that, for Sikhs, it is not a theological injunction with ritual manifestations; instead, it seems to be cultural phenomenon, something clearly understood by Sikhs in the UK (see Table.7).

Table.7 – Caste: Religion or Culture?

	Religion	Culture	Both	No Ans.
NB. Men		5	1	
NB. Fem		5	1	
Bap. Men			1	
Bap. Fem				4
Total	0	10	3	4

Unlike the Hindu system, the relationships are not based upon notions of spiritual purity and pollution (Sadangi, 2008 p.89). With approximately 80% of Sikhs in the Punjab being *Jats* the overall impression is of ‘caste homogeneity’ (Singh, 2000, p.85). Despite the *Rehat* and the Sikh theological teachings that one’s caste does not affect spiritual progression, it is clear that caste distinctions are still a part of Sikh practice. Caste today manifests in the choice of spouse, local division of labour and upbringing given to children.

3.3 Castes in the UK

In the UK, the two main caste groups are *Ramgarhias* and *Jats*, with several other, smaller caste groups (see Table.8).

Table.8 – Main UK Castes

<u>Caste</u>	<u>Occupation</u>
<i>Jats</i>	Farmers
<i>Ramgarhia</i>	Artisans
<i>Bhatra</i>	Astrologers/Palm Readers
<i>Chamar/Ravidasi</i>	Skinner/Tanner

Ramgarhias have a variety of names, with Singh & Tatla (2007) seeing the terms *Ramgarhias* and *Tarkhans* as interchangeable, while other authors, such as Baumann (1996, p.110), see '*Ramgarhia*' as a 'catch all' term for numerous 'artisan' castes.

There are a number of smaller caste groups in the UK from the 'lower castes' – such as the *Chamar/Ravidasi* and *Bhatra* castes. The *Ravidasis* are technically a religious movement stemming from Guru Ravidas, comprising mostly of *Chamars* and other groups perceived as 'Untouchable' (Gillespie, 1995, p.31). It was a response to the continued poor treatment of various 'low caste' groups. The *Chamar/Ravidasi* caste is seen as the 'lowest' present in Britain – a *Chamar* could be a neurosurgeon or multimillionaire, but their caste status will still be 'low'.¹

¹ 'Mainstream' Sikhs do not consider Ravidas a Guru – only the untouchable *Chamars* do. This close association is probably the origin of the two terms sometimes being used interchangeably.

Bhatra Sikhs were among the first Sikh settlers in the UK (Singh & Tatla, 2007, p.48).¹ Thomas (in Parsons, 1993), states that their exact placement within the caste hierarchy is unclear (p.218). However, most Sikhs would argue that they are a ‘low caste’ group (Jhutti-Johal, 2011, p.11).

There are other minor castes, whose members either disassociate themselves from – resulting in a form of ‘anonymity’ – or disguise their identity by changing their surnames. D’Souza (in Rao, 1974, p.275) identifies the *Saini* as one such ‘minor’ caste – one respondent was a *Saini*, even though she felt she did not belong to a caste. One man gave his caste heritage as *Kumar*, further demonstrating that there are other castes in the UK besides those mentioned in Table.8.²

3.4 Contemporary Situation in Britain

Nesbitt (2005b) writes that the traditional relationships of *Jatis/Zats* were unsettled by the 20th Century’s urbanisation and migration (p.117). With technological and industrial development, as well as universal education, many Sikhs from traditionally ‘low’ occupations were able to achieve economic prosperity – the *Jat* was no longer automatically at the top of the social system and the *Chamar* was perfectly capable of gaining a high status in the community.

Nonetheless, stereotypes and assumptions about various castes persist, with *Jats* and *Khatri*s considering other castes to be ‘lower’ than them (Rait, 2005, p.9). As late as the 1990’s Sikhs from the artisan castes regarded *Jats* as: “*uneducated, crude, and rude, as well*

¹ Singh & Tatla refer to them as salesmen. They are also referred to as ‘pedlars’ by some. Rait (2005) classes them as astrologers and palm readers.

² ‘*Saini*’ is a gardener caste – although some may claim ‘*Rajput*’ or ‘warrior caste’ ancestry – ‘*Kumar*’ is a potter caste and classed by Singh & Tatla (2007) as an artisan caste (p.28).

as unsuccessful in the British economy” (Baumann, 1996, p.111). It is possible to dismiss these as examples of economic elitism – for example, the *Jats* look down on the *Ramgarhias* in the same way ‘old money’ looks down on the ‘nouveau riche’. One of the most damning stereotypes of the *Bhatras* is that they serve meat and alcohol in Gurdwaras (which is explicitly forbidden).¹ These probably stem from the pre-existing caste tensions in the Punjab, as well as historical relations between castes. One *Bhatra* suggested on www.punjabi.net that the *Bhatras*’ history of being pedlars who ‘had to con people into buying products’ caused the community to be viewed as a ‘gypsy-like’ people. Both this and the *Bhatras*’ seclusion from the rest of the panth are given as reasons for why rumours and stereotypes about them continue.

One cannot blame this continued practice on religious ignorance, as sixteen of the research participants demonstrated an understanding of the Gurus’ teachings on caste. If the sample is taken to be representative, then it is clear that many Sikhs know that they should not practice caste but still do (see Table.9).

Table.9 – Do Sikhs still Practice Caste?

	Yes	No	Non-committal answer
NB. Men	6		
NB. Fem	4		2
Bap. Men	1		
Bap. Fem	3		1
Total	14		3

¹ References to these rumours/stereotypes can be found on websites such as www.punjabi.net/forum/archive/index.php/t-968 (accessed 20/06/11).

One non-baptised woman, when asked about the Gurus' stance on caste, answered: *if you are a true baptised Sikh – caste doesn't matter...* (emphasis mine). This woman's answer is being treated as ambiguous because it seems to suggest that the Gurus' anti-caste ideology only applied to baptised Sikhs, despite the fact that these only existed after the founding of the Khalsa. How this answer relates to the earlier practices of the Sikhs (none of whom were 'baptised' in the modern theological sense) is unclear. It is also possible that she is merely acknowledging that many non-baptised (as well as some baptised) Sikhs are still preoccupied by caste.

Caste distinctions have continued to the present day. In Southall during the 1980's gangs such as the 'Holy Smokes' and the 'Tuti Nangs' reflected caste affiliation (Singh & Tatla, 2007, p.204-5). Caste heritage can also be established by observing variations in the style of turban (Jhutti-Johal, 2011, p.11). For example, East African Sikhs wear an often-white turban with a point at the top (Bhachu, 1985, p.51). There are three principal areas in which these distinctions are observed; surnames, Gurdwaras and marriages.

3.4.1 Surnames

The continuation of caste distinctions is most visible in surnames – often seen in various media and the bibliography of this thesis.¹ As there is no injunction on non-baptised Sikhs to follow the Khalsa model, it is necessary to consider this phenomenon in relation to baptised and non-baptised Sikhs *separately*. The latter would be an example of selective practice; the former would be an example of religious insubordination.

¹ For example, Darshan Singh **Tatla**, Satwant Kaur **Rait**, Opinderjit Kaur **Takhar** and Jagbir **Jhutti-Johal**. It should be noted that most 'caste' names *technically* refer to the many 'sub-tribes' (*gots*) present within each major caste grouping. The previous examples are from the *Jat* caste.

Although the ‘Khalsa name’ was supposed to remove caste, it is clear that this has not been achieved. There are variations in the names of baptised Sikhs – some use Kaur and Singh exclusively (as the religion instructs). Others, such as most of the SGPC’s Executive Board, use both (see Table.10). This is significant, since the 1925 Gurdwara Act requires that these bodies comprise of *Amritdhari* Sikhs (Singh, 2004, p.11). It is clear that these *Amritdhari* Sikhs, who are supposed to be representing the global Sikh community, are going against their religious tenets.

Table.10 – SGPC Executive Committee Members (www.sgpc.net [accessed 20/06/11])

Name	Position	Board/Committee
Jathedar Avtar Singh	President	SGPC
S. Raghujit Singh Virk	Sr. Vice-President	Executive Committee
S. Kewal Singh Badal	Junior Vice-President	Executive Committee
S. Sukhdev Singh Bhaur	General Secretary	Executive Committee
S. Rampal Singh Behniwal	Member	Executive Committee
S. Gurbachan Singh Karmuwala	Member	Executive Committee
S. Mohan Singh Bangi Kallan	Member	Executive Committee
S. Rajinder Singh Mehta	Member	Executive Committee
S. Nirmail Singh Jora Kallan	Member	Executive Committee
S. Bhajan Singh Shergill	Member	Executive Committee
S. Surjit Singh Garhi	Member	Executive Committee
S. Dayal Singh Kolianwali	Member	Executive Committee
S. Mangal Singh	Member	Executive Committee

S. Karnail Singh Panjoli	Member	Executive Committee
S. Suba Singh Dabwala	Member	Executive Committee

Whilst some *Amritdharis* use their Khalsa surname in a public forum, they may continue using their caste surname in private. Only one out of the five *Amritdharis* who took part in this research used her caste name, with Kaur acting as a ‘middle name’. It is also clear from various informal discussions and observations that a number of baptised Sikhs still use their caste names, even if it is only on official documentation, such as membership forms. Whilst a lack of supporting literature and a small sample size make it impossible to draw any definite conclusions, what is evident is that baptism does not always eradicate the practice of using caste-specific names.

This same variation in the use of names applies to non-baptised Sikhs as well (Jhutti-Johal, 2011, p.97-8). What is unique about them is that *some* do not use the names Singh/Kaur at all. One reason for this is that, as they are not baptised, they feel they cannot use only Singh or Kaur. Others will use the Khalsa names as a middle name, but retain their caste name as a marker of their heritage and (particularly if they are from a ‘high caste’) their status. If one considers the sample of *Sahajdhari* Sikhs in this research along caste lines, there is almost no ‘middle ground’ – it is a case of either/or between using Khalsa or caste names exclusively (see Table.11).

Table.11 – Surnames amongst *Sahajdharis*

	Khalsa name only	Caste name only	Both names used
<i>Jat</i>	1	3	
<i>Kumar</i>	1		
<i>Ramgarhia/Tarkhan</i>	1	1	
<i>Ravidasia</i>			1
<i>Saini</i>		1	
Not stated	2		

The ‘Khalsa name exclusive’ Sikhs are from varied caste backgrounds, implying no statistical trend. The implication from the statistics is that *Jats* are more prone to be ‘caste name exclusive’; however the ratio of *Jats* to non-*Jats* in this sample renders this conjecture – the statistics could merely be the result of *Jats* being the best numerically represented caste group. If one considers gender distinctions, there is no real statistical trend. Whilst slightly more males were ‘Khalsa exclusive’, this can be accounted for by their slight preponderance in the sample, as well as the limited sample size.

One possible influence on the answer given by the sample as a whole must be considered: that these individuals, when responding to this research, used Khalsa names exclusively because they felt that they were ‘supposed to’. It is interesting to note that five of them considered themselves to be part of a caste, despite using Khalsa names. One *Sahajdhari* woman considered herself as being part of a *baradari* (brotherhood) instead of a caste. Even though *baradaris* are used as another form of social stratification, she did not appear to accept this, stating: *[I] do not look down on other baradaris, as caste does.*

One must consider the reasons given for Sikhs continuing to use caste names. The obvious reason would be that the individual Sikh still wants their neighbours to know their caste background – that they wear it almost as a ‘badge of honour’. *Jats* and *Ramgarhias* in particular could be susceptible to these accusations, given their high status in the Punjabi caste system.

Another reason given is that an entire community using only two surnames (Singh and Kaur) would be problematic for such things as school registers and official/legal documents – especially if two individuals shared the same first name. The obvious counter-argument to the ‘school register’ assertion is that, whilst this situation might *possibly* arise, it is not *probable*.

What is clear is that, despite its use, there are some strong views on the internet about Sikhs (whether baptised or not) who continue to use caste names. In the ‘comments’ section of the blog ‘*What Shall I Call Thee?*’ one of the replies stated that it was an obscenity for any Sikh to use their caste name. Another comment stated that abandoning caste names is one of the easiest practical steps that a Sikh can take on their journey to be a member of the Khalsa. The blogger was himself critical of those *Amritdharis* who use their Khalsa names as ‘middle names’, stating that; *[The] urge to appropriate a name to differentiate oneself by occupation or place runs contrary to one's raison d'etre to be [baptised]...* (Mahal, 2010)

3.4.2 Gurdwaras

Caste is not just observed by individuals in their names, but also by Gurdwaras, despite institutions (such as the *langar*) and teachings against this (McLeod, 1989b). Singh & Tatla (2007) emphasise that around 83.3% of British Gurdwaras are ‘caste non-specific’. Some would argue that these are de facto ‘*Jat* Gurdwaras’ but their *sangats* (congregations)

are often from different castes (p.77). Bakhshi (2008) argues that many urban non-*Jats* prefer these ‘caste-plural’ Gurdwaras, as they are able to take part in their management (p.195).

Nonetheless, when Singh & Tatla discuss the growth and diversification of Gurdwaras in Britain, they highlight caste as one of the reasons for this. The role of caste identity in Gurdwara allegiance is also emphasised by Nesbitt (2005b), who states that; “*in the UK the names ‘Bhatra’ and ‘Ramgarhia’ figure in the titles of many Gurdwaras*” (p.117). A Google search of West Midlands Gurdwaras confirms the presence of caste-specific Gurdwaras, suggesting that the main designators are ‘*Ramgarhia*’ and ‘*Ravidasi*’ (see Table.12).

Table.12 – West Midlands Gurdwaras

Gurdwara	Location	Caste
Ramgarhia Gurdwara	Birmingham	Ramgarhia
Ramgarhia Sikh Temple	Birmingham	Ramgarhia
Gurdwara Guru Nanak Bhatra Singh Sabha	Birmingham	Bhatra
Gurdwara Ravidass Sabha	Birmingham	Ravidasi
Shri Guru Ravidas Temple	Coventry	Ravidasi
Ramgarhia Sabha	Wolverhampton	Ramgarhia
Gurdwara Ravidass Sabha	Wolverhampton	Ravidasi

Pre-existing caste tensions are a prominent cause of this ‘Gurdwara tribalism’, as ‘low caste’ Sikhs were often barred from certain Gurdwaras (Takhar, 2005, p.95). Gillespie (1995) argues that many low-caste Sikhs worship in Hindu temples because they feel marginalised in Gurdwaras (p.30 – 1). However, one young *Amritdhari* man disputed this by saying: *...if*

someone from a 'lower' caste sits next to [you in the *langar* hall]... no one says anything or treats [them] badly.

Takhar (2005) argues that the divergent customs within castes is another likely cause of this development, with worship conforming to the individual caste's preferences. One woman supported this argument by stating that different castes may have different priorities/methods of running a Gurdwara.

Of those Gurdwaras that identify with a given caste, *Ramgarhia* Gurdwaras are the most common in the UK. These were set up as a means to distance themselves from the 'Direct Migrants', who some perceived as lapsed 'rustics'.¹ This perception was no doubt fuelled by the fact that many direct Punjabi migrants had had to abandon the 5 Ks in order to get jobs in the UK. When the *Ramgarhia* twice migrants arrived in the late-1960's they led a return to the traditional Sikh dress code, which in turn led to religious revivals in many communities (Bhachu, 1985, p.50-1).

The economic and social aspirations of the *Ramgarhias* (seen as inferior in terms of caste) caused tensions. East African *Ramgarhias* rejected the idea that they were 'inferior' to *Jats*, due to their increased economic prosperity and the ease with which they adapted to British society, having come from an urban environment (Rait, 2005, p.9). Ballard (1994) observes that the *Ramgarhia* social upward mobility was achieved through promoting religious virtue (p.111).

Ballard & Ballard point to the fact that the 'direct migrants' from the Punjab, who had also settled in Britain, were far more caste-and-village-connection-conscious than the 'twice

¹ This can be seen as synonymous with 'redneck' or 'hick'.

migrants' were ('The Sikhs' in Watson, 1977, p.54). It is suggested that, with the fusion of these two communities in Britain that the 'twice migrants' became more caste conscious.

Bhatra Sikhs migrated to Britain mainly between the 1920's and 40's and settled in port cities such as Bristol and Glasgow. Before the establishment of the first Birmingham-based *Bhatra* Gurdwara in 1957, it is likely that most *Bhatras* met at private residences and improvised religious services. Singh & Tatla (2007) argue that their steadfast commitment to Khalsa ideals is a religious conservatism atypical of the 'mainstream' Sikhs. *Bhatras* tend to remain aloof from the rest of the British Sikh community, preferring to preserve their autonomy (p.79).

It is clear that opinions of the existence of caste-specific Gurdwaras vary, with one baptised woman feeling that they were signs of a caste community trying to show how well they were doing; that the Gurdwara was almost a status symbol. Other views are more neutral, seeing this as almost inevitable. One man saw caste-specific Gurdwaras as part of a natural development, where people from similar geographical and caste backgrounds band together and create religious institutions. Another man, talking about the development of Gurdwaras along caste lines, said; *possibly the worst element is the caste development but I would say that that would have happened anyway – it's happened in Punjab as well...*

Others were hostile, with one woman blaming the development on 'politics and prejudice'. One man described them as a 'joke' and felt that, whereas they were originally set up for the community in general, caste affiliation has overtaken them due to a desire for power by committee members. One non-baptised woman felt that these Gurdwaras had emerged through the 'snobbery' of (presumably high-caste) Sikhs who deem certain Gurdwaras to only be suitable for themselves.

3.4.3 Marriages

Another arena in which caste distinctions are evident is marriages – Sikh marriages tend to be caste endogamous (McLeod, 1989b, p.109). They are regarded as an alliance between families of compatible social and caste status (Kalsi, 2005, p.69). Takhar (2005) highlights the significance of caste endogamy when discussing how marriages between *Goras* and ethnically Punjabi Sikhs will not occur, due to the presence of caste endogamy within the Punjabi section of the *Panth* (p.173). Whilst *Gora* Sikhs are not a caste in themselves, a lack of marriages between them and Punjabi Sikhs demonstrate a continuation of caste consciousness.

The continued practice of caste endogamy is evident in matrimonial websites. A Google search for ‘Sikh matrimonials’ will generate an extensive list of websites. A number of general Indian matrimonial sites – such as www.jeevansathi.com/ and www.apnamatch.com/ – have ‘caste’ as part of their search options, even when ‘Sikh’ is selected in the ‘religion’ option.

It might be tempting to conclude that this phenomenon is due to these being ‘generic’ South Asian matrimonial websites. However, even Sikh-specific websites include options for caste – such as www.simplymarry.com/sikh-matrimonials/ and www.sikhmatrimony.com. www.sikh.matrimonialsindia.com allows for prospective brides and grooms to search by caste (this is actually the first option), stating; “*matches made in the same caste are considered to be more successful.*” Many other websites require registration before the search options can be seen, so it is impossible to tell if these websites also have caste search options. Another telling feature is that in the ‘searches related to’ section at the bottom of the page, the first related search is for ‘*Jat* Sikh matrimonials’.

One of the main justifications for caste endogamy is that the Gurus themselves practiced it, making it acceptable. Others argue that, because each caste is different, people of two different castes cannot live together because of different behaviours, views and values. A non-baptised *Saini* woman spoke about the possible tensions caused by an inter-caste marriage, presumably between a high and low caste Sikh: *...many families want their children to marry within caste to preserve tradition and also to avoid any feuds/disagreements if a family member marries from higher castes.*

It is for this reason that inter-caste marriages were and are rare, with some exceptions found in the late-1980s, because – as one *Jat* man in his fifties said; *...people are still very reluctant to arrange marriages outside of their particular caste...even those who are baptised Sikhs...by 'self selection' [arrange marriages] from the same caste.*

One *Jat* man recounted how his uncle arranged for his daughters to marry the sons of his uncle's best friend. These marriages were a cause for concern with some members of the family because the grooms were *Tarkhans*. This precedent could cause more traditional relatives to worry that their own children will follow suit. Some Sikhs will not attend inter-caste weddings due to this fear. He was also critical of Gurdwaras that are anxious about officiating inter-caste marriages.

A thirty-six year old *Keshdhari* man felt that the practice of caste endogamy was directed principally towards the 'lower' castes: *it's not so much to do with general caste but what they class as the 'lower castes'; they think 'we don't want to associate with them because they're lower'.*

Singh & Tatla (2007) point out that inter-caste relationships are still considered taboo but that in the last decade the pressures against them have begun to weaken (p.175). Jhutti-Johal (2011) maintains that the increase in inter-caste marriages can be attributed to a

combination of adhering to the ideals of the Gurus and westernisation (p.70 – 1). One *Ramgarhia* woman who married out of caste (although she did not mention her husband's caste) implied that, although her parents were initially opposed, they eventually accepted it. A *Jat* man indirectly implied a greater acceptance of inter-caste marriages by speaking about parents' desire for their children to have happy marriages irrespective of caste, religion or ethnicity:

...one has to be a realist; in this day and age many Sikh parents would be pleased if their children [married within the community]...In other cases, they'd be quite happy if their children found [good] partners...!

Research makes it clear that there are only two groups (both strict *Khalsa* groups) who do not practice caste endogamy – *Goras*/converts (who are outside the caste system entirely) and the *Namdharis*, whose status as 'Sikhs' is contentious, however the SGPC does class them as such (Takhar, 2005, p.3). Inter-caste marriages have been encouraged within the *Namdhari* community – although both people must be followers of the *Namdhari* tradition (Kaur, 1999, p.42). Nonetheless, marriages between scheduled castes and higher castes do not generally take place – most are between different castes of a similar standing; such as a *Jat* marrying a *Tarkhan*. It could be viewed that the *Jat* is not so much marrying 'down' as they are marrying 'sideways'¹ – their spouse's status is different but not necessarily inferior to their own. The active encouragement of inter-caste marriages is itself interesting, as it implies that the *Namdharis* are trying to strengthen their identity by showing how religiously pious they are. This could be seen as another form of caste consciousness.

¹ In the same way you have 'sideways' movements in employment – the 'status' is the same but still 'different'.

3.5 Future of Caste

Cole & Sambhi (1993) claim that, in India, going against social norms and mores of family and village life would most likely result in hostility and this is why caste has continued amongst Sikhs in India. However, many British Sikhs now have had no direct experience of rural Punjab whilst growing up and have been exposed to the British education system and culture, which has provided second, third and fourth generation Sikhs with a different perspective from the more 'traditional' first generation of settlers.

Gillespie (1995) quotes an essay written on caste amongst Southall Sikhs which states that most young Sikhs do not like to discriminate on the basis of caste. From this she argues that many young Sikhs do form 'special bonds' with friends from the same caste, but this is not the rule and that a collective 'Asian' identity is progressively being formed (Ibid, p.32). It must be emphasised that Gillespie was writing in the mid-1990s. This means that her information is (at the time of this research) around 15 years old. Undoubtedly, Sikhism in Britain has moved on considerably since then – the 'young Sikhs' she refers to are now adults, most likely in their thirties and forties, and probably prominent members of their communities. They may hold significant authority and may have adopted a different view of caste.

From the fieldwork it is evident that Sikhs (young and old) are knowledgeable about their own caste background. The overwhelming impression given is that caste is seen by the 'middle' generation (31-50 year olds) – corresponding to Gillespie's 'young Sikhs' – as part of their heritage but not as a system of social stratification. One participant stated of his Kumar heritage; *I know what I am and I'm not going to hide it, but I don't believe in [the caste system]*. This man actually went as far as to refer to the caste system as 'humorous' and that, in his social groups (made up of various castes), the caste system was the 'butt of all the

jokes'. Another, who identified himself as descending from *Jat* farmers, saw 'caste' as significant in understanding his historical roots, rather than as a social marker. He also expressed some hostility to those who still practice caste;

...if [baptised] Sikhs today can be so mindful of caste, particularly [with]... the marriages they're arranging...then what kind of right do they really have to call themselves Sikhs?... How can this not be hypocrisy? On the one hand it's 'I'm a Sikh' and on the other hand it's 'well, actually... I'd prefer [that my child was married to]...someone from the same caste, thank you very much.'

Although the small sample makes generalisations impossible, there seems to be great optimism that the caste system is, essentially, on 'borrowed time' and that the next generation will destroy it. A young *Amritdhari* man felt that his British values combined with his knowledge of the Gurus' message was responsible for his attitude toward caste. One man said that the only castes that most young Sikhs know about are the *Jats*, *Tarkhans* and *Chamars*; that they do not really know about the other, smaller castes. He felt that this 'invisiblisation' of caste is due to the adoption of the British class system.

It would be simplistic to believe that caste will abruptly disappear with the passing of the initial settler generation, or even with the passing of the 'Second Generation' Sikhs who were born here. If caste does disappear it will most likely be a gradual process, taking place over several generations. In order to obtain a more accurate understanding of the position of caste, a larger study and sample is needed.

CHAPTER 4: DOWRY

The practice of giving a dowry (though of unknown origin) is common in South Asian marriages. The earliest evidence suggests it existed before the 3rd Century BCE and it was a prevalent feature of medieval Indian society – the time of the Sikh Gurus. The Sikh Gurus felt that dowry was a condemnable practice and attempted to eradicate it. However, whilst the teachings contained in the Guru Granth Sahib explicitly forbid the practice, dowry remains a prominent feature of Sikh life today.

This chapter will first define dowry, before proceeding to outline Sikh theological teachings. An analysis of why the practice has continued will follow, which will include analysing the views of the research respondents. The size and quality of dowries amongst British Sikhs will then be analysed, alongside the participants' knowledge and understanding of the practice and their own theological teachings. The chapter will finally conclude by discussing the future prospects of the dowry practice.

4.1 Definition

Dowry is the means through which a Sikh girl acquires the respect of her in-laws and in its literal sense is the gifts given to the bride by her parents at the time of her marriage (Rait, 2005, p.143). These gifts, defined as her property, are referred to as the '*daj*', with the quality and quantity of items given being guided by social norms (Bhachu, 1985, p.104).

The *daj* is also accompanied by 'affinal gifts' given to the groom's family from the bridal family. Bhachu (1985) states that, in the past, the *daj* and affinal gifts were viewed as

one. However, today *daj* only applies to bridal gifts (Bhachu in Amit-Talai & Knowles (ed.), 1996, p.293).

The affinal gifts accompany the ‘gift of a maiden or virgin’ and there is no expectation of reciprocation (Tambiah in Goody & Tambiah, 1975, p.64). These gifts have a unique place in the North Indian culture which differs from other places. For example, Mauss’ (1954) ‘*The Gift*’ argues that the giving of gifts elevates the status of the ‘givers’ (the bride’s family), provided a return is not made, and the status of the ‘receivers’ (the groom’s family) is diminished (p.72). Karve states that Punjabi cultural norms effectively dictate that the bride’s family should not receive any gifts (1953, p.31). If the bride’s family receive something, they bring dishonour to themselves. Thus, the bride’s family’s status is always ‘low’, despite them giving gifts. It is important to note that it is the right of the groom’s family to be constant ‘receivers’ (Bhachu, 1985, p.102).

4.2 The Sikh Gurus

The practice of dowry had many far reaching effects on the patriarchal Indian society in the times of the Gurus. Women, irrespective of their religious background, were seen as inferior to and the property of men. Beliefs that women were distractions on the road to *moksha/mukti* (liberation) and that they were ritually impure because of menstruation contributed to their comparatively poor social status. Widows were expected to commit *Sati* (self-immolation on her husband’s funeral pyre), as a woman’s life was meaningless without a husband.¹ The prevalence of child marriages and the expectation of a dowry meant that the practice of female infanticide – the killing of female children – was widespread (Gangoli,

¹ *Sati* was only performed in some communities but is sometimes thought of as a pan-Indian tradition. Narayan (1997) suggests that this perception derives from the political discussions that took place during British colonial times, with its status “[*transcending*] the actual facts of its limited practice.” (p.65)

2007, p.3), for many parents could not afford a dowry, especially if they had several daughters:

*“There are two causes alleged for female infanticide...the other is...the **habitual expenditure of large sums upon marriage ceremonies...**”* (J. P. Grant, quoted in Oldenburg, 2002, p.41 [emphasis mine])

The Sikh Gurus were witnesses to such behaviour towards women, and especially to the financial burden that dowry caused. The Gurus condemned the practice (as part of their wider teachings on the equality of women), however dowry does not feature prominently in the Guru Granth Sahib. An explicit condemnation is only made in two *shabads* – both composed by Guru Ram Das and appearing side by side:

“O my father, give me the Name of the Lord God as my wedding gift and dowry. Any other dowry, which the self-willed manmukhs offer for show, is only false egotism and a worthless display.” (Guru Granth Sahib, taken from SikhiToTheMax)

Guru Gobind Singh argued that dowry caused marriages to be based on monetary gain (Singha, 2000, p.63). He felt that people who practiced dowry were a threat to the purity of the Khalsa (Ibid). This prohibition has come down in the *Sikh Rehat Maryada* (1994), which also explicitly forbids the practice of dowry. Despite these teachings, dowry is still a prominent feature of Sikhism both in India and in Britain. It has also had many side effects, such as ‘dowry deaths’ in India (Ash, 2003). A recent phenomenon is the selective abortion of female foetuses (female foeticide), which has triggered legislative attempts to prevent the practice (Chamberlain, 2008). Nonetheless, there are ‘backstreet practices’ with many clinics in India still performing such services and being used by families from around the world, including the United Kingdom (Jhutti-Johal, 2011, p.53). The consequence of this is a severe gender ratio discrepancy in India (Lal, 2005, p.128).

4.3 Continuation

Despite the Sikh Gurus, the *Rehat Maryada* and the SGPC being explicit in their rejection of the practice of dowry, the question must be asked – why have Sikhs continued this practice, despite legislative and religious injunctions against it?¹ It would be tempting to suggest that British Sikhs simply do not know the religious teachings with regards to dowry.

However, this can be summarily dismissed if one considers the ethnographic data. Only ten participants *explicitly* knew the Gurus' teachings.² However, most of the other seven participants were able to accurately speculate on the Gurus' teachings by apply their knowledge of Sikhism's wider message of equality to the subject, as demonstrated by a young *Amritdhari* man:

Specifically, I can't say what the Gurus said about dowry, but if you look at their teachings...the Gurus have said that men and women... [should be treated] equally... [and dowry] obviously doesn't fall into that 'category'...

It is evident that the continuation of the dowry system cannot be blamed on religious ignorance and that one must instead consider socio-economic influences. There are two principal academic theories, based primarily on economics, which may provide the answer – dowry is either a form of compensation or inheritance.

4.3.1 Compensation

Dowry has been described as a form of compensation. Traditionally, because women did not work, they were completely dependent upon their husband's financially. Unable to

¹ Legislative measures include the 1961 Dowry Prohibition Act (Croll, 2000, p.122). Religious injunctions include the SGPC's Anti-dowry campaign in 2006 and the requests of Delhi's Sikh community leaders for weddings to be 'slimmed down' on the grounds that the current arrangement encourages the dowry system (Page, 2007).

² The participants comprised of three *Amritdhari* women and seven *Sahajdhari* Sikhs (three men and four women).

monetarily contribute to the household, her dowry would offset her status as financially burdensome. However, this explanation does not account for what has occurred after female economic emancipation in the 20th Century.

Western scholars thought that dowry would diminish as women entered the work force in large numbers, becoming self sufficient and, potentially, the main breadwinner (Jacobsen & Kumar, 2003, p.208). This presupposition has been called into question by the fact that dowries have instead flourished since women entered the workforce. Financial independence has had little influence on the demise of the dowry system instead it has proved decisive in both its continuation and escalation amongst British Sikhs.

4.3.2 Inheritance

Scholars such as Goody point out that for much of India's history daughters were not able to inherit in the same way as sons. Prinsep & Prinsep (2010) show that around 1846 Sikh inheritance practices were male oriented.¹ Within this multi-faceted system male preference was the norm, with conditions laid down for the possible inheritance by brothers of the deceased and nephews (p.146-7). This form of gender-selective inheritance was the norm until the mid-20th Century. In the 1950s laws began to be passed in India which drastically altered the inheritance rights of daughters, with subsequent legislation being passed as recently as 2005. This legislation has removed the previous inequalities that denied equal inheritance rights to daughters – for example, they could now inherit land.

As a result, Goody & Tambiah, (1975) have argued that dowry was, effectively, a form of pre-mortem inheritance; the daughter received her inheritance – a substantial amount

¹ This publication is a reproduction of a book published in 1846.

of her parent's wealth – in her *daj*. This inheritance was in the form of moveable items, rather than immovable property, such as land which had to remain within the family.

However, scholars such as Madan (1975 cited in Agarwal, 1994, p.135) and Sharma (1980) dispute this (Agarwal, Ibid). Sharma (in Pottier, 1999), argues that 'real' dowry is not transferred solely to the bride and does not provide her with any autonomy (p.62). Bhachu (in Amit-Talai & Knowles (ed.), 1996) also supports this argument – dowries during the 1920's to 1940's were given to the matriarch of the groom's family to redistribute as she wished (p.293). This demonstrates the complete lack of control the bride had over her dowry – something which would not be expected of any form of inheritance.

Even if the pre-mortem inheritance model is accepted, it only accounts for the continuation of dowries in India up until the mid-20th Century. Egalitarian British inheritance laws also cast doubt on the applicability of this theory for British Sikhs but most importantly women are no longer economically burdensome due to their entry into the workforce.

Neither of the previous theories takes into account the place of dowry within the socio-cultural subconscious of south Asians. Cultural practices are often difficult for communities to abandon, even in light of religious injunctions.¹ This may explain why dowry has survived the explicit condemnation of the Gurus. The research sample demonstrates quite clearly that most Sikhs understand that dowry is part of Indian culture, rather than any religious movement (see Table.13).

¹ Numerous 'pagan' practices persisted in Europe after its widespread Christianisation, despite the demonisation of pre-Christian European societies and practices as 'Satanic' e.g. dancing around the Maypole.

Table.13 – Dowry: Religion or Culture?

	Religion	Culture	Both/Unsure	No Ans./Don't Know
NB. Men		3	1	2
NB. Fem	1	5		
Bap. Men		1		
Bap. Fem		3		1
Total	1	12	1	3

The one non-baptised woman who identified dowry as part of religion did not give any further comments explaining her response. However, as another non-baptised woman (who identified dowry a cultural practice) also said that: *[dowry] might be related to Hinduism – the predominant religion in India*, it is possible to advance a potential theory as to this confusion. Hinduism – the dominant religion of India – has permeated Indian society so extensively that the line between ‘religion’ and ‘culture’ is indistinct.¹ Whilst dowry is not a Hindu practice, this equivocation of religion and culture has lead to Hindu religious practices being seen as part of South Asian culture and (potentially) vice-versa.² This might account for why this one woman mistakenly identifies dowry as a religious, rather than a cultural, practice.

¹ This raises the issue of the relation between religion and culture, as discussed by Narayan (1997). It is particularly important when considering ‘diffused religion’ – a phrase coined by Roberto Cipriani to describe the phenomenon whereby religion has become intermingled with society throughout a population (Dobbelaere in Swatos, 1998, p.93). It is possible that this is what has happened with Hinduism and Indian society.

² Narayan, U. (1997) bases this on the fact that; dowry is not a pan-Hindu practice, and; it is practiced by non-Hindus (p.107).

4.3.3 Tradition, Status and Pride

Are there any reasons for dowry's continuation which can be linked to its status as a cultural phenomenon? From the ethnographic research, it was clear that a number of Sikhs identified 'tradition' as a key cause for the continuation of dowry. The practice of giving dowries has been in place for thousands of years and as such, there may be a strong expectation that a dowry will be given at a wedding. A non-baptised man felt that this expectation was the reason why it was still practiced. One non-baptised participant spoke of dowry being a custom and went as far as to say that not giving one 'may be viewed as shameful'. Several participants viewed it as a status symbol, with one *Amritdhari* woman linking it to Sikhs showing off their (presumably economic) status. Another *Amritdhari* woman felt it had become a 'fashion statement or a must'. A non-baptised man also stated that families use the dowry as a status symbol.

4.4 Escalation

Jhutti (in Menski 1998) states that there are three 'standard' categories of bridal gifts – clothing/accessories; cosmetics/jewellery (including gold) and; household items although houses and cars have also been included. The composition, quantity and quality of the items included: "...has not changed over time, but [it] has increased qualitatively and quantitatively since migration" (Ibid, p.183).

One of the main changes in the clothes is that they are now predominately 'Western' in style, with women only likely to wear 'traditional' Asian clothes when attending special events. The quality and quantity of these clothes is increasing (Jhutti in Menski, 1998, p.176). The giving of gold and jewellery has also seen an increase over time and it is now common for approximately 8-14 ounces of gold to be given. Diamonds and other expensive

jewels set in gold are sometimes provided by wealthier parents (Rait, 2005, p.109). Large 'white goods' have become more popular than smaller household items, although they are less likely to be included, unless the bride is establishing her *own* household. As a result, parents may give money alongside the clothes and jewellery.

What is clear is that the size, quality and composition of dowries in many ways reflect the class position of the bride's family. Jhutti (in Menski, 1998) states that the less wealthy give gifts because they are visually impressive, whilst rich parents may buy a car or a house, to display their wealth more effectively than giving a cash payment. Parents want people to see that they have spent a lot of money on their daughter, as this will enhance their *izzat* and status

As with bridal gifts, the quality and quantity of affinal gifts has increased since migration to Britain. Gifts given to the groom typically include; clothes, a gold *Kara*, a ring and watch. It may also include a car, money and even a house; six respondents explicitly stated that dowry involves cash/money/payment. In the past, affinal gifts of clothes, jewellery were only given to the groom and his parents (Rait, 2005, p.110).¹ Jhutti (in Menski, 1998) notes that now the groom's siblings and their families receive clothes and/or jewellery. Rait (2005) states that the groom's grandparents and extended family can also be recipients of affinal gifts (Ibid).

It is clear that dowries are getting larger and this perception was shared by both baptised/*Amritdharis* and non-baptised/*Sahajdharis* Sikhs (see Table.14).

¹ Some money (no more than £101) is also given to the groom's father.

Table.14 – Are Dowries Getting Larger?

	Yes	No	No Ans./Don't Know/Non-Committal
NB. Men	4		2
NB. Fem	3	2	1
Bap. Men		1	
Bap. Fem	2	1	1
Total (%)	9	4	4

However, there were some who disagreed, with one baptised woman stating that the amount given depends upon what the family can afford to give, with some families agreeing to 'keep things simple'. Another woman, who felt that Sikhs do not give dowries, also disagreed, saying that: *...today's generation [believes] in religion, not in these customs. A young Sahajdhari woman also disagreed, citing its illegal status in India and stating that: some families are so against it that they encourage the girl not to bring anything from her life before the marriage.* While these four respondents did not feel that dowries were increasing, the majority of the sample felt that dowry escalation is a reality due to a number of reasons.

4.4.1 Causes

The escalation in the size of the *daj* is due primarily to the increased economic affluence of the British Sikh community. One respondent, when talking about Caste, mentioned that up until the mid-70's most Sikhs worked in factories and foundries with comparatively poor wages. This would undoubtedly have limited the capacity of families to give ostentatious dowries. Now, with more 'middle-class' Sikhs in Britain, the scope for

larger dowries has grown. Economic prosperity is one reason for the increased size of dowries:

That is just a sign of how well our community is doing. If...I marry my daughter off, and I'm doing well, and decide to buy [her] a car... that doesn't mean that I'm giving her a massive dowry; I've got the means [to pay for it]...and I can offer the gift...

Whilst parents have more money, so do the prospective brides (many of them working), meaning they can contribute to their own dowries (Bhachu, 1985, p.151). The increasing opulence of dowries is: “*undoubtedly linked to the earning power of brides themselves*” (Rait 2005 p.111), who purchase items for their dowry. Despite this, many brides will still claim that their parents bought the items; otherwise the parents' standing in the community might be damaged (Jhutti in Menski, 1998, p.185). Women who are not working also contribute to their dowries. Nevertheless, Rait (Ibid) and Jhutti (in Menski, 1998, p.184) state that dowries from unemployed or poorly paid brides are smaller than well-paid brides.

Dowries are also being increasingly used as a means to ‘keep up with the Jones’ and to elevate the social status (or *izzat*) of the bride's family. Wealthy parents, as a matter of prestige, often give larger dowries than traditional social conventions demand (Rait, 2005 p.108), demonstrating their financial security and status within the community. As a result, a dowry has become a means of competing with relatives and neighbours (Jhutti in Menski, 1998, p.191).

One woman felt the escalation was due to families showing off their wealth. Another woman felt that there is a pressure to display wealth, despite this being contrary to Sikh values of modesty and responsible use of wealth. A *Sahajdhari* man also felt that the scale of dowries was increasing because: *...of status/culture [and the] pressure to ‘impress’ the community*. This underlying notion of pride/social status was referred to by a number of

participants, with a *Sahajdhari* man stating that families use the dowry as a status symbol. Another woman suggested that; *...it could be the bride's family showing off their wealth to [the] groom's family.*

Whilst all of the above reasons for giving a dowry are the result of voluntary actions, Jhutti (in Menski, 1998) analyses another cause of escalation – demands being made by the groom's family. Most demands are made after an engagement has been announced, as this places the bride-to-be's family in a difficult situation. Failure to receive the number or quality of gifts that they demanded may result in the wedding being cancelled (Gillespie, 1995, p.42) or the bride may be abused once married. One *Mona* man did not refer to affinal gifts per se, but did speak about abuses. He felt that the basic idea of dowry (*daj*/bridal gifts) is a good idea, but that it has become 'subverted': *...if your daughter is being married off...then it's nice to be able to...give her some tools to take with her... I think the problem comes when there's a sort of expectation... [from] the other party...*

One *Amritdhari* woman, who had spoken about dowry as a possible means for the bridal parents to provide for the new couple, identified greed as the main cause of escalation. Another *Amritdhari* woman, who called dowry a 'disease', gave the following cause for escalation; *[t]here is no deterrent and people are getting more materialistic and want more and the best way is to make demands on the family and not have to spend a penny yourself on living life luxuriously.*¹

¹ It should be noted that this participant could *also* be referring to brides who demand certain items from their parents.

One woman who mentioned demands did so not with reference to dowry, but to lavish wedding receptions, which she saw as part of the equation; *[It may] not be a dowry but it's [still] fulfilling the demands the boy's side set.*

Rait (2005) states that female in-laws often bicker over 'petty matters' in relation to dowries, such as the quality and quantity of items. However, whilst in-laws in general can be very cruel to the bride because of a 'poor dowry/affinal gits', asking for a dowry or making demands of the bride's family are frowned upon (p.111). Rait emphasises that news of any demands travels around the community quickly, embarrassing the groom's family and potentially ruining the eligibility of the male members. If the groom's family is known to have made demands, women from 'good families' will no longer be suggested for the men in his family (Ibid).

These demands did not feature as prominently as might be expected, however there appears to be a general condemnation for the guilty family. One respondent described the practice as 'out of order and totally wrong'. A young *Amritdhari* man said that: *people just think it's immoral to ask so much from the other side and make them pay for everything or expect them to give so much; people just don't think that it's right anymore.*

A forty-nine year old *Mona* man was opposed to the giving of dowries and spoke strongly against those who practice it and even make the exchanges within Gurdwara grounds:

...I find that more offensive than ['Behzti']!¹ What's more offensive to the Guru?... [H]e forbids you to practice this form of ownership of human beings and control of their lives and oppression...and then to have it done within the very courtyards in the presence of the Guru – that's the ultimate offence.

¹ 'Behzti' was a controversial theatre production by a Sikh play write for, amongst other things, depicting rape and murder in a Gurdwara.

There is evidence of some families ‘taking a stand’ against the abuses of dowry:

*...I do recall an incident a few years ago when a family friend did not allow their daughter to marry into a particular family because the groom’s family were **demanding** more money and more goods [emphasis mine].*

Speaking about a conversation he had with his mother on the subject, a young *Amritdhari* man said: *she said that she would not take a single penny off of the other family.*

Whilst this may be true, it is possible that a family will begin to make demands after the marriage.

4.5 Future of Dowry

Despite dowries having increased in size and quality the future of this practice is somewhat uncertain, with a number of participants foreseeing the end of the practice. However, this optimism should be tempered when one considers the data, which demonstrates that many Sikhs do not actually possess an accurate understanding of what dowry is (Table.15). For example, a thirty-six year old married *Keshdhari* man, who did not include bridal gifts in his definition of dowry, said: *[They are] classed as a dowry but [they are] not – [they are] a gift; we’re giving her wedding gifts.*

Table.15 – What is Dowry?

	Bridal Gifts	Affinal Gifts	Both	No answer
NB. Men		3	2	1
NB. Fem	1	4	1	
Bap. Men		1		
Bap. Fem	1		1	2
Total	2	8	4	3

Two men – a young *Amritdhari* and a *Keshdhari* – identified ‘dowry’ with the groom’s family demanding items. A non-baptised woman described how a dowry could be the result of: *either...the groom’s family demanding certain goods/cash or, more subtly, with the bride’s family providing goods/gifts which the bride will pass on to the family.* This equivocation of ‘dowry’ with affinal gifts has significant implications when one considers the long-term viability of the practice. Given this association, it is perhaps more appropriate to question the future of affinal gifts, as opposed to the future of the *daj*.

One forty-nine year old *Mona* felt that practices such as dowry will ‘invisibilise’ because there is nothing in British society to inflame them. The young *Amritdhari* man also spoke about how Western values, combined with Sikhism, were informing the practices of the community. The thirty-six year old *Keshdhari* man said: *In this country, we’re trying to eradicate it... It doesn’t really exist to us; it’s what we’ve seen in films and what’s been said through whispers...*

The fallout from the financial crisis which began in the late 2000s may also be significant. In the coming ‘age of austerity’ extravagant dowries and weddings may become a

thing of the past. One respondent said: *what will be interesting is to see what happens in 10 years time... as the current recession kicks in... whether the size of weddings and... dowries will get a bit smaller.*

With this religious awareness within a British cultural context and the fallout from the financial crisis still yet to be felt in its entirety, it is tempting to predict the demise of the dowry system. However, given its apparent resilience thus far, it would be short sighted to predict that dowry will disappear from the Sikh community of the West Midlands in the near future. What seems more likely is that it will take on the western guise of wedding gifts – there is some evidence from the research sample that this has already occurred with the *daj*. A more worrying possibility is that dowries will be in some sense driven ‘underground’, as has already been observed by an *Amritdhari* woman and a *Sahajdhari* man – with covert delivery of dowries taking place.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The religious practices of Sikhs have not been subjected to an extensive academic study. The central hypothesis of this thesis was to show that there is a discrepancy between Sikh teachings and Sikh practice; that many people who identify themselves as ‘Sikh’ do not observe all of the teachings of the religion. The ethnographic research of this thesis, consisting of interviews and questionnaires, supports many of the claims made by scholars and has demonstrated the hypothesis.

The difficulties in recruitment (outlined in the methodology) cannot be overemphasised, as it has had a drastic effect on this research, making it virtually impossible to draw anything but tentative conclusions. Many Sikhs approached were initially enthusiastic but did not make contact or return the questionnaires. It is unclear why this occurred – they might have seen no worth in this avenue of research. However, it is also likely that the investigation of more controversial topics (such as caste and dowry) had a negative impact on recruitment. One prominent Sikh institution was willing to assist, however recruitment was delayed as they contacted the university to discuss the possibility of financial reimbursement for their support with the research.

Whilst one participant – a *Mona* man – felt that this research was a service to and beneficial for the British Sikh community as a whole, this might have been an isolated view. There may also have been a hesitance amongst Sikhs to ‘air their dirty linen in public’. These difficulties have also left this research highly susceptible to refutation and criticism from other academics.

With the sample only containing five *Amritdhari* Sikhs (making it unrepresentative of all baptised Sikhs), it was disconcerting that three of these respondents (all women) were often guarded in their replies appearing to merely repeat official doctrine or gave simple one-word answers to questions. Of the two *Amritdharis* (a man and a woman) who answered more freely, one was in the 18-30 year old age bracket. This may be indicative a generational and gender issue, with older Sikh women being more cautious with a male outsider.

There are a number of possible reasons why baptised Sikhs have proven to be both difficult to recruit and comparatively uncooperative, aside from distrusting an outsider. It is possible that baptised Sikhs do not acknowledge or are not interested in discussing the diversity of the *panth* as they have adopted the more segregationist ideas typical of some orthodox forms of religion – in order to be a member of the religion, one must entirely conform to the orthodox definition. There is also the possibility that these Sikhs have adopted a more isolationist mindset with regards to their religion and do not wish to engage with those outside of the community. It would be interesting to see if similar research, conducted by an insider, yielded different results, with a higher participation of baptised Sikhs. A potential future avenue of research would be to compare the responses of these Sikhs with different areas of the UK. Despite its failings, this research demonstrates that Sikh religious practice is not monolithic and static. Instead, it is fluid, being influenced by a variety of factors; economics, politics, education and culture just to name a few.

This study focussed on the three areas of religious practices: the observance of the 5 Ks, caste and dowry. Whilst the 5 Ks (and the associated Khalsa identity) have formed the basis for the ‘standardised’ external Sikh identity, they were not formalised until relatively recently. Despite the prescriptive nature of the *Rehat Maryada*, a strict observance of the 5 Ks is limited to baptised Sikhs. All evidence points to a plurality of observance with regards to

the 5 Ks, with a number of distinct ‘categories’ or ‘types’ of external adherence, ranging from the understated to the overt amongst non-baptised Sikhs.

This diversity of observance has had little effect on theological knowledge in the sample as a whole, although a lack of understanding of what the 5Ks are and their significance has been observed amongst younger *Sahajdhari* Sikhs. However, a number of changes have occurred in the observance of the 5 Ks, with some – such as *Kesh* – either being abandoned or reinterpreted in a more North-West European cultural style. Others, such as the *Kara*, are reflecting the aspiration and financial status of the wearer, either being ornate or made of precious metals. With regards to the preservation of the 5 Ks – and the external Sikh identity that they represent – baptised and non-baptised Sikhs alike, particularly the young, see it as vital that preaching and sermons in Gurdwaras should be done in English – especially as many young Sikhs cannot read, write or speak Punjabi or *Gurmukhi*. Despite these conflicting dynamics, the overwhelming image is of a community that is losing its baptised identity – that the wearing of the 5 Ks has become more of a fashion or cultural symbol.

Sikhs in modern Britain in many ways exist independently of strict religious injunctions. Observance of the 5 Ks is in a state of flux, with some Sikhs deeply concerned over the perceived decline in adherence. However, there seems to be no prevailing view amongst the community as a whole as to whether this perceived decline will continue unabated. The overall impression given is that the relationship between Sikh identity and practice is changing. The number of *externally* ‘nominal Sikhs’ is increasing; fewer Sikhs are making the commitment to wearing the 5 Ks.

Despite the theological rejection and cultural status of caste practices and distinctions, these have remained until this day. The hierarchical structure has been modified due to the agrarian society of the Punjab, which placed the *Jats* at the top. Nonetheless, the Sikh caste

system has also flourished in the urban landscape of Britain. The retention of caste names by *Sahajdharis* is not theologically problematic, as the exclusive use of Khalsa names are not required of them. However, the reluctance of many prominent *Amritdhari* Sikhs to completely abandon their family/caste name is a clear sign of a discrepancy between religious theory and religious practice. Whilst this practice has not been researched extensively – and was not discussed by the participants – it is clear from supplemental sources (such as internet searches and blogs) that it is a cause for concern amongst some members of the community. Others dismiss this as a pragmatic approach to various aspects of life – such as school registers and official documentation.

Many Sikh castes have developed their own caste-specific Gurdwaras, either to assert their own distinctive identity or due to perceived marginalisation in mainstream Gurdwaras. The most overt retention of caste practices are observed in marriage arrangements, with caste endogamy being the norm. Inter-caste marriages are rare, but are not as taboo as they were in earlier decades. It is possible that, as caste becomes less prominent in the subconscious of future generations, these will become more commonplace. Whilst all of the participants held negative views about caste practices in general, it is reasonable to infer that this is not representative of the *panth* as a whole, given the preponderance of caste distinctions amongst British Sikhs.

The final contradictory practice that was looked at was dowry. Dowries are still given by Sikh parents despite a litany of theological and Indian legal injunctions that have attempted to abolish the practice. Economic developments that (one would have thought) would present a significant threat to its continuation have instead had the opposite effect and become a significant factor in the escalation in the scale of gift giving. The complex relations based on *izzat* within the community have also played a role in this increase.

The exact nature of dowry is not well understood by Sikhs (of all ages) in the West Midlands, with the term often being used purely to designate affinal gifts, but what is clear is that there is a widespread acknowledgement that Sikhs still practice dowry, with many of the research participants expressing critical views of the custom. As for the community's reaction to the abuses that take place, there is some disagreement amongst academics. However, the research sample makes it clear that there are Sikhs – baptised and non-baptised – who are speaking out and condemning those guilty of these abuses.

Condemned practices such as caste and dowry have continued unabated and in some instances have escalated dramatically. This is in spite of a widespread understanding of the Gurus' teachings on these issues and the presence of highly critical views amongst participants. These Sikhs (many of them non-baptised) seem to be embracing the Gurus teachings on a variety of other subjects, such as caste and dowry. This conclusion can be gleaned from the ways in which they speak about the affects of these practices. These Sikhs could be described as 'externally nominal' but 'internally observant'.

It seems unlikely that future generations of this type of Sikh will abandon the external image of the Khalsa Sikh but remain committed to the Sikh teachings about such things as caste and dowry. What seems more likely is that some Sikhs will move away from Sikhism as a religion altogether yet still identify themselves as 'Sikh' due to birth. These people will effectively be 'ethnically Sikh' and may even continue such cultural practices as caste and dowry, conflating 'Sikh' with 'Punjabi'. Of those who are 'religiously Sikh', there will be a noticeable difference between those who join the Khalsa early and those who do not adopt the distinctive uniform of their faith until much later in life – they will technically be 'nominal' Sikhs until that time.

Which of these two religious groupings will be the larger is difficult to ascertain. In the immediate future it is likely that ‘nominal’ Sikhs will be the larger. It is important to note that even *Sahajdhari* Sikhs seem to be conforming more closely to the teachings of their Gurus, meaning that their own children are likely to have a better understanding of Sikh values and practices. This might provide a platform for future generations to become more religiously observant in both an internal and external manner.

This may already be evident, with some participants stating that many of the younger Sikhs in their teens and early twenties are becoming baptised and that the ratio of *Amritdhari* to *Sahajdhari* is higher amongst them. There is no real evidence to prove this, and further research is required for a definitive conclusion, but if this is the case and it continues, the notion of an ‘externally nominal’ adult Sikh may disappear in the following centuries.

Irrespective of what the future holds for the external expression of Sikhism, it is clear that religious practice does not always conform to Sikh teachings. Current cultural baggage makes the relationship complex, with many inconsistencies present. However, with many identifying this cultural baggage as just that – culture, rather than religion – there is already evidence that suggests something of a ‘reformation’ might occur in British Sikhism, with a reassertion of Sikh religious values and practices. It would appear that, whilst the external Sikh identity is waning, there is still a strong relationship between the designator ‘Sikh’ and the religious values and practices as set down by the Gurus. However, in order for more definitive conclusions to be drawn, continuing research on a larger scale needs to take place.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 – RECRUITMENT FLYER

Interested in Helping with some Academic Research?

Hello, I am Barry Keegan and I am a postgraduate student at the University of Birmingham. I also volunteer at the West Midlands Faiths Forum (WMFF). I am conducting research on Sikh practice in contemporary Britain and I am looking for participants. This will be a study examining whether British Sikhs adhere to Sikh religious teachings. More information will be provided after any initial enquiries.

My research will involve interviewing interested parties on specific subjects. Interviewees have the right to withdraw from the research at anytime and any data/information concerning them will be destroyed. There will be no adverse effects of withdrawal.

The interviews will be recorded and then transcribed later, with the audio recording being erased. All information on the participants will be stored electronically on a password protected system. Audio recordings and consent forms will be kept in a filing system which only myself and appropriate authorities will have access to. In accordance with the University's Code of Practice for Research, this information will be kept for ten years, after which time the information (data, recordings and consent forms) will be destroyed. Participants will be allowed to request copies of data, but only their own.

Participants **must** be 18 years or older.

If you are interested then please fill in the form attached below and send it to;

Barry Keegan

West Midlands Faiths Forum

138 Digbeth

Birmingham B5 6DR

If you wish to reply electronically, you can email me at [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] would like to contact my supervisor, their details are;

Dr. Jagbir Jhutti-Johal

DPhil Lecturer Sikh studies

School of Philosophy, Theology and Religion

0121 415 8338

[REDACTED]

Name: _____

Address: _____

Contact Telephone (Optional): _____

Email (Optional): _____

I am interested in participating in your research and would like more information please.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX 2 – PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM

Thank you for expressing an interest in my research. This is for an MPhil (B) course, which is one of the Master's Degree courses offered by the University of Birmingham. This will be a study examining Sikh practices in the Midlands, compared to Sikh religious teachings. I would like to gather data from all sectors of the Sikh community to ensure that my sample gives an accurate representation of the Sikh community in 2010. My analysis will include a comparison to previous academic research. The research will focus on three specific areas;

- Observance of the 5 K's
- Caste
- Dowry

If you are still interested, then please fill in the questionnaire provided **OR**, if you are willing and able to be interviewed, then please contact me to make arrangements.

All participants' identities will be confidential and will be referred to in the research by an alpha – numerical ID (e.g. Participant A-12). Participants will be asked their gender and whether they are a baptised (Amritdhari) Sikh or not. Please state the name of the Gurdwara you attend (if any) on the consent form provided (the Gurdwara **WILL NOT** be mentioned by name in the research).

The interviews will take place at a neutral venue to maintain participants' anonymity. All participants may request a copy of the transcript of their interview if they wish, so that they may approve it; a transcript will not be included unless it has been approved by the participant (unless they have waved the right and not requested a copy).

To return the questionnaire or to contact me to arrange an interview, please contact me at;

Barry Keegan

West Midlands Faiths Forum

138 Digbeth

Birmingham B5 6DR



Thank you again for expressing an interest and offering your help and support.

Barry Keegan

APPENDIX 3 – PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Name: _____

Address (Optional): _____

Contact Telephone (Optional): _____

Email Address (Optional): _____

I declare that;

- I am 18+ years old
- I understand the subjects being investigated and the purpose of the research

I give my consent to participate in this research knowing that:

- In the event of an interview taking place, it will be recorded and that it will be later transcribed, with the audio recording being erased.
- My personal information will be kept confidential, with myself being referred to in the research by an alpha – numeric ID
- I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time and that any data/information concerning me will be destroyed.

- I may request a copy of the transcript of my questionnaire/interview for me to approve/amend if I so wish
- I will receive a copy of this declaration for my own records

I declare the above information to be accurate

I give my informed consent

I would like to be sent a copy of the transcript of my interview/questionnaire

Please state which (if any) Gurdwara you attend (the Gurdwara **WILL NOT** be mentioned by name in the research)

Signed: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX 4 – QUESTIONNAIRE

Questionnaire ID (to be filled in by the researcher): _____

Gender (please circle): Male/Female

Are you a baptised (Amritdhari) Sikh (please circle): Yes/No

Age: 18-30 31-50 50+

The following questions are on the subjects of; observance of the 5 Ks, caste and dowry.

Please include any information you feel is relevant (**continue on a separate sheet if necessary**)

Observance of the 5 Ks

1. What are the 5 K's – who wears them?

2. Have you noticed any changes in observance of the 5 K's? What are they and why?

3. These changes seem to be readily accepted by the community; why?

4. What do you think the long term effects of these changes might be? Do they concern you?

5. Do these changes mean there are different types of Sikh?

Caste

6. Do you consider yourself as belonging to a caste?

Yes

No

If so, what is it? _____

7. In your opinion, what is caste? Is it part of religion, culture or both? Why?

8. In your opinion, is caste still observed by Sikhs? If so, how and why is it still significant?

9. What did the Gurus say about caste?

10. Why do you think there are caste-specific Gurdwaras?

Dowry

11. What is dowry? Do Sikhs still practice it? If so, why?

12. Research suggests that dowries are getting larger – do you agree/disagree and why?

13. Is dowry part of religion, culture or both?

Religion Culture Both

Why?

14. What did the Gurus say about dowry?

15. What effect do you think the practice of dowry has had on the community, both in the UK and in India?

Thank you for taking part in this research.

Please return it to;

Barry Keegan

West Midlands Faiths Forum

138 Digbeth

Birmingham B5 6DR



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