

‘The Fools Argue about Flesh and Meat’: Sikhs and Vegetarianism

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ABSTRACT: Starting from recent UK media reports relating to Sikhs and vegetarianism, this article examines practice in the *langar* (gurdwaras’ free food provision) before exploring earlier Sikh tradition (the scriptures, stories of the Gurus, and disciplinary codes) for religious guidance on meat-consumption. Contrary to some contemporary Sikh leaders’ emphasis on vegetarianism, these older sources do not provide a consistently clear prohibition of meat-eating. Committed (Khalsa) Sikhs today belong to, or are at least influenced by, groupings such as the Akhand Kirtani Jatha and Damdami Taksal, each with its own code of practice. This article on the one hand suggests that Indic values and norms provide a relevant context to Sikh emphases on vegetarianism; on the other, it describes Sikhs’ dismay that one of the UK’s responses to meat provision in a religiously plural society directly conflicts with their code of conduct. The need for further ethnographic study is highlighted.

KEYWORDS: diet; halal; Khalsa; meat; Sikh; vegetarian.

INTRODUCTION

The questions whether Sikhs are vegetarian and whether they should be vegetarian underlie several recent disputes in the UK. Starting from these cases, this article explores past and present Sikh practice for tentative answers to these questions. The relationship between diet and devotion hinges on (a) whether the consumption of meat (and, for that matter, fish or eggs)² is com-

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2. In Sikh discussion (as in most Hindu discourse too), vegetarian diet is assumed to include milk and dairy products but to preclude eggs, fish and meat and any ingredient such as gelatine that is taken from an animal’s body. This is spelt out clearly in *GRMDT*, which proscribes ‘lecithins, egg trace, gelatins [sic] etc.’.

patible with identification as a religiously observant Sikh (Nesbitt 2007: 143–44) and, more specifically, as one of the sub-set of *amritdhari* Sikhs,³ and on (b) a Sikh's awareness of the method of slaughter involved.

This article examines the importance of the issue of vegetarianism/non-vegetarianism to the *langar*, the centuries-old tradition of providing a shared meal in the gurdwara (Sikh place of worship), and to present-day provision of school meals.⁴ Discussion of vegetarianism vis-à-vis *langar* will lead into an investigation of earlier Sikh tradition—the sacred text and the Gurus' lives, as well as successive statements of *rahit* (discipline)—for evidence of relevant dietary exhortation and practice. The issue of meat-eating or avoidance is then explored in the context of a religious diversity that is masked by any simple division of Sikhs into Khalsa (initiated and religiously committed) on the one hand and non-Khalsa on the other. The dietary emphases of contemporary Khalsa groups and spiritual leaders are highlighted, and contextual factors in Sikhs' avoidance or consumption of meat are considered. Underlying this discussion is ethnographic and documentary research into Britain's (evolving) Sikh communities (Nesbitt 2011), and more particularly into young Sikhs' socialization (Nesbitt 1980, 2000; also Nesbitt 2007; forthcoming 2016b). Whilst I recognize the limitations of online material (as indeed of other sources), I have referred to websites throughout (without elaborating on partisan biases, but instead aiming to include a cross-section of constituencies), not least because the internet is an influential resource used by Sikhs themselves in researching issues such as dietary teaching. This article offers a basis for future ethnographic study of contemporary UK Sikhs' understanding and implementation of dietary principles.

TWO RECENT DISPUTES

In 2013 the Board of Representatives of Guru Gobind Singh Gurdwara, Bradford, West Yorkshire, UK vowed its resistance to Bradford Council's decision to allow a food firm to set up a wholesale meat plant next to a gurdwara (*Bradford Telegraph and Argus* 2013). The Board, readers were informed, feared that the smell of meat would be wafted into the gurdwara and 'hundreds of Sikhs—many of whom are strict vegetarians—had objected to the plan'. More sweepingly, visitors to the online petition website learned that 'Sikhs are strict

3. An *amritdhari* is a Sikh who has received initiation into the Khalsa through a rite involving *amrit* (sweetened water) administered by five members of the Khalsa. The Khalsa is a community of Sikhs, both men and women, who are committed to a discipline involving a routine of daily prayer and maintaining the 'five Ks' (five outward signs of that commitment), one of which is *kes*, i.e. not removing or cutting hair. Adult Khalsa males—and increasingly in the UK some Khalsa females—tie a turban over their hair.
4. The first state-funded Sikh school in the UK, the Khalsa Voluntary Aided Primary School, was opened in 2010 in Southall (Taneja 2010).

vegetarians and killing living beings is against the beliefs of Sikhs'.⁵ Subsequently Sikhs applied for a judicial review to challenge the plans (Mahmood 2013).

Two years before the Bradford case, a Sikh employee in London had alleged discrimination on grounds of religion or belief in an appeal brought before Wandsworth Borough Council's Employment Appeal Tribunal in 2011. When Mr Chatwal, a council employee, was required to participate in a rota for cleaning the fridge in the communal kitchen he told the council that 'the new requirement would conflict with his religious belief, as a Sikh, that he was not supposed to have contact with meat or meat products', as recorded in Transcript of Employment Appeal Tribunal (Appeal No. UKEAT/0487/10/JOJ) before Mr Recorder Luba QC, para 6.

Subsequently, in his claim to the tribunal, Mr Chatwal stated more specifically that 'Sikhs who have taken Amrit (Holy water) vow never to eat, touch or prepare meat' (para. 6). 'Before the Employment Tribunal his evidence was that at the age of 13 he had taken Amrit and that he was accordingly an Amritdhari Sikh' (para. 7). Still more specifically:

At the same age he had become a member of the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha or 'GNNSJ' branch which is a revivalist organisation within the broader Sikh community. It was his case that it was an aspect of the religion or belief of that sub-group, or at least some members of it, that they should not come into contact with meat or meat products. (para. 7)

Two Sikh experts' evidence was considered: they, however, differed over 'whether the touching of meat was prohibited by the religion, as to how many GNNSJ members there were, and as to the practices or beliefs to which those members adhered' (para. 39).

Apparently, in both the Bradford and Wandsworth cases, the Sikhs lodging the complaints declared, initially at least without qualifying their assertion, that Sikhs are *per se* vegetarian, although the *Bradford Telegraph and Argus* report stated only that 'many' Sikhs are 'strict vegetarians' (2013). In the Wandsworth case this claim was subsequently refined to a claim that *amritdhari* Sikhs are vegetarian and then, during the tribunal, as a further clarification, the belief of 'at least some members' of a 'sub-group', the GNNSJ, was mentioned. The dietary stance of the GNNSJ, a Birmingham-based group (Takhar 2005: 38–58), and of other 'sub-groups' will be discussed later in this article.

As these two cases illustrate, the question whether or not Sikhs (or, more specifically, Khalsa/*amritdhari* Sikhs or, indeed, even more specifically, a certain sub-set of Khalsa Sikhs) do or may eat meat—or even come into con-

5. For the petition see <http://www.change.org/en-GB/petitions/bradford-council-block-planning-for-meat-processing-plant-next-to-bradford-sikh-temple-2> (accessed 19 November 2013).

tact with it—is not simply of academic interest. It appears that employers, public bodies and lawyers need an educated awareness of the Sikh community, including recognition that not all Sikhs are *amritdhari*/Khalsa Sikhs, and that Khalsa Sikhs themselves identify with different groupings with differing codes of discipline. Discrepancies between the reported statements also suggest that the relationship between being Sikh and being vegetarian may be complex, and they thus invite scrutiny of contributory factors in Sikhs' dietary behaviour.

SCHOOL MEALS: ONGOING DEBATES

More recently, school meals have become a matter for discussion. One 2014 headline read 'Row as atheist pupils are sent to vegetarian Sikh school' (Paton 2014). The article reported the anger of non-Sikh parents in South Buckinghamshire whose children had been allocated places in a local school, the Khalsa Secondary Academy, where '[t]he school provides strictly vegetarian meals, prevents pupils from bringing meat or fish in packed lunches, provides lessons in Punjabi and Sikh studies, promotes meditation and begins the day with prayers from the Sikh scriptures'.⁶

Meanwhile, Sikh parents in Ilford had been distressed to learn that the meat provided in (non-Sikh) school canteens was halal. An Ilford Sikh, Harmander Singh, described parents as 'concerned that their children are unknowingly going against their religion, which says they are not allowed to eat meat from animals that have suffered'.⁷ At the time of writing, UK Sikhs' discussions centre on recent disclosures (in e.g. Poulter *et al.* 2014) that much of the meat supplied by major supermarkets is halal meat that has no labelling to indicate it as such.

WHO ARE THE SIKHS?

Globally Sikhs probably number over 23 million and almost all are Punjabi by family background. (See introductions such as Jakobsh 2011; Mandair 2013;

6. For the school's published menu see khalasasecondaryacademy.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/menu1.pdf (accessed 17 November 2015). School food standards effective from January 2015 require the provision of meat, fish and eggs, or vegetarian protein (<http://www.schoolfoodplan.com/school-food-standards> (accessed 22 October 2004)). This has occasioned concern that vegetarian food would be contaminated by non-vegetarian, and that even Hindu schools would be required to provide non-vegetarian food. (<http://www.hinducounciluk.org/articles/484-school-reforms-impacts-hindus> (accessed 21 October 2014)).
7. This quotation from the *Ilford Recorder* of 10 November 2005 is available at www.politicsforum.co.uk/forum/viewtopic.php?t=29978 (accessed 18 September 2014). Sikhs in Harrow (Royston 2010) and Chingford (Binns 2013) were similarly distressed over halal school meals.

Mann 2004; Nesbitt forthcoming 2016b) Their religious emphasis on one God is encapsulated in the formula *ik oan kar*, the statement by their founder-Guru, Guru Nanak (1469–1539).⁸ Guru Nanak exhorted his disciples (the literal meaning of *sikh*) to lead lives of *seva* (voluntary service of others) and *simran* (remembrance of God). Only a minority of Sikhs are initiates who observe the discipline expected of members of the Khalsa.

The historian Hew McLeod suggested that Sikhs can be categorized in one of three ways: (1) as 'Khalsa' or 'Amrit-dhari', all of whom are 'kes-dhari', that is, they refrain from cutting or removing their hair or beards; (2) as 'Affiliated Khalsa'; and (3) as 'Non-Khalsa' or 'Sahaj-dhari' (1989: 114), all of whom cut their hair and shave. McLeod's second category, 'Affiliated Khalsa', included both 'Kes-dhari' and 'Mona' (i.e. short-haired, 'shaven') Sikhs.⁹ More recently, on the basis of fieldwork among young British Sikhs, Jasjit Singh has suggested that religiously engaged young Sikhs are of three types: (1) 'group affiliates' (born into families who identify with sub-groups such as the GNNSJ); (2) 'identity inheritors' (born into families that are unaligned with such sub-groups but in which most males maintain the turban); and (3) 'identity owners' who have joined a sub-group and who wear the turban even though their families are religiously less committed (2012: 232–34). Jasjit Singh has also pointed to the diversity of the Khalsa, comprising as it does a number of groups, some with their own *maryada* (code of discipline) (Singh 2014).

According to the UK's 2011 census, Sikhs in England and Wales exceed 400,000, and Sikhs are the fourth largest faith community after Christians, Muslims and Hindus. Although some Sikhs had settled before World War II, the major migration occurred from the 1950s, with the largest populations developing in London and the industrial cities of the Midlands and north-west. The UK now has 'some 250 gurdwaras' (Qureshi 2013: 93 citing Singh and Tatla 2006: 76), each comprising a congregational hall for worship and the kitchen and dining area that constitute the *langar*.

In the Bradford case, mentioned above, the gurdwara's second online petition states:

A Gurdwara is a place of worship... All meals served at a Gurdwara are strictly vegetarian as Sikhi [Sikh religion] teaches compassion and respect for all life including the lives of animals.¹⁰

While Sikhs may not say—to quote one Hindu informant—that 'being religious shows in your food' (Nesbitt 1998), many do make a connection between diet

8. Although 'God is one' is the usual 'translation' into English, *ik oan kar* is also rendered as 'one reality is' (N.-G. K. Singh 1995: 1) and 'One, Manifest as Word' (Shackle and Mandair 2005: 4).
9. *Mona* refers to males, although Jasjit Singh 2014 applies the term to females too, and the religious commitment of Khalsa females is also indicated by the avoidance of haircuts.
10. www.change.org/en-GB/petitions/stop-meat-plant-next-to-place-of-worship (accessed 12 December 2013).

and religious commitment. Given the centrality to Sikh observance of serving meals in the *langar*, this is an appropriate starting point for any enquiry into the relationship between Sikhs (including Khalsa Sikhs) and vegetarianism.

THE LANGAR

The provision by gurdwaras of free vegetarian meals has been a central feature of the Sikh religious tradition from the time of its earliest Gurus. The word *langar* is applied to the food that is served, to the area of the gurdwara in which it is eaten, and to the kitchen where it is prepared, as well as to this provision as a whole. *Langar* is acclaimed by Sikhs as a practical expression of the religious emphasis on equality, a break with Hindu custom whereby members of higher and lower castes would eat separately and those of higher caste would not accept cooked food from individuals of the lowest castes (Srinivas 1967: 66–67).

Himself He Cooks, an award-winning, reflective film by Belgian film directors Valerie Berteau and Philippe Witjes (2011), offers an hour-long visual meditation on the stages and processes involved in the co-operative *seva* (voluntary service), a key principle of *sikhi* (Sikh teaching and practice), of providing daily *langar* for 50,000 pilgrims at Harmandir Sahib.¹¹ In 2013 the Qatar-based Aljazeera Network ran the story of the ‘world’s largest free kitchen’, producing ‘200,000 flat breads and 1.5 tonnes of lentil soup daily’ for ‘100,000 people’ and using ‘7,000 kg of wheat flour, 1,200 kg of rice, 1,300 kg of lentils, 500 kg of ghee (clarified butter)’ to do so (Shafi 2013). In 1995 the BBC transmitted a series of television programmes entitled ‘Flavours of India’, hosted by noted cookery writer, Madhur Jaffrey. Uniquely, the programme on Punjab’s cuisine commenced with a tour of a place of worship, namely Harmandir Sahib, the Golden Temple in Amritsar.

When the fourth Parliament of the World’s Religions assembled in Barcelona in 2004, the GNNSJ memorably provided *langar* for up to 7,000 participants a day.¹² In December 2013, readers of *The Independent* newspaper learned that, as the number of food-hungry Britons increases, UK gurdwaras are augmenting food banks’ provision with ‘around 5,000 vegetarian meals’ each week (Badshah 2013). In all these cases, as in gurdwaras worldwide and at Sikh religious functions more generally, the *langar* food consists of flatbreads (*roti*), *dal* (spicy, soup-like preparation of lentils), *sabzi* (vegetables, such as potato and cauliflower, cooked with spices), plain yoghurt and a sweet dish

11. Harmandir Sahib and Darbar Sahib are Sikh names for their most sacred and celebrated shrine, the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab.
12. <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/2004/07/Come-Together.aspx> (accessed 19 April 2014). For the impact of the Barcelona *langar* on anthropologist Kathryn Lum see Nesbitt 2010: 146.

(such as *khir*, rice pudding). *Langar* food is generally understood by Sikhs to be straightforwardly lacto-vegetarian.

Unlike a kitchen or dining area in a church hall, the *langar* (i.e. the premises, the preparation of food and the partaking thereof) is as much a part of normative Sikh religious practice and provision as are the worship hall, *kirtan* and participation in worship. According to Sikh tradition *langar* (like the singing of *kirtan*) was a feature of life in Guru Nanak's settlement in Kartarpur. Even before the time of the Sikh Gurus, a similar practice existed in Sufi rest houses which provided hospitality for travellers. (*Langar* is Persian for 'anchor'.) The third Guru, Amar Das, reputedly enunciated the rule *pahle pangat pichhe sangat*, 'First sit in the *langar* and only then join the congregation.' This was occasioned by the Mughal emperor Akbar's visit to Guru Amar Das whose words reminded his followers that, whatever their caste or status, all were equal and none could claim precedence. The Barcelona instance (above) illustrates how *langar* gives Sikhs a public profile as providers of Punjabi vegetarian hospitality on a huge scale, and it demonstrates the considerable planning, preparation and commitment of time and effort that Sikhs are willing to invest.

It is assumed by most Sikhs that all food that is brought into a gurdwara or stored, cooked and consumed on gurdwara premises is, and must always be, vegetarian. However, during fieldwork in Nottingham, Sikhs from other castes informed me (disapprovingly) that meat was consumed in the *langar* in Bhatras' gurdwaras, although I never witnessed this myself.¹³ I have also been told of meat being eaten at a historic gurdwara in Lahore in Pakistan. Certainly, the distribution of goat's flesh as *mahaprashad* is reported by Sikhs from outside who visit Gurdwara Hazur Sahib in Nanded, the place in Maharashtra where Guru Gobind Singh passed away in 1708.¹⁴ Moreover, Nihang Sikhs, whose tall blue turbans and variations of eighteenth-century dress are espoused by an increasing number of young UK Sikh men (Jasjit Singh 2012: 63–67), affirm the practice of eating meat as integral to their centuries-old Nihang Sikh tradition.

Nonetheless, investigation of *langar* practices indicates that, with almost no exceptions, non-vegetarian food is proscribed in gurdwara premises and religious congregations. Reasons for the prohibition of meat in the *langar* include the claim that (all or many) Sikhs are vegetarian, as well as the teaching of compassion for all life and also the explanation that, as the *langar* is open to people of all communities, its catering must be inclusive. Certainly, if the (usual) *langar* rule of exclusively vegetarian provision is indeed based

13. Gurdwaras are often set up and established by one of the several castes, for example Bhatras, into which Sikhs are born. Most of the pre-World War II Sikh settlers in the UK were Bhatra (Nesbitt 1980).

14. *Prashad*, literally grace, denotes food that is distributed to devotees in, for example, a Hindu temple. *Maha* means great.

on concern for hospitality and respect for members of other communities, rather than on Sikhs' own dietary discipline, any investigation of intrinsically Sikh dietary principles needs to go deeper and wider than *langar* practice, and pointers—such as the exhortation to compassion—need to be identified in Sikh scripture. This is all the more necessary if, as indicated above, a small minority of Sikh communities and/or institutions appear to invoke Sikh tradition itself in order to endorse non-vegetarianism.

EARLIER SIKH TRADITION

SCRIPTURE

Sikhs have revered their scripture (*Adi Granth*, abbreviated AG) as the living Guru (spiritual teacher), since 1708 when Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth of the line of human Gurus that began with Guru Nanak, passed away. This book, also known by the honorific name *Guru Granth Sahib*, is consulted as the ultimate source of religious authority. However, it is important to note that the Gurus' insights are not presented in the form of commandments, or as prose narratives, but as poetry.

The poetry of the scripture is condensed in form, and rich in metaphor and imagery drawn from human activities and the countryside. Memorably, the fifth Guru, Arjan, affirmed: *bhojan kirtan* '*bhojan* [food, sustenance] is [an analogy for] *kirtan* [worship, hymn-singing]', which the Guru is presumably declaring to be as vital to full humanity as food is. The whole verse can be translated as 'May the preservation of your honour by the Transcendent Lord be your clothes, and may the singing of His praises be your food' (Arjan Dev) (AG 496, trans. Khalsa). Scriptural verses referring to food are, both individually and collectively, open to divergent interpretations.

Apparent support for the view that the Gurus advocated vegetarianism can be adduced from the words translated as:

If one's clothes are stained with blood, the garment becomes polluted. Those who suck the blood of human beings—how can their consciousness be pure?

(AG 140, trans. Khalsa)

Moreover, the question 'Who would cut his throat to have meat with his bread?' (AG 1374, trans. Khalsa) appears to be an exhortation to vegetarianism.

Furthermore, it is only to cereal food that the third Guru, Guru Amar Das, explicitly refers in his sustained food metaphor, conveying the indwelling of the divine in every aspect of life:

The Lord himself is the earth
Himself is the farmer
Himself he grows and grinds

Himself he cooks¹⁵
 Himself he places on the platter
 And himself he sits and eats it too...

(AG 550, trans. Gopal Singh)

Some of Guru Nanak's words (AG 16) have been translated as 'The food which causes pain to the body and breeds evil in the mind is baneful' (Cole 1996: 314), thus apparently lending support to arguments for avoidance of meat, but in their context they are probably better understood as 'all other foods', meaning other than 'Thy Name', 'fill the mind with evil and make the body writhe in Pain' (trans G. Singh 1987: 20). Nor was Guru Nanak advocating vegetarianism in the following often-quoted lines addressing the Brahmin view that anyone eating meat was polluted (Nesbitt 2007: 144); he was pointing out both that humans are caught up in the chain of life, and so of flesh, and that some individuals refrain from eating meat, yet (much more reprehensibly) exploit others ('devour men at night'):

The fools argue about flesh and meat, but know nothing about meditation and spiritual wisdom.
 What is called meat, and what is called green vegetables? What leads to sin?
 It was the habit of the gods to kill the rhinoceros and make a feast of the burnt offering.
 Those who renounce meat, and hold their noses when sitting near it, devour men at night....
 They are produced from the blood of their mothers and fathers, but they do not eat fish or meat.

(AG 1289, trans. Khalsa)

Surindar Singh Kohli comments: 'Guru Nanak condemned the Brahmanic aversion towards taking meat on the ground that their [i.e. Brahmins'] ethical conduct in every-day life was at its lowest and that they advocated kindness to animals without being kind to their fellow-beings' (1961: 327). Guru Nanak's words suggest that a spiritually enlightened person might partake of meat, and that this was unproblematic for his devotees. For the Guru, principles of remembrance of God, hard work and charitable giving were more important than any dietary rules. He 'did not fall into a controversy of eating or not eating meat' (Kohli 1961: 328). Mandair observes that 'the primary source of Sikh ethics, the Guru Granth Sahib, does not provide hard-and-fast rules concerning diet' (2013: 171).

While no one denies the primacy of the Guru's 'emphasis on the discrimination between good and bad, between right and wrong' (Kohli 1961: 328), an examination of twenty-first-century Sikhs' understandings of the Gurus' teaching on the subject of diet reveals contradictory insistence on their strict vegetarianism on the one hand and on their acceptance of non-vegetarianism

15. This line (painted on a wall) appears in a scene of Berteau and Witjes's film (2011), and provides its title.

on the other. Moreover, investigation of clues to the Gurus' dietary practice suggests that at least some of the ten Gurus were non-vegetarian or were regarded as such by near-contemporaries.

TRADITIONAL ACCOUNTS OF THE GURUS' LIVES

Anecdotes from the life of Guru Nanak are recounted in *janamsakhis* (literally 'birth witness'), hagiographic stories which were written down in later centuries and which also thrive in oral tradition. According to tradition, Guru Nanak accepted venison to eat while he was at a Hindu pilgrimage centre, Kurukshetra (Brar 2011, quoting *Gyan Ratnavali* of Bhai Mani Singh). Applying textual critical methods to the *janamsakhi* literature, Hew McLeod argued that, rather than being historically factual, they afforded more reliable insight into the worldview of devotees from the mid-seventeenth century (McLeod 1980b: 13). So, whether or not Guru Nanak actually ate venison, it is noteworthy that the belief that he did so was entirely compatible with his later followers' veneration of him. Quotations provided by Brar (2011) suggest, however, a shift in the Gurus' diet towards the greater consumption of meat by the sixth Guru, Hargobind.

Bhai Gurdas mentions Guru Hargobind's hunting (Var 26, Pauri 24; Jodh Singh 1998: 131). In a popular painting, Guru Hargobind is depicted intervening between a leaping lion and the Mughal Emperor Jehangir during a hunt (Nesbitt 2013: 68). Artists showed Guru Arjan, Guru Hargobind and Guru Gobind Singh on horseback, hunting in the same style as contemporary secular princes (p. 68). Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru, records in his autobiographical composition, *Bachittar Natak*, that he himself hunted bears, boars, deer and other animals (*Bachittar Natak* chapter 8: chaupai 1–3, quoted in Brar 2011). In the translation used by Brar, the quarry consists of 'ferocious lions and also nilgaus and elks'. According to tradition, and as depicted in iconography, Guru Gobind Singh shot a hare in Nanded, Maharashtra (as discussed by Nesbitt 2013: 70).

Bhai Gurdas was a relative of the third Guru, Amar Das, and a contemporary of the three subsequent Gurus, and his poetic compositions (*vars*) are approved—together with the work of Bhai Nand Lal—for reading in the gurdwara. The title of Pauri (verse) 13 of Var 23 is 'Lesson from the Goat'. While the thrust of the verse is endorsement of the services of the 'humble' goat in contrast to the higher-profile lion and elephant, what is left in no doubt is the acceptability of eating goat meat at religious celebrations. 'Among the householders its meat is acknowledged as sacred' (Jodh Singh 1998: 54). Moreover, its gut is used for stringed instruments and its leather for shoes worn 'by the saints merged in their meditation upon the Lord' and for drums that are used in the congregational singing of hymns (p. 54).

It is evident that, cumulatively, the Gurus' practices provide little support for strict vegetarianism. However, Sikhs can also consult the *Sikh Rahit Mary-*

ada (SRM), the code of conduct,¹⁶ and the rulings of the Akal Takhat (the seat of religious authority in Amritsar).

RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

SIKH RAHIT MARYADA

According to the SRM, during the *amrit sanskar* one of the *panj pyare* (the five Sikhs initiating candidates into the Khalsa) must tell them to abstain from four prohibited actions, the second being *kutthā khānā* (SRM 18), meaning 'eating meat cut¹⁷ and prepared in Mohammedan fashion (Halal)' (SRM 37). A footnote in the English rendering explains that 'The Sikhs eat *Jhatka* meat, i.e. the flesh of a bird or animal that has been killed with one stroke and not by the slow process favoured by the Mohammedans' (p. 37). The animal is decapitated by a single blow at the back of the neck (Arora 1990: 11, in Jasjit Singh 2014: 212). As Mandair observes, 'the current Sikh Code of Conduct (SRM) has left the question of dietary rules unresolved or ambiguous at best' (2013: 171). However, many *amritdhari* Sikhs, in the UK at least, interpret this injunction as a complete ban on non-vegetarian food, and after 'taking *amrit*' they avoid not only meat but all foods that contain eggs and other non-vegetarian ingredients. Thus, in the Employment Appeal Tribunal cited above, one of the two experts reported that 'the overwhelming majority of Amritdhari Sikhs refrain from any contact with meat or meat products' (para. 40). Their strictly lacto-vegetarian diet accords, in fact, with the dietary principles intrinsic to most Indic spiritual teaching (see below).

One question that arises is whether this widespread interpretation corresponds more to prohibitions in the various codes of *rahit* (discipline) that predate the SRM, but this is not the case. Concerning the prohibition of *kuttha* meat only, McLeod explains, 'This is an injunction that has come down unchanged from the early eighteenth century' (2003: 226).¹⁸ He suggests the ban on *kuttha* meat originated in Sikhs' experience of repeated attacks by the (Muslim) Mughals. However, McLeod also points to a 'limited degree of support' in eighteenth-century pronouncements for regarding Sikh discipline as vegetarian—he cites Banda's order to avoid intoxicants, 'meat, fish, or onions' (McLeod 2003: 40, 226), as well as, on the other hand, exhortations to Sikhs to eat meat.

16. The *Rahit* [also *Rehat*] *Maryada* is available in Punjabi at new.sgpc.net/sikh-rehat-maryada-in-punjabi (accessed 19 April 2014), and in English translation at sgpc.net/Sikhism/sikh-dharma-manual.asp (accessed 19 April 2014).

17. The verb *cut* is used in Indian English in the sense of 'slaughter' (Nihalani *et al.* 1979: 61).

18. McLeod (2003: 226) continues: 'Tanakhāh-nāmā expresses it and so too do Chaupā Singh, Desā Singh, and Dayā Singh (TanN 29; ChS 372, pp. 104, 179; DesāS 30; DayaS 35, 57, 59, 79)'.

For example, the probably early nineteenth-century *sanatan*¹⁹ author of *Prem Sumarag* stated, without further comment, in a section on the preparation of food: 'Eating meat is not an offence. It too will make the body glow [with health]' (McLeod 2006: 58). The author's unequivocal endorsement continues: 'Include meat in your daily diet. Eat it regularly in large or small quantities as the Guru provides' (McLeod 2003: 227).

AKAL TAKHAT

In view of the general support for meat consumption in the Sikhs' successive codes of discipline, it is unsurprising that, in his *hukamnama* on 15 February 1980, 'Sadhu Singh Bhaura, Jathedar of the Akal Takhat, stated that eating meat is not *kurahit* (i.e. it does not go against the code of conduct of the Sikhs); Amritdhari Sikhs can eat meat as long as it is Jhatka meat' (Brar 2011).

However, many religiously observant Sikhs belong to groups which follow not the SRM but their own code (Jasjit Singh 2014), and some *sants* (leaders of religious groupings) disagreed with the Akal Takhat's ruling in 1980. Accordingly, discussion of the relationship between religious observance and vegetarianism needs to take account of the diversity of the Sikh *panth* (religious community), in other words the *sampradayas* (distinct followings of particular spiritual masters) (Nesbitt 2014; forthcoming 2016b) and the *sant samaj* (spiritual masters of *sampradayas* who form a counterweight to the Akal Takht in discussion of, for example, calendar reform).²⁰

SIKH SAMPRADAYAS AND VEGETARIANISM

Four Sikh 'orders', which pre-date the reformist movements of the nineteenth century, are the Nihangs, and three non-Khalsa (i.e. not *amritdhari*) orders, the Udasi, Sevapanthi and Nirmala Sikhs (Luis 2013).²¹ Namdharis, as well as other spiritual movements more loosely connected with Sikh tradition such as the Radhasoami Satsang, are dated from the nineteenth century.²² Khalsa groupings that formed during the twentieth century are the Akhand Kirtani Jatha, the Damdami Taksal, Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere,

19. The adjective *sanatan* is used to refer to (individual Sikhs accepting) practices that belong to a wider Indic tradition rather than being distinctively Sikh. *Prem Sumarag* (literally 'path of love') is an early *rahitnama*.

20. *Sant samaj* refers to Gurmat Sidhant Parcharak Sant Samaj, a union of *sants* and *deras*—religious establishments set up by a *sant* and his entourage—that was formed in the late twentieth century.

21. *Mahan Kosh* (Nabha 1974: 712) names the first Nirmalas as five Singhs (i.e. *amritdhari* Sikhs), and the website's '*sanatan*'/'pre-reformist' stance needs to be taken into account.

22. For an account of the Radhasoami Satsang Beas see Juergensmeyer 1995.

the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sevak Jatha (GNNSJ) and 'the Nanaksar movement' (Nesbitt 1985).

As noted above, Nihangs prepare and eat *jhatka* meat, and it is given as *parshad* in Nihang gurdwaras. Badyal (1974: 44) observes that in rural India Nihangs are asked to use their swords to kill goats, in the belief that a goat killed by a Nihang will help the donor attain *mukti* (liberation from the cycle of repeated birth and death). Rupinder Pamme described the Dassehra festival in Nanded:

During these festivities a goat is decapitated at the shrine with a single blow of the sword known as *jhatka*. The head of the goat is then squeezed for its blood which is collected in a bowl and then a dot of the blood is placed on the weapons. The goat is skinned and the meat or *mas* of the goat is considered to be *maha-prasad* ('great sacramental food') and is distributed to fellow Nihangs.

(Pamme 2010: 124)

Unlike the Nihangs, the other three pre-reform 'orders', Nirmala, Udasi and Sevapanthi, are strictly vegetarian, as are *sampradayas* of more recent origin: Namdhari (Takhar 2005: 59–88), Radhasoami (Juergensmeyer 1995), Akhand Kirtani Jatha (Barrow 2000), Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere (Takhar 2005: 158–78), Damdami Taksal (Jasjit Singh 2012), and the followers of living *sants* (Tatla 1992; Nesbitt 2014). The latter include the *sants* associated with Nanaksar, as well as Baba Ajit Singh (Nesbitt 2000; Chohan 2008) and the GNNSJ (Takhar 2005). Whereas Nihangs, and the more recent *sampradayas* and *sants*, emphasize the importance of initiation with *amrit*, this is not the case for Nirmalas, Udasis and Sevapanthis.

The *sants*' and other preachers' call for total vegetarianism is one of a range of requirements. For example, in accordance with their code of discipline, the *Sarbloh Bibek*, the Akhand Kirtani Jatha insists on maintenance of *sarab loh* (all iron), in other words using only iron utensils and *thalis* (trays, platters) for the preparation and consumption of food (Barrow 2000; Nesbitt forthcoming 2016a). As a result, adherents to the Akhand Kirtani Jatha prefer to eat only with other members rather than with Sikhs more generally.

Together with its vegetarian emphasis, some *sants*' teaching echoes and reinforces purity-related exclusions on the basis of gender. Thus the Damdami Taksal *maryada* forbids women sitting behind the Guru Granth Sahib when they are menstruating (H. Singh 2004 in Jasjit Singh 2014: 214); furthermore, in the GNNSJ's gurdwaras women are debarred from reading scripture in *akhand paths* (continuous recitation of the whole AG) and from making *karah parshad* (the sweet food given to all who attend the gurdwara) (Takhar 2005: 49–50). In the Ajit Darbar gurdwara in Coventry, women are required to avoid contact with the *nishan sahib* (the revered pennant and flagpole) and so may not participate in its annual cleansing and refurbishment (Nesbitt 2000: 135), and the Nanaksar sub-tradition's requirement of celibacy from its *bhangams* (male religious personnel) also suggests that relations with women may compromise purity.

Such practices, like vegetarianism itself, have no firm basis in the Guru Granth Sahib, nor in the *SRM* or rulings from the Akal Takhat. However, the requirements of members of some contemporary Khalsa groups, and Sikh-related groups, do include strict vegetarianism. For example, the *Gurmat Rehat Maryada* of the Damdami Taksal states:

It is a cardinal sin to eat any type of meat whether it be Kutha or meat killed in any other fashion and it makes one a traitor to the Guru. In Sri Guru Granth Sahib there is no place where permission to eat meat is given, on the contrary, it is condemned consistently and continually. A person that kills an animal and eats it, will be reborn in that life form and have to experience being killed and eaten.

(GRMDT 29)

This is an ancient idea; the *Laws of Manu* 5.55 explains the word *māṃsa* ‘meat’ as meaning ‘Me he (*mām sa*) will eat in the next world’ (Olivelle 2005: 140, 280). One of my Hindu interviewees mentioned a similar causal connection between eating an animal’s flesh and being born as an animal of that kind (Jackson and Nesbitt 1993: 59). Further exploration of Sikhs’ dietary belief and practice (as of other elements of their tradition) needs to interrogate the Indic context for contributory factors.

THE INDIC CONTEXT

Abstention from meat (like the distancing of women from what is most sacred—in the Sikh case the Scripture and the *nishan sahib*) is arguably continuous with pre-Sikh and ongoing emphases in some Hindu *sampradayas*, rather than straightforwardly implementing the Gurus’ precepts. This is in no way to suggest that ‘Sikhism’ is a ‘Hindu sect’, a view robustly discredited by scholars including Kapur Singh (1989) in his chapter ‘The Baisakhi of Guru Gobind Singh’. Nonetheless, Sikhs’ dietary norms and assumptions do suggest some continuities with the mass of cultural material that is common to Buddhist and Jain as well as earlier and contemporary Hindu traditions. The condemnation of meat-eating is especially emphasized in Buddhist, Jain and Vaishnava traditions. So, for example, online information about gurdwara Shikar Ghat at Nanded in Maharashtra includes the explanation that by killing the hare the tenth Guru liberated the soul of one Bhai Mula who had been cursed since the time of Guru Nanak to continue in the cycle of birth and death until released by the Guru.²³ *GRMDT* states similarly:

Guru Jee used to go hunting to free souls from the cycle of births and deaths. We do not have the power to become Mukht (liberated) ourselves from the cycle of births and deaths let alone liberate others.

(GRMDT 29)

23. See ‘Takht Sachkand Sri Hazur Abchalnagar Sahib’, at www.sikh-history.com/sikhhist/institutes/hazur_sahib_takht.html (accessed 25 February 2014).

Such explanations for the Gurus' hunting exploits recall Vaishnava stories in which demons or animals killed or defeated by Krishna are thereby released from the curse or bad karma which caused their evil birth. For instance, the sons of Kubera who had been condemned to be trees are released and become devotees when uprooted by Krishna (*BhP* 10.10.40-42); the snake-demon Ajagara is released from sin by his touch (*BhP* 10.12.38); the water-snake Kaliya is released from delusion by Krishna, and becomes his devotee (*BhP* 10.16.58-59; 64-66); and even the evil king Kamsa reaches an exalted state when killed by him (*BhP* 10.44.39). The Sikh interpretation of the Guru's hunting seems to attribute similar benefits to death at the hands of a person of high spiritual stature. At the same time, it shows a continuing ethical unease, in an Indic context, over the killing of animals, especially when attributed to such a person. For, certainly in a *vaishnava* Hindu context, a personage of the Guru's spiritual stature would be assumed to be vegetarian (see below) and certainly not killing animals for pleasure. Interestingly, *GRMDT* pre-empts this by asserting: 'The Khalsa is a warrior, not being a Vaishnoo [*vaishnava*] (those who do not kill any other living beings), but at the same time the Khalsa is not a butcher who kills for meat' (*GRMDT* 29). Similarly, the near universal ban on non-vegetarian food within gurdwara precincts accords with a wider Indic concern for maintaining the purity of sacred premises. (This is the case in almost all Indian temples, although goats and other animals are sacrificed, and the practice is particularly evident in Nepal.)

While Guru Nanak's hymns contain mocking condemnation of both contemporary Hindu and Muslim superficiality and hypocrisy, he was interacting as an insider to Hindu society. The first four Gurus' birth families were Hindu, and the ancestors of the last six were also Hindu. Moreover, as reported in a *janamsakhi*, Guru Nanak reportedly called himself *hindu* (McLeod 1980a: 84), when challenged over his unorthodox behaviour in throwing Ganges water westward rather than heavenward. The connotations of the word for the eighteenth-century author (and for the Guru, if indeed he applied this word to himself) differ from today's usage. Primarily the term signified that he was not Muslim: his practices were Indic rather than Islamic.

Integral to Indic understandings, and so to what has much more recently come to be called Hinduism, are the three *gunas* (literally strands), translated as qualities or tendencies. Creation's strands (as also articulated in the *Bhagavad Gita*) are *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. The three *gunas* are fundamental to *ayurveda* (traditional Indic medicine) in categorizing diets that will, respectively, promote clarity of mind and purity of character; facilitate dynamism and energetic lifestyle; result in lethargy, inertia and spiritual torpor.²⁴ A vegetarian diet is essential to a *sattvik* life. My fieldwork among UK Hindus (both vegetarian and non-vegetarian) disclosed a persistent assumption of a correlation between vegetarianism and spiritual progress.

(Nesbitt 2004: 21-34)

24. See e.g. www.joyfulbelly.com/Ayurveda/article/Psychological-Effects-of-Food-Sattva-Rajas-and-Tamas/56.

This conforms too to the principle of non-harming or *ahimsa* in Indic tradition, notably in Jain teaching and practice. The Bradford gurdwara petition statement that ‘killing living beings is against the beliefs of Sikhs’ accords with this principle. So too does Harmander Singh’s dismay at Sikhs finding themselves ‘going against their religion, which says they are not allowed to eat meat from animals that have suffered’.²⁵

Another relevant element in Indic tradition is the part played by purity in the hierarchy of *jati* (Nesbitt 1998: 401). Pollution is associated with handling and eating dead animals, and with the lower castes traditionally involved in these practices. The adoption of a vegetarian lifestyle has historically characterized the upward mobility of some hereditary communities, while meat-eating was associated with low-caste communities (Srinivas 1967: 45, 59, 66–67). In this context, it is noteworthy that one expert in the Employment Appeal Tribunal recorded that some members of GNNSJ ‘would feel “polluted” if they were even remotely near meat’ (para. 41); although feelings of being polluted are not peculiar to Indic tradition, such extreme sensitivity to the proximity of meat appears distinctively Indic.

With regard to the Gurus’ inclusion of meat in their diet, one can argue for conformity with the ancestral practice of their *khatri* (i.e. *kshatriya*) caste. Guru Nanak’s allusions to eating meat are consistent with his challenge to brahminical authority and his exposure of how externals can distract from lives of integrity centred on *seva* and *simran*.

The discussion of Sikh approaches to diet needs to be understood against the wider background of Indic concepts, practices and norms. This is not only because of the historic roots of Sikh observance in earlier religious and cultural tradition, nor is it adequate to view ‘Sikhism’ as a discrete faith in an Indic context which includes Hinduism. The subject of vegetarianism can be seen as illustrating the problematic nature of boundary-drawing between Sikh and more generally Indic tradition and of defining ‘religions’ and ‘communities’ as discrete entities.²⁶ Moreover, the dietary diversity of religiously observant Sikhs underscores Jasjit Singh’s portrayal of a diversity within the Khalsa rather than earlier lay and scholarly (but problematic) distinctions between ‘orthodox’ and ‘non-orthodox’ Sikhs (2012; 2014).

THE HALAL ISSUE

At the same time, an understanding of some current Sikh advocacy of vegetarianism takes one back to the time of the tenth Guru and to associated disciplinary codes that designedly, or de facto, socially differentiate Sikhs and

25. *Ilford Recorder*, 10 November 2005, www.politicsforum.co.uk/forum/viewtopic.php?t=29978 (accessed 18 September 2014).

26. Oberoi (1994) problematizes religious boundaries in nineteenth-century Punjab; Geaves (1998), Ballard (2000), and Purewal and Kalra (2010) demonstrate contemporary fluidity.

Muslims by, for example, forbidding halal meat. Research is needed to discover whether Khalsa Secondary Academy and other UK Sikh schools' strictly vegetarian policy is related to the routine undeclared provision of halal meat by school catering services. Some Sikhs regard even inadvertent consumption of halal meat as a matter of apostasy. Consequently, the schools are upholding the ruling of the *SRM*, insofar as a Sikh is forbidden to eat the meat of ritually slaughtered animals, even though '[t]he view of Sikhism is that eating [non-halal] meat or abstaining from it is the individuals [sic] choice' (Brar 2011).

Significantly, the groups that are currently succeeding in opening Sikh schools in the UK tend to be *sant*-led, strictly vegetarian groups. The GNNSJ opened Nishkam High School in Birmingham; in Hayes, the Guru Nanak Sikh Academy and Nanaksar Primary School were established by the Nanaksar Thath Isher Darbar Trust, led by Sant Baba Amar Singh Ji. Hence, a Sikh school's vegetarian policy may well implement such groups' prohibition of all non-vegetarian food rather than being a response to the likelihood of caterers using unlabelled halal products. The 'Reception Religious Questionnaire' for the Guru Nanak Sikh Academy requires Sikh applicants to state whether the child, and his or her father and mother eat meat or fish.²⁷

IN CONCLUSION

Sikhs' involvement in UK society as pupils and students, parents, teachers and caterers, as well as employees, neighbours and providers of free vegetarian cooked meals in the *langar*, increasingly brings their dietary beliefs and practices to public notice. Grievances related to religious sensitivities about diet, like those concerning the wearing of religious symbols, suggest the need for the public to be religiously educated (e.g. *The Economist* 2014). I have suggested that, whereas Indic tradition promotes a strong association between purity and spiritual progress, diet was of only secondary importance in the morality preached by Sikhs' first Guru, Guru Nanak. The vegetarian character of the *langar* betokens inclusivity rather than the implementation of a clear message of meat-avoidance by the Gurus. Nor is vegetarianism intrinsic to Khalsa discipline as set out in the *SRM*, which allows for choice, provided only meat of animals that have not been ritually slaughtered is eaten. Patterns of dietary observance that are spelled out in the specific guidelines of some Sikhism-related groups and in Khalsa groups—notably Damdami Taksal, Akhand Kirtani Jatha, Nanaksar and GNNSJ—also connect with emphases in Hindu, especially *vaishnava*, tradition. Diet maps the internal diversity of the *panth* as a whole as well as its overlaps with wider Indic society.

27. See <http://primary.gurunanaksikhacademy.co.uk/page/?pid=11> for the school's statement about vegetarian meals.

At the same time, Sikhs' growing awareness of the undeclared presence of halal meat in schools, universities, and, more generally, in supermarkets and restaurants, looks set to incline more Sikhs towards vegetarianism, or lead them to declare themselves as vegetarian in certain contexts. In twenty-first-century Britain, the SRM's distinctively Sikh proscription of halal meat, a consistent and unambiguous taboo for all Khalsa Sikhs which is also widely known and observed by Sikhs more generally, has become more high-profile because a plural and pluralist society has made its observance more problematic.

Ethnographic research is needed to establish contemporary UK Sikhs' dietary attitudes, principles and practice. The reasons which Sikhs offer for consistently or situationally eating or avoiding non-vegetarian foods may provide insight into how religious tradition connects with society's current concerns about health, ethics, the environment and food-labelling in a religiously plural society. Such an investigation would reveal whether some Sikhs, even though not *amritdhari* and not belonging to Khalsa groupings such as GNNSJ or Nanaksar, are—individually and as families—becoming vegetarian because of the prevalence of unlabelled halal meat in the UK, and whether some are simply avoiding eating meat when it is not guaranteed to be non-halal. Ethnographic research might also uncover the various impacts of educational institutions and employment on Sikhs' approach to adopting vegetarian or non-vegetarian diets, and what spectrum of foods these designations are assumed to cover.

ABBREVIATIONS

- AG *Adi Granth*. Cited by page number in the canonical 1430-page volume in Gurmukhi script. Text and English translation (by Dr Sant Singh Khalsa) at <http://www.srigurugranth.org>, which uses the canonical page numbers. Quotations in this article follow this translation or Singh (1987), as indicated.
- BhP *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Cited by *skandha*, *adhyaīya* and *śloka*.
- GNNSJ Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha.
- GRMDT *Gurmat Rehat Maryada Damdami Taksal*. n.d. http://www.vidhia.com/Rehat%20Maryada/Gurmat_Rehat_Maryada_-_Damdami_Taksal.pdf (accessed 15 May 2014). Cited by page number.
- SRM *Sikh Rahit Maryada: The Sikh Code of Conduct*. n.d. Punjabi-English edn. Birmingham: Sikh Missionary Resource Centre.

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