

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

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Politics of Equality:

Caste and Gender Paradoxes in the Sikh Community

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Political Science

by

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For my mother, Jass Behl, with love.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Politics of Equality:

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by

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My dissertation asks: How do ordinary Sikhs maintain a belief in equality while also participating in caste- and gender-based discrimination? How do Scheduled Caste Sikhs and Sikh women take political action in a community that engages in discrimination, yet denies its very existence? By drawing on in-depth interviews I conducted in Punjab, India, the dissertation (1) explains paradoxes shared by many Sikhs who vehemently oppose casteism and sexism as antithetical to Sikhism, but simultaneously engage discrimination; and (2) develops a meaning and understanding of agency from within the set of symbolic, institutional, and material practice, which uphold and maintain the paradoxes of equality. What makes this particular contradiction interesting is the fact that a majority of Sikhs maintain that Sikhism has eliminated casteism and sexism even though discrimination is a common, everyday lived experience. I make sense of this contradiction through Linda Alcoff's (2006) account of the self and Margaret Somers' (1994) notion of narrative identity. I argue that despite a belief in and commitment to equality, a structure of hierarchy exists among Sikhs; and this particular hierarchical structure is tied to specific material interests, narrative methods employed to maintain and challenge these interests, and social actors who are, in turn, privileged and displaced.

## Chapter One – Introduction: Politics in Unusual Places

In 2005 I spent the summer in India traveling throughout Punjab, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh, visiting universities, historic sites, and religious temples and shrines in an effort both to generate research questions and to locate fieldwork sites and archival resources. During this time, Biji, my grandmother, who was in Punjab, suffered a stroke, was admitted to hospital, and eventually passed away. What began as an intellectual endeavor quickly transformed into a deeply personal experience.

My grandmother's funeral began with a ritual bathing and dressing, followed by a procession from our familial home to the local cremation grounds. At the cremation grounds, we said our final goodbyes to Biji while listening to Sikh scripture, and then Biji was moved to the funeral pyre. Without much thought, I followed Biji. Within minutes of reaching the funeral pyre, Dhavan uncle, a family friend, approached me and kindly said in English, "It isn't appropriate for you to be here." As I looked around, I realized that I was the only woman among a large crowd of men. In response, I said in English, "I would like to stay with Biji." He repeated his request again, and I refused again. As I tried to move closer to Biji, I was forcibly restrained. An older woman grabbed me and began to pull me from the location of the funeral pyre. She repeatedly stated in Punjabi, "You will cause harm by being here. Your presence is inauspicious. You will cause harm by being here." As she dragged me away from Biji, I stated in Punjabi, "The harm has already occurred: Biji is dead." I struggled and repeatedly called for my father's help when an unknown man stepped forward from the crowd and freed me from the older woman's grasp.

I was utterly shocked by the experience. How could I cause harm by being close to Biji, close to her funeral pyre? And whom would I cause harm to? Why did my gender mark me as the source of potential harm and inauspiciousness? Why did another woman try to physically remove me from this particular location? And what did any of this have to do with a Sikh funeral ceremony? Initially, my only response was to think of Biji. When Biji was alive she referred to me as her beloved child. However, after she passed, at the cremation grounds, I became her granddaughter, an identity visibly marked by gender. This gendered difference, in turn, limited my access to and inclusion in my grandmother's funeral. Religious Studies scholar Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh notes that at her mother's funeral she was not allowed to light the funeral pyre:

Since time immemorial, Indian society has depended on the eldest son to ignite the pyre of his mother and father...In my family, there was only one son. My brother was in the United States. He could not make it to our mother's funeral. Who could be entrusted to perform his profound duty? A surrogate had to be found. From among all the men surrounding Mother's body, my father asked his former secretary, who had been like a son to my parents, to light the pyre. I did not even question his choice. In the male-defined and male-controlled web of action, I was not even aware of being eliminated (2000, 64-65).

Just as Nikky Singh experienced sexism at her mother's funeral, I experienced it at my grandmother's funeral. My gendered identity marked me as "other" within the Sikh cremation rites; it determined, to a large extent, my access to power and privilege, as well as my inclusion within a Sikh funeral.

My personal story complicates my relationship with and understanding of Sikhism because my lived experience as a woman, as a granddaughter, is in tension with Sikh scriptural prescriptions that call for gender equality in the Sikh community. This research project can be read as a linking of my personal story with a larger body of stories in an effort

to understand the profoundly collective and historical context within which stories of gendered difference and inequities of power, privilege, inclusion, marginalization, and discrimination make sense. The goal of this project is to understand my personal story and the stories of others by examining the tension between a Sikh scriptural call to equality and the common, everyday lived experience of caste- and gender-based discrimination and exclusion present in the Sikh community.

Gender discrimination in religious life is present throughout India; however, much is at stake in exploring this issue among Sikhs in particular. Sikhism has been widely hailed as solving caste- and gender-based discrimination through radical and revolutionary institutions, practices, and norms initiated by Sikh Gurus. Everyday lived experience in the Sikh community, however, indicates that equality has yet to be achieved. Sikhism espouses a radical equality and egalitarianism by placing the Untouchable on par with the Brahman, and woman on par with man. Guru Nanak, the first Guru, believed that *Vahiguru* [God] was the creator and protector of all individuals, and therefore, everyone was entitled to religious salvation irrespective of caste and gender differences. In short, Sikhism makes no allowances for hierarchical distinctions. As a result, all Sikhs irrespective of age, gender, or social status visit *gurdwara* [Sikh temple], participate in congregational prayer, and partake in *langar* [communal kitchen] and *karah parsad* [blessed food]. Yet, to some degree, the contradictory situation of inclusion and inequality continues in the Sikh community. Daily life in the Sikh community is filled with contradictions: while Scheduled Caste [SC] Sikhs' ability to freely enter *gurdwaras* points to the unprecedented ways in which Untouchables have been integrated into Sikhism, the fact that these same SC Sikhs are often given food after higher-caste Sikhs shows that casteism is still present among Sikhs. Similarly, while

women's direct relationship with the Guru Granth [Sikh scripture], unmediated by men, signals the unprecedented ways in which women have been granted access to Sikh religious life, the fact that female *granthis* [keepers or custodians of the Guru Granth] are rare, if not non-existent, indicates that sexism continues in the Sikh community.

This project, "Politics of Equality: Caste and Gender Paradoxes in the Sikh Community," seeks to make sense of such contradictions, to better understand how caste and gender inequality persist in the Sikh community despite a genuine belief in and commitment to equality, and substantial efforts to create equality. This project asks: How do ordinary Sikhs maintain a belief in equality while also participating in caste- and gender-based discriminatory practices? And how do Scheduled Caste Sikhs and Sikh women take political action in a community that engages in discrimination, yet denies its very existence? By drawing on in-depth interviews I conducted in Punjab, India, the dissertation (1) explains paradoxes shared by many Sikhs who vehemently oppose casteism and sexism as antithetical to Sikhism, but simultaneously engage in caste- and gender-based discrimination; and (2) develops a meaning and understanding of agency from within the set of symbolic, institutional, and material practice, which uphold and maintain the paradoxes of equality.<sup>1</sup> What makes this particular contradiction interesting is the fact that a majority of Sikhs, including Scheduled Caste Sikhs and Sikh women, maintain that Sikhism has eliminated casteism and sexism even though discrimination is a common, everyday lived experience.

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<sup>1</sup> I draw from Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety*, which calls for "uncoupling the analytical notion of agency from the politically prescriptive project of feminism, with its propensity to valorize those operations of power that subvert and resignify the hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality" (2005, 153-154). According to Mahmood, by uncoupling agency from subversion and resignification, one is able to acknowledge and explain "modalities of agency whose meaning and effect are not captured within the logic of subversion and resignification of hegemonic terms of discourse" (2005, 154-154). As a result, Mahmood argues, "the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity" (2005, 14-15).

This project is organized around two interlocking themes: deconstructing a politics of equality and understanding quotidian political action. The questions of lived experience, subjectivity, and visible, marked identity run centrally through both of these interlocking themes. I intervene by problematizing current notions of equality and agency present in the Sikh community by demonstrating that Sikhs construct, reinforce, and challenge social hierarchies through narrative identities in ways that are complex and often surprising. This is not only an empirical study intended to provide an accurate depiction of contemporary Sikh politics of equality and Sikh quotidian political action, it is also a theoretical contribution that forces a re-evaluation of social-scientific understandings of identity, the way in which identity functions on a daily basis, and how identity interacts with agency.

To make sense of a politics of equality and quotidian political action, I turn to Linda Alcoff's (2006) account of identity and Margaret Somers' (1994) notion of narrative identity to understand this particular contradiction as an uneasy interplay between two narratives: a Sikh narrative that professes equality and ontological narratives that give rise to discrimination.<sup>2</sup> An analysis of the interplay between narratives provides evidence for the following arguments: (1) despite a belief in and commitment to equality, a structure of hierarchy is present among Sikhs; and (2) this particular hierarchical structure is tied to

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<sup>2</sup> Unlike most traditional social science studies of identity formation, this study makes ontology, a theory of being, central to the analysis. Traditional social science studies focus primarily on agency and action. According to Margaret Somers, the consequence of a primary focus on agency and action are “(1) issues of social being, identity, and ontology are excluded from the legitimate mainstream of sociological investigation, and 2) the social sciences focus their research on action and agency by studying primarily observable social behavior - measured variously by social interests, rational preferences, or social norms and values - rather than by exploring expressions of social being and identity” (Somers 1994, 615). In this study, I focus on both ontology and agency by rejecting the decoupling of action from ontology present in most traditional social science studies. As a result, I am able to explore the relationship between ontology, identity, and agency.

specific material interests, narrative methods employed to maintain and challenge these interests, and social actors who are, in turn, privileged and displaced.

This examination of Sikh narrative explanations of caste- and gender-based discrimination contributes to three distinct literatures and debates. At the most general level, the dissertation responds to the literature on identity and identity politics. By connecting an examination of identity to a larger set of symbolic, institutional, and material practice, a conceptualization of identity as an uneasy interplay between public identity and lived subjectivities offers a fuller understanding of social power dynamics. Second, the dissertation contributes to the literature on political agency by developing a meaning and understanding of agency from within paradoxes of equality, rather than imposing an understanding of agency that is fixed in advance and developed from outside the specificity of Sikh lived experience. At the most specific level, the dissertation contributes to the literature on Sikh and Punjab studies by arguing that caste- and gender-based discrimination in the Sikh community can be explained as an uneasy interplay between two distinct narratives: a public Sikh narrative that professes equality and ontological narratives that give rise to discrimination.

For this project, I conducted and analyzed forty in-depth interviews. I conducted these interviews in Punjabi over a duration ranging from half an hour to two hours. I conducted interviews in two districts of Punjab, India – Mohali and Amritsar – with approximately the same number of men as women from each of the three major caste groups—Jats, Khatri, and Scheduled Castes/Backward Castes. Also, I conducted interviews with respondents of varying ages (from 21 to 71) and educational levels (from illiterate to highly educated). In addition to conducting in-depth interviews, I had the opportunity to

gather crucial information in follow up interviews, informal conversation, and through observation of religious and social activities. In addition to conducting in-depth interviews, I had the opportunity to gather crucial information through follow-up interviews, informal conversation, and observation of religious and social activities.

Although I make a general argument about the way in which social identities are best understood, I also find that the issue of identity is best approached in very specific context-based analyses. Specificity, context, and locality are necessary in analyses of identities because identities are constituted by social contextual conditions in specific cultures at particular historical periods; however, an understanding of identity can also be developed in more general terms, as I do by building on the work of Linda Alcoff and Margaret Somers in Chapter Two. Though I am careful to point out that my account of social identities cannot be generalized, I argue that my particular account has explanatory value in trying to understand how visible and marked identities operate in India. In short, the account I develop in this project does have a certain specificity, restricted to racial and gendered identities, and therefore, I cannot claim that it applies equally well to other forms of identity. This does not mean, however, that the account I develop cannot be used to understand racial and gendered identities in other localities. One can transport my account of social identities to understand racial and gendered experiences in, for example, the Americas; however, this transportation requires sensitivity to the context-based specificity of the Americas.

In Chapter Two I ask, how do racialized and gendered identities operate? What is the best way to describe and account for the current operations of these identities? And how do these identities relate to subjectivity, lived experience, and agency? By asking these

questions, I am able to provide a fuller understanding of the implications of identities on political action, behavior, and opinion. To answer these questions, I turn to Linda Alcoff's *Visible Identities*, which argues that identity, conceptualized as horizon of agency, is a way of inhabiting, interpreting, and working through, both collectively and individually, an objective social location and group history (2006, 42). I argue that Alcoff's approach to identity as horizon of agency has explanatory value because (1) it accounts for both historical fluidity and instability within identities, and the powerful salience and persistence of identities as self-description and as predictors for how one is treated; (2) it develops a notion of identity as a way of seeing and acting in the social world; and (3) it defines identities as embodied lived experiences in which individuals and groups work to construct meaning in relation to historical experience and historical narratives. I operationalize Alcoff's approach to identity as a horizon of agency by turning to Margaret Somers' notion of narrative identity. Somers argues that identity is best understood through narrative because it is through narratives that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives that we constitute our social identities (1994, 606). By adopting Somers' notion of narrative identity, I am able to analyze interview data through a series of identity narratives to demonstrate that identity is a way of seeing and acting in the social world.

Chapters Three and Four deconstruct a politics of equality by examining paradoxes shared by many Sikhs in Punjab who vehemently oppose casteism and sexism, but simultaneously engage in discrimination against Scheduled Caste [SC] Sikhs and Sikh women. These chapters focus primarily on deconstructing a Sikh politics of equality by explaining how current hierarchical structures and power relations are constructed, reinforced, and maintained at the individual level through narrative identities. The

respondents whom I interviewed believe in and commit themselves to a Sikh narrative of equality because for them it is divinely ordained. Yet the task of living in accordance with a narrative of equality is not a simple matter; it is mediated not only by debates internal to Sikh religious tradition, but also by the particular material conditions of respondents' lives. Part of my goal in Chapters Three and Four is to explore the limits of a public Sikh narrative of equality, its assumptions and presuppositions, and the day-to-day context through which these limitations are constructed, reinforced, and challenged. I argue that most respondents are able to discuss their personal discriminatory beliefs and practices while maintaining a commitment to a Sikh narrative of equality through the use of ontological narratives. These ontological narratives allow respondents to (1) distance themselves from discriminatory actions by shifting responsibility onto others, and (2) obscure specific types of discrimination through the use of a narrow definition of equality, thus rendering specific discriminatory acts harmless. A majority of the respondents explain the structural position of Scheduled Caste Sikhs and Sikh women through a series of ontological narratives that minimize their own participation in discriminatory practices by shifting focus to Scheduled Caste Sikhs' and Sikh women's behavior, state policies, and degrees of religious observance. These ontological narratives obscure the perpetuation of casteism and sexism, and therefore allow for continuation of current caste and gender hierarchies in the Sikh community.

Chapter Five asks, how do Scheduled Caste Sikhs and Sikh women take political action in a community that engages in discrimination, yet denies its very existence? To answer this question, I turn to James Scott (1990), Ranajit Guha (1988), and Michael Hanchard (2006) who argue that the politics of subordinated groups are best understood as neither overt collective defiance nor complete hegemonic compliance, but rather as

quotidian politics. By examining quotidian politics, I am able to make sense of the modalities of agency present among some of the most marginalized groups in the Sikh community. Yet, my analysis also departs from these scholars. Instead of imposing a binary conception of agency as either resistance or resignification of power relations, I develop an understanding of agency from within the specificity of Sikh lived experience through Alcoff's horizon of agency. In particular, I examine (1) SC Sikh participation in squatting movements as one modality of agency that highlights issues of suffering and survival; and (2) Sikh women's participation in Sukhmani Seva Societies [religious societies] as a second modality of agency, which highlights the theme of religious devotion. Through an exploration of quotidian politics, I am able to demonstrate that, at times, SC Sikhs and Sikh women undermine and adopt the very ontological narratives that give rise to casteism and sexism in the Sikh community.

Finally, the Conclusion examines how well the theoretical framework I develop in Chapter Two explains caste and gender paradoxes in the Sikh community. It summarizes the arguments made throughout the dissertation regarding equality and agency. The Conclusion also looks at the implications of what I have demonstrated about a Sikh politics of equality for identity politics in the Americas and beyond.

## Chapter Two – Visible Identity, Subjectivities, and Lived Experience

This project, “Politics of Equality: Caste and Gender Paradoxes in the Sikh Community,” seeks to make sense of a set of contradictions present in the Sikh community in an effort to explain how casteism and sexism persist despite a genuine belief in and commitment to equality, and substantial efforts to create equality. According to a majority of Sikhs, casteism and sexism are not problems in the Sikh community because Sikhism has eliminated caste- and gender-based hierarchies, and therefore one would expect Scheduled Caste [SC] Sikhs and Sikh women to enjoy a status equal to that of their counterparts in Sikh society. On-the-ground reality, however, indicates that equality has yet to be achieved. Most social indicators, such as landownership rates, poverty levels, and educational attainment, confirm the continuation of caste-wise inequality. Social norms, such as separate SC cremation grounds, *gurdwaras*, and religious sects, also indicate continued unequal treatment of SCs. Similarly, social indicators, such as sex ratio, infant and child mortality rate, and relative care, confirm the continuation of gender-wise inequality while social norms, such as lack of female *granthis*, *ragis* [musicians who lead the congregation in *kirtan*, devotional singing], and *sewadars* [others who serve the *gurdwara*], also indicate continued unequal treatment of Sikh women. As a result, I ask: (1) how do ordinary Sikhs maintain a belief in equality while also participating in caste- and gender-based discriminatory practices? (2) How do respondents account for the vast discrepancies between general-caste Sikhs and SC Sikhs, and Sikh men and Sikh women, if, for them, casteism and sexism do not exist? (3) How do Scheduled

Caste Sikhs and Sikh women take political action in a community that engages in discrimination, yet denies its very existence?

To answer these questions, I turn to the literature on identity and identity politics to create a theoretical framework from which to understand the aforementioned contradictions. Unlike most mainstream political science scholarship, identity politics literature rejects an approach to theory that sets aside the scholar's own social identity and the social identity of political actors. Much of mainstream political science assumes that if a scholar's particularity is transcended, then one can produce a theory of universal scope of which all rational agents would be persuaded.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, identity politics makes central particularities like race, class, and gender to show that identity may affect political action, behavior, and belief. Identity politics does not presuppose a link between identity and politics, but rather introduces identity as a factor in any political analysis and argues for a reflexive analysis of the influence of any given identity on political action and belief.

The constitution of identities, the process of identity formation, and the internal contradictions, multiplicities, and fragmentations of identities are rarely examined, explored, or understood in political science scholarship. One reason that the very constitution of identity has not received significant attention is because the process of identity formation is often assumed to be a more or less harmonious process, which results in a normal, stable, and unitary identity. According to Craig Calhoun, the assumption that identity formation is

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<sup>3</sup> According to Linda Martín Alcoff, by transcending particularity both liberalism and poststructuralism come to a similar conclusion that underneath we are all the same: "For liberalism, particularities are irrelevant because 'underneath we are all the same'; for the poststructuralist, race, class, and gender are all constructs and therefore incapable of decisively validating conceptions of justice and truth because underneath there is nothing—hence once again underneath we are all the same" (2006, 143-144).

harmonious often leads scholars to underestimate the internal struggle involved in forging identities:

The constitution of identities has not only been kept off center stage. It has been presented as a more or less harmonious process resulting in a normally stable and minimally changing identity. Thus we have been led by our theories often to underestimate the struggle involved in forging identities, the tension inherent in the fact that we all have multiple, incomplete and/or fragmented identities, the politics implied by the differential public standing of various identities or identity claims, and the possibilities for our salient constructions of identities to change in the context of powerfully meaningful, emotionally significant events. (1994, 24)

By assuming that identity formation processes are harmonious and result in normal, stable, and unitary identities, one forecloses the space from which to explain a politics of equality characterized by a set of paradoxes shared by most Sikhs who vehemently oppose casteism and sexism, while simultaneously subscribing to and engaging in racist and sexist beliefs and practices. Calhoun finds that when scholars treat identities as though they are unitary and internally homogenous, the capacity for understanding an “internal dialogicality is erased” (1994, 27).<sup>4</sup> In this project I rely on the theories of Linda Martín Alcoff and Margaret Somers to place identity formation processes at the center of analyses. By thus creating the theoretical space from which to understand an often overlooked and erased internal dialogicality, I am able to explain a Sikh politics of equality and Sikh quotidian political action.

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<sup>4</sup> Both Craig Calhoun and Linda Alcoff make a similar argument in regards to identity and identity formation. Alcoff claims that scholars can argue that identity is in conflict with reason because they conceptualize identity “as coherent, uniform, and essentially singular, as if what it means to be Mexican American is a coherent set of attributes and dispositions shared by all members of the group and essentially closed or stable” (2006, 45).

## **Conventional Political Science Approaches to Identity and Identity**

### **Formation**

Comparative political scientists have turned to identity to explain a variety of phenomena, such as violence (Hardin 1995; Fearon & Laitin 2000; Wilkinson 2004), democratic stability (Rabushka & Shepsle 1972; Horowitz 1985; Chua 2003), and institutional design (Lijphart 1977; Horowitz 1990; Posner 2005). These scholars respond to genuine explanatory needs; however, the concept of identity that they adopt privileges a singular, unitary, and stable identity, which I argue lacks sufficient explanatory value. In response, I offer a critical analysis of the problems associated with the current use of the concept in comparative politics, make a claim for developing an alternative formulation of identity that emphasizes the epistemic and ontological salience of identity, and explain how this alternative might be employed to understand a politics of equality and quotidian political action in the Sikh community.

I will turn to a brief review of how identity is conceived in some comparative politics literature to show its limitation. Next, I will turn to a discussion of an alternative way of conceiving of identity through the work of Alcott and Somers. This alternative approach provides a better understanding of Sikh politics of equality and Sikh quotidian political action because it responds to the significant disparity between the way in which identity is characterized by most comparative politics scholars and the way in which identity is generally lived or experienced and thus allows for nuanced, valid understandings of the link between identity and political action.

Conventional conceptualizations of identity in comparative politics scholarship are limited in their explanatory value due to two underlying assumptions: (1) that groups are a “seemingly unproblematic, taken-for-granted concept, apparently in no need of particular scrutiny or explication” (Brubaker 2004, 7); and (2) that individuals seek to achieve maximally integrated identities (Calhoun 1997, 18-19). The following section will explore the work of Robert Bates (1983), Russell Hardin (1995), and Donald Horowitz (1985) to show the way in which many political scientists assume first that groups are discrete, bounded, and substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed; and second, that identity, at the individual level, is integrated and unitary.

In his article, Robert Bates responds to two specific questions: How are ethnic groups formed, and how can we explain their persistence? Bates argues that ethnic groups represent coalitions, which have been formed by individuals to secure benefits created by the forces of modernization (1983, 152). Furthermore, Bates argues that ethnic groups persist because they are a rational way to “extract goods and services from the modern sector” (1983, 161). Similarly, in *One for All*, Russell Hardin asks why specific kinds of identifications are maintained, and why individuals act on behalf of these identifications (1995, 8). Hardin responds by stating that identification with a group is neither irrational nor extra-rational, but is rational (1995, 180). He argues that these types of identifications represent situations in which the collective-action problem has been solved by matching self-interest with group interest. In *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Donald Horowitz asks, why do followers follow in ethnic conflict (1985, 140)? Horowitz explains non-elite participation in ethnic conflict through invidious comparison (1985, 181). Invidious comparison, for Horowitz, produces anxiety for individual group members because an individual’s sense of identity is heavily

dependent on group affiliations (1985, 181). To entertain feelings of anxiety, in turn, creates pressure to end invidious comparison, which explains individual participation in ethnic conflict (1985, 166-167).

All three authors are interested in why individuals identify with and act on behalf of specific groups. However, all three authors respond to a question regarding individual behavior with an explanation that takes the group as the significant actor. For example, Hardin asks why individuals act on behalf of a group, but he answers by focusing on group interest because he assumes that group interests and individual interests are one and the same. Similarly, Horowitz asks why individual followers follow, but he answers by explaining why groups follow because he assumes that an individual identity is coherent with and equivalent to a group identity. All three authors pose a question regarding individual behavior and respond with an answer that focuses on group behavior because they assume that an ethnic group is an internally homogenous, externally bounded, unitary collective actor with common purpose (Brubaker 2004, 8). Bates, Hardin, and Horowitz are able to do so because they envision ethnic groups as unitary collective actors to whom interests and agency can be attributed in a uniform and equal manner.<sup>5</sup> Instead of simply asserting that an ethnic group shares common rational interest and motivation, or common worth and legitimacy, one needs to specify how and when individuals identify themselves in, perceive

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<sup>5</sup> According to Craig Calhoun, much mainstream sociological theory tries to find a way to fix identity by appealing to some more “objective” underlying variable or factor. For Calhoun, the most common candidate is rational self-interest. However, Calhoun argues that identity cannot be collapsed satisfactorily into interest or made to reflect it except as part of a personal and/or political project because (1) identities can and to some extent, indeed, always do change; and (2) there are always internal tensions and inconsistencies among the various identities and group membership of individuals (1994, 27-28). Linda Alcoff also questions an understanding of identity as rational self-interest by arguing “identities are not lived as discrete and stable set of interests, but as a site from which one must engage in the process of meaning-making and thus from which one is open to the world” (2006, 42-43). And therefore, identity, for Alcoff, cannot be equated with rational self-interest.

others through, and experience the world in ethnic, gendered, and racial terms. One needs to specify how a sense of groupness becomes adopted and crystallized by individual members of the group in some situations, but remains latent and potential in others.

In addition to assuming that ethnic groups are homogenous and bounded, all three authors assume that individuals privilege an ethnic identity over other forms of identification. The three authors describe the interplay between putatively discrete collective identities by presuming that these labels define meaningful social groupings and that the members of these groups accept the dominance of a single label over their identities (Calhoun 1999, 224). By assuming the dominance of an ethnic identification over all other forms of identifications, Bates, Hardin, and Horowitz foreclose the possibility of an individual to identify with multiple identities that are perhaps internally partial, fragmented, and contradictory. Both Rogers Brubaker and Taeku Lee argue that scholars of identity need to take concepts like ethnicity as subject to, rather than prior to, empirical study. For example, Brubaker argues that ethnicity or ethnic common sense “is a key part of what we want to explain, not what we want to explain things *with*; it belongs to our empirical data, not to our analytic toolkit” (2004, 9). Similarly, Lee argues, “An expectation of a preordained identity-to-politics link can potentially distort our understanding of race and ethnicity, especially when taken as prior to, rather than subject to, empirical study” (2008, 461). In accordance with Brubaker and Lee, I argue that concepts like ethnicity, gender, and race need to be subject to empirical study.

Scholars like Bates, Hardin, and Horowitz are unable to provide space from which to understand identification with multiple identities or a single identity that is internally fragmented, contradictory, or partial because they assume that people “are members of one

and only one race, one gender and one sexual orientation, and that each of these memberships describes neatly and concretely some aspect of their being” (Calhoun 1999, 226). It does not reflect reality, however, to assume that people “naturally live in one world at a time, that they inhabit one way of life, that they speak one language, and that they themselves, as individuals, are singular, integral beings” (Calhoun 1999, 226). Instead of asserting the dominance of a single identification, one needs to acknowledge the interplay between multiple identifications and within a single identification. Additionally, it is necessary to specify why and when non-elites perceive themselves in ethnic, gendered, and racial terms and why, at times, that identity remains latent and potential.

My analytic framework differs from most political science studies of identity in three important ways. First, the approach I outline does not regard groups as a taken-for-granted concept; second, it does not assume a homogeneous, integrated, and unitary notion of identity; and third, it accounts for embodied lived experience. I argue that an analysis of identity should not presume the salience of specific forms of identification, rather it should specify why and when individuals identify with and act on behalf of a specific identity, without assuming that this identity is singular and neat. My approach to identity encourages one to ask how, when, and why people interpret social experience in ethnic, gender, or racial terms. The emphasis shifts not only to questions about how people get classified, but also to questions about how gestures, utterances, situations, and events are interpreted and experienced. My investigation of a Sikh politics of equality and Sikh quotidian political action also accounts for bodily practices as the terrain upon which identity is mapped. In short, my approach enables one to explore the “how” of identity formation processes.

This analytic approach to identity provides two specific benefits: first, it offers resources for avoiding what Brubaker calls “groupism”<sup>6</sup> while at the same time helping to account for its tenacious hold on our social imagination; and second, it helps to elucidate and concretize a notion of identity as a way of seeing and being in the social world. This approach avoids the problem of taking groups for granted because it does not treat groups as “substantial entities but as collective cultural representations, as widely shared ways of seeing, thinking, conceptualizing the social world” (Brubaker, Loveman, Stamatov 2004: 45). In other words, I shift my analytic attention towards the process of group-making rather than taking groups as a basic unit of analysis. Equally important is the fact that this approach also suggests that identity is a way of seeing and being in the world; it is, as Alcoff argues, a way of inhabiting, interpreting, and working through, both collectively and individually, an objective social location (2006, 42).

## **Public Identity, Lived Subjectivity, and Narrative Identity**

To deconstruct a Sikh politics of equality and understand Sikh quotidian political action, I rely on Linda Alcoff’s *Visible Identities*, which develops an alternative approach to identity that is able to simultaneously account for the historical fluidity and instability of identity, as well as “the differences within identities, and yet also account for the powerful salience and

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<sup>6</sup> I draw this term from Brubaker who defines groupism as “the tendency to take discrete, bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis”. For Brubaker, most scholars adopt groupism in their treatment of ethnic groups, nations, and races by assuming that they are “entities to which interests and agency can be attributed”. This tendency to reify groups manifests in scholarly treatment of groups such as “Serbs, Croats, Muslims, and Albanians in the former Yugoslavia, of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, of Jews and Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories, of Turks and Kurds in Turkey, or of Blacks, Whites, Asians, Hispanics, and Native Americans in the United States as if they were internally homogenous, externally bounded groups, even unitary collective actors with common purposes” (Brubaker 2004, 8).

persistence of identities as self-description and as predictors for how one is treated” (2006, 87-88). In developing a realistic account of identity, Alcoff concludes, “identity is not merely that which is given to an individual or group, but is also a way of inhabiting, interpreting, and working through, both collectively and individually, an objective social location and group history” (2006, 42).

Alcoff’s goal in *Visible Identities* is to salvage the concept of identity while not succumbing to the conventional problems associated with it. Alcoff provides a sustained defense of identity against those who “see the attachment to identity as a political problem, psychological crutch, or metaphysical mistake” (2006, 5). She writes against the increasing tendency in contemporary social theory which views “strongly felt identities as a political danger for democracy as well as a metaphysically erroneous view about the true or fundamental nature of the self” (Alcoff 2006, 12). Alcoff recognizes that there are serious difficulties with some constructions of identity, but this does not lead her to abandon the concept altogether; rather, she explores the theoretical foundations of the “claim that identity itself, under any construction, is a problem and even a kind of mistake” (2006, 14). By doing so, Alcoff is able to show that the critiques of identity are misguided, thus allowing her to provide a sustained defense of identity as an epistemically salient and ontologically real entity.

According to Alcoff, there are two distinct aspects of selves involved in social identity: on one hand, the term identity deals with how we are socially located in public, and on the other hand, it refers to a lived subjectivity. For Alcoff, a more plausible account of social identity would hold that neither “public identity nor lived subjectivity are separable entities, fundamentally distinct, or entirely independent from the other” (Alcoff 2006, 92-93).

Public identity is our “socially perceived self within the systems of perception and classification and the networks of community in which we live” (Alcoff 2006, 92-93) whereas lived subjectivity refers to “who *we* understand ourselves to be, how we experience being ourselves, and the range of reflective and other activities that can be included under the rubric of our ‘agency’” (2006, 93). One of the analytic tasks that Alcoff calls for is an exploration of the relationship between a public identity and a lived subjectivity because, for her, there is no ultimate coherence between or within anyone’s multiple identities, and therefore there will always be tensions between and within various aspects thereof (2006, 112). In short, Alcoff does not assume that identity formation is a harmonious process, because she recognizes that public identity and lived subjectivity do not map neatly onto one another. As a result, in Alcoff’s formulation, identities are not normal, stable, and unitary, but have the potential to be internally fragmented, contradictory, or partial.<sup>7</sup>

Alcoff is able to account for the interplay between public identity and lived subjectivity by introducing the concept “horizon of agency.” Horizon of agency captures this particular interplay because the horizon is a “substantive perspectival location from

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<sup>7</sup> Other authors also discuss the importance of identity comprising a public and external component and a subjective and internal component. For example, Craig Calhoun argues, “Identity turns on the interrelated problems of self-recognition and recognition by others” (1994, 20). And therefore, for Calhoun, subjectivity is best understood as an internal project, as something always under construction, never perfect (1994, 20). Brubaker argues that a more effective way to conceive of identity is by disaggregating it into three different approaches: identification and categorizations, self-understanding and social location, and commonality, connectedness, and groupness. Self-understanding and social location is an improvement on identity because the term self-understanding is “a dispositional term that designates what might be called ‘situated subjectivity’: one’s sense of who one is, of one’s social location, and of how (given the first two) one is prepared to act” (Brubaker 2004, 44). Lastly, Taeku Lee proposes that we view the identity-to-politics link as a bundle of processes through which racial/ethnic identity categories are linked to a group politics. For Lee, two of the five processes can be characterized as identification and consciousness, where identification refers to “how individuals might be defined independent to how they view themselves” and consciousness refers to “how individuals think of themselves” (2008, 467). All of the authors in question link an understanding of identity as external identity and internal subjectivity (or public identity and self-consciousness) to political action and agency.

which the interpreter looks out at the world, a perspective that is always present but that is open and dynamic, with a temporal as well as physical dimension” (2006, 95). The concept of horizon offers a more adequate understanding of identity because it is able to explain the relevance of identity in everyday life while also allowing for the “mediated nature of experience and the fluid character of identity” (2006, 96). Alcoff’s conceptualization of identity as horizon of agency also incorporates an understanding of agency that is tied to a visible, marked public identity and internal, lived subjectivity. This approach to agency provides a degree of specificity that allows for an account of political action that is sensitive to the particular practices, including embodied practices that provide the necessary conditions for political action. For Alcoff, identity operates as a horizon, always culturally located with great specificity even as it is open to an indeterminate future and a reinterpretable past not of its own creation. Alcoff is careful to point out that horizons should be understood as “material and embodied situatedness, and not simply mentally perspectival or ideological” (2006, 102).

To emphasize the importance of materiality, physicality, and embodiment, Alcoff highlights the difference between subjectivity and identity by stating that subjectivity can be conceived of as “mind or imagination, merely mental, and thus as transcending its necessary physical base” (2006, 102). Identity, in contrast, is intimately tied to physicality and bodily difference. Social identities of race and gender, according to Alcoff, operate through bodily markers. Racial and gendered identities “are most definitely physical, marked on and through the body, lived as a material experience, visible as surface phenomena, and determinant of economic and political status” (2006, 102). Therefore, Alcoff argues that

social identities, specifically racial and gendered, cannot be adequately analyzed without sufficient attentiveness to the role of the body and the body's visible identity.<sup>8</sup>

Alcoff's account of identity as a horizon of agency brings together a hermeneutic approach that claims that a subject's location in any analysis of knowledge and experience cannot be eliminated, and a phenomenological approach, through Merleau-Ponty, that calls for an understanding of location not as an abstract concept, but as physical, embodied position. By doing so, Alcoff is able to argue that the "interpretive horizon we each bring with us should be understood not simply as a set of beliefs but as a complex (meaning internally heterogeneous) set of presuppositions and perceptual orientations, some of which are manifest as a kind of tacit presence in the body" (2006, 113). As a result, Alcoff develops a formulation of identity that is closer to lived experience on two different fronts: first, by recognizing the fluid, unstable nature of intersections between and within categories and thus avoiding the assumption that intersections between and within multiple-identity categories are always experienced in untroubled ways; and second, by recognizing the importance of the material reality of racialized and sexed bodies and thus making the body central to analyses of racism and sexism.

I operationalize Alcoff's approach to identity as a horizon of agency by turning to Margaret Somers' notion of narrative identity. Narrative identity is premised on a new interpretation of narrative, which is not limited to representation or representational form,

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<sup>8</sup> Alcoff's analysis focuses on the experience of racialized and gendered experiences in North America, and therefore, she is most interested in racialization, racial categorization, and racial history of North America. This project explores caste and gender experiences in India, and therefore, the particularities of racialization, racial categorization, and racial history are different. I posit that caste identities in the Sikh community are experienced in similar ways to racialized identities in North America, and therefore, Alcoff's understanding of identity is applicable. However, when transporting Alcoff's formulation of identity to an examination of visible and marked identities in India, I am sensitive to the context-based specificity.

but defines “narrative and narrativity as concepts of *social epistemology and social ontology*” (Somers 1994, 606). This conception of narrative posits that “it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities” (Somers 1994, 606). In short, Somers argues “all of us come to *be* who we *are* (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives *rarely of our own making*” (1994, 606).

Somers brings together two different and seemingly unrelated developments in social theory to reconfigure the study of identity formation. The first set of literature that Somers draws from is the literature on identity politics and social construction of identity. The second set of literature that she brings to bear is a reconfigured approach to the concept of narrative. According to Somers, both literatures have limitations on their own; however, “the limitations of each potentially can be overcome by bringing the two thematics together” (1994, 605). The key concept that Somers proposes to achieve this reconfiguration is that of narrative identity. Somers provides a mid-range theory that is relevant for both social scientists and social theorists because there is a degree of groundedness and practicality in the way that Somers develops the concept of narrative identity. By linking identity formation to narratives, Somers is able to “infuse the study of identity formation with a relational and historical approach that avoids categorical rigidities by emphasizing the embeddedness of identity in overlapping networks of relations that shift over time and space” (1994, 607). Furthermore, for Somers, the focus on narrative avoids sense-making of a singular isolated phenomenon. Rather, it demands that one “discern the meaning of any single event only in temporal and spatial relationship to other events” (Somers 1994, 616).

Somers describes this relatively abstract formulation of narrativity by outlining four different dimensions of narrative - ontological, public, conceptual, and metanarrative (1994, 617). For the purposes of this analysis, the two most relevant dimensions of narrative are ontological and public. I operationalize Alcoff's notion of lived subjectivity through Somers' ontological narratives, which are "stories that social actors use to make sense of - indeed, to act in - their lives" (Somers 1994, 618). For Somers, people "act, or do not act, in part according to how they understand their place in any number of given narratives - however fragmented, contradictory, or partial" (1994, 618). Furthermore, Somers argues that social actors "adjust stories to fit their own identities, and, conversely, they will tailor 'reality' to fit their stories" (1994, 618). I operationalize Alcoff's concept of public identity through Somers' notion of public narratives, which are "attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual, to intersubjective networks or institutions" (Somers 1994, 619). Public narratives, for Somers, can range from the narratives of one's family to those of the workplace, church, government, and nation.

Somers' notion of narrative identity successfully operationalizes Alcoff's conceptualization of identity as horizon of agency because it is sensitive to and cognizant of identities as "positioned or located lived experiences in which both individuals and groups work to construct meaning in relation to historical experience and historical narratives" (Alcoff 2006, 42-43). One can name, understand, and explain the way in which individuals see, understand, and act through a horizon of agency by adopting Somers' notion of narrative identities. Narratives are one way to concretize the fact that every identity carries "with it always this horizon as a specific location, with substantive content—as, for example,

a specifiable relation to the Holocaust, to slavery, to the *encuentro*, and so on—but whose content only exists in interpretation and in constant motion” (Alcoff 2006, 42-43).

In the next two chapters, I deconstruct a politics of equality by examining paradoxes shared by many Sikhs in Punjab who vehemently oppose casteism and sexism, but simultaneously engage in discrimination against Scheduled Caste [SC] Sikhs and Sikh women. The following chapters focus primarily on deconstructing a Sikh politics of equality by explaining how current hierarchical structures and power relations are constructed, reinforced, and maintained at the individual level through narrative identities. In particular, I explore the uneasy way in which individuals understand themselves through and act based on Sikh public narratives of caste and gender equality, which do not map neatly onto ontological narratives that give rise to caste- and gender-based discriminatory practices. The goal of the analysis is to make sense of the apparent contradictions espoused by so many Sikhs by reading their interview responses as an interplay between two types of narratives: a public narrative of equality rooted in Sikhism and individual ontological narratives.

By doing so, one is able to disentangle what are often empirically interwoven public and ontological narratives in an effort to better understand a Sikh politics of equality. However, in doing so one must not lose sight of the critical fact that each of these elements is meaningful only in terms of constituting a whole, a total configuration. The goal is, therefore, to understand identity as a horizon of agency in which public and ontological narratives are in constant interplay. I argue that a Sikh politics of equality cannot be understood if one relies on conventional notions of identity and identity formation precisely because these conventional notions assume that identity formation processes are harmonious and result in normal, stable, and unitary identities. To understand a Sikh politics

of equality, one needs to recognize that identities are not normal, stable, and unitary. Rather a more plausible account of identity, with more explanatory value and coherence with everyday experience, does not assume that identities are discrete and bounded, but creates room to understand identities as possibly fragmented, contradictory, or partial.

## Chapter Three – The Paradoxes of Caste Equality

When asked about the relationship between caste and Sikhism, Bakhtawar Singh, a 51-year-old Jat man, states, “The person who recognizes caste isn’t Sikh.” Within minutes of defining and delimiting a Sikh by his or her ability to see beyond caste, Bakhtawar Singh stereotypes Scheduled Castes as being “hungry”, “greedy”, and the source of all current corruption in India:

If god made castes, then he gave etiquettes to each caste group as well. Whatever environment a child lives in, he will adopt such behaviors. [SCs] engage in negative type of activities, whatever corruption occurs now a day is all due to them. Children of good families are unable to get jobs and these poor SCs, now look, why should we criticize people, but these people [SCs] get to the top and they remain hungry, they remain greedy. Caste does make a difference. We don’t want to believe it, but there is a difference.

Bakhtawar Singh’s comments are representative of a larger contradiction shared by many Sikhs who vehemently oppose casteism, but simultaneously engage in discriminatory practices. What makes the contradiction even more interesting is the fact that this contradiction is not simply upheld by certain caste groups, such as high-caste or general-caste Sikhs; rather a majority of Sikhs, including Scheduled Caste Sikhs, maintain that Sikhism has eliminated caste and casteism even though caste-based discrimination is a common, everyday lived experience. Singh’s comments thus highlight a number of issues and raise intriguing questions: how do ordinary Sikhs maintain a belief in caste equality while also participating in caste-based discriminatory practices? How is casteism defined by ordinary Sikhs? And what forms of discrimination are included and excluded in the dominant definition of casteism? How do Scheduled Caste Sikhs make sense of everyday experiences of caste-based discrimination in a community that denies its very existence?

Drawing on Linda Alcoff's account of identity as horizon of agency, this chapter deconstructs a Sikh politics of equality by examining paradoxes shared by many Sikhs who vehemently oppose casteism, yet simultaneously engage in discrimination against SCs. According to Alcoff, an account of identity with more explanatory value and coherence with everyday experience "would hold that neither public identity nor lived subjectivity are separable entities, fundamentally distinct, or entirely independent from the other" (2006, 93). As a result, one of the tasks of analysis, then, is to explore the interrelationships between a public identity and a lived subjectivity. Public identity, for Alcoff, is "our socially perceived self within the systems of perception and classification and the networks of community in which we live," whereas lived subjectivity refers to "who *we* understand ourselves to be, how we experience being ourselves, and the range of reflective and other activities that can be included under the rubric of our 'agency'" (2006, 93). Lived subjectivity, according to Alcoff, does not perfectly or neatly map onto one's public identity or one's socially perceived self.

Alcoff's conceptualization of identity as horizon of agency incorporates an understanding of agency that is tied to a visible, marked public identity and internal, lived subjectivity. This approach to agency provides a degree of specificity that allows for an account of political action that is sensitive to the particular practices, including embodied practices that provide the necessary conditions for political action. For Alcoff, identity operates as a horizon, always culturally located with great specificity even as it is open to an indeterminate future and a reinterpretable past not of its own creation. One can name, understand, and explain the way in which individuals see, understand, and act through a horizon of agency by adopting Margaret Somers' (1994) notion of identity narratives.

Narratives are one way to concretize the fact that every identity carries with it always this horizon as a specific, embodied location, with substantive content that is necessary for developing a meaning and understanding of agency and political action.

The goal of this analysis is to explore the contradictions and tensions between a public identity characterized as a Sikh public narrative of equality, and lived subjectivities characterized as ontological narratives, which themselves give rise to a range of practices, including caste-based discrimination. By analyzing the relationship between a public identity and lived subjectivities, I hope to demonstrate the substantive context and location from which interviewees develop an understanding of a Sikh politics of equality and Sikh quotidian political action. The benefit of conducting this type of analysis, by relying on Linda Alcoff's understanding of identity as a horizon of agency and Margaret Somers' conception of identity as narrative, is that it renders "understanding only by *connecting* (however unstably) *parts* to a constructed *configuration* or a *social network* of relationships (however incoherent or unrealizable) composed of symbolic, institutional, and material practices" (Somers 1994, 616). I argue that a Sikh politics of equality, characterized by caste-based paradoxes, is best understood by connecting it to and situating it in a larger set of symbolic, institutional, and material practices because this allows one to expose the material interests at stake, the narrative methods employed to maintain and challenge these interests, and the social actors who are, in turn, privileged and displaced.

### *Current Study*

Other scholars acknowledge the contradiction between Sikh scriptural prescriptions calling for caste equality and social realities of caste-based discrimination (McLeod 1975; Mann

2004; Puri 2003; Jodhka 2004). Some scholars explain the undeniable persistence of caste difference in the Sikh community through caste diversity and numerical strength (McLeod 1975; Dhami 1995). Some scholars explain the paradox between religious prescription and social reality as a function of land ownership or 'agrarianism' (Ram 2004; Dhami 1995; Ram 2004; Jodhka 2001), while others explain the contradiction by focusing on issues of economic and political power (Puri 2003; Judge 2004). However, there are several problems with such arguments. First, most of these approaches operate on the assumption that Sikh identity is a simple reflection of Sikh scripture; therefore, these approaches make use of a prescribed identity, rather than building an understanding of Sikh identity from the ground up. Second, most of these approaches do not directly explore the opinions, behaviors, and practices of common Sikhs in an effort to make sense of this particular contradiction; therefore, these approaches are unable to connect this paradox to the social context and power dynamics in which it is created, reinforced, and challenged.

In contrast to the aforementioned approaches to caste in the Sikh community, I argue that there is a complex relationship between Sikh religious prescriptions, elite interpretations thereof, and the practices of common Sikhs, calling into question any simple correlation between the social position of a particular group and the religious interpretation that the group's members uphold. I find that it is important to pay attention to the reasoning, arguments, and terms used to justify and contest the everyday Sikh practices that are in tension with Sikh religious prescriptions because an examination of this sort reveals the limits of a Sikh politics of equality, its assumptions and presuppositions, and the day-to-day context through which these limits are constructed, reinforced, and challenged.

To examine the limits of a Sikh politics of equality, I, first, operationalize Alcoff's notions of lived subjectivities by developing a series of potential ontological narratives<sup>9</sup> to understand how Sikhs use these narratives to take action in and make sense of their lives.<sup>10</sup> By doing so, I hope to demonstrate that a notion of identity as discrete and bounded is problematic, and that it is more reasonable to understand identity as being simultaneously rooted in multiple ontological narratives that can be partial, fragmentary, and, at times, contradictory. Second, I use public and ontological narratives to analyze data I collected from 40 in-depth interviews conducted in Punjabi with Sikhs of all walks of life. By reading interview responses as an uneasy interplay between a public Sikh narrative of equality and ontological narratives, which do not map neatly onto one another, I am able to provide evidence to support the arguments that (1) despite a belief in and commitment to caste equality, a structure of caste hierarchy is present among Sikhs; and (2) this particular hierarchical structure is tied to specific material interests, narrative methods employed to maintain and challenge these interests, and social actors who are, in turn, privileged and displaced.

### *Primary Findings*

When asked about caste, a majority of respondents adhere to a Sikh narrative of caste equality while simultaneously engaging in discriminatory practices against Scheduled Caste [SC] Sikhs. Most respondents are able to discuss their personal discriminatory beliefs and

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<sup>9</sup> I draw on the work of Margaret Somers' in an effort to operationalize Alcoff's notion of lived subjectivity. Ontological narratives, for Somers, are "the stories that social actors use to make sense of - indeed, to act in - their lives. Ontological narratives are used to define who we *are*; this in turn can be a precondition for knowing what to *do*" (1994, 618).

<sup>10</sup> I develop the contours of multiple Sikh ontological narratives from Sikh history and lived experience. These narratives are not meant to be an exhaustive formulation of Sikh identity; however, each one does correspond to important historical and religious traditions and has particular contemporary significance to Sikhs.

practices while maintaining a commitment to a Sikh narrative of equality by defining casteism in a narrow way, which emphasizes certain forms of discrimination and obscures others. According to a Sikh narrative of caste equality, caste-based discrimination is no longer a problem in the Sikh community because Sikhism has eliminated casteism, and/or the recognition of caste, and therefore one would expect SC Sikhs to enjoy equal status in Sikh society. However, this is not the case. Most social indicators, such as landownership rates, poverty levels, and educational attainment, confirm the continuation of caste-wise inequality. Thus the following questions arise: how do respondents account for the vast discrepancies between general-caste and Scheduled Caste Sikhs, if, for them, caste differences and caste-based discrimination do not exist? How do Scheduled and general-caste [GC] Sikhs experience and interpret casteism in a community that denies its very existence? More specifically, how do SC and GC Sikhs live within the contradiction between a hierarchically organized caste society and a religious commitment to caste equality? I argue that a majority of respondents explain the structural position of Scheduled Caste Sikhs through a series of ontological narratives that minimize their own participation in discriminatory practices by shifting focus to SC behavior, state policies, and degrees of religious observance. The most prominent ontological narratives among respondents are the following: (1) SCs engage in 'bad' behavior and 'bad' work; (2) SCs consider themselves inferior to others; (3) SCs fail to adopt middle class Sikh values; (4) caste difference is created by state policies; and (5) casteism persists due to an incomplete adoption of Sikhism.

## Caste in Context

Prior to discussing the ways in which ordinary Sikhs understand caste and casteism, one needs some information regarding caste in India. The following section will briefly outline the contours of the relationship between caste and Hinduism, and caste and Sikhism. The relationship between caste and Hinduism is important because Sikh Gurus initiated and implemented many practices, rituals, and institutions in response to the perceived shortcomings they encountered in Hinduism. This historic connection continues to be salient for average Sikhs in their daily practices of Sikhism.

### *On the Relation between Caste and Hinduism*

Caste, stratified in a hierarchical order, determines, to a large extent, social norms and behavior for Hindus. The social hierarchy of caste is governed by “the distinction between purity and pollution, with the higher, purer castes at the top of the structure, and the lower, polluted and polluting, castes at the bottom” (Flood 1996, 12). Caste-based social hierarchy is composed of four classes (*varnas*) with one excluded or outcaste class.<sup>11</sup> Brahmans are at the top of the caste hierarchy, followed by the nobles or warriors (*ksatriya*), next are the

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<sup>11</sup> Often the term caste is used to describe two distinct concepts in Hinduism, *varna* (four caste or class groups) and *jati* (birth group). Some authors argue that these two terms refer to two different concepts, “which are assumed, quite wrongly, to have an automatic connection” (Quigley 2003, 502) whereas other authors see a clear connection between the two terms even if they are not defined in the same way. For example, David Kinsley argues that the system of Hinduism that exists today “seems to be the result of a historical blending of two social systems, the *varna* system, which dominated Vedic religion and the traditional Law Books, and the *jati* system, which is only vaguely described in Hindu literature but which dominates Hinduism at the village level (1982, 152). The *varna* system, according to Kinsley, is used as a way to systematize *jatis*. Unlike the *varna* system, which consists of four ranked categories, there are thousands of *jatis*, which are also ranked, but are geographically and linguistically limited. And in many cases, the *varna* categorization is imposed on the social system of *jatis* “which gives the village *jati* system a certain common pattern throughout India” (1982, 155). Thus, *jatis* are usually identified with one or another of the four *varnas*.

commoners (*vaiśya*), and the last group are the serfs (*śūdra*).<sup>12</sup> Each group, according to the Veda, has clear duties and obligations: the Brahman's duty is to teach the Veda; the warrior's (*ksatriya*) duty is to protect the people; the commoner's (*vaiśya*) duties are to engage in agriculture, to lend money, and to tend cattle; and the serf's (*śūdra*) duties are to serve others and to practice art (Flood 1996, 59). The excluded or outcaste group, Untouchables, who self-identify as *dalits* and are identified by the state as Scheduled Castes, have no place within the caste-based social order and live by performing "menial and polluting tasks such as working with leather and sweeping excrement from the village" (Flood 1996, 61).

Caste groups, according to Gavin Flood, are characterized by four features:<sup>13</sup> (1) castes are arranged in a hierarchical structure with Brahmans at the top, and the

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<sup>12</sup> The four-*varna* system was first described in the *Purusha Sukta*, Hymn to the Person, which, in the second part of the hymn, describes the correlations between the sacrificed *Purusha*, cosmic body, and features of the universe, including human society: "The *Brahmin* priests are said to have come from *Purusha's* mouth and the ruling class (*rajanya*, later called *ksatriya*) from his arms. From his thighs came the *vaiśhyas*, a word that literally means 'people' and refers to artisans, merchants, and farmers. And from the feet came the *śūdras*, the servant class" (Shattuck 1999, 26).

<sup>13</sup> There is, however, some debate concerning this conventional characterization of caste. In *Structures and Cognition*, Das challenges the conventional understanding of caste and ritual by examining a selected number of texts in Sanskrit. Through the examination of these texts, Das challenges two of the features associated with conventional understandings of caste. First, according to Das, castes (*jatis*) do not function as a linear hierarchical order, but are better understood as a "triangle defined by the three respective relations between each of the categories, Brahman, king, and *sanyasi*" (1982, 69). And second, differences between castes (*jatis*) are not conceived in these texts as differences of purity. In short, Das argues for a tripartite caste classification, which does not solely rely on purity and pollution and is therefore more complex than a linear classification with Brahmans at one end and Untouchables at the other (1982, 69). Declan Quigley criticizes two of the conventional approaches to caste by challenging the assumption that caste is hierarchically organized. The first approach finds that Brahmans are on top due to their degree of purity as priests, whereas the second approach privileges Brahmans because of their landed wealth (2003, 497). According to Quigley, "neither of these theories is sustainable because the underlying assumption of a stratified, ladder-like series of caste statuses does not match certain crucial features of the known ethnography" (2003, 497). In *Castes of Minds*, Nicholas Dirks challenges the conventional understanding of caste by tracing the career of caste in early colonial archives, commentaries from 18<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit missionaries, and ethnographic writings of colonial administrators to demonstrate that caste as we know it today is the product of a historical encounter between India and Western colonial rule. According to Dirks, "it was under the British that 'caste' became a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all 'systematizing' India's diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization" (2001, 5-6). The construction of caste as all 'systemizing' denies ethnographic specificities and political mechanisms that would elevate and valorize different social units at different times. Consequently, Dirks argues that an all 'systemizing' construction of caste obscures the fact that caste is better understood as embedded in kingship, royal authority, and social relations based on power, rather than an ideology of purity.

Untouchables at the bottom; (2) caste hierarchy is based on and governed by the polarity between purity and pollution, with the Brahmans being most pure, and the Untouchables being most polluted; (3) caste is an inalienable part of the body, and therefore cannot be removed; and (4) caste is governed by strict rules regarding marriage and commensality (Flood 1996, 59).

The distinction between purity and pollution, which governs caste hierarchy, is conventionally understood as functioning in two distinct dimensions. According to Flood, the polarity between purity and pollution is an organizing principle that regulates rituals and differentiates one social group from another (Flood 1996, 57). The idea of purity is central to Hindu rituals because anyone participating in ritual activity is expected to be as free from pollution as possible. Pollution arises, in part, from the natural functions of the body; for example, bodily fluids, hair, and nail clipping are considered polluted. In addition to these forms of pollution, there “are also graver forms of pollution caused by death and grieving, menstruation and birth” (Flood 1996, 219-220). During these times, individuals are considered polluted and are therefore excluded from ritual activities.<sup>14</sup>

The logic of purity and pollution, for Flood, also functions to differentiate “individuals from each other, men from women and high caste from low caste” (1996, 219-220). This second dimension of purity and pollution is generally regarded as a property of the body or a bodily substance, which informs an individual’s rank; for example, “The highest caste, the Brahmans, have a pure bodily substance while the lower castes have

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<sup>14</sup> According to David Kinsley, Brahman women must observe many rules in order to insure that others will not come in contact with them during their menstruation: “For five days, for example, a Havik [Brahman] woman may not serve food to her family or even eat with them but must remain outside the house on the porch. The clothes she wears during her menstruation are also very polluting and must be handled carefully to avoid transmitting pollution to her family (1982, 164).

impure bodily substance, with the Untouchables being the most polluted” (Flood 1996, 219-220). Members of the same caste (*jati*), according to the logic of purity and pollution, share the same kind of bodily substance. This bodily substance is exchanged between individuals through specific transactions.<sup>15</sup> The boundaries between groups and genders are governed in effect to limit the exchange of bodily substance between ranked groups by policing certain kinds of interaction, including commensality and marriage.<sup>16</sup>

In an effort to break down boundaries maintained and enforced by the caste system and to better the social and economic situation of low-caste and outcaste groups, the Indian constitution outlawed the practice of untouchability and established reservation of seats in the legislature for former untouchables and members of forest tribes.<sup>17</sup> Both of these groups are known as “Scheduled Castes and Tribes” respectively because they were listed on a special schedule in the constitution. With time these reservations have been expanded to also include preferential access to educational institutions and government service jobs.<sup>18</sup> The

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<sup>15</sup> According to David Kinsley, pollution arises from three primary sources. Bodily excretions, such as feces, urine, blood, pus, and saliva, are highly polluting, and any activity that involves contact with bodily excretion reduces one’s purity. Kinship is another source of pollution; the more closely related one is to another person, the more intense the sharing of pollution. Finally, people of other castes are a source of pollution, which passes primarily from lower to higher castes (1982, 163-165). For a detailed discussion of bodily substance and the way in which it is exchanged also see Pauline Kolenda. 1991. “The Ideology of Purity,” in *Social Stratification* edited by Dipankar Gupta. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

<sup>16</sup> Commensality, for Kinsley, can give rise to pollution both through bodily excretions and through exposure to members of other castes. Eating is a polluting act in part because Indians eat with their hands: “the hands touch the lips when eating, and therefore touch saliva that is transmitted back to the food and hence back to the lips, the very act of eating involves a certain amount of pollution” (Kinsley 1982, 164). Thus, the act of dining together involves the risk of pollution because one may ingest others’ pollution in the form of saliva. To minimize the transfer of pollution while eating food is consumed among equals and “even among caste equals, different seating arrangements are often called for because of the relative purity of the diners...To be in the same line is automatically to share in the pollution of other members of that line” (Kinsley 1982, 164).

<sup>17</sup> The original provision called for reservations in the legislature for a ten-year period ending in 1960; the policy, however has been extended to 2010. Originally, reservations were provided solely for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes; however, in 1993 reservation policies were also extended to the other backward classes at the national level (Das 2000, 3834).

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed discussion regarding the expansion of reservation policies, see Das, “Moments in a History of Reservations.”

demands for such provisions came initially from the oppressed and through a long process of negotiation and struggle have been accepted by the state.<sup>19</sup>

### *On the Relation between Caste and Sikhism*

Sikhism does not permit the practice of casteism and one of its fundamental missions has been to build a caste-free society. The ten Gurus categorically rejected the caste system and established institutions that would undermine its practical functioning. For example, the institutions of *langar* [communal kitchen], *kbande di pahul* [baptismal ceremony], and *karah parshad* [blessed food] make no allowances for hierarchical distinctions based on age, gender, or social status. The scriptural and institutional rejection of the caste system would lead one to believe that casteism has been abolished among Sikhs. However, ground-level social realities point to the fact that a parallel caste system functions among Sikhs.

According to Harish Puri, in Sikhism there is no scriptural sanction for caste distinction, as in Hinduism, but nonetheless there exists “a Sikh caste hierarchy, parallel to that of the Hindu caste hierarchy” (2003, 2697). The Sikh parallel caste system is composed of Jats, Khatri, artisan castes, and Scheduled Castes. However, there are disagreements regarding the rank order of the system; some consider Khatri to be at the top while others place Jats at the top.<sup>20</sup> The topmost position is held either by Jats or Khatri, followed by

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<sup>19</sup> For example, when the issue of reservation was raised at the conferences leading up to the Communal Award of 1932. Leaders of the “depressed classes,” including B.R. Ambedkar, supported the policy, while Mahatma Gandhi opposed it because he saw it as a danger to Hinduism. In an effort to block the policy, Gandhi threatened to fast to death, which, in turn, led to the Poona Act, an agreement “between the Hindu leaders and the leaders of the depressed classes to save the life of Mahatma Gandhi” (Das 2000, 3832). The Poona Act did grant limited reservations in provincial and central legislatures; however, it did not grant “depressed classes” access to reservations in public services, even though other minorities were granted access.

<sup>20</sup> According to Harish Puri, Jats, who were the ruling class under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, remain on top of the hierarchy, followed by Khatri and Aroras, and dalits at the bottom. However, he also states that “the perceptions regarding which caste is placed second, third and fourth varied both by the village and the caste one belonged to (Puri 2003, 2697-2698). In contrast, Gurinder S. Mann places the urban Khatri and Arora

artisan castes, such as Ramgarhias [carpenters], with Scheduled Castes, such as Ramdasis and Mazhbis, at the bottom.<sup>21</sup> Unlike the traditional Brahmanical caste system, the Sikh hierarchical system is “considerably liberated from the purity-pollution frame of relations that is prevalent amongst Hindus” (Puri 2003, 2700).

Jats, who constitute a majority of the Sikh population, have traditionally been rural landowning farmers. Jats are the most powerful segment of the Sikh community and enjoy a great degree of influence over the religious and political institutions of Sikhism. During the eighteenth century, Jats played a vital role in the establishment of Khalsa Raj, and thus entered the position of nobility in the region. During British Raj, Jats distinguished themselves in the police and army. And most recently, Jats have proven “to be outstanding farmers, and...have been responsible for converting the Punjab into the granary of the subcontinent” (Mann 2001, 95). Khatri is the smallest segment of the Sikh community and historically represent the urban segment of the population who originally come from upper-caste Hindu backgrounds (Mann 2001, 94). All ten Gurus came from Khatri families and many Khatri Sikhs continue to marry other Khatri, including Hindu Khatri. Khatri have historically prospered in industry, commerce, government services, and higher education. The Scheduled Caste community is the second largest group in the Sikh community (Mann 2001, 95). A large portion of the Scheduled Caste community is traditionally known as Chamars (leather workers), who refer to themselves as Ramdasis or

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segment of the community, who originally come from upper-caste Hindu background, at the top of the hierarchy, followed by Jats, and then Backward and Scheduled Castes (Mann 2001, 94-95).

<sup>21</sup> For detailed information regarding the general characteristics of the dominant caste groups in Sikh society see McLeod *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*, 95-103.

Ravidasis, and Chuhras (sweepers), who refer to themselves as Mazhbis or Rangretas.<sup>22</sup> Unlike their Muslim and Christian counterparts, low-caste Sikhs have the distinction of being included in the list of the Scheduled Castes.<sup>23</sup> A substantial proportion of both Ramdasi and Mazhbi Sikhs represent “the result of an influx into the Panth [Sikh community] during the early decades of the present century” (McLeod 1975, 103). According to W.H. McLeod, the impulse “behind this movement was a desire to purge the traditional taint of the outcaste status and that a majority of the converts regarded the egalitarian traditions of the Khalsa as the best hope of achieving this end” (1975, 103).

### **Sikh Narrative of Caste Equality**

The respondents whom I interviewed believe in and commit themselves to a Sikh narrative of equality because for them it is divinely ordained. Yet the task of living in accordance with a narrative of equality is not a simple matter; it is mediated not only by debates internal to Sikh religious tradition, but also by the particular material conditions of respondents’ lives. Part of my goal in this chapter is to explore the limits of a public Sikh narrative of equality, its assumptions and presuppositions, and the day-to-day context through which these limitations are constructed, reinforced, and challenged.

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<sup>22</sup> In addition to Chamars and Chuhras, the Sikh dalit community has members from the following groups: “Chhimas (tailors), Jhinvar (water carriers), Lohars (blacksmiths), Nais (barbers), and Ramgarias (carpenters)” (Mann 2001, 95).

<sup>23</sup> Sikhs secured dalit recognition following independence. In 1948, one of the major demands put forward by all the 22 Sikh members of the East Punjab legislative assembly involved securing for the former untouchable castes converted to Sikhism the same recognition and rights as would have been available to them if they had not become Sikhs. Sikh leadership worried that if reservation benefits were not extended to low-caste Sikhs, then they may leave the Sikh fold. See Puri, “Scheduled Castes in Sikh Community,” 2699; and Jodhka, “Sikhism and the Caste Question,” 179.

An analysis of the interviews reveals several consistent reactions to the issue of caste and casteism in the Sikh community. First, there is near consensus among respondents that casteism is not a salient issue in the Sikh community even though these same respondents express discriminatory beliefs and participate in discriminatory practices. Second, a majority of respondents substantiate their belief in caste-blindness and equality through a Sikh public narrative of caste equality rooted in specific embodied practices. And third, a majority of respondents define casteism in a narrow way, which enables them to recognize specific forms of discrimination while obscuring other forms.

When asked if there is a relationship between Sikhism and caste, a majority of respondents state that there is no relationship between the two. More specifically, respondents claim that (1) Sikhism has eliminated casteism; and (2) Sikhs do not recognize caste differences. This type of narrative characterization is predominant among a majority of Sikhs irrespective of gender, caste, age, and educational differences. For example, Jasveer Singh Gill, a 54-year-old educated Jat man who works as a teacher at a government high school, and Fauja Singh, a 55-year-old illiterate Ramdasi man who works as a day laborer, both state that casteism has been eliminated by Sikhism:

*Jasveer Singh Gill:* Amongst Sikhs there is no casteism. Casteism has been eliminated in the Sikh religion.

*Fauja Singh:* No, there is no relationship between Sikhs and caste...it is written in the *bani* [the utterance of the Gurus] that there is no casteism. The Gurus eliminated caste.

The dominant conception of caste and casteism discussed by respondents is best understood as a Sikh public narrative of caste equality rooted in the embodied institutions and practices of Sikhism. In short, this particular narrative argues that Sikhism does not assign any place

to the institution of caste in its doctrinal principle and “its proponents claim that one of [Sikhism’s] fundamental missions has been to build a caste-free society” (Jodhka 2002, 1814).

According to W.H. McLeod, Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, makes it explicit in his teachings that caste status has “no bearing on access to the divine Name and thus to the means of liberation” (1989, 12). Sikh religious embodied institutions and practices such as *langar* (free community kitchen), *kbande di pabul* (baptismal ceremony), and *karah parshad* (blessed food) can be seen as representations of an imperfect commitment to equality as these embodied institutions and practices explicitly attempt to undermine hierarchical distinctions. McLeod argues that *langar*, community kitchen, requires participants, regardless of differences, such as age, gender, and caste, to “sit in status-free line (*pangat*) and eat together” (1989, 12-13). *Langar* not only encourages individuals to sit together irrespective of difference, but also requires individuals to eat food that has been offered, prepared, and served by others, thus ensuring that general-caste Sikhs eat with and be served by Scheduled Caste Sikhs. *Langar* is an embodied practice in which individual Sikhs sit, eat, and interact with others irrespective of marked physical differences, like caste and gender.

The baptismal ceremony, *kbande di pabul*, initiated by the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, also undermines caste hierarchies by questioning notions of ritual purity. The ceremony requires all participants to drink *amrit* (nectar, or water used for baptism) from a common bowl without assigning any significance to the caste background of those who administer and partake in the ceremony (Mann 2001, 93). In addition to requiring participants to drink from the same bowl, the *kbande di pabul* ceremony further reinforces caste equality because it is believed that the first five to accept baptism “included a representative range from high-caste Khatri through middle-caste Jat to low-caste barber and washerman” (McLeod 1975,

86). The *khande di pabul* ceremony is an embodied practice that undermines the logic of purity and pollution by requiring individual Sikhs of all caste backgrounds to drink *amrit* from a common bowl. In short, the ceremony undermines bodily restrictions, such as commensality, prescribed by caste hierarchies.

The practice of distributing *karah parshad* (blessed food) in *gurdwaras* also undermines notions of ritual purity. The practice is significant not only in the actual presentation of the blessed food, but also in its subsequent consumption (McLeod 1975, 86-87). *Karah parshad* can be offered by anyone. These offerings are then deposited into a single dish and a portion is distributed to everyone who is present in the congregation. The distribution of *karah parshad*, according to McLeod, “ensures that high castes consume food received in effect from the hands of lower castes or even outcastes and that they do so from a common dish” (1975, 86-87). Participation in *langar*, initiation through the *khande di pabul* ceremony, and distribution and consumption of *karah parshad* undermine notions of caste-based ritual purity by ensuring that Sikhs irrespective of marked, visible differences participate communally in embodied religious practices. By ensuring that Sikhs irrespective of marked differences participate communally in embodied religious practices, the rituals of *khande di pabul*, *langar*, and *karah parshad* all “give a striking blow to the notion of ritual purity, in contrast to the ritual rigidity in the Hindu religious places” (Puri 2003, 2694). Consequently, these institutionalized embodied rituals and practices can be seen as a realization of a Sikh narrative of caste equality.

### *Narrowing the Definition of Casteism and Minimizing Discrimination*

A majority of interviewees respond to inquiries regarding caste relations by referencing a Sikh public narrative of caste equality, which challenges caste hierarchy and promotes caste-blindness through specific embodied rituals, practices, and institutions. For example, Jasveer Singh Gill's narrative characterization of caste relations in the Sikh community focuses specifically on the practice of *langar* [community kitchen] at *gurdwaras*:

Like I mentioned earlier, in Sikhism, there are no caste-based differences. In a *gurdwara* we have never asked anyone about caste; thousands, hundreds of thousands of people gather at *gurdwaras*. Who is Scheduled Caste, who isn't, we don't know. There is no difference. Everyone sits in *pangat* [collective seating in a status free line] – the *pangat*, which was initiated by Guru Nanakji – and eats together. We don't know who sits next to us and we sit and eat with them; there is no discrimination, no difference.

According to Gill, the fact that Sikhs are able to partake in a communal meal without recognition or knowledge of caste demonstrates their commitment to caste equality.<sup>24</sup>

Others like Bakhtawar Singh, a 51-year-old Jat man, emphasize equal treatment in their responses:

If we are able to eat *langar* together in *pangat* then how can we say that one person is SC and another is not? There aren't special tables for anyone; its not as if a separate table is set up for *maharajas* [great kings]. The treatment towards SCs is great; a Sikh is Sikh irrespective of caste.

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<sup>24</sup> According to the logic of purity and pollution, all interaction between castes groups should be highly regulated in an effort to minimize the exchange of pollution. To demonstrate the highly regulated nature of interaction, David Kinsley, describes the interaction between caste groups at a Brahman wedding. A large, celebratory feast that is shared with others marks the Brahman wedding, but the manner in which the feast is shared also evinces an attempt at managing and regulating the exchange of pollution. For example, "Shudra castes will be fed outside the [Brahman] house on the porch...[whereas] Members of the untouchable castes are given the leftovers and usually are asked to eat their food in the street, outside the Havik [Brahman] family compound, or to take their food home" (Kinsley 1982, 162-163). Gill's commitment to caste-blindness while participating in *langar* is significant when contrasted against the highly regulated interactions between caste groups dictated by the logic of purity and pollution.

The ability to consume food together in a status-free line, *pangat*, eliminates, for Bakhtawar Singh, any caste difference.<sup>25</sup>

The narratives of caste equality discussed above rest on a narrow definition of casteism that relies on an understanding of caste hierarchy as rooted in the logic of purity and pollution. Narrowing the scope of caste distinction in this way has the effect of emphasizing certain types of discrimination while obscuring other discriminatory practices, opinions, and behaviors. When discussing caste, most respondents argue that caste has no significance among Sikhs and to substantiate this claim most respondents discuss the preparation and consumption of food. For both Gill and Singh the ability to eat with others irrespective of caste hierarchies is demonstrative of caste equality. However, equating one's willingness to eat with others as a manifestation of caste equality is intelligible only within the logic of purity and pollution, which is rooted in bodily restrictions. Notice how this narrow definition allows other caste-based incidents to be interpreted as devoid of casteism. For example, refusal to eat with Scheduled Caste Sikhs in *gurdwaras* is identified as discriminatory, but other kinds of acts, such as serving food to Scheduled Caste Sikhs after general-caste Sikhs, are not identified as discriminatory in nature.

In addition to operating on narrow definitions of casteism, others, like Balbir Kaur, a 60-year-old Khatri woman, minimize the salience of caste and caste discrimination in the present by discussing exclusionary practices of the past. According to Balbir Kaur, SCs were treated poorly prior to the Guru period, extending from the birth of Guru Nanak in 1469 to the death of the Tenth Guru in 1708, but now are treated well:

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<sup>25</sup> According to the logic of purity and pollution, the act of dining together “in the same line is automatically to share in the pollution of other members of that line” (Kinsley 1982, 164). And therefore, sitting and sharing food with others in a status-free line challenges this very notion of pollution exchange.

Before it was the case that Scheduled Castes weren't allowed to hear religious scripture. And if they did hear religious scripture, then a coin was inserted in their ear. This occurred prior to Guru Gobindji, prior to Guru Nanakji. Guru Gobindji brought them into Sikhism; he is the one that allowed them to prosper in Sikhism. Before this, they were kept at such a distance; people didn't even want to be exposed to their shadow. If someone was exposed to these people's shadow, then that person had to be bathed.

Balbir Kaur's description of past atrocities against SCs is intelligible only within the logic of purity and pollution. Exposure to a SC's shadow, for example, requires one to bathe only if one ascribes to shadows the power to pollute. Current forms of discrimination fall outside her definition of casteism because they do not exhibit discrimination on the basis of purity and pollution. Balbir Kaur explicitly states that casteism existed prior to the Guru period and that the Gurus during their time on earth dismantled the caste system by bringing SCs into the Sikh fold and allowing them to prosper.<sup>26</sup> By defining casteism as a problem of the past that has been remedied by Sikhism, Balbir Kaur is able to minimize present-day discrimination based on caste while also denying her own personal culpability in continued discriminatory practices. When asked explicitly about present-day treatment of SCs, Balbir Kaur maintains that SCs are treated well and substantiates this claim by stating that SCs have entered kitchens:<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Kaur refers to caste-based restriction regarding who has the ability to hear and learn the Hindu Veda. According to caste hierarchies based on purity and pollution, "only the twice-born classes [Brahmans, Khatris, and Vaisya] were allowed to hear the Veda and...only the Brahmans came to be its guardians, learning it and reciting it during rituals" (Flood 1996, 58-59). In Sikhism, all people irrespective of caste have the ability to hear and learn the Sikh scripture, *Guru Granth* sahib. Currently, a majority of *granthis* [keepers or custodians of the *Guru Granth*] come from low-caste backgrounds, thus undermining the logic of purity and pollution, which is supposed to restrict one's capacity to hear and learn scripture.

<sup>27</sup> Balbir Kaur's discussion of SCs entering upper-caste kitchens is illustrative of a shift that has occurred throughout Punjab. Many of the wealthy farmers in Punjab, most of whom are Jat *zamindars* [landowners], continue to live in villages while enjoying the modern amenities of urban life. For example, many of these households have begun to employ SC women as maids to help with domestic chores. According to Surinder S. Jodhka, "At least ten to twelve dalit women in almost every village of Punjab were regularly employed for domestic help" (2004, 183). These women do various kinds of domestic work such as sweeping, washing of

Before people were terrible to SCs; however, now things are fine. Nowadays, the lower castes are ahead in every type of work. They do the kitchen work, they do all of the labor work, and now these people are also ahead in education. They have prospered because of the reservation system. There is a reservation system in politics as well. They have also succeeded in housework. If they have entered into the kitchen, then how will they ever be behind?

Balbir Kaur's emphasis on the kitchen, where food is prepared, is consistent with an operative definition of casteism grounded in embodied notions of purity and pollution. For Balbir Kaur, SCs are currently "fine" in comparison to before because they have been able to overcome restrictions associated with embodied ritual purity. A narrow operative definition of casteism allows Kaur to recognize the entry of SC Sikh maids into general-caste Sikh kitchens as a victory while she simultaneously ignores other forms of discrimination that SC Sikhs continue to endure.<sup>28</sup>

While the dominant operative definition of casteism in a Sikh public narrative of equality is one rooted in the logic of embodied purity and pollution, the scholarly literature on caste and casteism finds that factors of purity and pollution are less influential in the Sikh community than in the rest of India. Indeed, many argue that what makes caste

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clothes, and in some cases, even working in kitchens preparing food and washing dishes. See Surinder S. Jodhka's "Sikhism and the Caste Question."

<sup>28</sup> After interviewing Balbir Kaur, I had the opportunity to interview a SC Sikh woman, Gurinder Kaur, who works in Balbir Kaur's home as a maid. Gurinder Kaur washes dishes, sweeps and mops floors, cleans bathrooms, washes clothes, and helps prepare food in the kitchen. The interview with Gurinder Kaur was not entirely successful; Kaur's responses were brief yet polite. This was, in large part, due to my inability to set up the interview in a more neutral site. The only opportunity I had to speak with Gurinder Kaur was during her working hours in the home of her employer. Additionally, her employer, Navdeep Kaur (Balbir Kaur's daughter-in-law) was present for the interview. However, after the interview was completed, I had the opportunity to talk to Navdeep Kaur regarding Gurinder Kaur's role in their household. During this conversation, Navdeep Kaur discussed her relationship with Gurinder Kaur. She stated that Gurinder was treated well and ate well in her home. She also discussed the fact that the family helped to pay some of the expenses for Gurinder's oldest daughter's wedding. According to Navdeep, the relationship between the two women – Navdeep and Gurinder – has not been received well by her mother-in-law, Balbir Kaur. Balbir Kaur, who throughout the duration of her interview maintained that SC Sikhs enjoy equal status, is highly opposed to the fact that Gurinder Kaur, a Mazhbi woman, has been allowed into the family's kitchen to prepare food. Currently, according to Navdeep, Balbir Kaur allows Gurinder Kaur to enter their home freely, but she remains displeased with the fact that Gurinder is allowed to work in the kitchen and prepare food.

discrimination in the Sikh community different from discrimination in the rest of India is the absence of a purity-pollution frame of relations.<sup>29</sup> A majority of respondents, however, use a narrow definition of casteism that relies on this frame of relations even though it does not capture the present-day practices of discrimination within the Sikh community. The predominance of a purity-pollution frame allows most respondents to discuss casteism as an issue of the past that has been remedied by the institutions and practices of Sikhism, thus obscuring current discriminatory practices.

### **Narrative Explanations of Caste Difference**

This section demonstrates the ways in which a majority of the respondents maintain a belief in a Sikh public narrative of caste equality while simultaneously explaining and participating in caste differentiation. These ontological narratives allow respondents to (1) distance themselves from discriminatory actions by shifting responsibility onto others, and (2) obscure specific types of discrimination through the use of a narrow definition of discrimination, thus rendering specific discriminatory acts innocuous.

According to a majority of respondents, caste-based discrimination is no longer a problem within the Sikh community because Sikhism has eliminated casteism and/or the recognition of caste, and therefore one would expect SC Sikhs to enjoy a status in Sikh society equal to that of their general-caste counterparts. However, this is not the case. Most social indicators, such as landownership rates, poverty levels, and educational attainment,

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<sup>29</sup> See Ronki Ram, "Limits of Untouchability, Dalit Assertion and Caste Violence in Punjab, 148-149; Harish Puri, "Scheduled Castes in Sikh Community," 2698; Surinder S. Jodhka, "Prejudice without Pollution," 387; Paramjit S. Judge, "Interrogating Changing Status of Dalits in Punjab," 103; and Ronki Ram, "Untouchability in India with a Difference," 898.

confirm the continuation of caste-wise inequality. Social norms, such as separate SC cremation grounds, *gurdwaras*, and religious sects, also indicate continued unequal treatment of SCs.<sup>30</sup> Thus the question arises, how do respondents account for the vast discrepancies between general-caste and Scheduled Caste Sikhs, if, for them, caste differences and caste-based discrimination do not exist? A majority of respondent explain the structural position of Scheduled Caste Sikhs through a series of ontological narratives that minimize their own participation in discriminatory practices by shifting focus to SC behavior, state policies, and degrees of religious observance. The most prominent ontological narratives among respondents are the following: (1) SCs engage in ‘bad’ behavior and ‘bad’ work; (2) SCs consider themselves inferior to others; (3) SCs fail to adopt middle-class Sikh values; (4) caste difference is created by state policies; and (5) casteism persists due to an incomplete adoption of Sikhism.

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<sup>30</sup> Some gains have been made in the Sikh community, which should not be overlooked. For example, *granthis*, *ragis*, and *sewadars* come largely from the “lower castes, including a noticeable number from the scheduled castes; and, it may be surprising, very few from the jat caste” (Puri 2003, 2698). Some Scheduled Caste *granthis* have “risen to positions of power and influence and have become the head *granthis* and *jatbedars* at the Golden Temple and Akal Takhat, two of the most important seats of the Sikh religion” (Jodhka 2002, 1817). Some interviewees pointed to the predominance of SCs in positions such as *granthis* and *ragis* as a way to demonstrate a narrative of Sikh caste equality. Gains have also been made in access to drinking water. In the past, SCs were forced to rely on GC Sikhs for access to drinking water wells, but wells are no longer the primary source of drinking water. Taps and hand-pumps have replaced wells throughout Punjab. Though in some cases sources for drinking water remain separate for SCs and general castes, “there was much less restriction on the access of dalits to the taps and hand-pumps used or owned by upper castes” (Jodhka 2004, 184-185). It should be noted, however, that while SCs can and do access water from GC water sources with regularity and frequency, the same cannot be said about GC Sikhs. According to Jodhka, upper castes do not frequently access water from the sources used by SCs (2004, 184-185). One of the respondents discussed the change in access to drinking water as demonstrative of caste equality. Segregated housing is also on the decline in Punjab. For a detailed discussion of drinking water see Surinder S. Jodhka’s “Dissociation, Distancing and Autonomy,” 75-76. The old village structure has been, to some extent, diluted due to “growing population and a continual expansion of residential areas” (Jodhka 2004, 184). Successful upper-caste families are constructing newer and bigger homes on the peripheries of villages closer to SC settlements. There are also some situations in which “upwardly-mobile dalits had purchased houses in upper-caste localities from those who had left the village for towns or had emigrated to the West” (Jodhka 2004, 184).

### *'Bad' Behavior and 'Bad' Work*

Many respondents explain social distancing between castes by relying on an ontological narrative of SC 'bad' behavior and work. For example, Jasveer Singh Gill claims that though there is no untouchability among Sikhs, the behavior of SCs warrants social distancing:

There is no untouchability; however, [SCs] behavior is such that, or their work is such that people do keep a distance from them. People choose to stay at a hand's length away from them; they do keep some distance.

Gill recognizes the existence of social distancing between GC and SC Sikhs; however, this distancing is attributed completely to SCs. Gill forecloses any possibility of identifying general-caste Sikh participation in the process of distancing; the culpability is squarely placed on Scheduled Caste Sikhs, allowing Gill to obscure his own participation in the creation of social distancing. Gill substantiates his claim regarding 'bad' behavior by providing multiple examples, one of which outlines the behavior of a SC teacher who works with him:

And sometimes what happens is that when you are sitting in an office with ten or twenty people, [SCs] will engage in acts that show their caste. And that's why they get the degree of respect that they deserve [Gill laughs a bit after saying this]. Sometimes they do the most terrible things; they participate in awful acts. For example, just yesterday, at our school an incident like this occurred. We have a staff fund through which we collect money...So, for example, if there is wedding in the village, we have to go, we have to give a *shagan* [a blessing given in the form of a monetary gift]...Actually, one of our female staff members is getting married tomorrow. We are going to give her a *shagan*; 1100 rupees or 2100 rupees, whatever it is. There are about 10 to 15 staff members and each staff member gives 100 or 200 rupees. One of our staff members was collecting the money, the staff member who was delegated this responsibility. One person, only one person amongst us is SC. He asked a question, "First tell me what the prior account balance was; give me the initial account balance." The one collecting the money said, "I am not going to give any type of clarification regarding the account balance, if someone else wants to collect the money, then fine, but I won't do it. I won't take responsibility for this work. If you are going to give me 100 rupees and then ask me for a written account balance, I won't do it. I am collecting this money not for myself, but for joint work, for shared work. I make enough of a salary that if I collect 1000 rupees for the group I don't need any of it." But the SC guy raised this question. No one took

money from him...It's because of their terrible actions that people stay away from [SCs]. That's why people aren't close to them; that's why they keep their distance.

For Gill, it is the 'bad' behavior and 'terrible' actions of SCs that create a distance between Scheduled and general-caste Sikhs. Furthermore, Gill believes that SCs deserve the respect, or lack of respect, they receive because of their behavior. Any perceived 'bad' behavior, according to Gill, is not only attributed to the caste group, but is also described as constitutive of or essential to the Scheduled Caste.<sup>31</sup> Gill's limited definition of casteism overlooks and ignores other forms of discrimination, such as stereotyping and essentializing, by regarding these forms of discrimination as harmless. Additionally, one must ask why Gill identifies his colleague's behavior as 'terrible'. As described by Gill, the SC gentleman is asking to see the prior account balance before contributing to the staff fund. The exchange can be described as the SC teacher's asking for a more transparent process. However, Gill reads this request for transparency as 'bad' behavior. It might be the case that Gill is upset with the situation not because of the demand for transparency, but because the demand originated from a SC colleague.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Gill's description is logical if one understands caste as conforming to the conventional Brahmanical view, which is characterized by the following features: (1) castes are arranged in a hierarchical structure; (2) caste hierarchy is based on the polarity between purity and pollution; (3) the caste of any individual is inalienable; and (4) there are strict rules regarding commensality and marriage (Flood 1996, 59). In this particular description, Gill relies strongly on the third feature, which states that the caste of any individual is a property of the body and cannot be removed or changed.

<sup>32</sup> Surinder Singh Jodhka finds that caste in Punjab is the basis from which individuals "make claims over the common resources of the village and begin to demand equal rights vis-à-vis other caste communities" (2004, 189). Similarly, Craig Jeffrey argues that in rural north India "caste as an identity, form of social organization and basis for staking claims to resources remains significant" (2001, 231). Accordingly, one can perhaps read Gill's description of perceived 'bad' behavior as his discomfort and displeasure with a SC colleague making claims over common resources. In short, the demand to see the balance sheet for joint funds in and of itself does not constitute 'bad' behavior; however, the fact that this demand comes from a SC individual may account for why it is perceived as 'bad' behavior, as the SC teacher is asserting himself by questioning and challenging his general-caste colleagues.

### *Lack of Personal Confidence*

Some respondents, like Jasveer Singh Gill and Santokh Kaur, a 46-year-old Jat woman, explain differential treatment through an ontological narrative that emphasizes a SC self-perception of inferiority:

*Jasveer Singh Gill.* Let me tell you something else: inside your heart there is one feeling. There is nothing else, only one feeling. Inferiority complex is embedded in your heart, too. If you remove inferiority complex, then you will believe that you are superior; if you keep inferiority complex in your heart, then of course you will believe that you are inferior. How is your confidence level created? It comes from your heart. These people [SCs] don't remove this thing from their own heart. Others may remove it from their heart, but these people [SCs] don't.

*Santokh Kaur.* We told you about this earlier. For example, Labo Aunty, poor thing, is considered low-caste and she works, and she asks for things herself. We don't give everyone things. For example, we don't go to high-caste *sardars* [Sikhs] and try to give them stuff. But because these people [SCs] consider themselves low they are treated this way.

Gill explains differences between general- and Scheduled Caste Sikhs by referencing individual levels of confidence and self-esteem. By doing so, Gill ignores the structural forces that create the current socio-economic position of Scheduled Caste Sikhs, and is able to shift the discussion to individual failures by detaching the discussion of inferiority and superiority from issues of power. The transition from being dominated to being dominant for Gill is an internal one, which has little to do with power relations or power structures. For Gill, if one can remove inferiority from one's heart and replace it with superiority, then one has changed his or her life chances. Furthermore, Gill argues that even if others (meaning general-caste Sikhs) are willing to elevate SC Sikhs in their hearts to a level of equality, SC Sikhs continue to cling to their inferior self-perception. Thus, Gill is able to distance himself from discriminatory practices by shifting culpability for caste-based disparity

onto SCs; he thus forecloses the space from which to understand general-caste Sikh participation in creating a perception of inferiority.

When discussing Labo Aunty, a SC Sikh woman who works as a maid, Kaur claims that Labo is treated differently because she considers herself to be low. Thus, Kaur implies that if Labo thought of herself as an equal of Kaur's, then Kaur would treat her differently. Once again, all culpability for differential treatment towards SCs is shifted onto SCs themselves. Scheduled Caste Sikhs are identified as the source of differential treatment because, for Kaur, "these people [SCs] consider themselves low." Consequently, for Kaur, individuals like Labo are willing to ask for and accept items, like wheat, lentils, and cooking oil, from general-caste Sikhs because of their inferior self-perception. Kaur substantiates her explanation by pointing to the fact that this practice does not occur with upper-caste Sikhs. What is completely obscured in Kaur's discussion of Labo is the issue of class. According to Kaur, Labo is low-caste, and therefore, she works in people's homes as a maid, and also asks for and accepts specific items. However, Kaur's explanation does not consider the fact that Labo is poor, and as a result, she is willing to work as a maid, and also willing to ask for and accept things from general-caste Sikhs who tend to be well off. An ontological narrative emphasizing lack of self-confidence characterizes SC Sikhs as the source of casteism because they cling to their inferior self-perception, therefore shifting all culpability for casteism away from general-caste Sikhs.

### *Middle-Class Values*

Others explain the current situation of Scheduled Caste Sikhs by pointing to their inability or unwillingness to adopt middle-class Sikh values. Respondents like Jasveer Singh Gill and

Rupinder Kaur, a 62-year-old Khatri woman, adopt a middle-class ontological narrative that assumes that Scheduled Caste society suffers from casteism whereas middle-class Sikh society is devoid of caste and casteism.

*Jasveer Singh Gill:* It's like this, miss. The first thing is that these people [upwardly mobile SCs] have changed their society. They were able to escape the society that they used to live in. They are now in a society in which there are no caste differences, no caste discrimination.

*Rupinder Kaur:* Even if I found out that some person is Scheduled Caste, I would say, "What are you talking about? I think you have made a mistake. This person is wonderful; how could they be Scheduled Caste? How could this person be included in Scheduled Caste?" If I found out that someone was Scheduled Caste, I would say, "This person's way of life, way of speaking is just like ours; their homes are just like ours; their way of eating is just like ours, so how could this person be Scheduled Caste? What limitations or shortcomings do you see in this person that you are calling them Scheduled Caste?"

For Gill, individuals who enjoy upward mobility manage to escape their SC society and have entered a middle-class Sikh society devoid of caste and casteism. Once again, Gill attributes casteism to SCs by arguing that casteism exists in Scheduled Caste society, but not in middle-class Sikh society. Furthermore, Gill equates caste equality with middle-class Sikh values, thereby denying any space for a Scheduled Caste Sikh identity in the Sikh middle class. In Gill's formulation equality is granted to those who accept and assimilate into the dominant society by abandoning their own identity, which is regarded as the source of differentiation and discrimination, to adopt middle-class values.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Gill associates SC identity with specific oppressive social structures—casteism—and, therefore, in his formulation abandoning SC identity will simultaneously be an abandoning of the oppressive social structures of casteism. However, according to Linda Alcoff, this type of formulation is highly problematic. According to Alcoff, "identities are best understood as ways in which we and others around us represent our material ties to historical events and social structures" (2006, 287). And at times, these events might be traumatic and the social structures might be oppressive, but, for Alcoff, "this indicates that the events need to be carefully understood and analyzed and that the structures need to be transformed, not that the identities themselves need to be left behind" (2006, 287).

When asked about the treatment of SCs, Rupinder Kaur responds from a position of caste-blindness by discussing SC status as something she would ‘find out’ about. Kaur’s claim that so and so person cannot possibly be SC because he or she is “wonderful” is problematic because of its implicit characterization of SCs. Kaur’s statement is intelligible only if one assumes that SCs are not capable of being wonderful, and therefore, any person who is wonderful is by definition not SC. Kaur also assumes that a middle-class lifestyle is a caste-free lifestyle in which one cannot tell one caste apart from another. However, to adopt a middle-class lifestyle and access the benefits of a caste-free society, one needs socio-economic resources; resources unavailable to a majority of SCs. Kaur’s ontological narrative of middle-class values functions to foreclose the possibility for most SC Sikhs, who live in poverty, to ever gain respect or equality because respect and equality are available for those who adopt middle-class values.

When asked about SC Sikhs who are not part of the middle class, Kaur argues that they are self-isolating:

Now, listen to me, if those people [SCs] isolate themselves; if they say, “We don’t have any similarities with these people [GCs]; we won’t interact with people who are not like us,” then it arises in our heart that these people [SCs] don’t want to be close to us; they don’t want to interact with us. So what are we supposed to say to people like this?

Kaur distances herself from discriminatory practices and shifts culpability onto SC Sikhs by arguing that SCs choose self-isolation because they are unwilling or unable to find similarities between themselves and middle-class Sikhs. Interestingly, for Kaur, the sentiment of class-based difference and distrust arises from SCs, not GCs, thus shifting all culpability away

from herself, and allowing her to cohere to a Sikh public narrative of equality while simultaneously holding discriminatory beliefs.

### *State-based Policies*

Others, such as Surinder Singh, a 22-year-old Jat man, explain the persistence of caste difference and caste discrimination through an ontological narrative that emphasizes state policies. In short, some respondents argue that that casteism is created and maintained by state policies, which treat individuals differently due to their caste affiliation. The Indian constitution provides special provisions relating to certain classes of people, including Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Three different programs have been adopted in an effort to improve the social, cultural and economic conditions of SCs: (1) the Special Component Plan (SCP), which was enacted during the Sixth Five-Year Plan (1980-1985), ensures adequate benefits to SCs by providing funds in proportion to the percentage of SCs in the state;<sup>34</sup> (2) statutory reservation in the legislature, government services, and higher education have been adopted for the backward classes of India; and (3) government welfare measures, including educational scholarships, distribution of free textbooks, health services, and housing schemes, have also been initiated, at times, by central and state governments.<sup>35</sup> Surinder Singh's narrative focuses on reservations in educational institutions, government jobs, and the legislature as the source of the continued casteism:<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> The SCP program has rarely received full funding in Punjab. See J.R. Kundal's "Government's Affirmative Actions for the Scheduled Caste," 245-252.

<sup>35</sup> Some argue that these types of welfare programs focus too heavily on individuals, thus resulting in a mismatch between household capacity and individual achievement. In response, J.R. Kundal has called for the adoption of the household as the unit of distribution (2004, 253-254).

<sup>36</sup> This is a common belief among individuals in Punjab. Manmohan S. Gill finds in his study, which surveyed 120 respondents of different caste affiliation in Jalandhar, that a majority of respondents agree that reservation

And now in jobs and education there is a difference, too. If there wasn't a difference then there wouldn't be SCs and BCs. The state gives priority to SCs and BCs; the state continues to say that these people are lower caste, so how are things supposed to change?

According to Singh, if the state did not recognize and maintain caste differences when allocating government jobs and seats in education, then the categories of Scheduled Caste and Backward Castes would be eliminated. In Singh's estimation "the state continues to say that these people are lower," and therefore, casteism continues. After shifting the responsibility for continued recognition of caste to state policies, Surinder Singh asks, "How are things supposed to change?" Change, for Singh, is impossible due to state policies; therefore, he is able to shift culpability of the continued salience of caste and casteism away from individual acts of discrimination to the state by emphasizing the incentives created by state reservation policies.

Surinder Singh continues by stating that the incentives created by the reservation system are so strong that general-caste Sikhs are also trying to change their caste status:

Let me tell you more. There are Jats who are getting SC certificates made. Now why are they doing this? In the hopes of getting a job, of being part of the quota... Those who are Saini used to be in the general category but they demanded repeatedly that they be in the SC quota – no, sorry, the BC category – and now they are part of this group, meaning that now the casteism that remains is a demand for quotas.

Singh's narrative characterization of Scheduled Caste status as a mechanism for extracting state-based benefits obscures three distinct realities. First, Singh fails to recognize that many SCs are unable to avail themselves of the benefits associated with reservation policies

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policies create unequal opportunity structure for different groups. Furthermore, a majority of respondents find that reservations based on caste undermine notions of equality and social justice (Gill 2004, 92).

because they are not adequately empowered and lack the necessary skills.<sup>37</sup> Second, Singh's narrative characterization of the situation assumes that SC Sikhs are a uniform and monolithic group with equal ability to access the benefits associated with reservation policies. This, however, is far from the truth. Paramjit S. Judge finds that Ramdasis have made the best use of the reservation policy whereas Mazhbis have not been able to keep pace (2004, 114).<sup>38</sup> Third, Singh equates casteism with the demand for quotas, and by solely emphasizing the benefits associated with SC status obscures discriminatory and exclusionary practices associated with casteism. An ontological narrative that emphasizes state-based policies is one way in which ordinary Sikhs are able to distance themselves from casteism because they shift responsibility for the maintenance and perpetuation of caste hierarchies to state-based policies.

### *Incomplete Adoption of Sikhism*

Others explain casteism in the Sikh community by pointing to the fact that Sikhs have not adopted Sikhism in its full extent. This specific ontological narrative coheres perfectly with a Sikh public narrative of equality as Sikh religious practices and institutions are maintained as the source of caste equality. When asked about the predominance of inter-caste marriages among Sikhs, Surinder Singh argues that inter-caste marriages will remain the norm until Sikhs fully adopt Sikhism by becoming baptized:

There is another issue as well. When all Sikhs take *amrit* [nectar, or water used for baptism] then they will be equal, but people won't be equal until that time. There is

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<sup>37</sup> To remedy this situation, J.R. Kundal calls for the implementation of special government programs designed to provide quality skills to SCs while institutionalizing and formalizing the informal skills they possess (2004, 252).

<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Surinder S. Jodhka finds that "Initially it was the Ad Dharmis and the Chamars who seemed to have cornered a major part of the reserved seats. Subsequently, the state government decided to reserve fifty per cent of the reservation quotas for the Mazhbis" (2003, 38).

a difference until one takes *amrit*. For example, if there is a Chamar boy and a Jat girl, they will be equal once they both take *amrit*, and, at that point, they can get married.

Equality, for Singh, is achieved if and only if Sikhs undergo the baptism ceremony, *khande di pahul*, which eliminates all difference. According to this narrative logic, “a Chamar boy and a Jat girl” cannot marry until both have undergone the baptism ceremony and have achieved equality. Until they do so, they will remain unequal and therefore should not get married. Singh identifies the baptism ceremony as the process through which equality is achieved; therefore, caste difference and discrimination can be attributed to the slow adoption of the religion. This also implies that only those SC Sikhs who have undergone the baptism ceremony are equal to general-caste Sikhs. According to this particular ontological narrative, equality is available to those who fully adopt the Sikh religion.

Some, like Rupinder Kaur discuss the difficulty of policing those who do not fully adopt Sikhism:

Now, what kind of authority do I have? You are talking to me now, but what authority do I have to tell other people, “How dare you talk about such things? How dare you bring up caste?” How can I tell people, “No you aren’t suppose to say, ‘I am Khatri Sikh or Ramdasi Sikh,’ but say simply that you are *gursikhs* [a true Sikh of the Guru]?” In India no one has full authority to say something about this religion or to say something about different caste groups.

Kaur discusses the fact that Sikhs maintain caste and casteism by identifying themselves in both religious and caste terms, rather than solely adopting a Sikh or *gursikh* identity, which would eliminate the use of surnames and the recognition of caste. According to Kaur, caste difference remains due to an incomplete adoption of Sikhism. Furthermore, Kaur points to the fact that there is no single source of authority on the subject of either caste or religion. And she does not believe that she as an individual has any authority to regulate the way in

which individual Sikhs self-identify. As a result, culpability for continued casteism is attributed to an incomplete adoption of the Sikh religion, thus maintaining the idea that casteism is a problem that has been remedied by Sikhism and that the adherents of Sikhism need to become more devout and devoted Sikhs, *gursikhs*. In short, for Kaur, when Sikhism is fully adopted, then the remaining residue of casteism will be remedied. This explanation allows individual general-caste Sikhs to shift the blame away from their own behavior and practices by pointing to a larger set of issues regarding commitment to religious doctrines and practices.

### *Obscuring and Minimizing Discrimination*

The aforementioned ontological narratives obscure general-caste Sikh participation in the creation and perpetuation of casteism. General-caste Sikhs use many methods to maintain the current caste hierarchy, including physical violence, sexual abuse, repeated humiliation, denial of pay and food, and restricted access to fodder and bathroom facilities.<sup>39</sup> In addition to these overt expressions of domination, general-caste Sikhs perpetuate caste domination through implicit, indirect methods. Fauja Singh's interview responses provide some insight on how individuals make sense of everyday experiences of caste-based discrimination in a community that denies the very existence of discrimination. More specifically, Fauja Singh, a 55-year-old Ramdasi man, discusses some of the ways in which Scheduled Caste Sikhs are reminded by general-caste Sikhs, on a daily basis, of their "inferiority". When asked about

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<sup>39</sup> According to Puri, GC Sikhs often use methods such as rape, gang rape, stripping naked, and stripping and parading publicly against SCs to teach them a lesson (2003, 2700). Mark Juergensmeyer finds a similar pattern in his examination of a culture of deprivation in three Punjabi villages. In one of the villages, "The youngest brother in one [Jat] landlord family claims, with some pride, that he has totally eradicated virginity among the daughters of his father's [SC] labour families (Juergensmeyer 2004, 49). Juergensmeyer also finds that SCs were denied daily access to jat landlords' fields "an act which was tantamount to blocking access to the SCs' toilets," for supporting the Congress party instead of the Akali party in a recent election (2004, 49).

the treatment of SCs in Sikhism, Fauja Singh's response that "the Gurus have eliminated caste" reflects a public narrative of caste equality. But when asked about the treatment of SC Sikhs in local *gurdwaras*, Fauja Singh discusses the indirect ways in which SC Sikhs are kept in their place.<sup>40</sup>

The Scheduled Castes are the poor public. We don't have funds, and therefore we remain back; we don't take the lead. The higher caste stays ahead because they have funds; they say, "We built the gate for the *gurdwara*, we had the *gurdwara* painted, and we had the doors installed." They have more property, and therefore they stay at the top, they stay ahead at the *gurdwara*... Those of us who are poor, we live within our means, and if we go too forward then... Actually, let's just talk about me. If I try to make myself visible in the *gurdwara*, if I try to take the lead, then some people within the *gurdwara* will try to uproot me and they will say to me – not directly, but indirectly, in their casual language – that I should remain within my limits; that I should do this, not that; I should act this way, not that way. And I understand this. I don't want anyone talking negatively about me, so I stay within my limits.

Scheduled Caste Sikhs are made to feel inferior because they lack the necessary resources to contribute and donate to *gurdwaras*. And if SC Sikhs attempt to contribute and donate to *gurdwaras*, then they are reminded of their position as low-caste and low-class, and told to stay in their place. Fauja Singh states that if he were to make himself visible in *gurdwara* activities by taking a leadership position, then he would be reminded by general-caste Sikhs

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<sup>40</sup> The contradiction that thus far has been evident in the responses of general-caste Sikhs is also present among SC Sikhs. Fauja Singh, a Ramdasi Sikh who explicitly discusses his experiences of caste-based discrimination, is able to claim that in Sikhism there is no space for caste recognition or caste discrimination because the Gurus eliminated caste. Thus, the question arises, how is Fauja Singh able to make sense of his own experience of discrimination in a community that vehemently opposes casteism? One way in which Fauja Singh deals with this situation, is by identifying Sikhs who participate in discriminatory behavior as "clean-shaven Sikhs," thus implying that these Sikhs have not fully adopted Sikhism: "Most people treat me well and they speak to me with love, but there are some people clean-shaven people who believe in Sikhism less and they have less knowledge, and they spend more money for the *gurdwara* and try to make others around them feel inferior. The people who hold on to these differences and act based on these differences aren't doing it because they have hatred in their hearts; they do it because they don't have knowledge" (Fauja Singh).

in everyday conversations through casual language that he should stay in his place and live in his means.<sup>41</sup>

Scheduled Caste Sikhs are reminded of their “inferiority,” in effect, to maintain current power relations. General-caste Sikhs, according to Fauja Singh, say, “The poor should remain poor; low castes should remain low.” When a SC Sikh challenges the current power relations, then he or she becomes the object of ridicule, rumor, and gossip. Fauja Singh emphasizes repeatedly that SC Sikhs are restricted in their behavior and actions through indirect means, “little by little.” And these daily reminders of SC “inferiority” propagated by general-caste Sikhs are internalized by SCs, and function as a form of self-regulation:

*Fauja Singh:* The situation is like this: if we have less money, then our clothes are also cheap. Due to these reasons we remain back. We limit ourselves because our clothes are simple; our clothes are cheap so we remain back. We know that we will be served *parshad*, but we choose to take it last because of our clothes. The poor public, we are happy staying back and not taking the lead because sometimes we don’t even have one rupee to *matha tek* [touch one’s forehead to the ground in front of the holy text]. Some [SC] people will go to *maharaj* [holy book of the Sikhs] and *matha tek* without money; others don’t think it’s appropriate, so they will *matha tek* from afar and not even go to *maharaj*...Some [SC] people experience hatred toward their own clothes, and therefore they say my clothes are cheap, they are ugly. So I can’t take a primary position; I can’t take the lead...It’s not as if anyone directly stops the poor from participating or from taking the lead. But they limit themselves; they stop themselves.

Sartorial appearance, according to Fauja Singh, signifies caste affiliation, and therefore, it functions as a visible, marked difference.<sup>42</sup> Fauja Singh argues that he and other SC Sikhs

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<sup>41</sup> Surinder S. Jodhka finds that SCs are rarely if ever stopped from entering *gurdwaras* managed by general-caste Sikhs. Nevertheless, SC Sikhs do believe that they are “not treated at par with their counterparts from the upper castes (2002, 1818). For example, Scheduled Caste children are often asked to come for *langar* after everyone else is finished eating, or they might be asked to sit in separate queues [*pangaal*], and members of the Scheduled Caste community are often not allowed to cook and serve *langar* at local *gurdwaras* (See Jodhka, “Sikhism and the Caste Question,” 184). According to Jodhka, in a village of Gurdaspur district, the devout Mazhbi Sikhs would regularly visit the village *gurdwara*, but “they could never sit along with the upper caste jats, [and] rarely would they be encouraged to distribute *langar* or *parshad*” (2002, 1818).

make a self-conscious decision to remain back, to partake of *karah parshad* last and *matha tekh* from afar. These decisions are made due to visible, marked differences, such as sartorial appearance. For some, according to Fauja Singh, self-regulation transforms into self-hate. Some SCs do not believe they are capable or worthy of a primary position in society because of their self-hate. Consequently, general-caste Sikhs do not need to constantly regulate the behavior and actions of SC Sikhs through force because SCs limit their own behavior according to current social prescriptions and power relations.<sup>43</sup>

When asked why SCs engage in self-regulation, Fauja Singh states that it is born out of fear of humiliation:

This behavior is born out of the fear of others saying, “Your clothes aren’t decent, your hands aren’t washed, your feet are filthy, and look at you. You are trying to get ahead and take the lead. Just stay back, a little man.” Before anyone can make this type of statement, the poor limit themselves and remain behind.

SC Sikhs, according to Fauja Singh, want to avoid public humiliation, and therefore, they behave in ways that avoid any opportunity for ridicule. Fear of being criticized and chastised creates reluctance in SC Sikhs, which is evident not only in *gurdwaras*, but also in other locations.<sup>44</sup> Others, such as Jasveer Singh Gill and Santokh Kaur (see section on *Lack of*

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<sup>42</sup> In my conversation with Fauja Singh, he mentions an encounter he had with the local police. In the description of the encounter, Fauja Singh emphasizes his attire and appearance in great detail. He describes his appearance because, to a large extent, his appearance dictates the way in which he is treated by the *thanadar* [local police chief]. The mistreatment that Fauja Singh experiences at the hand of the *thanadar* reinforces the fact that clothing oftentimes functions as signal of caste, which in turn determines treatment and degree of respect received.

<sup>43</sup> When SCs challenge the status quo, members of the general caste at times suppress them through violence and sexual abuse. See Harish Puri, “Sikhism Scheduled Castes in Sikh Community,” 2700 and Juergensmeyer, “Cultures of Deprivation,” 49.

<sup>44</sup> According to Fauja Singh, SC Sikhs also self-regulate when attending prayers at a general-caste Sikh home: “This does happen in *gurdwaras*, and it happens when people have prayers in their homes. The poor will *matha*, eat *parshad*, and enjoy *langar*, but they do it while remaining in the shadows, while staying back.” Simran Kaur, a 28-year-old Khatri woman, confirms that SC Sikhs are expected to stay back at such functions; however, according to Simran Kaur, this expectation is born out of general-caste Sikh behavior and treatment towards

*Personal Confidence*) read this reluctance as a lack of confidence, which obscures the indirect ways in which general-caste Sikhs help to create this sense of “inferiority.” Fauja Singh’s narrative provides some insight on the ways in which SC Sikhs experience, understand, and negotiate everyday experiences of caste-based discrimination in a community that denies its very existence.

## **Conclusion**

An analysis of the ways in which Sikhs narrativize caste discrimination helps to explain (1) how ordinary Sikhs maintain a belief in caste equality while also participating in caste-based discriminatory practices; (2) how casteism defined by ordinary Sikhs; and (3) how SC Sikhs make sense of everyday experiences of caste-based discrimination in a community that denies its very existence. Through Alcoff’s understanding of identity as a horizon of agency and Somers’ notion of narrative identity, I am able to demonstrate that Sikhs maintain a belief in and commitment to caste equality while participating in caste-based discrimination through a public Sikh narrative of equality and a series of ontological narratives. Most respondents are able to discuss their personal discriminatory beliefs and practices while maintaining a commitment to a Sikh narrative of equality through a series of ontological narratives that minimize their own participation in discriminatory practices by shifting the focus to SC’s behavior, state policies, and degrees of religious observance. I find that it is important to pay attention to the reasoning, arguments, and terms used to justify and contest everyday Sikh beliefs and practices that are in tension with Sikh religious prescriptions

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SC Sikhs. Therefore, one must qualify what Fauja Singh identifies as self-imposed restriction with the fact that this type of behavior is reinforced if not prescribed by general-caste Sikhs who have prayers in their homes.

because an examination of this sort reveals the limits of a Sikh politics of equality, its assumptions and presuppositions, and the day-to-day context through which these limitations are constructed, reinforced, and challenged. By doing so, I demonstrate that an understanding of identity as a horizon of agency has explanatory value because it renders meaning by connecting an examination of identity to a larger set of symbolic, institutional, and material practice, which underscores issues of power and power dynamics by asking what material interests are at stake, what narrative strategies are employed to maintain and challenge these interests, and who, in turn, is privileged and displaced.

## Chapter Four – The Paradoxes of Gender Equality

When asked how women are treated in Sikhism, Rupinder Kaur, a 62-year-old Khatri woman, directly cites Sikh scriptures to demonstrate that Sikhism renounces notions of female inferiority and impurity: “If you consider this question, then you have to say, *‘Then why call her polluted from whom, All great ones [rajas] are born?’* This is written in *gurbani* [word of god].” However, within minutes of celebrating Sikhism as a religion that denounces notions of female inferiority and impurity, Rupinder Kaur claims that women are polluted and compares them to insects:

If you consider the question of women’s purity, then you have to acknowledge that women are polluted...We consider men to be pure. Women on the other hand, are insects among insects. Ask me why? See, first of all a woman hasn’t even come to her senses and she starts her – you know – menses. This happens when she is a girl. And in the Sikh religion this is considered impure. In the Sikh religion they say that a woman shouldn’t engage in prayers when she is impure and she shouldn’t come before [Guru Granth] and bow...Secondly, a woman, to be completely frank, if she is left free, left to her own devices, do you think she can remain pure [reference to sexual purity]? Men don’t even leave an insane woman untouched. This is neither a woman’s fault, nor a man’s fault. This is how God created women.

Rupinder Kaur’s comments are representative of a larger contradiction shared by many Sikhs who vehemently oppose sexism as antithetical to Sikhism while simultaneously subscribing to sexist beliefs and engaging in sexist practices. What makes this contradiction even more interesting is the fact that it is not upheld simply by as Sikh men; rather, a majority of Sikhs, including Sikh women, maintain that Sikhism has eliminated sexism even though gender-based discrimination is an everyday lived experience. Kaur’s comments thus highlight a number of issues and raise intriguing questions: how do ordinary Sikhs maintain a belief in gender equality while also participating in gender-based discriminatory practices? How is

sexism defined by ordinary Sikhs, and what forms of discrimination are included and excluded in the dominant definition of sexism? How do Sikh women make sense of everyday experiences of gender-based discrimination in a community that denies its very existence?

This chapter draws on Linda Alcoff's account of identity to deconstruct a Sikh politics of equality by examining paradoxes shared by many Sikhs who vehemently oppose sexism, yet simultaneously engage in discrimination against women. According to Alcoff, a more plausible account of identity with more explanatory value and coherence with everyday experience "would hold that neither public identity nor lived subjectivity are separable entities, fundamentally distinct, or entirely independent from the other" (2006, 93). As such, one of the tasks of analysis is to explore the interrelationships between a public identity and a lived subjectivity (Alcoff 2006, 93). Public identity, for Alcoff, is "our socially perceived self within the systems of perception and classification and the networks of community in which we live," whereas lived subjectivity refers to "who *we* understand ourselves to be, how we experience being ourselves, and the range of reflective and other activities that can be included under the rubric of our 'agency'" (2006, 93). Lived subjectivity, according to Alcoff, does not perfectly map onto one's public identity or one's socially perceived self.

For Alcoff, identity operates as a horizon, always culturally located with great specificity even as it is open to an indeterminate future and a reinterpretable past not of its own creation. Her conceptualization of identity as a horizon of agency incorporates an understanding of agency that is tied to a visible, marked public identity and internal, lived subjectivity. This approach to agency provides a degree of specificity that allows for an account of political action sensitive to the particular practices (including embodied practices)

that provide the necessary conditions for political action. One can name, understand, and explain the way in which individuals see, understand, and act through a horizon of agency by adopting Margaret Somers' (1994) notion of identity narratives. Narratives are one way to concretize the fact that every identity carries with it always this horizon as a specific, embodied location, with substantive content that is necessary for developing a meaning and understanding of agency and political action.

The goal of this analysis is to explore the contradictions and tensions between a public identity characterized as a Sikh public narrative of equality and lived subjectivities characterized as ontological narratives. By analyzing the relationship between a public identity and lived subjectivities, I hope to demonstrate the substantive context and location from which interviewees develop an understanding of a Sikh politics of equality and Sikh quotidian political action. The benefit of conducting this type of analysis, by relying on Linda Alcoff's understanding of identity as a horizon of agency and Margaret Somers' conception of identity as narrative, is that it renders "understanding only by *connecting* (however unstably) *parts* to a constructed *configuration* or a *social network* of relationships (however incoherent or unrealizable) composed of symbolic, institutional, and material practices" (Somers 1994, 616). I argue that a Sikh politics of equality characterized by gender-based paradoxes is best understood by connecting it to and situating it in a larger set of material, symbolic, and institutional practices because this allows one to expose the material interests at stake, the narrative methods employed to maintain and challenge these interests, and the social actors who are, in turn, privileged and displaced.

### *Current Study*

Other scholars acknowledge the contradiction between Sikh scriptural prescriptions calling for gender equality and social realities of gender-based discrimination (McLeod 1989; Mann 2004; N. Singh 1993; Jakobsh 2000; I.J. Singh 1998). Some scholars explain the undeniable persistence of gender difference in the Sikh community as a manifestation of the pernicious influence of Hindu and Islamic patriarchal values (N. Singh 1993; Kaur 1990; I.J. Singh 1998). Some scholars explain the paradox between religious prescription and social reality as a function of a basic prejudice on the part of commentators, translators, and teachers of Sikhism who excise female voice, symbolism, and imagery and replace them with male ones (N. Singh 1993; Jakobsh 2000; Johal 2001). Others explain the contradiction by suggesting that Nanak's commitment to equality was restricted to the realm of spiritual liberation and that in a social context he is at best ambivalent and at worst a supporter of the patriarchal system (McLeod 1989; Mann 2004). However, there are several problems with such arguments. First, most of these approaches operate on the assumption that Sikh identity is a simple reflection of Sikh scripture; therefore, these approaches make use of a prescribed identity, rather than building an understanding of Sikh identity from the ground up. Second, most of these approaches do not directly explore the opinions, behaviors, and practices of common Sikhs in an effort to make sense of this particular contradiction; therefore, these approaches are unable to connect this paradox to the social context and power dynamics in which it is created, reinforced, and challenged.

In contrast to the aforementioned approaches to gender in the Sikh community, I argue that there is a complex relationship between Sikh religious prescriptions, elite interpretations, and the practices of common Sikhs, which calls into question any simple

correlation between the social position of a particular group and the religious interpretation of equality that the group's members uphold. I find that it is important to pay attention to the reasoning, arguments, and terms used to justify and contest everyday Sikh beliefs and practices that are in tension with Sikh religious prescriptions because an examination of this sort reveals the limits of a Sikh politics of equality, its assumptions and presuppositions, and the day-to-day context through which these limitations are constructed, reinforced, and challenged.

To examine the limits of a Sikh politics of equality, I, first, operationalize Alcoff's notions of lived subjectivities by developing a series of potential ontological narratives<sup>45</sup> to understand how Sikhs use these narratives to take action in and make sense of their lives.<sup>46</sup> By doing so, I hope to demonstrate that a notion of identity as discrete and bounded is problematic, and that it is more reasonable to understand identity as being simultaneously rooted in multiple ontological narratives that can be partial, fragmentary, and, at times, contradictory. Second, I use public and ontological narratives to analyze data I collected from 40 in-depth interviews conducted in Punjabi with Sikhs from all walks of life. By reading interview responses as an uneasy interplay between a public Sikh narrative of equality and ontological narratives, which do not map neatly onto one another, I am able to provide evidence to support the arguments that (1) despite a belief in and a commitment to gender equality, a structure of gender hierarchy is present among Sikhs; and (2) this particular

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<sup>45</sup> I draw on the work of Margaret Somers' in an effort to operationalize Alcoff's notion of lived subjectivity. Ontological narrative, for Somers, are "the stories that social actors use to make sense of - indeed, to act in - their lives. Ontological narratives are used to define who we *are*; this in turn can be a precondition for knowing what to *do*" (1994, 618).

<sup>46</sup> I develop the contours of multiple Sikh ontological narratives from Sikh history and lived experience. These narratives are not meant to be an exhaustive formulation of Sikh identity; however, each one does correspond to important historical and religious traditions and has particular contemporary significance to Sikhs.

hierarchical structure is tied to specific material interests, narrative methods employed to maintain and challenge these interests, and social actors who are, in turn, privileged and displaced.

### *Primary Findings*

When asked about gender, a majority of respondents adhere to a Sikh narrative of gender equality while simultaneously engaging in discriminatory practices against Sikh women. Most respondents are able to discuss their personal discriminatory beliefs and practices while maintaining a commitment to a Sikh narrative of equality by defining sexism in a narrow way, which emphasizes certain forms of discrimination and obscures others.<sup>47</sup> According to a Sikh narrative of gender equality, gender-based discrimination is no longer a problem in the Sikh community because Sikhism has eliminated sexism, and therefore one would expect Sikh women to enjoy equal status in Sikh society. However, this is not the case. Most social indicators, such as sex ratio (Booth & Verma 1992; Sen 2003), infant and child mortality rate (Booth & Verma 1992; Sen 1992, 2003; Gupta 1987), and relative care (Sen 1992, 2003; Gupta 1987), confirm the continuation of gender-wise inequality and discrimination. Thus the following questions arise: how do respondents account for the vast discrepancies between Sikh men and women, if, for them, gender differences and gender-based discrimination do not exist? How do Sikh men and women experience and interpret sexism

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<sup>47</sup> To demonstrate that gender equality is defined in a narrow way, in effect to highlight specific types of discrimination while obscuring other types, I deconstruct and de-mystify respondents' operative meanings of "equality" and "woman". I follow Linda Alcoff's claim that the dilemma facing feminist scholars is that our very self-definition is grounded in a concept that must be deconstructed and de-essentialized (2006, 134). By doing so, I am able to show that whether a woman is construed as essentially immoral and irrational or essentially kind and benevolent, she is always construed as "an essential *something*...she is always the Object, a conglomeration of attributes to be predicted and controlled along with other natural phenomena" (Alcoff 2006, 134).

in a community that denies its very existence? More specifically, how do Sikh women live within the contradiction between a hierarchically organized gender society and a religious commitment to gender equality? I argue that a majority of respondents explain the structural position of Sikh women through a series of ontological narratives that minimize their own participation in discriminatory practices by shifting focus to women's behavior, state policies, and degrees of religious observance. The most prominent ontological narratives among respondents are the following: (1) women lack sufficient purity; (2) girls and women are perpetual outsiders, aliens in their own homes; (3) women's *seva* [service] is tied to the home; (4) gender difference is created by state policies; and (5) sexism persists due to women's incomplete adoption of Sikhism.

## **Gender in Context**

Prior to discussing the ways in which ordinary Sikhs understand gender and sexism, one needs some information regarding gender in India. The following section will briefly outline the contours of the relationship between gender and Hinduism, and gender and Sikhism. The relationship between gender and Hinduism is important because Sikh Gurus initiated and implemented many practices, rituals, and institutions in response to the perceived shortcomings they encountered in Hinduism. This historic connection continues to be salient for average Sikhs in their daily practices of Sikhism.

### ***On the Relation between Gender and Hinduism***

A woman's role and status in Hinduism differs depending on a number of factors, including religious tradition, time period, caste, stage of life, and region. Nonetheless, one can point to

a dominant paradigm within Hinduism that, in part, determines a woman's status. Hindu women have an ambiguous position<sup>48</sup> characterized by extreme power associated with sexuality and fertility, and severe subordination tied to purity and pollution.<sup>49</sup> Women's status differs in part because, at certain times, women's sexuality and fertility are emphasized, whereas, at other moments, women's purity and pollution are privileged.

The Rgveda period (?1200-800 BCE) is considered by some (Young 2002; Anderson 2004) the golden age for women because of the freedom, education, and high status they enjoyed. The Rgveda period facilitated a higher status for women, in part because women's sexuality and fertility were seen as integral to ritual practice: "This was because the wife injected her power of sexuality and fertility into the ritual...Without this contact with the wife, the ritual would have no life and no benefits" (Young 2002a, 8). However, as the categories of pure and impure became more important, women's confinement and subjugation increased.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Not all Hindu women can be characterized as occupying an ambiguous position in Hinduism. According to Katherine Young, women in Srivaisnavism enjoy equality: "Whereas the conservative brahmanical tradition has often restricted the means to and goal of liberation to twice-born men, Srivaisnavism has opened the path to liberation to everyone...Women have often been considered inferior in conservative brahmanical circles. In Srivaisnavism, they have been considered equal or even preferred by God" (2002, 111-112).

<sup>49</sup> In addition to sexuality and fertility, and purity and pollution, inauspiciousness has also primarily been attributed to women. For example, if a woman's husband dies before her, then this is seen as a sign of the woman's inauspiciousness. In this situation, an upper-caste Hindu woman had two primary options. One option was to undergo the rite of passage to widowhood, which entails leading an ascetic life, restricting what one eats to the simplest foods, dressing in plain clothes, and wearing no adornment. The second option was the act of sati (burning herself on the funeral pyre of her husband). Remarriage for women is rare and is strongly opposed in most Hindu writings. Widowhood continues to be a problem for Hindu women. According to Leona Anderson, there are roughly 30 to 50 million widows in India today, and their fate is relatively bleak; this is especially true for those who are uneducated and unprovided for by their husbands or relatives. Anderson argues that widows "are often considered to be a burden to the family...often they are shunned by those who believe that widows are somehow responsible for their husband's demise and that their dharma was not strong enough to ensure their husband's longevity" (2004, 29-30).

<sup>50</sup> According to Katherine Young, women "could not enter the assembly, they must eat after their husbands, they could not have inheritance, [and] they were segregated during menstruation" (2002a, 8).

During the Classical period (400 BCE-400 CE) women's status decreased, which is apparent not only in how their role changed in the Vedic rituals, but also in how their body was described. According to Katherine Young, the decreasing status of women can be explained by the growing emphasis on purity and pollution:

Whereas once their fertility was emphasized, now their impurity was underscored. Whereas once they were married only when mature (after puberty), now they were married before puberty...Whereas once both daughters and sons were viewed as important...now sons were not only highly preferred...but daughters came to be viewed as serious liabilities (2002a, 9).

Brahmin men, during the Classical period, defined their own status in relation to the purity of their women and therefore tried to control women's sexuality (both the source of women's power and impurity).<sup>51</sup> According to the *Law Book of Manu*, women are to be under the control of their fathers, married women under the control of their husband, and widows under the control of their sons. David Kinsley argues that in the *Law Book of Manu* women are viewed almost entirely vis-à-vis men. Their role in society is to serve, give birth to, and nourish males because without male control women are thought to be socially irresponsible and dangerous (Kinsley 1982, 134-135).<sup>52</sup> *Manu* also mandates women to worship their husbands as if they were gods and declares that marriage is the supreme mode of female religious fulfillment.<sup>53</sup> *Manu's* definition of marriage is also reinforced through the Epic

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<sup>51</sup> According to Young, some women rejected or circumvented this type of sexual control by becoming prostitutes and courtesans. For Young, these women's "style of non-confrontational resistance was not a part-time or sporadic activity but a way of life as old as the profession, examples of which can be found through the centuries (2002a, 18).

<sup>52</sup> Jeffrey Lidke, in contrast to Kinsley, argues, "What is potentially dangerous to men is the vibrant sexuality embodied by women, not women themselves. For it is the potency of sexuality that entraps one in desire, identified as the root cause of suffering" (2003, 110-111).

<sup>53</sup> In the early modern period, women's status changed dramatically as a result of the Bhakti movement. The Bhakti movement defined the ideal type of devotion for men and women as an exclusive love of God. This new formulation of devotion exclusively to God, rather than to one's husband, allowed women to "to defy the marital system by refusing to marry or leaving their husbands altogether" (Young 2002a, 16-17). In short, God

literature in Hinduism, particularly in the characterization of Sita, the devoted wife of Rama, in the *Ramayana*.<sup>54</sup>

Women's access to spiritual liberation was contested for some centuries in brahmanical circles. Male Brahmin elites debated "whether women and sudras [low-castes] could utter the sacred syllable *om*; whether they could attain liberation in this life."<sup>55</sup> Women's exclusion from spiritual liberation and religious ritual is, in part, explained through women's sexuality, specifically menstruation and childbirth.<sup>56</sup> Female sexual fluids are regarded as highly polluting, and during menstruation and immediately following childbirth, women are excluded from normal social contact and ritual practice, and are banished from the kitchen in case they pollute the food. Female pollution, according David Kinsley, can also help to explain why "women are included with the low castes as unfit to hear or read sacred texts, as too unclean to take part in a variety of rituals, and as lacking the spiritual maturity to qualify for most religious professions" (1982, 137).

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was no longer conceived as a human husband, and therefore, women were able to experience and express love, spirituality, and liberation outside of marriage.

<sup>54</sup> Sita is one of the most pervasive role models for Hindu women. For some, Sita represents the ideal wife who exhibits total devotion to her husband, whereas for others' Sita is a clear construction of Hindu patriarchy. For example, according to Gavin Flood, "Sita is the ideal Hindu woman, fulfilling her 'womanly duty' (*strisvadharma*) to the letter, yet who retains self-possession and an element of autonomy and identity independent of her husband Rama" (1996, 109). According to Leona Anderson, the image of Sita as a pure and innocent virtuous woman and ideal wife is exploited to serve a patriarchal brahmanic system: "Her ideal status links her quite clearly to suffering, and sends the message that a good Hindu woman should obey her husband without question, even when he subjects her to abuse (2004, 12). Similarly, Amrita Chhachhi argues, "The reiteration of the 'pati-parameshwar' (husband as god) model through the yearly performances of the *Ramayana*, in films and television has a clear function in ensuring that women had to be confined within the household and that 'tradition' sanctioned violence to ensure that women remained within these boundaries" (1989, 574).

<sup>55</sup> These debates ensued even though the *Bhagavad Gita* explicitly states "Even women, vaisyas [prostitutes], and sudras [low-castes] shall attain the supreme goal [liberation]" (Young 2002a, 11).

<sup>56</sup> According to David Kinsley, Brahman women must observe many rules in order to insure that others will not come in contact with them during their menstruation: "For five days, for example, a Havik [Brahman] woman may not serve food to her family or even eat with them but must remain outside the house on the porch. The clothes she wears during her menstruation are also very polluting and must be handled carefully to avoid transmitting pollution to her family (1982, 164).

In an effort to break down boundaries maintained and enforced by gender hierarchies, and to better the social situation of women, the Indian government instituted, against the will of some Hindus, the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 and the Hindu Succession Act of 1956. In accordance with these acts, polygamy became illegal, the age for marriage was raised to eighteen for girls and twenty-one for boys, and women could file for separation and divorce. In addition to these acts, a series of laws were implemented to address dowry deaths, assault, rape, wrongful confinement, cruelty, and sexual harassment.

### *On the Relation between Gender and Sikhism*

Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, categorically rejected gender-based distinctions and argued that through a life of ethical and social commitment both men and women could attain liberation. Women can attain liberation because within the Sikh worldview women are seen as part of the divine creation, and therefore, cannot be the carriers of pollution. Nanak explicitly admonishes those who attribute pollution to women because of menstruation and childbirth by stating “Pollution lies in the heart and not in the stained garment” (Guru Granth 140).<sup>57</sup> According to Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh, Nanak was deeply conscious of the victimization of women that was prevalent in his society.<sup>58</sup> And therefore, Nanak actively opposed customs and beliefs, such as *sati*, *pardah* [practice of veiling], and menstrual

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<sup>57</sup> This particular translation comes from Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh’s *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent*, 4.

<sup>58</sup> In the late fifteenth century, when Guru Nanak started preaching his message, women were considered to be inferior to men, an impediment to spiritual progress, and the cause of man’s normal degradation. During this time, polygamy was rampant; widows were denied remarriage; and *sati*, child marriage and female infanticide were widespread.

pollution, leading him toward “a new praxis, a formulation of new possibilities for the weak and oppressed” (Singh 2000, 67).<sup>59</sup>

The Guru Period, extending from the birth of Guru Nanak in 1469 to the death of the Tenth Guru in 1708, is often discussed as being the golden age of Sikh women’s equality.<sup>60</sup> Nikky Singh argues that the Guru Period represents a time in which women led Sikh institutions, recited sacred poetry, fought against oppression and injustice, and generated new liberating rituals. In short, Nikky Singh claims that the “Sikh faith opened up a wide horizon for all women, irrespective of their caste, class, or marital status; married and single, wives and widows, all were equally validated” (2000, 69-70). Nikky Singh substantiates this claim of gender equality by discussing the fact that during the Guru Period women were no longer segregated or restricted from entering sacred spaces, including the innermost sancta of sacred spaces. Furthermore, the Sikh faith permitted women to touch and recite the Guru Granth. Also, there were no rules stating that men and women must eat and worship apart. And lastly, menstruation and childbirth were no longer stigmatized as polluted. The Guru’s scriptural and practical rejection of sexism was later institutionalized through the *rahit* [Sikh code of conduct] literature culminating in the *Rahit Maryada*. The Sikh *Rahit Maryada* lays out specific rules to combat female oppression; for example, female veiling is prohibited, female infanticide is forbidden, widow remarriage is sanctioned, and

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<sup>59</sup> J.S. Grewal describes Nanak’s new formulation for the weak and oppressed in the following manner: “The *shudra* and the untouchable are placed at par with the Brahman and the Khatri. The woman is placed at par with the man. The differences of caste and sex, and similarly the differences of country and creed, are set aside as irrelevant for salvation” (1990, 30).

<sup>60</sup> Doris Jakobsh finds fault with this particular approach by arguing that references to a Sikh golden age of women’s equality obscure present-day issues of gender inequality: “The ‘golden age’ of Sikh women during the Guru period is iterated and reiterated and scriptural passages highlighting women’s equal access to liberation along with injunctions against women’s impurity are consistently upheld. When the issue of inequality is raised, the *raison d’être* for such inequalities is quickly deflected to the religious milieu surrounding Sikhism [Hinduism and Islam]” (2006, 187).

dowry is disallowed. The scriptural and institutional rejection of the gender-based discrimination would lead one to believe that sexism has been abolished among Sikhs. However, ground-level social realities point to the fact that gender hierarchies are present among Sikhs.<sup>61</sup>

According to W.H. McLeod, in theory Sikh women are regarded as the equals of Sikh men; however, “their actual status falls short of the theoretical claim” (1989, 108). McLeod argues that women’s right to participate in religious rituals is generally recognized, and most Sikhs commonly claim that Sikh women possess greater freedom than those who belong to other religions in India.<sup>62</sup> In reality, however, the actual place of women in the Sikh faith and community is conspicuously subordinate to that of males (McLeod 1989, 108-109). Those who enjoy effective authority within the Sikh faith and community “are almost always men and likewise the various functionaries who serve in gurdwaras, Sants, granthis, jathedars, members of the SGPC – virtually all are men” (McLeod 1989, 108-109).<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ground-level realities also demonstrate that historically gender inequality in the Sikh community has varied, in part, based on caste affiliation. For example, female infanticide was a problem among Khatri Sikhs, particularly Bedis and Sodhis, during the late nineteenth century. According to W.H. McLeod, “Among Sikhs the practice was particularly prevalent with the Bedis, a result of their high social and ritual status. It was essential to marry daughters to a higher subcaste (got), but because they occupied the highest rank of their section of the zat the Bedis had nowhere to go. Often they preferred infanticide as the solution” (1995, 65). As a result, midwives were instructed to sometimes kill a newborn if it was female. This was done by “turning the baby’s face into the placenta so that she suffocated in her mother’s blood. Other methods were strangulation, feeding drops of *akk da dudh* (calotropis procer) mixed with *gur* (raw sugar), or burying alive” (McLeod 1995, 65).

<sup>62</sup> Others, like Doris Jakobsh, reject McLeod’s claim of scriptural equality of women. According to Jakobsh, “Although Sikh apologetics repeatedly insist that men and women are inherently equal in the Sikh worldview, in reality, historical writings say virtually nothing about women” (2000, 270). Jakobsh also argues that Nanak’s hymns can be read as contradictory because, at times, women are respected as procreators and, at other times, they are described as manifestations of *maya* and the source of corruption and degradation. Rajkumari Shanker finds that the Granth emphasizes female subservience, obedience, docility, and dedication while these same attributes are discouraged in men, thus undermining notions of gender equality (2002, 118-120).

<sup>63</sup> Jakobsh makes a similar argument when she states that “women have the right to become granthis (custodians of gurdwaras who also act as caretakers of the Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred scripture of the Sikhs), ragis (professional musicians of kirtan), and panj piaras (the five beloved who administer the initiation rite), but there is no mention of the fact that women rarely, if ever, become granthis or panj piaras” (2006, 188).

## Sikh Narrative of Gender Equality

The respondents whom I interviewed believe in and commit themselves to a Sikh narrative of equality because for them it is divinely ordained. Yet the task of living in accordance with a narrative of equality is not a simple matter; it is mediated not only by debates internal to Sikh religious tradition, but also by the particular material conditions of respondents' lives. Part of my goal in this chapter is to explore the limits of a public Sikh narrative of equality, its assumptions and presuppositions, and the day-to-day context through which these limitations are constructed, reinforced, and challenged.

An analysis of the interviews reveals several consistent reactions to the issue of gender and sexism in the Sikh community. First, there is near consensus among respondents that sexism is not a salient issue in the Sikh community even though these same respondents express discriminatory beliefs and participate in discriminatory practices against women. Second, a majority of respondents substantiate their belief in gender equality through a Sikh public narrative of gender equality, which emphasizes Sikh women's *seva* [service], duty, and responsibility in relation to their place within the home, conjugal marriage, and heterosexuality. And third, a majority of respondents define gender equality in a narrow way by emphasizing heterosexualization<sup>64</sup> of women, which enables them to recognize specific forms of discrimination while obscuring other forms.

When asked how women are treated in Sikhism, a majority of respondents state that Sikh women are equal to Sikh men and Sikh women enjoy respect and reverence in the Sikh

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<sup>64</sup> This term comes from Chandra Mohanty's *Feminism without Borders*. Mohanty uses the term "women's heterosexualization" to refer to the process by which women are defined by their role as housewives, "which defines women in terms of their place within the home, conjugal marriage, and heterosexuality" (2003, 150).

faith.<sup>65</sup> This type of narrative characterization is predominant among a majority of Sikhs irrespective of gender, caste, age, and educational differences. For example, Hardev Singh Saini, a 43-year-old educated Saini man who works as a police constable, and Balbir Kaur, a 60-year-old minimally educated Khatri woman who is a housewife, both state that sexism has been eliminated by Sikhism:

*Hardev Singh Saini:* “The Sikh religion gives women the utmost respect – a good amount of respect.”

*Balbir Kaur:* “The Sikh religion gives women a very high degree of respect. Guru Nanak Devji said woman gives birth to *rajas*, and therefore she deserves full respect and reverence.”

The dominant conception of gender and sexism discussed by respondents is best understood as a Sikh public narrative of gender equality, which argues that “from the very beginning of the tradition, Guru Nanak took special care to give women a position of equality with men in matters religious as well as mundane” (Singh 1993, 30).

According to Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh, Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, elevated women to a position of equality by rejecting “all austere and ascetic practices, elaborate forms of worship, and rites and ceremonies that segregated society on the basis of religion, caste, race, class, or gender” (2000, 67). Singh argues that in Nanak’s new community men and women enjoyed complete equality.<sup>66</sup> This equality was established in part because there “was no priesthood, and men were not designated to play any more important role as

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<sup>65</sup> According to I.J. Singh, “Ask any Sikh, no matter how uninformed he or she is of Sikhism, of the place of women in Sikh teaching. The answer will be quick that they are equal. Ask any Sikh, no matter how liberated or erudite in the intricacies of the faith, or the position of women in Sikh society today and he or she will hem and haw, and side step the issue” (1998, 133).

<sup>66</sup> Others, like Doris Jakobsh, reject this view. According to Jakobsh, “although Sikh apologetics repeatedly insist that men and women are inherently equal in the Sikh worldview, in reality, historical writings say virtually nothing about women, apart from minimal asides about the occasional exceptional woman who has been deemed worthy enough to have *made* the pages of history” (2000, 270). Jakobsh argues that the idea of gender equality is best understood as a myth because Sikh history is largely silent when it comes to issues of gender.

liaisons between humanity and Divinity than were women” (Singh 1993, 254). According to Gurinder Singh Mann, in Nanak’s vision there were no gender distinctions, and “through a life of ethical and social commitment, it was possible for both men and women to attain liberation (*mukti*), a place of honor in the divine court, the ultimate goal” (2001, 22). Mann also argues that Nanak’s successors continued his vision. For example, Guru Amardas denounced customs and practices that denigrated women, such as *sati* and *pardah*, while Guru Ramdas defined dowry as “divine remembrance and not a burden for parents, which results in the unwelcome birth of daughters, and Bhai Gurdas emphasized the merit of monogamy” (Mann 2001, 103).

Much of what Nanak and his successors envisioned has been institutionalized through the *rahit* literature, culminating in the *Rahit Maryada* the Sikh ethical code developed in the middle of the twentieth century. According to Gurinder Singh Mann, from the eighteenth century, the *Prem Sumarag* stressed women’s full participation in religious life. For example, women were expected to be the best-informed members of the household, able to instruct their husbands and children in matters of belief and practice; widow marriage was encouraged; and women partook in the *khande di pahul* ceremony (Mann 2001, 103). By the twentieth century, the Sikh ethical code was emphatic that no distinction be made on the basis of gender. For example, the practice of dowry and female infanticide are prohibited. Furthermore, even association with people who practice girl-killing is prohibited. The *Rahit Maryada* also states that women should not practice *pardah*. According to Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh, the Sikh religion, as envisioned by Nanak and institutionalized through the *Rahit Maryada*, “grants full equality to men and women in all spheres—religious, political, domestic, and economic” (2008, 333).

### *Narrowing the Definition of Sexism and Minimizing Discrimination*

A majority of respondents reply to inquiries regarding gender relations in the Sikh community by referencing a Sikh public narrative of gender equality, which emphasizes Sikh women's *seva*, duty, and responsibility in relation to their place within the home, conjugal marriage, and heterosexuality. When asked how women are treated in Sikhism, a majority of respondents state that Sikh women are equal to Sikh men and Sikh women are respected in the Sikh faith. Many respondents also claim that prior to the Guru Period, extending from the birth of Guru Nanak in 1469 to the death of the Tenth Guru in 1708, women were relegated to a position of inferiority. Guru Nanak, however, provided women with social and religious uplift, thereby eliminating any problems associated with women's impurity, inferiority, and inequality. For example, Bachittar Singh Walia, a 40-year-old Jat man, states:

In the Sikh religion women are given full respect and reverence. During the time of Sri Guru Nanak Devji there was a great deal of disrespect and mistreatment of women. At that point, Sri Guru Nanak Devji, for the protection of women, went so far as to say "*Then why call her inferior/polluted from whom, All great ones [rajas] are born*" (Guru Granth, 473)<sup>67</sup> It is the woman's womb that gives birth to *rajas* [kings] and *maharajas* [great kings], so how can we say anything negative about a woman? At that point in time women were thought of as inferior – they were considered to be at a very low level – and Sri Guru Nanakji made some fantastic changes and gave women their due respect and reverence.

Walia characterizes gender-based impurity, inferiority, and inequality as problems of the past that were remedied during the Guru Period. And thus, he is able to describe current gender relations through a public Sikh narrative of gender equality.

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<sup>67</sup> This translation is from Nikky Singh, *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent*, 30 and Nikky Singh, "Female Feticide in the Punjab and Fetus Imagery in Sikhism," 125.

To substantiate a public narrative of gender equality, many respondents, including Walia, directly cite passages from the Guru Granth.<sup>68</sup> The passage cited most frequently by the respondents comes from Guru Nanak's hymn in which Nanak asks "Then why call her inferior/polluted from whom, All great ones [*rajas*] are born" (Guru Granth, 473)? This is a line from Guru Nanak's larger hymn:

Of woman are we born, of woman conceived,

To woman engaged, to woman married.  
Woman we befriend, by woman do civilizations continue.  
When a woman dies, a woman is sought for.  
It is through woman that order is maintained.  
Then why call her inferior/polluted<sup>69</sup> from whom  
    All great ones are born?  
Woman is born of woman;  
None is born but of woman.  
The One, who is Eternal, alone is unborn.  
Says Nanak, that tongue alone is blessed  
    That utters the praise of the One.  
Such alone will be acceptable at the Court of the True One (Guru Granth, 473).<sup>70</sup>

Some scholars, like Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh, point to this particular hymn as evidence of a Sikh feminist principle. Guru Nanak's questioning of the stigma and taboo associated with women's reproductive power is interpreted by Nikky Singh as an acknowledgement of menstrual bleeding as an essential, natural process, one free of pollution and stigma. Others, like Gurnam Singh, reinforce Nikky Singh's view of Sikhism by identifying the radicalism of Nanak's teaching. According to Gurnam Singh, Nanak's representation of the disciple as

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<sup>68</sup> I.J. Singh argues that "Every Sikh can recite the hymn from the morning prayers which clearly reminds the follower that all are born of woman, that without her no one can exist, and then asks the rhetorical question: 'Why should one demean a woman?'" (1998, 136)

<sup>69</sup> Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh uses two different terms in her translation of this particular word. In *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent* she uses the word "inferior"; however, in "Female Feticide in the Punjab and Fetus Imagery in Sikhism" she uses "polluted". I am therefore including both.

<sup>70</sup> This translation is from Nikky Singh, *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent*, 30 and Nikky Singh, "Female Feticide in the Punjab and Fetus Imagery in Sikhism," 125.

bride and God as groom allows Nanak to (1) disrupt the powerful male-female binarism; and (2) affirm female sexuality, thus demonstrating a commitment to radical equality (2006, 148). Other scholars, such as Gurinder Singh Mann, argue, “women, as part of the divine creation, could not be the carriers of pollution...for Vahiguru [God] views men and women as equals” (2001, 102-103). However, for Mann, Nanak’s ideas evolved within the parameters of patriarchy because Nanak’s support for women emerged from his emphasis on family as the basic unit of a community. Therefore, Nanak’s approach, according to Mann, “augmented the tradition’s positive attitude toward the presence of women in the community, while maintaining an overall framework of patriarchy” (2001, 106).

The aforementioned scriptural passage establishes a qualified and restricted role for women in the Sikh faith and community by equating gender equality with “women’s heterosexualization.” A narrow definition of women’s equality as heterosexualization allows respondents to recognize some forms of discrimination while obscuring others. The hymn emphasizes women’s reproductive capacity and power by stating, “Of woman are we born, of woman conceived.” However, in this formulation, women’s sexuality is limited to the institution of heterosexual marriage and defined in terms of its reproductive benefit. Therefore, an understanding of gender equality based on this particular hymn forecloses the space from which to understand the position and experience of those women who choose not to marry, women who cannot or choose not to have children, and women who are lesbian.<sup>71</sup> In particular, Nanak states that women’s reproductive power grows civilization,

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<sup>71</sup> According to Daniel Maguire, “religions are always active and influential in defining the meaning of the bonding called family and have regularly shrunken it into a gated preserve for heterosexuals” (2007, 2). Maguire argues that religious emphasis on heterosexism puts sexual pleasure on trial because sexual pleasure must be justified or validated through reproduction. Sexual joy is, therefore, stripped of its natural legitimacy.

maintains order, and begets *rajas* [male kings]. Nanak does characterize women's bodies as free of pollution and stigmatization; however, women's sexuality is restrained, controlled, and circumscribed. The line cited by the respondents defines women as free of pollution and points to their capacity to give birth to male kings as evidence of their pure state. What remain unexamined are the ways in which this hymn reinscribes heterosexism, patriarchy, and sexism by privileging a woman's capacity to give birth to *rajas* within the institution of heterosexual marriage.<sup>72</sup>

In addition to citing scripture, respondents also refer to the fact that the Gurus eliminated specific social norms and practices, thus ensuring the uplift of women. In particular, respondents discuss *pardah* and *sati* to substantiate a Sikh narrative of gender equality.<sup>73</sup> According to Surinder Singh, a 22-year-old Jat man, the Sikh religion was the first to eliminate the practice of *pardah*:

The practice of *pardah* was eliminated by the Sikh religion. The Sikh religion was the first to take this step. Next it was the British Raj that said that this practice should stop. The Sikh religion did a lot to eliminate both the practice of *sati* and *pardah*. Sikhs said that both these practices should come to a stop.

Singh's characterization of a Sikh narrative of gender equality not only argues that Sikhism eliminated practices such as *pardah* and *sati*, but also that Sikhism was the first to do so.

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<sup>72</sup> According to Rajkumari Shanker, Sikhism privileges the metaphor of maternal love both on a religious and temporal plane: "On the religious plane, the Adi Granth sanctifies motherhood, especially procreation of sons. On the temporal level, the status of a woman is enhanced when she becomes a mother of sons" (2002, 116). Interview respondents also privilege maternal love and procreation of sons in their narrative explanations of gender equality and gender-based differences (Also see the section entitled *Obscuring and Minimizing Discrimination*).

<sup>73</sup> According to Navdeep Mandair, Sikh repudiation of misogynistic practices like dowry and *sati*, particular vis-à-vis the reforms of the Singh Sabha movement, are best read as a strategy of establishing a clear distinction between Sikhism and its Hindu cultural milieu: "It is not obvious that this repudiation of misogynistic practices facilitates a sanction of gender equality given that the real purpose of this expression of censure is to highlight the fundamental degeneracy of a [Hindu] culture that advocates such customs" (2005, 49-50). In short, for Mandair, the purpose of repudiating misogynistic practices is not to create gender equality, but to create separation between Sikhism and Hinduism.

According to Singh, Sikhs during the Guru Period first questioned, challenged, and ultimately eliminated sexist and misogynistic practices. Singh not only argues that Sikhs were the first to do so, but he also argues that after the Sikhs it was the British who called for the abolition of these practices.<sup>74</sup> Singh's narrative description reinforces the idea that gender-based discrimination, inferiority, and inequality were eliminated during the Guru Period, thus freeing Sikhs of any present-day responsibility for continued sexism.<sup>75</sup>

Other respondents substantiate a public Sikh narrative of gender equality by discussing women's access to and engagement with the Guru Granth. Hardev Singh Saini, a 43-year-old Saini man, points to women's participation in Sukhmani Seva Societies [women's religious societies] as a manifestation of women's equal and active role in Sikh religious life:

Now women are active. Like in our colony a Sukhmani Seva Society has been created by women; so a majority of the time when there is Sukhmani Sahib prayers in someone's home, women usually conduct these prayers. The *granthi* doesn't do it; the women do.

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<sup>74</sup> Singh's characterization of the British as champions of women's rights is problematic because as Lata Mani demonstrates colonial official, missionary, and indigenous elite discourse in Britain and India in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries denied any agency to women. According to Mani, "women are neither subjects nor objects, but rather the ground of the discourse on *sati*" (1987, 152). And therefore, Mani characterizes women as marginal to the debate on *sati*. The debate on *sati* becomes the occasion for a "struggle over the divergent priorities of officials and the indigenous male elite" (Mani 1987, 152). Doris Jakobsh makes a similar argument regarding women's rights vis-à-vis the Sikh reform movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to Jakobsh, women themselves did not collaborate in the design of the Sikh reform movement, and moreover, women were often portrayed as being opposed to their own liberation (2006, 183).

<sup>75</sup> Similarly, Surjit Kaur, a 28-year-old Khatri woman, argues that Sikh women receive better treatment than women of other religions because Sikhism has eliminated traditions such as *sati*: "In comparison to other religions women are treated better in Sikhism. Women receive more respect. This is a young religion and therefore older traditions like *sati* have been eliminated from Sikhism." Kaur is careful to point out that the treatment of Sikh women is better in comparison to the treatment of women in other religions; however, unlike most respondents, Kaur does not adhere to a public Sikh narrative of gender equality. Nonetheless, she does argue that Sikh women are better off because older traditions such as *sati* have been abolished. Once again, the narrative emphasis is on the Guru Period. By emphasizing the Guru Period, Kaur reinforces the idea that Sikh Gurus helped to remedy many of the problems associated with sexism, patriarchy, and inequality.

For Saini, the creation of women's Sukhmani Seva Societies<sup>76</sup> is evidence of women's equality and increased participation in public religious life. However, the very nature of this participation is restricted and qualified. The female members of the local Sukhmani Seva Society have access to the Guru Granth, thus enabling them to engage in public recitation of the scripture.<sup>77</sup> Yet, these women are denied access to the title of professional keeper and reader of the Granth. According to Saini, "the *granthi* doesn't [recite prayers]; the women do." This narrative characterization creates two separate and mutually exclusive categories of women and *granthi*, thus foreclosing the possibility of female *granthis*. Women have the capacity to conduct prayers, but they are not endowed with the official title and position.

The dominant operative definition of gender equality in a Sikh public narrative of equality is one rooted in women's heterosexualization in which women are defined in terms of their place within the home, conjugal marriage, and heterosexuality. A majority of respondents use a narrow definition of gender equality that relies on a heterosexualization frame of gender-relations even though this frame obscures current day practices of gender-based discrimination within the Sikh community. The predominance of a heterosexualization frame allows most respondents to discuss sexism as an issue of the past that has been remedied by the institutions and practices of Sikhism, thus obscuring present-day discriminatory practices.

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<sup>76</sup> In the next chapter, I examine in more detail the creation and role of Sukhmani Seva Societies in the Sikh community. In this analysis, I demonstrate that many of these Sukhmani Seva Societies work to reinforce and reinscribe gender-based discrimination and inequality, rather than being a space of emancipatory action.

<sup>77</sup> According I.J. Singh, there is "no activity in the Sikh religion reserved exclusively for men, nor is there any which is closed to [women]" (1998, 131). For Singh, it is important to note that all religious activity is open to women because in other religions, particularly Hinduism and Islam, "a woman may not read the scriptures, lead the prayers or perform many of the other priestly functions, particularly if she is menstruating" (1998, 131).

## Narrative Explanations of Gender Difference

This section demonstrates the ways in which a majority of the respondents maintain a belief in a Sikh public narrative of gender equality while simultaneously explaining and participating in gender differentiation through the use of ontological narratives. These ontological narratives allow respondents to (1) distance themselves from discriminatory actions by shifting responsibility onto others, and (2) obscure specific types of discrimination through the use of a narrow definition, thus rendering specific discriminatory acts harmless.

According to a majority of respondents, gender-based discrimination is no longer a problem within the Sikh community because Sikhism has eliminated sexism, and therefore one would expect Sikh women to enjoy equal status in Sikh society. However, this is not the case. Most social indicators, such as sex ratio (Booth & Verma 1992; Sen 2003), infant and child mortality rate (Booth & Verma 1992; Sen 1992, 2003; Gupta 1987), and relative care (Sen 1992, 2003; Gupta 1987), confirm the continuation of gender-wise inequality and discrimination. Social norms, such as lack of female *granthis*, *ragis*, and *sewadars* (Jakobsh 2006; N. Singh 1993), restrictions on women's ability to perform religious *seva* (Jakobsh 2006; N. Singh 2000), and women's restricted and circumscribed relationship with her natal family (N. Singh 2009; Sen 1992, 2003) also indicate continued unequal treatment of Sikh women. Thus the question arises, how do respondents account for the vast discrepancies between Sikh men and Sikh women if, for them, gender differences and gender-based discrimination do not exist? A majority of respondents explain the structural position of Sikh women through a series of ontological narratives that minimize their own participation in discriminatory practices by shifting the focus to women's behavior, state policies, and

degrees of religious observance. The most prominent ontological narratives among respondents are the following: (1) women lack sufficient purity; (2) girls and women are perpetual outsiders, aliens in their own homes; (3) women's *seva* [service] is tied to the home; (4) gender difference is created by state policies; and (5) sexism persists due to women's incomplete adoption of Sikhism.

### *Purity and Pollution*

Many female respondents turn to an ontological narrative that emphasizes the logic of embodied purity and pollution to explain differential treatment of women in the Sikh community. For example, Balbir Kaur, a 60-year-old Khatri woman, and Beena Kaur, a 65-year-old Khatri woman, both explain the lack of female *granthis* through an ontological narrative that emphasizes female impurity and pollution<sup>78</sup>:

*Balbir Kaur.* First of all the reason that there are restrictions against women being *granthis* is because women aren't capable of such a high degree of purity. Women can't have the same degree of purity as men and that's why women aren't allowed to get ahead and take the lead...For example, women lose their purity monthly [menstruation]...It comes to my mind that this is perhaps the reason that women aren't allowed to be *granthis*.

*Beena Kaur.* One reason [for lack of female *granthis*], I think, has to do with the fact that women have problems associated with their monthly [menstruation] or with their deliveries [childbirth] [she says in a hushed voice]. This problem does exist. The question of purity does arise. Within this issue of purity, there is also the fact that we aren't supposed to sit before the Guru Granth Sahib. And this becomes a difficulty. And this is something that we have to consider, that we have to accept.

According to Balbir Kaur, women are incapable of attaining the same degree of purity as men because they lose their purity as a result of their monthly menstruation, and therefore, they cannot be *granthis*. Similarly, Beena Kaur explains the lack of female *granthis* by stating

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<sup>78</sup> It is important to note that only female respondents ascribed to an ontological narrative of purity and pollution. And most women spoke of these issues in a hushed voice, thus underscoring the shame, secrecy, and embarrassment associated female impurity.

that women's purity is in question due to monthly menstruation and childbirth. Beena Kaur is able to explain the lack of female *granthis* by stating that one should not sit before the Guru Granth when polluted, and therefore, women must accept that they cannot be *granthis* because menstruation and childbirth cause pollution. In short, both women are able to shift culpability for the perpetuation of misogynistic practices away from any individual, institutional, or structural forces to female reproduction and biology, and therefore to an embodied female difference.

Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, unequivocally rejected notions of female pollution associated with menstruation and childbirth. This initial vision was institutionalized and codified in Sikh *rahit* from the eighteenth century onward, which explicitly stresses women's full participation in religious life. Nonetheless, many women believe that menstruation and childbirth are polluting, and therefore, that women lack the purity necessary to enter *gurdwaras* and sit before and/or read from the Guru Granth. This logic in turn forecloses the possibility of female *granthis* because women cannot attain the purity needed to be a professional reader and caretaker of Sikh scripture. When asked how women come to know about issues of embodied purity and pollution, Santokh Kaur, a 46-year-old Jat woman, states "Women are told about this, my child, by the female elders in the home. There is an emphasis on being clean and pure people especially when you go the *gurdwara sahib* [Sikh temple]."<sup>79</sup> Knowledge of purity and pollution does not come from

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<sup>79</sup> Rupinder Kaur, a 62-year-old Khatri woman, makes a similar claim when she states "We [Sikh women] come to know these things [regarding purity and pollution] within our family; our mother, *bhua* [paternal aunt], *maisi* [maternal aunt], like this would tell us at this time you don't go to the *gurdwara*, at this time you don't bow before *Guru Granth*. All of this is taught within the family."

scriptural text, religious *rabit*, or religious *katha* [commentary on sacred verses], rather it is transmitted within the home from older women to younger ones.

### *Perpetual Outsiders and Aliens*

Many respondents explain the preference for male children through a narrative characterization of girls and women as perpetual outsiders. According to Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh, the Sikh compulsion for sons stems for the fact that parents regard their sons as their “social security, financial insurance, and religious functionaries” (2009, 122).<sup>80</sup> In addition, sons are considered essential for carrying on the family name, property, and land, whereas girls have no rights over their natal homes. Singh also finds that daughters are characterized as beautiful commodities and investments that will eventually be lost to someone else whereas sons are characterized as a source of family wealth because with a son comes “*his* wife [and] *her* dowry adding to the economic resources of his family” (2009, 122).

Many respondents, like Santokh Kaur explain discrimination and violence against girl children by defining girls as outsiders in their natal homes: “But people still engage in [infanticide] because some people have four or five girls, and then say that with boys our name lives on, our roots keep growing, and girls are destined for someone’s home, someone’s family.” In Kaur’s narrative two factors are salient: (1) the birth order of

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<sup>80</sup> In “Son Preference and Its Effect on Fertility in India,” the authors make a similar argument by outlining three major factors that underlie son preference in India: (1) sons are the source of economic utility because sons are more likely to earn wages, support parents during old age, and upon marriage bring a daughter-in-law who represents economic reward in the form of dowry payments; (2) sons provide socio-cultural utility because having one son is imperative for the continuation of the family line; and (3) sons provide religious utility because sons are needed to kindle the funeral pyre of his deceased parents (Mutharayappa, Choe, Arnold, and Roy 1997, 5).

children,<sup>81</sup> and (2) an understanding of girls as perpetual outsiders who are destined for someone else's home. Boys are defined as the source of familial growth and vitality, whereas girls are characterized as outsiders who do not belong in their natal homes. Similarly, Jatinder Singh, a 24-year-old Ramgarhia man, argues that female infanticide occurs due to narrow thinking that characterizes a male child in terms of social security and a girl child as a perpetual outsider: "Infanticide occurs due to narrow thinking...In other words, the thinking is a male child will look after you in your old age whereas your girl child will become someone else's – she will leave your home."<sup>82</sup> Singh's characterization of girl children as perpetual outsiders, as aliens in their own homes, assumes that girls will leave their natal homes, and therefore will never contribute to the social, financial, and religious well being of their families.

Dharamvir Singh, a 35-year-old Mazhbi man, provides an example of how gender preference and bias, rooted in notions of girls as perpetual outsiders, manifests in his home:

Even though many girls are more capable than boys, they aren't given a chance; they aren't given support. I can give you an example of this from my own home. My brother has two girls, and he is going to put a stop to their education once they complete plus-two [12<sup>th</sup> grade]. And his son doesn't know anything – he is

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<sup>81</sup> Monica Das Gupta's findings support Santokh Kaur's explanatory emphasis on birth order of children. Gupta finds that birth order has a significant effect on child mortality rates, specifically the mortality rate for girls: "The data on sex differentials in child mortality by birth order show a steep rise in the mortality of girls at birth order four and higher...Fourth and higher births appear to be geared toward achieving the desired quota of boys. This finding provides clear evidence of the role of behavioral factors in raising the mortality of girls. It also indicates that the burden of excessive mortality falls most heavily on girls at higher birth orders" (1987, 81-82).

<sup>82</sup> Unlike Jatinder Singh, Paramjit Kaur Sidhu, a 22-year-old Jat woman, embraces the idea of women as perpetual outsiders. According to Sidhu, women need to understand, accept, and embrace their position in order to avoid future conflict: "A girl should consider that she is leaving her home and the home she is going to is now her home. She should forget her old family and she should think that her in-laws are now everything. They are her mother; they are her father. She should now consider that her new home is everything for her. These are her parents; these are her everything. Don't even think about the past. If we keep thinking, 'Oh no what is happening in my family,' this too can cause problems. Because then one thinks that 'I want to go back. I want to return home.' And this can cause fights too." For Sidhu, thinking about the past can cause conflict between a newlywed woman and her in-laws, and therefore, Sidhu claims that girls need to forget their old families, thus positioning girls as perpetual outsiders in their natal homes.

intellectually dull – but my brother says, “I will educate my son. After the girls finish plus-two then it’s time for their weddings and marriages; they will go to their homes.”

According to Dharamvir Singh, his brother does not plan to educate his daughters beyond high school even though they show great potential. Singh’s brother justifies his decision by stating that after his daughters complete 12<sup>th</sup> grade, it is time for them to get married, so they can go to their homes. In this narrative the daughters are characterized as outsiders, and therefore, any decision regarding their future, including education, is determined with this fact in mind. According to this logic, if a father provides his daughter with education, then this education will benefit his daughter’s in-laws because her in-laws home is her true home. However, any and all education provided to a son will directly benefit a father because his son will remain with him and support him through his old age. An ontological narrative that characterizes girls and women as perpetual outsiders not only helps to justify violence and discrimination against girls and women, but also forecloses the possibility of an alternative conceptualization of the relationship between women and their natal families.

### *Seva, Duty, and Responsibility*

Respondents, like Surinder Singh, a 22-year-old Jat man, Santokh Kaur, a 46-year-old Jat woman, and Jasvir Singh Gill, a 54-year-old Jat man, explain gender difference and discrimination by defining women’s *seva* [service], duty, and responsibility in relation to their place within the home, conjugal marriage, and heterosexuality. For example, when asked if there is any restriction against women conducting *seva* at *gurdwaras* both Surinder Singh and Santokh Kaur respond by defining women’s *seva* in relation to their place within the home:

*Surinder Singh:* Those who are ladies, in some ways, their devotion is to give children life. This is their greatest devotion that they raise their children. Their biggest *seva* is

to their children; mothers are everything for their children. Therefore, women's greatest *seva* is to their children.

*Santokh Kaur*: Also, the greatest *seva* for women is to their children. Fathers aren't able to teach and guide their children because they are always outside the home.

Both Singh and Kaur define women as mothers, thus limiting their *seva* to the realm of the home.<sup>83</sup> An ontological narrative that emphasizes women's *seva*, duty, and responsibility within the home makes sense only within the logic of conjugal marriage between heterosexual men and women. Within this logic, service to children within the home is the greatest accomplishment for women. By assuming heterosexualization of women, this particular narrative (1) fails to address the needs, desires, and experiences of those who fall outside of these bounds, such as, lesbians, women who cannot or will not have children, and women who choose not to marry, and (2) obscures questions regarding women's equal participation in *seva* outside the home.

Jasvir Singh Gill employs a similar ontological narrative by defining Sikh women as the center of the Sikh household:

The women who are part of the Sikh community are the center of the household no matter their education status. Sikh women, educated or uneducated, are the center of the Sikh home. Women perform all household and social work. And for men, see, we Sikhs in particular are landowning families – we are farming families – and therefore, men don't have the time to perform or participate in social work or religious work. Our women therefore take the lead and they do so much of the work. They take care of the home; they engage publicly with others; they participate in social work; they take the lead in wedding rituals, and in other works – other functions, like religious functions. Women are the leaders in all of these things; and they are considered the center of the household for good reason.

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<sup>83</sup> According to Gurinder Singh Mann, women since the time of Guru Nanak have been assigned a position of considerable importance within the household because for Nanak the home is the appropriate arena for the search for liberation. Furthermore, according to *rabit* literature women “were expected to be the best-informed member of the household and able to instruct their husbands and children in matters of belief and practice” (2001, 103).

Gill takes great pride in defining Sikh women, irrespective of their educational background, as the center of the Sikh household. According to Gill, Sikh men are landowning farmers who do not have time to participate in household, religious, and social tasks, and therefore Sikh women take the lead by taking care of Sikh homes, Sikh wedding rituals, and Sikh religious life. Gill assumes a heterosexualization of women by defining women in terms of a middle-class home and heterosexual marriage. It is within this logic of middle-class heterosexuality that Sikh women are considered the center of the household, in part because their class status allows these women to be housewives. An ontological narrative that emphasizes women's *seva*, duty, and responsibility within the home obscures questions of Sikh women's equality, leadership, and power outside the middle-class heterosexual Sikh home. Within this ontological narrative women, particularly heterosexual middle-class women, enjoy a restricted and constrained power that is limited to the home; thus questions of women's equality outside of the home are never asked because women's greatest *seva*, her true *seva* is equated with the home.

### *State-based Policies*

Some respondents, like Beena Kaur argue that female feticide is a problem created by the state:

And feticide is a problem created by the state...Before we didn't have the problem of feticide...Then some time ago, they created a law so that women could have abortions. The law included abortions in family planning. They made it legal. Once you make one action legal, then someone can do it for good or they can do it for bad; and someone can do it for the greed of money...However, in the Sikh *qaum* [nation or community] it is forbidden, unequivocally forbidden, and we aren't supposed to interact with those people who abort their children. But we started doing it; our daughters do it. What are we going to do? Feticide is completely forbidden; we aren't supposed to socialize with those who practice it. Now that it is

legal, how can we not socialize with these people? After they made it legal, now they are trying to stop it.

Kaur's narrative account coincides with Sikh *rabit* that forbid female feticide and socializing with those who practice female feticide. Kaur asks, if the practice of aborting female fetuses is legal, then how can Sikhs stop socializing with these people? This raises a difficult issue for Kaur because she claims that "our daughters" (meaning Sikh women) are engaging in female feticide even though it is forbidden by Sikh *rabit*. Kaur uses this particular ontological narrative to shift culpability for practices, like female feticide, away from individual Sikhs to the state. For Kaur, the state is culpable for the skewed sex ratio among Sikhs because the state made abortions legal allowing Sikhs to take advantage of a practice that is sanctioned by the state, yet forbidden by Sikh *rabit*.

Similarly, Udham Singh, a 33-year-old Saini man, holds the state responsible for both female feticide and dowry deaths:

The state is the one that is responsible for creating these problems. The state is now saying that girls have a legal right to a share of their parents' land. But when the girl has left her parent's house, then what sense does it make to give a share of her parents' land to her? If she has moved forward with another family, then what right does she have to look back and demand land from her old family? The law itself is wrong. The main hand in female feticide is the state's because the state made this law. See, what happens is this: Let's say there is a falling-out between the sister and her brothers. Well, then she sells her parental property and destroys her brothers. And she becomes the owner of her parents' land and of her in-laws' land; she is the owner of the old property and the new property...The state causes the killing that is occurring of young girls at this time; the state is responsible for these killings. If this law were to change then this [killing] would stop.

According to Singh, state-initiated policies protecting women's right to inheritance cause violence against women, including murder. This particular ontological narrative allows Singh to shift culpability onto the state, thus rendering him and others free of responsibility. Singh is able to make this argument in part by combining two different ontological narratives. He

begins by defining girls as outsiders who have moved forward with another family, and therefore have no right to natal property and land. Singh argues not only that state policies cause violence against women, but also that state policies have the potential to destroy men by allowing women to stake claims over their parents' and in-laws' property.

### *Incomplete Adoption of Sikhism*

Some respondents, like Fateh Singh, a 42-year-old Ramgarhia man, explain the mistreatment of Sikh women by discussing degrees of religious observance:

The mistreatment of women in the Sikh community is caused by a deficiency in one's commitment to the *bani* [the word of God]...Before [the Guru Period] women did not have religious freedom; Guru Nanak Sahib gave this religious freedom to women. But I will not hesitate to say that even though Guru Nanak gave women religious freedom, most women have not used this freedom in a proper way. Women haven't used this freedom in a proper way! Women use this freedom to pursue their own pleasures. Some women use freedom to pursue what is financially beneficial...Other women use their freedom to pursue fashion. Some have gone so far as to forgo their own bodily modesty and respect...When people have knowledge of Sikhism, then there will be respect of women.

According to Fateh Singh, women are responsible for their own mistreatment because of their incomplete adoption of Sikhism. Rather than using their religious freedom as dictated by the *bani* women use their religious freedom for financial gain and pursuit of fashion, thus forgoing their own bodily modesty and respect. Singh claims that women will enjoy respect in the Sikh community when people have full knowledge of Sikhism, and therefore, Singh is able to explain sexism as an incomplete adoption of Sikhism. By doing so, Singh can free himself and others of any responsibility for sexist practices.

Similarly, Beena Kaur explains the current mistreatment of Sikh women by discussing Sikh women's limited adherence to *bani* and *bana* [dress of the *Khalsa*, Sikh brotherhood]:

Nowadays, forget a woman wearing her *dupata* [scarf] on her head; there are some who don't even wear it around their neck. The *dupata* has flown away. Sleeveless arms, very, very small blouses...The meaning of this is that today's woman has become shameless. She is showing off her body, like many Hindustani [Indian] women. And men are becoming hunters. The men are hungry. Guru Gobind Singh Maharaj said, "Read *bani* and wear *bana*. And what kind of *bana*? Modest attire; a modest *kurta-pajama* [shirt and pants], a modest *kameez-pajama* [long-shirt and pants], and *dupata* on one's head...If a girl is herself strong, if a girl dresses well, eats well, drinks well, then no man has the nerve to even get close to this girl. A woman is respected in our religion; she is very well respected. However, if we ourselves have turned on our proper attire, then how is that the Guru's fault?"

According to Kaur, Sikh women are no longer wearing modest attire as ascribed by Gobind Singh; they are wearing sleeveless shirts and short blouses, like Hindustani [Indian] women.<sup>84</sup>

Kaur describes this less modest attire as the attire of a shameless woman. A modest woman, according to Kaur, wears *salwar kameez* and a *dupata* on her head. This, for Kaur, is the *bana* as outlined by the Guru and any deviation from this *bana* is equated with a shameful woman who is deserving of disrespect and mistreatment. For example, if a woman "dresses well" (meaning modestly), then she has nothing to fear; however, when women dress inappropriately, then they are inviting men to "hunt." Kaur's narrative focus on religious observance allows her to shift all culpability for violence against women to women themselves by stating that women's respect in Sikhism is predicated on and determined by women's adherence to proper attire, which functions as a visible marker of a woman's embodied modesty. This particular ontological narrative assumes that women are the objects of sexual desire and men the desiring subjects, "an assumption that has come to justify the injunction that women should 'hide their charms' when in public so as not to

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<sup>84</sup> At this point, Beena Kaur says to me, "Please don't take offense, but look at your sleeves." I at the time was wearing a traditional *salwar kameez* with a *dupata* in my neck, but not on my head. However, my *kameez* had short sleeves something Beena Kaur found inappropriate and shameful.

excite the libidinal energies of men” (Mahmood 2005, 110-111).<sup>85</sup> Kaur not only frees men of any responsibility for “hunting” women, but also shifts culpability away from Sikhism by saying “if we ourselves have turned on our proper attire, then how is that the Guru’s fault?”

The aforementioned ontological narratives obscure Sikh participation in the creation and perpetuation of sexism because they allow respondents to minimize their own participation in everyday forms of discrimination against women by shifting the focus to women’s behavior, state policies, and degrees of religious observance. By doing so, respondents are able to maintain their belief in and commitment to a public Sikh narrative of gender equality while also participating in gender-based discrimination.

### *Obscuring and Minimizing Discrimination*

Paramjit Kaur Sidhu’s interview responses provide some insight on how individuals make sense of everyday experiences of gender-based discrimination in a community that denies the very existence of discrimination. More specifically, Sidhu, a 22-year-old Jat woman, challenges a public narrative of gender equality and many of the ontological narratives by discussing some of the ways in which Sikh women are reminded, on a daily basis, of their precarious and inferior position:

When a woman has a daughter other people will say, “Oh no, why did she have a daughter?” They will continue to harass [the mother] and mistreat her. People say it’s her fault; they say, “Why did you have a daughter?” But how is it the woman’s fault alone? And let’s say the woman does have a daughter; well, then she won’t receive as much respect. Even if [in-laws] accept the daughter, “Fine you had a daughter. It’s fine,” the mother never gets full respect. She will always be harassed about it, ridiculed about it.

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<sup>85</sup> According to Saba Mahmood, “these kinds of arguments assign the burden of maintaining a community’s purity and integrity to women, a task that necessitates their subordination to men, who are entrusted to oversee and control women’s sexuality and mobility, as well as their access to a community’s symbolic and material resources” (2005, 112).

According to Paramjit Sidhu, a woman's place in her in-laws' home, the degree of respect and love she receives, and her personal status are tied to her capacity to birth sons. And if a woman does not satisfy the preference for sons, then she is reminded of her inferiority on a daily basis through rumors, gossip, and ridicule. To a large extent, Paramjit Sidhu's narrative challenges the notion of gender equality by demonstrating how a woman's status is tied to her capacity to bear sons. Furthermore, Sidhu's narrative also demonstrates the fact that Sikh women are perpetual outsiders not only in their natal homes, but also in their married homes because their rights, status, and privileges are partial, limited, and restricted.

Surjit Kaur, a 28-year-old Khatri woman, makes sense of everyday experiences of gender-based discrimination by acknowledging that Sikh women are treated better than women in other religions; however, she is quick to point out that gendered differences are still present in the Sikh community. For example, Kaur says, "If you go to the main location of Sikhism [the Golden Temple], women are not allowed to participate in *seva*." When asked why this is the case, Kaur discusses male domination and power:

The logic is simple; we live in a man-dominated society. Those who are in positions of power – those who are at the center – are men, and they want to retain their power. There aren't many ladies in these positions. It is true that it hasn't been written anywhere that women can't participate in *seva*. However, it is also the case that none of our Gurus were women; they were all men. A woman could have been Guru. But from the beginning man domination is the norm. Ladies' rights are simply in the books; they aren't actually put in practice.

Kaur acknowledges that within Sikhism women have the right to participate in *seva* because nowhere has it been written that women cannot participate. However, Kaur qualifies her initial statement by saying that even though gender discrimination is not sanctioned, very little has been done to achieve women's equality. For example, Kaur states that "none of our Gurus were women; they were all men." Kaur uses this concrete example of male

dominance to discuss the fact that women's rights exist both in Sikh scriptural and Indian legal texts, but that these rights are not realized or actuated.

Kaur also discusses the fact that Sikh men are in positions of power, they are at the center of institutional power, and they want to retain this power. W.H. McLeod makes a similar argument when he states, the Sikh faith does not recognize gender differences because women and men share the same religious obligations and receive the same rewards. Yet McLeod qualifies his initial claim of gender equality by acknowledging patriarchal control in Sikhism:

Sikhism has, however, been located in a society that observes patriarchal control, with the result that in some important respects the operative observances of Sikhs differ from the normative prescriptions of their faith. Very few Sikh women appear in Sikh history, and today most major Sikh institutions are overwhelmingly male in membership and control. (1995, 70)

McLeod's argument that most major Sikh institutions are overwhelmingly male in membership and control substantiates Kaur's claim that Sikh men are at the center of institutional power. For Kaur, male domination of key Sikh institutions creates and reinforces male domination in the Sikh community even though this domination is not scripturally or legally sanctioned. In short, male domination is the norm in Sikh institutions yet these very institutions obscure their own participation in the creation and perpetuation of gender inequality by relying on a public narrative of gender equality.

Kaur continues her narrative by sharing her personal experience to demonstrate the fact that women's rights are abstract notions, not concrete realities. Kaur, a widow with a five-year-old son, explains that when her husband passed away, her in-laws wrote an erroneous will that claimed that Kaur and her husband had bad relations and that all of the property should be transferred to the in-laws. According to Kaur, she went through a

difficult multi-year litigation processes to gain her right to her husband's property. In the end, Kaur did not gain access to her husband's property; rather, it was transferred to her five-year-old son. And, for Kaur, this litigation battle is demonstrative of the fact that women's rights "are written in the books but aren't practiced."

In addition to sharing her personal story, Kaur also discusses the disjuncture between legal rights and actual practice in relation to inheritance:

See, people don't actually give their daughters land; however, legally daughters do have a right to their parents' land. See, once again, the rights are all words. In my knowledge, I don't know anyone who has actually taken advantage of these rights. My mother to this day hasn't asked for her portion of her parents' land. Practically speaking, girls don't receive any land from their parents, and they don't receive any land from their in-laws.

Kaur narrativizes the disjuncture between legal rights that women should enjoy and everyday lived experience of gender difference and discrimination. Women have a legal right to their parents land; however, this right is seldom acted on. Kaur specifically discusses her mother's experience to demonstrate the fact that she does not know of any woman who has taken advantage of the rights available to women. Ultimately, Kaur comes to the conclusion that women do not receive land from either their parents or their in-laws, thus demonstrating the precarious and inferior position of women.<sup>86</sup> Some, like Udham Singh (see section entitled *State-based Policies*), characterize a woman's right to her parents' and husband's property as a threat to men, as a strategy to destroy men. However, according to Kaur's narrative, in practice women fail to gain access to either their parents' or in-laws' land. Sikh women are perpetual outsiders who do not belong to or have a right to either their natal or married

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<sup>86</sup> According to Amrita Chhachhi, extreme forms of violence against women, such as dowry murders, police rape, abortion of female fetuses, and *sati*, can be connected to structural violence against women, including lack of property rights. For instance, Chhachhi argues "The issue of dowry murders is linked to the much more hidden and more widespread issue of violence within the family and the fact that women do not assert their right to property" (1989, 573).

home because in both instances their rights and status are partial, limited, and restricted. Sidhu's and Kaur's narratives provide some insight on the ways in which Sikh women experience, understand, and negotiate everyday experiences of gender-based discrimination in a community that denies its very existence.

## **Conclusion**

An analysis of the ways in which Sikhs narrativize gender discrimination helps to explain (1) how ordinary Sikhs maintain a belief in gender equality while also participating in gender-based discriminatory practices; (2) how sexism defined by ordinary Sikhs; and (3) how Sikh women make sense of everyday experiences of gender-based discrimination in a community that denies its very existence. Through Alcoff's understanding of identity as a horizon of agency and Somers' notion of narrative identity, I am able to demonstrate that Sikhs maintain a belief in and commitment to gender equality while participating in gender-based discrimination through a public Sikh narrative of equality and a series of ontological narratives. Most respondents are able to discuss their personal discriminatory beliefs and practices while maintaining a commitment to a Sikh narrative of equality through a series of ontological narratives that minimize their own participation in discriminatory practices by shifting the focus to women's behavior, state policies, and degrees of religious observance. I find that it is important to pay attention to the reasoning, arguments, and terms used to justify and contest everyday Sikh beliefs and practices that are in tension with Sikh religious prescriptions because an examination of this sort reveals the limits of a Sikh politics of equality, its assumptions and presuppositions, and the day-to-day context through which

these limitations are constructed, reinforced, and challenged. By doing so, I demonstrate that an understanding of identity as a horizon of agency has explanatory value because it renders meaning by connecting an examination of identity to a larger set of symbolic, institutional, and material practice, which underscores issues of power and power dynamics by asking what material interests are at stake, what narrative strategies are employed to maintain and challenge these interests, and who, in turn, is privileged and displaced.

## Chapter Five – Agency, Embodiment, and Quotidian Politics

The previous two chapters examine paradoxes shared by many Sikhs in Punjab who vehemently oppose casteism and sexism but simultaneously engage in discrimination against Scheduled Caste [SC] Sikhs and Sikh women. The chapters focus primarily on deconstructing a Sikh politics of equality by explaining how current hierarchical structures and power relations are constructed, reinforced, and maintained at the individual level through narrative identities. This chapter focuses on how subordinated groups with visible, marked identities (SC Sikhs and Sikh women) understand and respond to their structural position in Sikh society. In short, this chapter asks: how do Scheduled Caste Sikhs and Sikh women take political action in a community that engages in discrimination, yet denies its very existence? By asking this question, I am able to develop a meaning and understanding of agency from within the set of symbolic, institutional, and material practice that upholds the paradoxes of equality, rather than imposing an understanding of agency that is fixed in advance and developed from outside the specificity of Sikh lived experience.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> I draw from Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety*, which calls for "uncoupling the analytical notion of agency from the politically prescriptive project of feminism, with its propensity to valorize those operations of power that subvert and resignify the hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality" (2005, 153-154). According to Mahmood, by uncoupling agency from subversion and resignification, one is able to acknowledge and explain "modalities of agency whose meaning and effect are not captured within the logic of subversion and resignification of hegemonic terms of discourse" (Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 154-154). As a result, Mahmood argues, "the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity" (2005, 14-15). I also rely on Chandra Mohanty's *Feminism without Borders*, which develops a "feminist osmosis thesis." According to Mohanty, a feminist osmosis thesis accounts for the "analytic elision between the *experience* of oppression and the *opposition* to it" (2003, 112). Mohanty argues that many scholars implicitly rely on a feminist osmosis thesis, which assumes that "being female and being feminist are one and the same; we are all oppressed and hence we all resist" (2003, 112). Such an analysis, for Mohanty, overlooks politics and ideology as self-conscious struggles and choices.

To answer this question, I turn to James Scott (1990), Ranajit Guha (1988), and Michael Hanchard (2006), who argue that the politics of subordinated groups are best understood as neither overt collective defiance nor complete hegemonic compliance, but rather as quotidian politics.<sup>88</sup> By examining quotidian politics, I am able to make sense of the modalities of agency present among some of the most marginalized groups in the Sikh community. Yet my analysis also departs from the analysis offered by these scholars. Instead of imposing a binary conception of agency as either resistance or submission, I develop a meaning and understanding of agency, with the help of Alcoff's horizon of agency, from within the specificity of Sikh lived experience. In particular, I examine (1) SC Sikh participation in squatting movements as a modality of agency that highlights issues of suffering and survival; and (2) Sikh women's participation in Sukhmani Seva Societies [religious societies] as a second modality of agency, which highlights the theme of religious devotion. Through an exploration of quotidian politics, I am able to demonstrate that, at times, SC Sikhs and Sikh women undermine and adopt the very ontological narratives that give rise to casteism and sexism in the Sikh community.

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<sup>88</sup> A focus on peasant agency, and more broadly subaltern agency, in New Left scholarship (Hobsbawm 1980; James Scott 1985), and Subaltern Studies (Guha and Spivak 1988), parallels, to some degree, a focus in feminist theory and gender studies on women's agency, particularly at the intersection of gender, race, class, and sexuality. For example, Patricia Hill Collins argues, "African-American women have been neither passive victims of nor willing accomplices to their own domination. As a result, emerging work in Black women's studies contends that Black women have a self-defined standpoint on their own oppression" (Collins 1986, 747-748). In short, Collins argues subordinate groups, in this case Black women, not only experience a different reality than groups that rule, but may also interpret that reality and act on that interpretation differently than dominant groups (1986, 747-748). Chandra Mohanty argues that scholarship on Third World women's political struggles focuses on their participation in organized movements; however, "not all feminist struggles can be understood within the framework of "organized" movements" (2003, 76). According to Mohanty, questions of political consciousness and self-identity have to be addressed both at the level of organized movements and at the level of everyday life in times of revolutionary upheaval as well as in times of peace (2003, 77). Feminist scholarship, like New Left and Subaltern Studies scholarship, restore an absent voice of marginalized groups to analyses of politics by portraying marginalized individuals as active agents whose lives are far richer and more complex than previous scholarship suggests.

### *Expanded Notion of Politics*

James Scott introduces the notion of “infrapolitics” (like infrared rays, beyond the visible end of the spectrum), to understand the political agency of subordinate groups, which has been ignored because “it takes place at a level we rarely recognize as political” (1990, 198). Scott creates an expanded notion of politics by distinguishing between “the open, declared forms of resistance, which attract most attention, and the disguised, low-profile, undeclared resistance that constitutes the domain of infrapolitics” (1990, 198-199). Scott argues that neither open political action nor declared resistance will fully capture the politics of the least privileged minorities and marginalized poor. And therefore, according to Scott, if one confines his or her conception of “*the political* to activity that is openly declared we are driven to conclude that subordinate groups essentially lack a political life or that what political life they do have is restricted to those exceptional moments of popular explosion” (1990, 199). To equate the political with activity that is openly declared as political leads one to miss the immense political terrain that lies between quiescence and revolt.

Similarly, Michael Hanchard argues that broader dimensions of politics have been largely obscured from the vantage point of political science because it adopts a view of politics “as the politics of electoral competition” (2006, 27). For Hanchard, this narrow view of politics has had specific consequences for the study of black politics and black political agency. To better understand black politics, Hanchard introduces a more expanded notion of politics<sup>89</sup> that identifies “the borders of culture and politics, yet also offers two distinct

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<sup>89</sup> Hanchard acknowledges that his understanding of quotidian politics is similar to Scott’s conceptualizations of infrapolitics, Brechtian acts of resistance, and weapons of the weak. However, Hanchard is careful to point out that his conceptualization of quotidian politics complicates Scott’s understanding in three distinct ways: (1) Hanchard questions the distinction between the public and private spheres, crucial to Scott’s conceptualization of infrapolitics and hidden transcript; (2) Hanchard challenges Scott’s modern teleology of politics that seeks to

forms of politics within a broader definition of politics” (2006, 16). The first type of politics is macropolitics, the dimension of political life expressed through institutional forms, such as political parties and elections. The second type of politics is micropolitics, or the politics of the weak, which is less formal, more fragmented and episodic, and forged in conditions of “denial, repression, prohibition, and negative sanction” (Hanchard 2006, 16-17). By creating the theoretical space from which to understand the politics of the weak, Hanchard is able to challenge characterizations of subordinate groups as either complete dupes or recalcitrant par excellence.

Ranjit Guha also develops an expanded notion of politics to understand the political agency of subaltern people. According to Guha, the parameters of Indian politics are assumed to be exclusively those of the “institutions introduced by the British for the government of the country and the corresponding sets of laws, policies, attitudes and other elements of the superstructure” (1988, 39-40). A historiography of India predicated on such a definition of politics, according to Guha, “can do no more than to equate politics with the aggregation of activities and ideas of those who were directly involved in operating these institutions, that is, the colonial rulers and the dominant groups in native society” (1988, 39-40). What is left out is the “politics of the people” (Guha 1988, 40). For Guha, there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant indigenous elites or colonial authorities, but the subaltern classes, the people. However, this other domain of politics is not accessible

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link infrapolitics and Brechtian acts of resistance to eventual collective action and the articulation of a public transcript; and (3) Hanchard questions Scott’s implicitly liberal view of political articulation, glimpsed in his preoccupation with speaking truth to power as evidence of a hidden transcript being made public (Hanchard 2006, 57-58).

through traditional historiography precisely because traditional historiography adopts a definition of politics that obscures the political agency of the people.

To understand the political agency of Scheduled Caste Sikhs and Sikh women, I adopt an expanded notion of politics, thus making visible largely invisible forms of political action that often remain outside the purview of scholars. I combine an expanded notion of politics with Linda Alcoff's understanding of identity as horizon of agency to develop a meaning and understanding of agency from within a politics of Sikh equality, rather than imposing an understanding of agency that is fixed in advance as either resistance or submission, and developed from outside the specificity of Sikh paradoxes of equality. By doing so, I am able to de-link the concept of political agency from a binary formulation, which can potentially distort our understanding of quotidian political action, especially when agency is taken as prior to, rather than subject to, empirical study.

### *Horizon of Agency and Narrative Identity*

Alcoff is able to account for political agency because she conceives of horizon of agency as an interplay between public identity and lived subjectivity. Public identity, according to Alcoff, is our “socially perceived self within the systems of perception and classification and the networks of community in which we live” (2006, 92-93) whereas lived subjectivity refers to “who *we* understand ourselves to be, how we experience being ourselves, and the range of reflective and other activities that can be included under the rubric of our ‘agency’” (2006, 93). Alcoff's conceptualization of identity as horizon of agency incorporates an understanding of agency that is tied to a visible, marked public identity and internal, lived subjectivity. This approach to agency provides a degree of specificity that allows for an account of political action that is sensitive to the particular practices, including embodied

practices, which provide the necessary conditions for agency without having to “reduce the heterogeneity of life to the rather flat narrative of succumbing to or resisting relations of domination” (Mahmood 2005, 174). An approach to agency that privileges the contours of embodied, lived experience has explanatory value because (1) such an examination of political action reveals the kind of questions that are important to understand the quotidian politics of SC Sikhs and Sikh women; and (2) such an examination allows for the particularities of Sikh lived experience to speak generatively to theoretical concepts, like identity and agency, that are often taken for granted.

Somers’ notion of narrative identity successfully operationalizes Alcoff’s conceptualization of identity and agency because it is sensitive to and cognizant of identities as “positioned or located lived experiences in which both individuals and groups work to construct meaning in relation to historical experience and historical narratives” (Alcoff 2006, 42-43). I operationalize Alcoff’s notion of lived subjectivity through Somers’ ontological narrative, which are “stories that social actors use to make sense of - indeed, to act in - their lives” (Somers 1994, 618). For Somers, people “act, or do not act, in part according to how they understand their place in any number of given narratives - however fragmented, contradictory, or partial” (1994, 618). I operationalize Alcoff’s concept of public identity through Somers’ notion of public narratives, which are “attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual, to intersubjective networks or institutions” (Somers 1994, 619). Public narratives, for Somers, can range from the narratives of one’s family to those of the workplace, church, government, and nation. For Alcoff, identity operates as a horizon, always culturally located with great specificity even as it is open to an indeterminate future and a reinterpretable past not of its own creation. One can name,

understand, and explain the way in which individuals see, understand, and act through a horizon of agency by adopting Somers' notion of identity narratives. Narratives are one way to concretize the fact that every identity carries with it always this horizon as a specific, embodied location, with substantive content that is necessary for developing a meaning and understanding of agency and political action.

### **An Ontological Narrative of Suffering and Survival**

The following section will explore Fauja Singh's interview responses to demonstrate how an ontological narrative of suffering and survival develops from within a Sikh politics of equality characterized by caste and gender paradoxes. I argue that this ontological narrative of suffering and survival can be seen as one modality of agency that functions, at times, to undermine, and, at other times, to reinforce the ontological narratives that legitimize and explain caste and gender differences (as outlined in Chapters Three and Four). Fauja Singh is a 55-year-old illiterate Ramdasi man who works as a day laborer and is currently squatting on public land.<sup>90</sup> When asked about his current living situation, Fauja Singh states:

We think like this: if the state does try to evict us, we have this hope that they won't try. The first thing is that we are about 500 homes that are squatting in so-called panchayati land [public land]...The first issue is that no one will try to evict us, and second if they do try to evict us, then they will probably move us to land that is worth less than the current land we are on. So we have this hope that they will at least give us cheaper property or they will build us homes for free or they will pay us for our homes. We at least have the hope that we will get something, we won't be left high and dry...If they evict us, we will have to live on the streets. We have to live somewhere. If we aren't able to build homes, if we aren't able to afford land,

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<sup>90</sup> According to Mike Davis, "the formal housing markets in the Third World rarely supply more than 20 percent of new housing stock, so out of necessity, people turn to self-built shanties, informal rentals, pirate subdivisions, or the sidewalks" (2006, 17). Davis argues that illegal or informal land markets have provided the land sites for most additions to the housing stock in most cities of the South over the last 30 or 40 years (2006, 17).

then we will live on the streets, or we will build slums, or whatever else we may have to do.

Fauja Singh responds by expressing his hope that the state will not evict him and the other 500 households who are squatting on public land. After stating his hope of not being evicted, Singh says that if his community is evicted, then he has hope that the state will compensate his community by moving them to cheaper land, building them free homes, or buying their homes from them. Singh holds hope that the state will compensate the squatters in some way. However, after expressing his hope, Singh describes the precarious situation he finds himself in. Singh states that if his community of squatters were evicted, then they would live on the streets because they need some place to live. He and his fellow squatters cannot afford to build homes, they cannot afford to purchase land, and therefore, if forcibly evicted, they will either live on the streets or build slums. Singh and his community are willing to do whatever it takes to survive, and therefore, one can read Singh's political actions as tied to an ontological narrative of suffering and survival.<sup>91</sup>

After expressing his willingness to do whatever it takes to survive, including street-dwelling and slum-building, Singh proposes yet another option:

Otherwise, I have another idea, another option. I will tell the state, "Why don't you just kill all of us, kill all of the poor public? You just finish us off once, and then you can keep all the land, all the property." If we go back to our village, we can't make ends meet there because we can't even get day-laborer work; we are laborers who work on a day-to-day wage. Even if we get a job as laborers the employers there don't give us our money on a day-to-day basis because the people who are employing us aren't doing so well either—they are financially weak. Here in the city area, people are financially strong, and we are able to get our full pay—fair pay—and we are able to afford our daily food and water. That's why we stay here; that's why we hide here. That's why we left our village. We decided to go somewhere where we

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<sup>91</sup> According to Asef Bayat, many squatters throughout the Third World ensure survival and minimal living standards through the illegal redistribution of public space (street pavements, intersections, street parking places, and roads), and public services (piped water and electricity) (Bayat 1997a, 59).

could easily find our daily work and easily eat our daily food. There's nothing else to it; this is our only issue.

Singh introduces another option by claiming that the state should simply kill all of the poor public because this strategy will allow the state to retain all public land without having to make alternative arrangements for squatters, such as moving them to another location, building them free or low-income housing, or buying their homes from them. Singh also claims that the squatters have no option but to stay close to the city. According to Singh, if he and the other squatters were to return to their villages, they would not be able to survive because they could not find employment as day laborers, which means they would not be paid and would not eat on a daily basis. In the city, day laborers are able to find work and receive full and fair pay, which allows them to eat on a daily basis.<sup>92</sup> For Singh, “there is nothing else to it; this is our only issue.”

One may read Singh's narrative as a form of hyperbole, especially when he calls on the state to “kill all of the poor public.” However, this statement must be understood in relation to the symbolic, institutional, and material practice that undergirds Fauja Singh's embodied location, a location that makes him vulnerable to state violence:<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Singh's decision to squat reflects the decision process of many squatters throughout the Third World. According to Mike Davis, everywhere in the Third World, housing choice is a hard calculus of confusing trade-offs: “The urban poor have to solve a complex equation as they try to optimize housing cost, tenure security, quality of shelter, journey to work, and sometimes, personal safety” (2006, 27-28). Davis finds that “for some people, including many pavement dwellers, a location near a job – say, in a produce market or train station – is even more important than a roof. For others, free or nearly free land is worth epic commutes from the edge to the center. And for everyone the worst situation is a bad, expensive location without municipal services or security of tenure” (2006, 27-29).

<sup>93</sup> Fauja Singh expresses his fear of state violence by referencing both fear of future violence and pain of past violence. Singh intimately understands the history of forced sterilization, which he refers to while discussing family planning: “You can't force people into changing. Indira Gandhi tried; she forcibly sterilized people. The state would take the poor in the middle of the night and do this to them and that to them. But this was wrong, absolutely wrong. They should have done it through education. They should have taught us about such issues [family planning].”

If the state evicts us forcibly, they have the upper hand; they can bring in the military. If only ten people come to forcibly evict us, then we will fight back, we won't hesitate; we will beat them with sticks and everything else we can get our hands on. If it's outside our capacity—for example, if the police comes, or the state calls on the military or brings in big, big bulldozers—then we will leave the land immediately due to fear. What could we possibly do? If they are going to tie our hands, then what can we do other than leave the land?

Singh is acutely aware of his vulnerability to state power and state violence, and therefore, any discussion of Singh's quotidian political action must account for this fact.<sup>94</sup> Singh understands that the state has the upper hand because it can use police and military force to evict squatters. Singh is willing to fight, but he also acknowledges his community's limitations. According to Singh, if only a handful of people come to forcibly evict his community, then they will fight back. However, if the state calls on police or military, if they bring bulldozers, then Singh and his community will leave the land immediately “due to fear.” Singh asks, “What can we do other than leave the land?”

Singh acknowledges that his public identity as a poor Scheduled Caste Sikh squatter makes him more vulnerable to structural violence, yet he also recognizes that the very public identity that makes him vulnerable also makes him indispensable:

No one is going to evict us so quickly; if they are going to evict us, they need a reason, an explanation. The state needs us; if the poor all die, what will the state do without us? They need us because they need votes. If there aren't any people, then what's the point of a state? If all of us poor die, then what will the high class do? Who will do their work? Who will install their doors? Who will build their structures? Who will repair their walls? Who will make their food? All of this work is done by the poor public. This is why we think that they can't evict us that quickly.

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<sup>94</sup> Mike Davis confirms Fauja Singh's characterization of the relationship between squatters and the state by arguing that “often squatting becomes a prolonged test of will and endurance against the repressive apparatus of the state” (2006, 38). Fauja Singh intimately understands this prolonged test of will and endurance against the state, and it is part and parcel of his ontological narrative of suffering and survival.

Singh argues that the squatters cannot be evicted so easily because the state needs the voters, the rich need the poor, and the high caste needs the Scheduled Caste. Singh asks what that state will do without people. The state gains its legitimacy through its governing process—through democracy—and if there are no citizens to vote, then how can the state continue to function? Singh also asks how the rich will live without the poor. The rich need the poor as a source of labor,<sup>95</sup> and therefore, Singh argues that he and his neighbors will not be evicted so easily. If they were evicted, then who would provide goods and services to the rich? Singh’s characterization of SC squatters as highly vulnerable yet indispensable demonstrates his intimate understanding of the mutually constitutive nature of elite and subaltern political action. Singh recognizes that the domains of elite and subaltern politics not only act in opposition to and as a limit upon one another, but also shape the emergent form of one another.

Singh’s agency must be understood in relation to his hope in and fear of the state,<sup>96</sup> his daily suffering, and his daily survival. From within this specific embodied location, Singh’s claim that the state should simply “kill all of us, simply finish us off” should be read not as hyperbole, but as part and parcel of Singh’s horizon of agency, a horizon in which his

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<sup>95</sup> Singh’s characterization of squatters as laborers is confirmed by research of squatters and street-dwellers in Mumbai, India. Mike Davis argues that the traditional stereotype of the Indian squatter and pavement-dweller is a destitute peasant, newly arrived from the countryside, who survives by parasitic begging. However, as research in Mumbai has revealed, “almost all (97 percent) have at least one breadwinner, 70 percent have been in the city at least six years, and one third had been evicted from a slum or a *chawl*” (Davis 2006, 36). Indeed, according to Davis, “many pavement-dwellers are simply workers – rickshaw men, construction laborers, and market porters – who are compelled by their jobs to live in the otherwise unaffordable heart of the metropolis” (2006, 36).

<sup>96</sup> Singh’s hope in and fear of the state can be understood in relation to Mike Davis’ characterization of the state in most of the Third World: “In the rest of the Third World, the idea of an interventionist state strongly committed to social housing and job development seems either a hallucination or a bad joke, because governments long ago abdicated any serious effort to combat slums and redress urban marginality” (2006, 62). Singh’s characterization of the state can be read as a reflection of his hope for an interventionist state strongly committed to social housing and job development, and his fear of the current workings of the state, which has abdicated constructive efforts to combat squatting and urban marginality.

public identity is marked by his status as a poor Scheduled Caste Sikh who squats on public land. Without an understanding of Singh's horizon of agency, one might come to the false conclusion that Singh and his fellow squatters are submissive to state power because they are willing to abandon their homes, their community, and the land on which they squat. But if one understands the embodied location from which Singh and his fellow squatters make this decision, then one can locate their agency without having to reduce it to submission. Singh's discussion of his current living situation and the circumstances under which he would leave his home should not be read as a submission to state power or as a reluctance to act. Rather it marks a constructive form of action that requires considerable contemplation, investment, struggle, and achievement.

An ontological narrative of suffering and survival is also apparent in Fauja Singh's discussion of basic necessities, such as food, water, and electricity:<sup>97</sup>

We all try to save money. We eat modestly; we don't eat much fruit or vegetables. For example, we have heard of cashews and almonds—we know the names—but we haven't eaten them; we can't afford them. We can't buy such expensive food. We eat vegetables once or twice a week. And the same vegetable we eat in the evening, we eat again for breakfast. This is how the poor live. Sometimes we eat only with chutney, a few green chilies and some salt, and that's good enough...We try to spend as little as possible.

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<sup>97</sup> Singh's struggle to access food, water, and electricity reflects a larger struggle throughout the Third World. According to Asef Bayat, for at least three decades, rural migrants and slum dwellers searching for ways to survive and improve their lives have colonized lands in and outside the big Iranian cities: "Silently, away from the eyes of the authorities, they build shelters, organize communities, and acquire amenities such as piped water and electricity, more often than not by unlawful means" (Bayat 1994, 11). Bayat argues that this mostly discreet and individual direct action allows squatters to escape the burdens of high rent and state control, and to form communities (1994, 11). Similarly, Michael Hanchard describes the way in which "several *favelas* (poor urban communities) on the periphery of Rio de Janeiro have 'liberated' electricity from the municipal power lines, a practice defined as illegal by both energy and municipal authorities" (2006, 29). This practice, according to Hanchard, occurs outside the bounds of commodified, market-driven power usage and pay-rate schemes and highlights the broader issue of unequal distribution of resources. This practice requires "individuals and groups who are willing, out of a sense of necessity and right, but also equipped with the technical skill, to extract these energy resources for their own use" (2006, 29).

Singh and his family try to save money by living modestly and simply. According to Singh, he and his family survive on *roti* [flat bread made from wheat flour] because they cannot afford to eat fruits and vegetables more than once or twice a week. Singh explains that he and his family know the names of certain foods, like cashews and almonds, but they have never tasted these foods because of their cost. To survive, Singh and his family take on the suffering associated with hunger and malnutrition.<sup>98</sup>

Singh's daily struggle to gain access to water and electricity<sup>99</sup> can also be characterized through an ontological narrative of suffering and survival. Singh openly discusses the fact that his community drinks water and consumes electricity for free. Households in Singh's squatter community cannot legally access water and electricity because they do not have proper land registration, which is required for installation of water lines and electricity meters. Consequently, Singh and his neighbors gain illegal access to

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<sup>98</sup> This particular strategy of survival is not unique to Singh and his family, but is adopted by the poor throughout the Third World. According to Asef Bayat, the poor in Cairo are "consumed by their constant search for adequate food, shelter, jobs and the maintenance of individual and familial dignity; most are involved in the informal economy and live in informal communities" (1996, 3). Bayat argues that "poor Cairenes cope with these economic realities either by stretching their resources to meet their needs or by cutting down on their consumption" (1996, 3). According to Bayat, breadwinners are forced to work longer hours, while other family members must also work. The poor further decrease their expenditures by "sharing living spaces with relatives, purchasing low-quality food and secondhand clothes which they may share with others within the household, limiting health and education expenses, and reducing daily meals to two or one" (Bayat 1996, 3). These practices, according to Bayat, are equally in New Delhi, Manila, and Rio de Janeiro (1996, 3).

<sup>99</sup> Singh characterizes his struggle to gain access to electricity in the following way: "Sometimes the electricity people are opposed to us using electricity, so they will remove our wires and our connections. And sometimes we are able to get them back when we plead for them. We say to them, 'Where will we go at night? How will we get wires at night? How will we make and eat *roti* in the dark? We are day laborers. We don't come home until dark and we make our *roti* at night; if our lights are off, it's very difficult for us, sir. Please give us our wires back.' Sometimes they will give them back, but sometimes due to fear from above they don't return them. They say to us, 'Just put up other wires. These wires we have to take with us; we have to show them to our superiors to prove to them we removed the wires. We get these orders from above.' Then in the middle of the night the men and the women get together, and we install the wires again. There is a fear to do this in the dark."

water and electricity by “liberating”<sup>100</sup> water pipes and electricity lines. This also means that Singh and his neighbors live with the constant fear that their water and electricity can be shut off at any moment, with no prior notice:

The people outside of our neighborhood say that we will have to leave eventually. Some say that we don't pay our water bills. One day the *takedar* [landlord] of the tube-well came and said, “If these people don't pay their bills, they don't give anything, then their water should be shut off.” I said, “It's not like we have much. We are only using the water for drinking, and we don't have a motor [to increase water pressure] or anything like that.” The state has subsidized *zamindars* [landowners] so much. Their motor bills are forgiven; they have access to river water. And they have land and property worth *crores* [more than ten million rupees]. The state keeps limiting the *zamindars*' [landowners] expenses, but we poor—where are we supposed to get drinking water from? And I said to him, “Please, sir, don't do this. At least let our water run. Where are we going to get water? We will have to come together and then protest at tube-wells in order to get water. This will be even more difficult for us because in order to protest at tube-wells or somewhere else, we have to stop working. Don't stop us from working, sir. We just want to drink water. Please let us drink.”

Singh describes the way in which others outside of his neighborhood, including the *takedar* of the tube-well, have tried to stop illegal usage of water. Singh recognizes that he and his neighbors do not pay for the water they use; however, he also points out that they do not have much to begin with. Singh then criticizes the unequal distribution of water by citing the fact that landowners get access to free and subsidized water, and asks, “We poor, where are we supposed to get drinking water from?”<sup>101</sup> Singh understands that he and his fellow neighbors can protest and agitate for access to water; however, he also states that every day spent protesting is a day not working. And if day laborers do not work, then they do not eat.

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<sup>100</sup> I borrow this term from Michael Hanchard who describes the practice of illegally extracting electricity in Rio de Janeiro *favelas* as “liberating” electricity from municipal power lines (2006, 29).

<sup>101</sup> Singh's characterization of the middle class as paying low taxes while receiving high levels of municipal services is substantiated by Mike Davis, who argues, “Public- and state-assisted housing in the Third World has primarily benefited the urban middle classes and elites, who expect to pay low taxes while receiving high levels of municipal services” (2006, 69). As a result, Davis concludes, “with a handful of exceptions, then, the postcolonial state has comprehensively betrayed its original promises to the urban poor” (2006, 69).

Without an understanding of Singh's public identity and his lived subjectivity, characterized through an ontological narrative of suffering and survival, one might come to the distorted conclusion that Singh and his fellow squatters are reluctant to protest, and therefore, they submit to current power relations. But if one understands the embodied location, the horizon of agency from which Singh and his fellow squatters make this decision, then one can locate their agency without having to reduce it to submission. The decision to not protest is a form of political action requiring considerable contemplation, investment, and struggle; the decision not to protest potentially ensures Singh's survival because protesting is only possible if one forgoes work, and to forgo work is to forgo food.

Singh recognizes that his ontological narrative of suffering and survival is connected to a public narrative that characterizes the experience of other poor Scheduled Caste Sikhs. According to Singh, the poor cannot survive without squatting:

How can the poor live without squatting! I can guarantee to you that no poor person can even buy one *marla* [25 square yards]. How could they possibly buy one *marla*? One *marla* of land is at least 1.5 *laks* [150,000 rupees]. How can any poor person afford to buy land? They can't buy the land because what they earn in one day is eaten in the evening. The poor buy what they need to eat in the evening—wheat flour, lentils, etc—and by the end of the night, it's gone. And then in the morning they are back to work. And if they can't find work, then the poor have to ask for food, plead for food.

Squatting, according to Singh, is a form of survival because the poor cannot afford to buy land. The money that is earned in one day is spent on wheat flour and lentils in the evening. According to Singh, the poor are not able to save, and therefore, they are forced to squat. It is tempting to read Singh's actions through the lens of resistance and submission: his decision to squat on public land and "liberate" water and electricity can be read as an expression of his desire to resist his current position in a hierarchical system of power

relations. This analysis is completely plausible and is pursued by many authors. However, I would argue this type of analysis remains inadequately attentive to the forms of reasoning, network of relations, and practices that make Singh's actions possible and meaningful. By focusing on a horizon of agency, I am able to be more attentive to the ontological narratives, lived subjectivity, and internal reasoning and practices that give rise to Singh's action. I find that Singh's actions are best understood through an ontological narrative of suffering and survival, which is not necessarily captured by terms such as resistance and submission or subversion and resignification. As Saba Mahmood would argue, the fact that narratives of suffering and survival are intertwined with issues of power does not mean that we can assume that poor SC Sikhs who inhabit this conjoined matrix are motivated by the desire to subvert or resist terms that secure caste and class domination; neither can we assume that an analysis that focuses on the subversive effects their practices produce adequately captures the meanings of these practices (2005, 175).

### *Exclusionary Understanding of Suffering and Survival*

An examination of Fauja Singh's horizon of agency not only helps to explain Singh's political action, but also demonstrates the way in which Singh's horizon of agency—in particular, his ontological narrative of suffering and survival—excludes Sikh women and in turn obscures their agency. Singh's narrative of suffering and survival, at times, obscures the political agency of Sikh women because it assumes that women are too weak to endure suffering and survival:

[Fauja Singh's wife asks,] "What will happen to the things that we have been able to purchase, the things we have worked so hard for?" My wife does say to me often that we have made a mistake. Part of the concern is that we are too close to the city – because in the city people are forcibly removed from land – so sometimes she says we should move further from the city to some village. And if we had spent the same

amount of money there we would have less fear...And you know women, their hearts are a bit more soft, so they have more fear, at times, whereas us men, we don't have as much fear. We say, "So what? We will do this; we will do that." At times, the women in the neighborhood come to me and ask me, "Sardarji, what will happen to us now? How will we handle this situation?" And I say in response, "There is no reason to be fearful. No one can evict us, and we aren't about to be evicted. I will be the one at the lead. If they hit anyone, it will be me, and only after they beat me will they do anything to you. Don't be so fearful; don't be so worried."

Singh states that his wife is more fearful about their current situation because she is scared to lose everything that they have worked so hard to create. His wife is also fearful because they are squatting close to the city, which means that they are more vulnerable to forcible evictions.<sup>102</sup> Singh explains his wife's fear by stating, "You know women, their hearts are a bit more soft, so they have more fear." Singh explains his wife's fear as part and parcel of a female essential nature, which characterizes women as emotionally soft, and therefore more likely to succumb to fear. By evoking women's essentialized nature, Singh forecloses the space from which to understand the legitimacy of his wife's fear. For Singh, women are simply not made for a life of suffering and survival because they are emotionally soft and weak, and therefore, more susceptible to fear.

I argue that a better way to understand women's fear in relation to squatting is neither through the evocation of an essentialized gendered nature, nor a blanket claim of women's resistance against or submission to power and domination. Rather, careful examination of the specificities of women's horizon of agency provides a better understanding of women's political action because this approach does not exclude women

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<sup>102</sup> Singh's wife is fearful of eviction, in part, because of their proximity to a large city. This fear is real and legitimate, as most Third World city governments are in permanent conflict with poor squatters. Mike Davis argues that "regardless of their political complexions and their different levels of tolerance for squatting and informal settlement on their peripheries, most Third World city governments are permanently locked in conflict with the poor in core areas...As a result, squatters and renters, sometimes even small landlords, are routinely evicted with little ceremony, compensation or right of appeal" (2006, 99).

from an ontological narrative of suffering and survival, but tries to understand women's unique embodied experience of suffering and survival. Women's visible, marked bodies make them more susceptible to violence, abuse, and rape, especially in squatter and street communities.<sup>103</sup> And perhaps this embodied difference gives rise to women's increased fear.

Much of the scholarship on quotidian politics assumes that men and women act in similar and equal ways without creating room from which to understand embodied differences that enable specific modes of seeing, being, and acting in the social world. For example, in *Domination and Arts of Resistance*, James Scott (1990) does not distinguish between the political action and agency of male and female peasants, male and female slaves, and male and female untouchables because he assumes that embodied differences do not impact agency. In contrast, Linda Alcoff argues that a female horizon of agency differs vastly from a male horizon for the following reasons:

The possibility of pregnancy, childbirth, nursing, and in many societies, rape, are parts of females' horizons that we carry with us throughout childhood and much or all of our adult lives. The way these are figured, imagined, experienced, accepted, and so on, is as variable as culture. But these elements exist in the female horizon, and they exist there because of the ways in which we are embodied (2006, 176).

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<sup>103</sup> Bapat and Agarwal demonstrate that squatting and street-dwelling are experienced differently by men and women. According to Bapat and Agarwal, a "disproportionate share of the labor and burden of ill-health related to inadequacies in provision of water and sanitation in the household and neighbourhood falls on women" (2003, 71). Women typically collect water from public standpipes, often queuing for long periods in the process and having to get up very early or go late at night to get the water. Women also "have to make do with the often inadequate water supplies to clean the home, prepare the food, wash the utensils, do the laundry and bathe the children" (Bapat and Agarwal 2003, 71-72). Bapat and Agarwal argue it is important not to underestimate this side of the water burden because "it is difficult...to appreciate how humiliating, tiring, stressful and inconvenient this can be" (2003, 71-72). Not having toilets, or having to wait in long queues to use filthy toilets, carries health risks and is also a source of anxiety. This anxiety is manifested in interview responses like those of Khatrabia Londhe, who discusses the specific difficulties women experience when trying to find a place to defecate: "Until now, we have used open land for defecating – men go on one side and women on the other. People passing by can see women squatting. The day before yesterday, an old woman went out to defecate at seven in the evening and a man came from behind and grabbed her. A few of us generally go together for the toilet. Men hide behind the bushes and watch women when they are squatting. If they see a woman alone, they creep in and molest her" (Bapat and Agarwal 2003, 74). The everyday act of defecating is one that evokes fear, humiliation, and anxiety for women because they must contend with the constant possibility of molestation and rape. This is a fear that men do not contend with.

A female body confronts the future with the possibility of pregnancy, childbirth, and rape, even if it never comes to pass. Alcoff argues that knowing that these things may occur provides some of the constraints that influence women's agency in the social world. One should point out that these embodied constraints are not deterministic of women's agency, yet they are significant to understanding women's agency.

An examination of exclusionary nature of an ontological narrative of suffering and survival demonstrates that a notion of identity as discrete and bounded is problematic, and that it is more reasonable to understand identity as being simultaneously rooted in multiple ontological narratives that can be partial, fragmentary, and, at times, contradictory. More specifically, Fauja Singh's exclusionary construction of an ontological narrative of suffering and survival complicates simplistic binary formulations between oppressor and oppressed. Singh's exclusion of women from an ontological narrative of suffering and survival is a manifestation of a larger phenomenon in which marginalized sectors of society marginalize still other sectors. Therefore, one cannot adopt simple narratives of oppressed and oppressor or resistance and submission because at times those who are marginalized fight against their marginalization while at other times these very marginalized individuals maintain and perpetuate the marginalization of other people.

### *Entering the Middle Class*

An analysis of Singh's agency rooted in resistance and submission is perhaps limited because it imposes a fixed notion of agency developed outside of Singh's embodied, lived experience. By de-linking the concept of agency from this binary formulation, the following discussion

takes agency as subject to, rather than prior to, empirical study. Singh explains his struggle for daily survival as part and parcel of a larger struggle for upward mobility:

At least we have a scheme, but the problem is that only the people who are doing well can create a scheme. For example, my kids are educated and they are working good jobs. So I tell them, “Open up bank accounts, save some money, file your income taxes, and in the future get a loan to buy some land.” And in four or five years, after filing income taxes, they will hopefully be able to put up half the money themselves and get half the money from the bank to buy some land. But only those whose work is going well can actually come up with schemes like this. If you don’t have anything, how can you have a scheme? Most of the poor work all day and then worry about how they are going to eat at night. How can you have a scheme if you have nothing?

Singh connects his narrative of suffering and survival to a larger goal of upward mobility, not necessarily a goal of resistance and subversion. Singh has devised a scheme for upward mobility and urges his sons to implement the scheme by working hard, saving money, living communally, and filing income taxes. This scheme, in Singh’s estimation, will result in upward mobility, enabling his sons to enter the middle class. Singh’s current situation is much improved because he was able to educate his sons, who are now working good jobs (not informal day-laborer jobs) and thus saving some money. By opening bank accounts, saving money, and paying income taxes, Singh’s sons will have what Singh does not: Singh’s sons will be able to change their public identity from poor, SC Sikh squatters to middle-class, land-owning SC Sikhs. The desire to enter the middle class is the motivation and reasoning for Singh’s quotidian political action.

The scheme that Fauja Singh creates for his family is a two-pronged scheme that emphasizes (1) working hard, saving money, and accessing loans; and (2) living communally as an extended family:<sup>104</sup>

Now we are doing ok. If things continue the way they are, then we should be ok. If my sons continue to work together, live together, and share expenses, then we should be ok. Then maybe in the next five to seven years we might be able to buy some land, and in eight to ten years we might be able to build a home. We do have these thoughts, these hopes. But if our children, after they get married, get into any fights and live separately, then we won't be able to do all this. If they live separately, then their expenses will increase; each will need his own gas for his own stove; each will have to purchase his own stuff from scratch. If this ends up happening, then they won't be able to save to buy land. We try to tell them, "This is your opportunity"...We try very hard to explain these things to our kids, to teach these things to our kids. At first we were living in such a difficult situation—we are from such a backward area—but still we were able to educate our kids.

According to Singh, his sons cannot achieve upward mobility if they live separately and establish their own homes. In order to save money, his sons must live together. Their individual expenses are reduced if they live communally because they are able to share the costs of running a home and feeding a family, and in turn their capacity to save is increased. If his sons live separately, then their expenses will increase because "each will need his own gas for his own stove; each will have to purchase his own stuff from scratch." And, according to Singh, if this happens, then "they won't be able to save to buy land."

Singh's conception of communal living implicitly adopts an ontological narrative in which girls and women are defined as perpetual outsiders, aliens in their natal homes (see Chapter Four). Singh emphasizes that his sons must live together in order to keep costs down and increase their capacity to save money. Singh never mentions his daughter when

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<sup>104</sup> Singh's strategy of communal living to decrease household expenditures is one adopted throughout the Third World. According to Asef Bayat, the poor in Cairo decrease their expenditures by "sharing living spaces with relatives, purchasing low-quality food and secondhand clothes which they may share with others within the household, limiting health and education expenses, and reducing daily meals to two or one" (Bayat 1996, 3). These practices, according to Bayat, are equally common in New Delhi, Manila, and Rio de Janeiro (1996, 3).

discussing communal living. His daughter is left out of his scheme for upward mobility because Singh assumes that his daughter's true home is her married home, not her natal home. By adopting an ontological narrative that characterizes girls and women as perpetual outsiders, Singh excludes his daughter from his conceptualization of communal living, his scheme for upward mobility, and his goal of entering the middle class.

Singh is careful to point out that the scheme he has devised for his family's upward mobility is not feasible for most poor SC squatters. Singh is able to devise a means for upward mobility because his sons are now working "good jobs" and are therefore able to save money, which allows them to open bank accounts, pay taxes, and eventually take out loans. However, according to Singh, "only those whose work is going well can actually come up with schemes like this." Most Scheduled Caste Sikhs cannot devise such a scheme because, as Fauja Singh says, "most of the poor work all day and then worry about how they are going to eat at night. How can you have a scheme if you have nothing?" Singh sees himself and his family as the exception, not the norm. And therefore, he acknowledges that most Scheduled Caste Sikhs are not able to gain upward mobility.

Singh's quotidian political action, manifested through squatting and a scheme for upward mobility, are politically significant, but this significance is not fully understood when reduced to terms like resistance and submission. Rather, I demonstrate how quotidian political action is shaped by the practices that uphold paradoxes of equality and how SC Sikh political action shapes and transforms these practices. For example, one way in which Singh changes current paradoxes of equality is by creating his own understanding of Sikh middle-class values, which competes with, challenges, and changes the current ontological narrative of middle-class values (as described in Chapter Three). Most respondents point to the

inability or unwillingness of SC Sikhs to adopt middle-class Sikh values as an explanation for current caste differences. Respondents are able to do so because they assume that Scheduled Caste society is the source of casteism whereas middle-class society is devoid of casteism. Fauja Singh's conception of upward mobility and middle-class status is intimately tied to an ontological narrative of suffering and survival, and as a result, caste and class differences and discrimination become central to Singh's conception of middle-class values. In short, Singh decenters the dominant understanding of middle-class values, the very understanding of middle-class values that general-caste Sikhs use to defend, explain, and legitimize their own discriminatory practices. By focusing on Singh's horizon of agency, I am able to be more attentive to the ontological narratives, lived subjectivity, and internal reasoning and practices that give rise to his political actions. I find that Singh's actions are best understood through an ontological narrative of suffering and survival, which is not necessarily captured by terms such as resistance and submission or subversion and resignification, because these terms assume a fixed notion of agency and then impose this notion of agency from outside Singh's embodied, lived experience.

### **An Ontological Narrative of Religious Devotion**

This section examines Hardeep Kaur Bedi's and Harsimran Kaur Sagoo's interview responses to demonstrate how an ontological narrative of religious devotion develops from within a Sikh politics of equality characterized by caste and gender paradoxes. I argue that this ontological narrative of religious devotion can be seen as one modality of agency, which functions, at times, to undermine, and, other times, to reinforce the ontological narratives

that legitimize and explain caste and gender differences (as outlined in Chapters Three and Four).

Both women are active participants in their local Sukhmani Seva Societies. When asked about their participation, both Bedi and Sagoo describe in some detail the lack of religious services in their particular village. According to Bedi, a 55-year-old Khatri woman, and Sagoo, a 61-year-old Ramgarhia woman, they helped to establish Sukhmani Seva Societies in their respective villages because of this paucity:

*Hardeep Kaur Bedi:* In the beginning, when this *gurdwara* was first made, it opened once every month. The *pathi* [keeper of the *granth*] would also say that the *gurdwara* would open in a month. However, once we established our Sukhmani Seva Society, we made a *kirtani jatha* [organization for devotional singing]. We did this because this is a Hindu village and people; therefore, most engage in *Jai Mataji, Jai Mataji* [hail the divine Mother]...When the ladies from my street would say, “We are having [Hindu] *kirtan* at our home; you must come,” I would go, but on a social basis. I would sit among them socially. I went thinking, “Ok, if I don’t attend their function, then tomorrow if I have an event or function they won’t attend, either.” So I would go but on a social basis. I would sit down among them, but my mind was constantly saying *Vabiguru, Vabiguru* [God]. And I would say to myself, “I wish that we too would have some type of weekly function like this.”

*Harsimran Kaur Sagoo:* Yes, actually I started the Sukhmani Seva Society when I moved here. I started it. See, when I first came here, at that time, nothing was done in the *gurdwara*. There was no *kirtan*—nothing at all. There weren’t even any gents who conducted *kirtan*. There was one gentleman—at least as far as I know—there was one blind gentleman, poor man who didn’t read *gurbani*. He would sing songs, for example, religious songs. He is the only one who did anything at the *gurdwara*. Then one day, I sang a *shabad* [devotional song], and afterwards some of the people of the village came to me and suggested that I start an *istri satsang* [women’s devotional association]. Then I started it here.

Both Bedi and Sagoo identified a need in their local communities, which they set out to fulfill. According to both women, their local *gurdwaras* did not provide sufficient religious services, such as daily reading of Sikh scripture and singing of Sikh *kirtan*. These women

responded to the lack of religious services by establishing Sukhmani Seva Societies in their communities.

Establishing and maintaining local Sukhmani Seva Societies has been a difficult task for these women; nonetheless, the women have been successful. Both Bedi and Sagoo attribute the success of their Sukhmani Seva Society to God's grace. Bedi describes the fact that when she started the Sukhmani Seva Society, she came up against many difficulties as its first president:

At that point, my children were all unmarried, and I started a weekly program, every Thursday. And I was the first president of the Sukhmani Seva Society. In the beginning, I came up against many, many difficulties because all of the ladies would say to me, "Your daughters are old enough to do household work when you are away, but we have young, young children. How will we manage?" I would then plead with them, "You tell me what time works for you, and we will do it at that time." For six months, we couldn't even come up with a day of the week. Should we do it on Thursday or Wednesday? Because some people raised havoc if we suggested one day, and others got upset if you suggested the other. And then at that point, other big-big [high status] men in the village said, "These women have just started organizing, they won't last two months." Then I got all the women together and said to them..."Look, the entire village has challenged us. They say that we won't last." And we then made an *ardas* [petition or prayer closing congregational worship] to Guru Nanak. We said, "We want to come together in your name. We want to follow your path. Please ensure that we keep walking on your path." And today we have been active now for ten years.

Bedi's ontological narrative of religious devotion emphasizes the difficulties she initially faced when organizing and establishing a Sukhmani Seva Society. In particular, Bedi narrates two distinct problems: (1) balancing women's childcare and household responsibilities with their desire to participate in religious devotion and activities outside the home; and (2) a general dismissive sentiment espoused by the men in power. According to Bedi, initially when she started organizing the Sukhmani Seva Society, many of the women in her village found it difficult to participate because they had young children, which meant that they were

burdened with both childcare and household work.<sup>105</sup> The women in the village claimed that because Bedi's children were older, she did not experience the same burdens at home.

The women in this particular village find it difficult to participate in activities outside the home because they are defined in large part by a Sikh public narrative of gender equality, which emphasizes Sikh women's *seva*, duty, and responsibility in relation to their place within the home, conjugal marriage, and heterosexuality (as illustrated in Chapter Four). This particular definition of women's roles focuses solely on the home, thereby impeding women's capacity to work, organize, and socialize outside the home. The women in the village pointed out that Bedi's position was different from their own because her daughters were older, and therefore she could share the burden of household work with her daughters (note that Bedi's daughters are able to share in the responsibilities of the home because they are unmarried, and therefore they have yet to leave their natal home for their married home). In short, Bedi, her daughters, and the women of the village are all defined by their role as housewives (or soon-to-be housewives), "which defines women in terms of their place within the home, conjugal marriage, and heterosexuality" (Mohanty 2003, 150).

In addition to the concerns regarding childcare and household work, Bedi and her companions also had to deal with the scrutiny of some of the men in the village, who claimed that the women's organizing would not last more than two months. In response to both the women and men of the village, Bedi and her companions came together through

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<sup>105</sup> When explaining the difficulties associated with establishing Sukhmani Seva Societies, both Bedi and Sagoo discuss the limited time and resources available to women. When asked how often she went to the *gurdwara*, Harsimran Kaur Sagoo replied: "We do our weekly *kirtan* at the village *gurdwara*. The *seva* I partake in is mostly reading of the scripture. I only have enough time to do this. You know, ladies have limited time. We start prayers at 10 a.m., and by 12 or 12:30 we complete our prayers. Then after that we come home and take care of work around the house." Sagoo, like Bedi, discusses the difficulty associated with balancing responsibilities within the home and religious commitments outside the home.

*ardas*, in which they asked Guru Nanak to help them in their struggle, to establish a Sukhmani Seva Society, which, according to Bedi, would enable these women to follow Nanak's path. Bedi ends her discussion of the difficulties she faced by stating that these women made a communal plea for the successful establishment of a Sukhmani Seva Society, and now they have been active for ten years. Bedi attributes her successes to divine agency, and therefore, one can read Bedi's political actions as tied to an ontological narrative of religious devotion.

By organizing, establishing, and maintaining a Sukhmani Seva Society in their local village, Bedi and her companions are able to qualitatively shift their gendered roles. A public Sikh narrative of gender equality defines women's roles in relation to their place in the home, conjugal marriage, and heterosexuality. Bedi and her fellow society members are able to open a new role for themselves, a role separate from the home within the public space of the *gurdwara*. These women are actively participating in public religious devotion independently of (and perhaps at the cost of) their domestic responsibilities. Interestingly, Bedi does not claim that her quotidian political actions led to this change, or even that the quotidian political action of the Sukhmani Seva Society members led to this change; rather, she attributes the change in her gendered position to divine agency. It is tempting to read Bedi's actions through the lens of resistance and submission: her decision to organize a women's devotional society can be read as an expression of her desire to resist her current position in a hierarchical system of power relations, a system characterized by paradoxes of equality. This analysis is completely plausible and is pursued by many authors. However, I would argue this type of analysis remains inadequately attentive to the forms of reasoning, network of relations, and practices that make Bedi's actions possible and meaningful. By focusing on

a horizon of agency, I am able to be more attentive to the ontological narratives, lived subjectivity, and internal reasoning and practices that give rise to Bedi's action. I find that Bedi's actions are best understood through an ontological narrative of religious devotion, which is not necessarily captured by terms such as resistance and submission or subversion and resignification.

Harsimran Kaur Sagoo also recounts the difficulties she experienced when establishing a Sukhmani Seva Society in her village:

When I first started, I actually encountered a lot of problems. Some people said, "This organization will never run." Some people said, "How will you ladies be able to do this? You won't be able to do it." I am not sure why people said these things. I don't know if they said it because we are ladies. But *Maharaj's* [God's] grace was with us, and I can guarantee that now the organization can't be stopped...God's grace has been with us.

According to Sagoo, many of her fellow villagers questioned her and her companions' ability to organize, establish, and run a Sukhmani Seva Society. Some individuals asked how the women would manage. Others explicitly stated that they were not capable of organizing in such a manner. For Sagoo, the women were able to organize, establish, and run a Sukhmani Seva Society because God's grace was with them. Sagoo attributes the success of her local Sukhmani Seva Society not to any one individual or to the group of women, but rather to divine agency.

### *Exclusionary Understanding of Religious Devotion*

Keeping in mind a politics of equality characterized by caste and gender paradoxes, one might interpret the creation of all women's Sukhmani Seva Societies as a form of resistance, an attempt to reverse power relations. However, presupposing a link between political

action and resistance forecloses the space from which to understand these women's full horizon of agency by overlooking the exclusionary nature of an ontological narrative of religious devotion. An examination of Hardeep Kaur Bedi's horizon of agency not only helps to explain her political action, but also demonstrates the way in which her horizon of agency—in particular, her ontological narrative of religious devotion—combines with an ontological narrative of purity and pollution to, at times, include women while, at other times, excluding them.

Bedi's ontological narrative of religious devotion expands the conventional role of women by making public spaces like *gurdwaras* available to women rather than defining them solely in relation to the home, conjugal marriage, and heterosexuality. However, Bedi's ontological narrative of religious devotion, which opens public spaces to women, combines at times with an ontological narrative of purity and pollution that functions to justify and legitimize discrimination against women:

Women aren't allowed in that particular position as *granthi*, but we still have access to the *Guru Granth* sahib. We go to the Guru's home and sit before the *Guru Granth*; we have the *Granth* sahib in our homes; and we can pray in the *gurdwara*. For instance, when we start a prayer, we go to the *gurdwara*, and we recite from *Guru Granth* sahib for two hours at a time. We sit before the *Guru Granth* sahib, in the same place that the *granthi* sits. There is no restriction per se. But it is the case that we are in a male-dominated country, and we ourselves give in to male domination. There is also a separate issue; there is one more issue. Women are not pure for some time due to a God-given trait. Women can achieve the highest of high levels, but ultimately we remain part of the female race. On a natural basis, we can't always partake in and maintain our duties to our *seva*.

Bedi describes women's access to and relationship with the *Granth* as restricted and qualified. She states that even though women do not have access to the title of *granthi*, they still have access to the *Granth*. She carefully points to the fact that women can recite Sikh scripture both privately and publicly, in homes and in *gurdwaras*. In the *gurdwara* women sit in the same

place as male *granthis*, and they perform all the same *seva* as male *granthis*. However, after outlining the ways in which women are equal to male *granthis*, Bedi points to the differences.

According to Bedi, there are two prominent differences between male *granthis* and women who participate in religious *seva*: (1) women must contend with male domination; and (2) women suffer from impurity. Male domination, for Bedi, explains in part why women are not granted the title of *granthi*. In addition to male domination, Bedi points to the logic of embodied purity and pollution to explain differential treatment of women in the Sikh community. According to an ontological narrative of purity and pollution, women are incapable of attaining the same degree of purity as men because they lose their purity as a result of their monthly menstruation, and therefore, they cannot be *granthis*. Bedi's statement that "On a natural basis, [women] can't always partake in and maintain our duties to our *seva*" makes sense if one assumes first that menstruation causes pollution, and second that those who are polluted should not touch or be near the *Guru Granth*. According to an ontological narrative of purity and pollution, women must accept the fact that they cannot be *granthis* because biologically they are impure. In short, while Bedi pushes back at the conventional definition of women's role by expanding women's access to the public sphere (specifically the *gurdwara*), she simultaneously restricts women's power in the *gurdwara* by adopting an ontological narrative of embodied purity and pollution, which, in turn, legitimizes the perpetuation of misogynistic practices.

Without an understanding of Bedi's and Sagoo's public identity and their lived subjectivities, characterized through an ontological narrative of religious devotion, one might come to the distorted conclusion that these women and their fellow society members are resisting current power relations. But if one understands the embodied location, the horizon

of agency from which Bedi and Sagoo and their fellow members make decisions, then one can locate their agency without having to reduce it to either resistance or submission. By de-linking the concept of agency from a binary formulation, I am able to better explain Bedi's and Sagoo's quotidian political action because my analysis is attentive to the forms of reasoning, network of relations, and practices that make their actions possible and meaningful. As a result, I am able to demonstrate how everyday political action, like participation in Sukhmani Seva Societies, function, at times, as a form of resistance, while at other times, reinforcing misogynistic practices.

## **Conclusion**

An analysis of political agency rooted in resistance and submission is perhaps limited because it imposes a fixed notion of agency developed outside of a Sikh politics of equality. By de-linking the concept of agency from a binary formulation, this analysis takes agency as subject to, rather than prior to, empirical study. As a result, I am able to develop a meaning and understanding of agency from within the set of symbolic, institutional, and material practice that uphold the paradoxes of equality, rather than imposing an understanding of agency that is fixed in advance and developed from outside the specificity of Sikh lived experience. By focusing on a horizon of agency, I am able to be more attentive to the ontological narratives, lived subjectivity, internal reasoning, and practices that give rise to quotidian political action. I have demonstrated in this chapter that any discussion of agency must begin with an analysis of the specific practices of identity formation. In the context of the Sikh community, this means closely analyzing the practices—both argumentative and

embodied—that secure respondents’ attachment to discriminatory forms of life that in turn provide the necessary conditions for both their subordination and agency.

## Chapter Six – Conclusion: Identity Politics Beyond the Sikh

### Case

Sikhism has been widely hailed as solving caste- and gender-based discrimination through radical and revolutionary institutions, practices, and norms. Sikhism espouses a radical egalitarianism by placing the Untouchable on par with the Brahman, and woman on par with man. Guru Nanak, the first Guru, believed that *Vahiguru* was the creator and protector of all individuals, and that therefore everyone was entitled to religious salvation irrespective of caste and gender differences. In short, Sikhism makes no allowances for hierarchical distinctions. As a result, all Sikhs irrespective of age, gender, or social status visit *gurdwara*, participate in congregational prayer, and partake in *langar* and *karah parsad*.

Everyday lived experience in the Sikh community, however, indicates that equality has yet to be achieved. To a large extent, a contradictory situation of inclusion and inequality continues in the Sikh community. Daily life in the Sikh community is filled with contradictions. One example of these contradictions is my personal experience at my grandmother's funeral (as described in the Introduction). My personal experience can be read as part of a larger politics of equality that Sikhs negotiate on a daily basis. This research project first links my personal story with a Sikh politics of equality, and second links a Sikh politics of equality to identity politics in the Americas and beyond to better understand the profoundly collective and historical context within which stories of inequities of power, privilege, inclusion, marginalization, and discrimination make sense. The goal of this project is to understand my personal story and the story of others by examining the tension between calls to equality and the common, everyday lived experience of discrimination and exclusion.

## **Public Identity, Lived Subjectivity, and Narrative Identity**

To make sense of a Sikh politics of equality and Sikh quotidian political action, I turn to an examination of the constitution of identities and the process of identity formation. The constitution of identities and the process of identity formation are rarely examined, explored, or understood in political science scholarship. One reason that the very constitution of identity has not received significant attention is that the process of identity formation is often assumed to be a more or less harmonious process, which results in a normal, stable, and unitary identity. By operating on this assumption, one forecloses the space from which to explain a contradictory politics of equality. This project places identity formation processes at the center of analyses in an effort to explain a Sikh politics of equality and Sikh quotidian political action.

My analytic framework differs from most political science studies of identity in three important ways: (1) the approach I outline does not take the concept of groups for granted; (2) it does not assume a homogeneous, integrated, and unitary notion of identity; and (3) the approach accounts for embodied lived experience. I argue that an analysis of identity should not presume the salience of specific forms of identification; rather, it should specify why and when individuals identify with and act on behalf of a specific identity, without assuming that this identity is singular and neat. My approach to identity encourages one to ask how, when, and why people interpret social experience in ethnic, gender, or racial terms. The emphasis shifts not only to questions about how people get classified, but also to questions about how gestures, utterances, situations, and events are interpreted and experienced. My investigation of a Sikh politics of equality and Sikh quotidian political action also accounts for the

empirical character of bodily practices as the terrain upon which identity is mapped. In short, my approach enables one to explore the “how” of identity formation processes. This analytic approach to identity provides two specific benefits: (1) it offers resources for avoiding what Brubaker calls, “groupism,”<sup>106</sup> while at the same time helping to account for its tenacious hold on our social imagination; and (2) it helps to elucidate and concretize a notion of identity as a way of seeing and being in the social world.

I rely on Linda Alcoff’s (2006) account of identity and Margaret Somers’ (1994) notion of narrative identity to explain the tension between a Sikh scriptural call to equality and the common, everyday lived experience of caste- and gender-based discrimination. An analysis of the interplay between a Sikh narrative of equality and ontological narratives provides evidence for the following arguments: (1) despite a belief in and commitment to equality, a structure of hierarchy is present among Sikhs; and (2) this particular hierarchical structure is tied to specific material interests, narrative methods employed to maintain and challenge these interests, and social actors who are, in turn, privileged and displaced.

By exploring the uneasy interplay between these two types of narratives at the individual level, I am able to disentangle what are often empirically interwoven public and ontological narratives in an effort to better understand a Sikh politics of equality. However, in doing so one must not lose sight of the critical fact that each of these elements is

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<sup>106</sup> I draw this term from Brubaker who defines groupism as “the tendency to take discrete, bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis.” (2004, 8). For Brubaker, most scholars adopt groupism in their treatment of ethnic groups, nations, and races by assuming that they are “entities to which interests and agency can be attributed.” (2004, 8). This tendency to reify groups manifests in scholarly treatment of groups such as “Serbs, Croats, Muslims, and Albanians in the former Yugoslavia, of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, of Jews and Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories, of Turks and Kurds in Turkey, or of Blacks, Whites, Asians, Hispanics, and Native Americans in the United States as if they were internally homogenous, externally bounded groups, even unitary collective actors with common purposes” (Brubaker 2004, 8).

meaningful only in terms of constituting a whole, a total configuration. The goal is, therefore, to understand identity as a horizon of agency in which public and ontological narratives are in constant interplay. I argue that a Sikh politics of equality cannot be understood if one relies on conventional notions of identity and identity formation precisely because these conventional notions assume that identity formation processes are harmonious and result in normal, stable, and unitary identities. To understand a Sikh politics of equality, one needs to recognize that identities are not normal, stable, and unitary. Rather, a more plausible account of identity, with more explanatory value and coherence with everyday experience, does not assume that identities are discrete and bounded, but instead creates room to understand identities as possibly fragmented, contradictory, or partial.

Deconstructing a Sikh politics of equality helps to explain how current hierarchical structures and power relations are constructed, reinforced, and maintained at the individual level through narrative identities. The respondents whom I interviewed believe in and commit themselves to a Sikh narrative of equality because for them it is divinely ordained. Yet the task of living in accordance with a narrative of equality is not a simple matter; it is mediated not only by debates internal to Sikh religious tradition, but also by the particular material conditions of respondents' lives. My goal is to explore the limits of a public Sikh narrative of equality, its assumptions and presuppositions, and the day-to-day context through which these limitations are constructed, reinforced, and challenged.

I find that most respondents are able to discuss their personal discriminatory beliefs and practices while maintaining a commitment to a Sikh narrative of equality through the use of certain ontological narratives. These ontological narratives allow respondents to (1) distance themselves from discriminatory actions by shifting responsibility onto others, and

(2) obscure specific types of discrimination through the use of a narrow definition of equality, thus rendering specific discriminatory acts harmless. A majority of the respondents explain the structural position of Scheduled Caste Sikhs and Sikh women through a series of ontological narratives that minimize their own participation in discriminatory practices by shifting focus to Scheduled Caste Sikhs' and Sikh women's behavior, state policies, and degrees of religious observance. These ontological narratives obscure the perpetuation of casteism and sexism and thus allow for continuation of current caste and gender hierarchies in the Sikh community.

To understand the political agency of Scheduled Caste Sikhs and Sikh women, I adopt an expanded notion of politics, thus making visible largely invisible forms of political action that often remain outside the purview of scholars. I combine an expanded notion of politics with Linda Alcoff's understanding of identity as horizon of agency to develop a meaning and understanding of agency from within a politics of Sikh equality, rather than imposing an understanding of agency that is fixed in advance as either resistance or submission and developed from outside the specificity of Sikh paradoxes of equality. By doing so, I am able to de-link the concept of agency from a binary formulation, which can potentially distort our understanding of quotidian political action, especially when agency is taken as prior to, rather than subject to, empirical study. In particular, I examine (1) SC Sikh participation in squatting movements as one modality of agency that highlights issues of suffering and survival; and (2) Sikh women's participation in Sukhmani Seva Societies as a second modality of agency, which highlights the theme of religious devotion. Through an exploration of quotidian politics, I am able to demonstrate that, at times, SC Sikhs and Sikh

women undermine and adopt the very ontological narratives that give rise to casteism and sexism in the Sikh community

This approach to agency provides a degree of specificity that allows for an account of political action that is sensitive to the particular practices, including embodied practices, that provide the necessary conditions for agency without having to “reduce the heterogeneity of life to the rather flat narrative of succumbing to or resisting relations of domination” (Mahmood 2005, 174). An approach to agency that privileges the contours of embodied, lived experience has explanatory value because (1) such an examination of political action reveals the kind of questions that are important to understanding the quotidian politics of SC Sikhs and Sikh women; and (2) such an examination allows for the particularities of Sikh lived experience to speak generatively to theoretical concepts, like identity and agency, that are often taken for granted.

### **Understanding Identity Politics Beyond the Sikh Community**

The theoretical framework I develop to understand a Sikh politics of equality characterized by caste and gender paradoxes also has explanatory value for understanding identity politics beyond the Sikh community. In particular, I find that my conceptualization and analysis of identity is helpful in understanding race and gender in other national and geopolitical systems. This being said, I would like to caution against grand theorization or generalizations about identity formation processes, and the relationship between these processes and political agency. Although I make a general argument about the way in which social identities are best understood, I also find that the issue of identity is best approached in very specific context-based analyses. Specificity, context, and locality are necessary in

analyses of identities because identities are constituted by social contextual conditions in specific cultures, at a particular historical period, and therefore the nature and effects associated with identities must be addressed in largely local and contextual terms.

This does not mean that the account I develop cannot be used to understand racial and gendered identities in other localities. For instance, my analysis of equality in Sikh community can, with appropriate sensitivity to the different in context, speak generatively to the experience of racial minorities throughout the Americas. More specifically, my account of identity and agency are most helpful when trying to understand situations in which a claim of and commitment to equality are present, yet discrimination and exclusion are also common. My analysis of a politics of equality can provide some insights for understanding, for example, the ideology of *mestizaje* in Mexico (Sue Forthcoming), the myth of racial democracy in Brazil (Telles 2004), the ideology of Latin American exceptionalism in Cuba (Sawyer 2006), and color-blind racism in the U.S. (Bonilla-Silva 2010). What these different cases share is a tension between claims to racial equality and everyday lived experience of racial discrimination and exclusion. My analysis of caste in the Sikh community teaches us that (1) denials of the existence of racial inequality are not credible evidence that racism does not exist; and (2) claims to caste-blindness, or more generally color-blindness, function as ways to justify, legitimize, and obscure racism. In short, a professed blindness to visible, marked difference, such as race and gender, does not dissolve its presence. Rather, to offset the power and privilege associated with these visible differences, one needs to be more attentive to (1) the “how” of identity formation processes; and (2) the relationship between identity formation processes and political agency.

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