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Lost in Translation? The emergence of the Digital Guru Granth Sahib

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This article explores the impact of the digital online environment on the religious lives of Sikhs with a particular focus on the emergence of the 'Digital Guru', i.e. digital versions of the Guru Granth Sahib. Using data gathered through interviews and an online survey, I examine how the 'Digital Guru' is impacting on the transmission of the Sikh tradition and on Sikh religious authority. I then explore some of the issues faced in engaging with the 'Digital Guru' and the consequences of the emergence of online translations. Given that 'going online' has become an everyday practice for many, this article contributes to understandings of the impact of the online environment on the religious adherents in general, and on Sikhs in particular.

Introduction

Despite its presence online for over twenty years, the digital world of the Sikh tradition remains relatively unexplored among scholarship on religion and the Internet. Studies have examined the impact of Sikh internet forums on ritual and identity (Jakobsh 2006), the discussion of the events of partition and of 1984 on Sikh internet forums (Barrier 2006), the role of Sikh dating websites (Maclaran et al 2008), the representation of Khalistan and of Sikh martyrs on the Internet (Axel 2005 and Sokol 2007), the differences between various discussion forums used by European Sikhs (Singh S 2012), the ways in which the Internet influences contemporary identity construction among Sikhs globally (Jakobsh 2012) and my own work on the examination of the impact of the Internet on religious authority (Singh J 2014).

This article builds on my earlier work to focus on the impact of the emergence of the 'digital Guru' on the religious lives of Sikhs. I present data gathered from research on processes of religious transmission among 18-30 year old Sikhs in Britain (Singh J: 2014) which used a variety of research methods including interviews, participant observation, focus groups and an online survey. The survey which ran between November 2009 and July 2011 was advertised to British Sikhs between the ages of 18 and 30 years on internet forums and on Facebook, and in total elicited 645 respondents. This survey did not seek to be representative of young British Sikhs as a whole, but sought to gather the views of a number of individuals to highlight possible trends.

The Internet and Religious Authority

To date, scholars have noted how the Internet has the potential to threaten traditional religious authority structures. For Eileen Barker, the Internet challenges these structures by offering users new additions to knowledge through "opinions, values, and, perhaps most importantly of all, questions" (2005: 74). Focusing on Sikhs, Doris Jakobsh (2006: 29) notes that "it is on the WWW that questions of caste, gender, abortion, Sikh ritual identity, premarital sex, homosexuality, to name only a few, can be found." In terms of their impact on religious authority Jakobsh argues that:

> members of virtual communities, instead of turning to the meta-narrative, be that the Akal Takht, the SGPC, or gurdwara administrations for validation, are exploring the multitude of truths readily available to them to come to their own truths, truths that are nonetheless rooted in their own tradition ... in essence then, revival and renewal has gone virtual. (2006: 32)

For Heidi Campbell (2007), the concept of authority is rarely contextualized when referring to the online environment, and is simply used as a term to describe how the Internet impacts on religion. She argues that "there is a need for a more refined investigation and explanation of what is meant when the term "authority" is used in reference to online contexts" (2007: 1043) and observes that the meaning of authority varies across different religious traditions. She argues that rather than assuming that authority refers to those in hegemonic positions:

> researchers must identify what specific form or type of authority is being affected. Is it the power position of traditional religious leaders? Is it the established systems by which policy decisions are made and information is passed on to community members? Is it the corporate ideology of the community? Or is it the role and interpretation of official religious rhetoric and teaching? (2007: 1044)

This article builds on my previous analyses of the impact of the digital environment on religious hierarchy, structure, ideology, and text within the Sikh tradition (Singh J, 2014) to examine how the digital environment has impacted on the relationship between Sikhs and the Guru Granth Sahib. How has the evolution of the online environment changed the ways in which the Guru Granth Sahib is presented and how have technological changes impacted on how Sikhs engage with and relate to the Guru?

The Sikh tradition online

Although a late arrival compared to other religious traditions, the Sikh tradition arrived online in the early 1990s (Singh J 2014). Ever since the emergence of the first Sikh

related websites and discussion forums a number of areas of interest have emerged. Indeed, my analysis of the early posts on the 'soc.culture.punjab' and 'soc.religion.sikhism' newsgroups during the period from 1995 to 1996 highlighted the following main topics of discussion (Singh J 2014):

1. Whether the eating of meat is mandated in the Sikh tradition (Kaur J. 1995).
2. Caste practices within the Sikh tradition (Singh R. 1995b).
3. The necessity for Sikhs to keep their hair and turbans (Gurpreet 1995)
4. Difficulties for young Sikhs in finding marriage partners (Rattan 1995)
5. The discord between the Sikh religion and Punjabi cultural practices (Singh, H.K. 1995)
6. Attacks on the Sikh religion from non-Sikh forces (Singh P. 1996).
7. Discussion in English of quotations from the Guru Granth Sahib (Singh R. 1996).
8. Details of events e.g. the 'Ontario Sikh Students Association Kirtan Darbar' on Jan 27th 1996 (Singh A.P. 1996).
9. Gender equality in the Sikh tradition (Chewter 1996).
10. How to keep the Sikh identity whilst living in the diaspora (Tandmark 1996).
11. How the Sikh tradition addresses issues raised by bio-ethics such as abortion and euthanasia (Singh B. 1996).
12. The status of sants within the Sikh tradition (Manjeet 1996).

It is interesting to note that these same topics continue to be important points of discussion among Sikhs both online and offline (e.g. Gurmatbibek: 2011, Punjabjanta.com: 2011, Sikhphilosophy.net: 2009, TheLangarHall: 2011). Since the emergence of online groups and discussion forums, the online presence of the Sikh tradition has further evolved through a number of important and relevant developments including the development of subject specific 'wikis' including Sikhiwiki a wiki focused on the Sikh tradition which arrived online in 2005 (Sikhiwiki.org n.d.). The emergence of social networking sites including Facebook (Kiss 2011) and Twitter in 2006 and of video hosting websites such as YouTube which arrived online in 2005 (Jeffery et al. 2009) has been a further important development in the online presence of religion.

These technological advances have increased the amount of material on the Sikh tradition which is now readily available online including recordings of live events held in gurdwaras, camps and Sikh societies from all over the Sikh diaspora (Singh J, 2014). It has

also led a number of Sikhs to establish online video channels to teach aspects of the Sikh tradition in English including the UK based 'Basics of Sikhi', 'Sikh 2 Inspire' and 'Nanak Naam' among others. Much of this content is now disseminated around the world through increasingly popular social media channels including Youtube, Facebook and Twitter.

My analysis of the survey responses to questions about Sikh tradition related internet usage (Singh J 2014) revealed that young Sikhs go online for a variety of reasons including discussing taboo subjects, obtaining answers to questions about the Sikh tradition, finding out about Sikh events, accessing event archives, recordings, and instructional videos and purchasing Sikh resources including books, photographs, and clothing. Many survey respondents highlighted that they found the internet particularly useful in enabling them to examine English translations of gurbani defined by Fenech and McLeod (2014: 59) as 'referring to the writings of the Gurus and bhagats recorded in the Adi Granth or Dasam Granth'. A 28 year old female respondent noted how "before the websites, I would sing without fully knowing the meaning of the shabads I was singing" with a 21 year old male respondent stating that "I've had access to translation of gurbani so I could find out anything I want". These survey responses indicate that the digital arena has clearly changed how many Sikhs engage with the Guru Granth Sahib.

More than simply a 'Holy Book', the Guru Granth Sahib is seen by Sikhs to contain the jot (light) of the ten Gurus in a scriptural body and is respected and treated accordingly. Although, the Guru Granth Sahib is regarded as the focal point of gurdwaras and the designator of sacred space, the digital environment now enables Sikhs to engage with the gurbani, in the Guru Granth Sahib online, without having to perform any of the ceremonies which would be necessary in the gurdwara environment. Indeed, the increased accessibility to gurbani both online and via translation software has enabled Sikhs to familiarise themselves with quotations from the Guru Granth Sahib.

The emergence of the Digital Granth

In his examination of the development of the Sikh scriptures Mann (2001: 274) notes that living in diaspora "has created a situation in which Sikhs may need to accept the Guru Granth Sahib in Roman transliteration or even in English translation, in place of or in addition to the original version". Though a number of English translations of the complete Guru Granth Sahib have been written over the years beginning with Ernest Trumpp's translation of 1877, Max Macauliffe's translation of 1909 and numerous subsequent full translations by Dr Gopal Singh (1960), Manmohan Singh (1962-1969), Gurbachan Singh Talib (1985), Pritam Singh Chahil (1993), Gurbachan Singh Makin (2000) and Dr Darshan Singh (2005), the evolution of the digital Guru began in the mid-1990s when the text of the Adi Granth became available on floppy disk and CD, usually developed by "professionals in

fields unrelated to the study of the Adi Granth" (Mann 2001: 128). The following list outlines the various types of 'Digital Guru' which have emerged online over the years and builds on a list developed by Mann (2001: 128):

1. Ik Oankar Bani System (1994) – was a package of four floppy disks developed by Balwant Singh Uppal an electrical engineer from Australia. This included the complete text of the Adi Granth in Gurmukhi and the meaning of every word in Punjabi.
2. Scripture and Heritage of the Sikhs (1995) – was a CD ROM developed by Preet Mohan Singh Kapoor and Bhupinder Singh, both computer engineers. This included the Gurbachan Singh Talib English translation of the Adi Granth
3. Gurbani Informant (1995) – was a package of four floppy disks developed by CadCON, New Delhi. This contained Sri Guru Granth Sahib in Gurmukhi, along with a Roman transliteration.
4. Gurbani CD (1995) - was developed by Kulbir Singh Thind, a physician from California contained the English translation of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib by Sant Singh Khalsa, a pediatrician from Phoenix, Arizona and the transliteration by Dr Thind. The CD also contained Gurmukhi fonts. Updates to the original CD have subsequently been made available on www.gurbanifiles.org.
5. The Gurbani Researcher CD-ROM (1998) – was developed by two Californians - Joginder Singh Alhuwalia a petroleum research engineer and Gurjot Singh, a computer engineer. This also contains the Sant Singh Khalsa English translation along with an advanced search engine.
6. The Encyclopaedia of Sikhism CD ROM (1998) – was developed by Raghbir Singh Bains, a former civil servant working in Vancouver, Canada also contained the Sant Singh Khalsa English translation of the Adi Granth.
7. SikhiToTheMax (2001) – was designed by Tarsem Singh, a software engineer from Coventry and uses the Sant Singh Khalsa English translation of the Adi Granth. The first version of SikhiToTheMax became available to download in 2004 and has since quickly become the standard software used to project the words of the Guru Granth Sahib with English translations in gurdwaras around the world.
8. Myguruji.com (2002) – was developed in Singapore by Harminder Pal Singh, which also appears to use the Sant Singh Khalsa translation.

9. The Isher Micro Media (ik13.com) CD (2004) - was developed by Bhai Baljinder Singh of Rara Sahib. This contains the text of the Guru Granth Sahib, the English-Punjabi translation by Manmohan Singh and the Guru Granth Darpan by Sahib Singh.
10. A number of websites (including www.srigranth.org and www.searchgurbani.org) and mobile phone apps have appeared in the twenty first century.

As the above list shows, the digital environment has clearly enabled increased accessibility to English translations of the Guru Granth Sahib. Previously, English translations of the Guru Granth Sahib were only available in books as outlined by Gurdit Singh (Singh G, 1996) in a post in the 'soc.religion.sikhism' google group. These included complete translations of the Guru Granth Sahib (Gopal Singh, Manmohan Singh, Gurbachan Singh Talib, Pritam Singh Chahil) and anthologies / collections of scriptures including Mansukhani (1975), Teja Singh (1985), Greenlees, (1975), McLeod (1984) and Kaur Singh (1995) (see Nirvikar Singh 2017 for a useful comparison of some of these translations). In 1996, Sandeep Singh Brar, the creator of the world's first web site on the Sikh tradition, Sikhs.org, highlighted in a post in the 'soc.religion.sikhism' google group that his website now contained an English translation of the Japji (Brar 1996). The translation appears to have been taken from a translation written by H.S. Doabia in 1973 (Doabia 1973). This analysis reveals that prior to the release of the first digital English translation by Sant Singh Khalsa, discussions about gurbani taking place online were likely to rely on a variety of English translations of Sikh scriptures, with no one translation being more regularly used than any other.

The emergence of digital versions of the Guru Granth Sahib led to a number of online discussions about how the 'Digital Guru' should be treated to ensure that sufficient respect was being shown (Sunil 2000). Questions related to whether it was necessary to cover one's head, wash one's hands and take one's shoes off when reading or listening to gurbani on CDs or on the internet. Responses to these questions made a clear distinction between the digital version of the Guru Granth Sahib and the physical version with one user explaining that

> Since CDs do not constitute the saroop of Guru Granth Sahib Ji ...they wouldn't have to treated and given the same reverance [sic] as we do to the formal saroop of Guru Granth Sahib Ji. However, that being said ... I would recommend you keep the CDs with great respect once you obtain them (i.e. keep them in a neat, tidy place...similar to a place you would keep gutkas)." (Guest Guest, 2008).

The development of apps on mobile phones has raised further questions around the reading of gurbani on mobile phones which may have been taken into 'unclean' environments such as bathrooms (Sikhnet, 2012).

Although online discussions in the mid-1990s highlighted the need for English translations, there were some early critiques with Hermanator (2000) stating that although translations were better than nothing, the main issues were that the musical measures (raags) would not be maintained and that future generations would lose any links to Punjabi/Gurmukhi if they relied too much on English.

The emergence of the first digitally accessible full English translation by Sant Singh Khalsa in the late 1990s has led to the dominance of this translation in the digital arena. As Sant Singh Khalsa describes, his English translation was derived from earlier English translations and developed by "working from all previous versions, but primarily from the Man Mohan Singh edition, with an array of dictionaries and reference works." (Khalsa, n.d). As well as being freely available online, the ubiquitous status of this translation has developed in part due to its link to the popular, freely available and easily downloadable software, Sikhitothemax.

Sikhitothemax

My fieldwork in gurdwaras, University Sikh societies and at Sikh Camps in the UK highlighted that Sikhitothemax is the translation software most often used by Sikhs of all ages (Singh J, 2011, 2015). Appearing online in its first version on 1st February 2001, with version two arriving in 2008 (Mr Sikhnet, 2008), the fact that Sikhitothemax is freely available to download and not dependent on an internet connection has led to it being used in gurdwaras and other venues where a secure wireless internet connection may not always be available.

Image 1: Sikhitothemax in use at a Gurdwara in Bradford (© J Singh)

As Tarsem Singh, the developer of Sikhitothemax explained to me at Khalsa Camp 2008, once the electronic translation of the Guru Granth Sahib had been released, a simple search engine was developed whereby any line from the Guru Granth Sahib could be found using the first letters of each of the words in this line. For example if someone were to search for the following line 'sath santokh dhaeiaa kamaavai eaeh karanee saar' [sic], they would only need to know the Punjabi letters s, s, d, k. As a young Sikh in diaspora himself, Tarsem Singh was fully aware of the complexities of the Punjabi language and of the fact that many Sikhs would be unable to spell full words when searching for translations of particular words:

> To try and find a word by spelling – you've got no chance – the words are spelt in so many different ways. So then I messed about with first letter searching, and that really worked well. And that was the key driver to getting it into gurdwaras.

Responses from the online survey demonstrated the importance of Sikhitothemax for many young Sikhs, with an 18 year old male respondent describing Sikhitothemax as "an amazing invention. I was actually a mona [had a haircut]; after attending a Rainsubhaaee Keertan (all night singing praises session) and seeing the meanings of gurbani, my life turned upside down - or right side up". A 28 year old female explained that:

> It is the best thing that has happened in the last 5 years or so, it makes understanding shabads [compositions] and what is being said much easier and is a step in the right direction. It should be born [sic] in mind that it is a literal translation and doesn't give the most deepest meaning but it's definitely a start to getting to grips with gurbani.

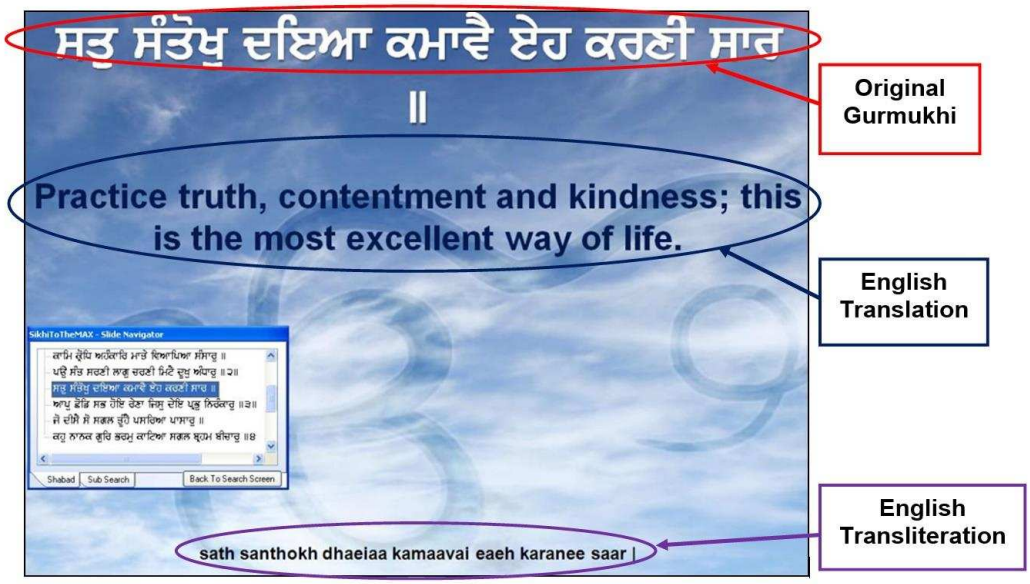

Image 2: A Screenshot from Sikhitothemax (© J Singh)

Alongside comments about the usefulness of Sikhtothemax, some respondents highlighted the problems of using translations, with a 21 year old Sikh male noting that "Its

OK but I don't think it should be used as a primary means of teaching Sikhism. The youth and sangat should still be encouraged to learn Punjabi as there are some things which simply cannot be translated correctly." The popularity and ease of use of Sikhitothemax combined with the appearance of the Sant Singh Khalsa translation as the very first English translation available digitally has contributed to this translation becoming the de facto English translation of the Guru Granth Sahib. As Anju Kaur (2015) notes in a piece for the Sikh Free Press:

> much of the world's understanding of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib comes from the English translation authored by one of Yogi Bhajan's long-time disciples, Sant Singh Khalsa, a pediatrician from Arizona. His translation is prevalent everywhere on the Internet ... [and] can be seen at many gurdwaras in the United States and around the world.

An updated version of Sikhitothemax entitled 'Sikhitothemax Everywhere' was released in April 2017 by the Khalis Foundation aiming to "create an app that will help Sangat connect with Gurbani across the world" (2017). The main innovation appears to be that unlike previous versions, 'Sikhitothemax Everywhere' now works on a variety of different operating systems (Windows, macOS and Linux). There is little mention of the translation being used, with the focus being on innovating how the translation can be accessed and used. This focus on developing the technology of the application, rather than the underlying translation highlights how although many Sikhs are confident in working on technological advances, they do not have the confidence or knowledge to develop translations. Indeed, as Pashaura Singh (2014: 632) observes, many of the English language translations developed to date have been undertaken by individuals, many of whom have not been through sufficient linguistic training. In order to address the lack of scholarly and carefully scrutinized translations, Pashaura Singh (2014: 636) proposes international teams of experts work towards producing standard academic translations of all of the Sikh scriptures including fresh renderings of previous translations which may be deficient in their use of language.

The consequences of the Digital Granth

The ubiquitous nature of Sikhitothemax and consequently of the Sant Singh Khalsa translation has led to the situation where the words of the Sant Singh Khalsa translation are often used as the words of the Guru Granth Sahib particularly as Sikhs, particularly those living in diaspora become less proficient in reading Punjabi. Both the results of my online survey and the British Sikh report 2014 (BSR, 2014) found that although a high number of Sikh respondents are able to speak Punjabi, far fewer (only 10.9% in the case of my survey and only 16% of the BSR respondents) could read Punjabi.

In addition to its usage in gurdwaras, an examination of the English translations regularly used in Sikh digital media including Basics of Sikhi (2014) and the Sikh television stations such as the Sikh Channel highlights that the Sant Singh Khalsa English translation is most often used across these digital platforms. I also found posters displayed in gurdwaras and other Sikh institutions most frequently using the Sant Singh Khalsa translation (for an example see the poster on 'Religious Fasting', available at http://www.sonapreet.net/religi10.jpg):

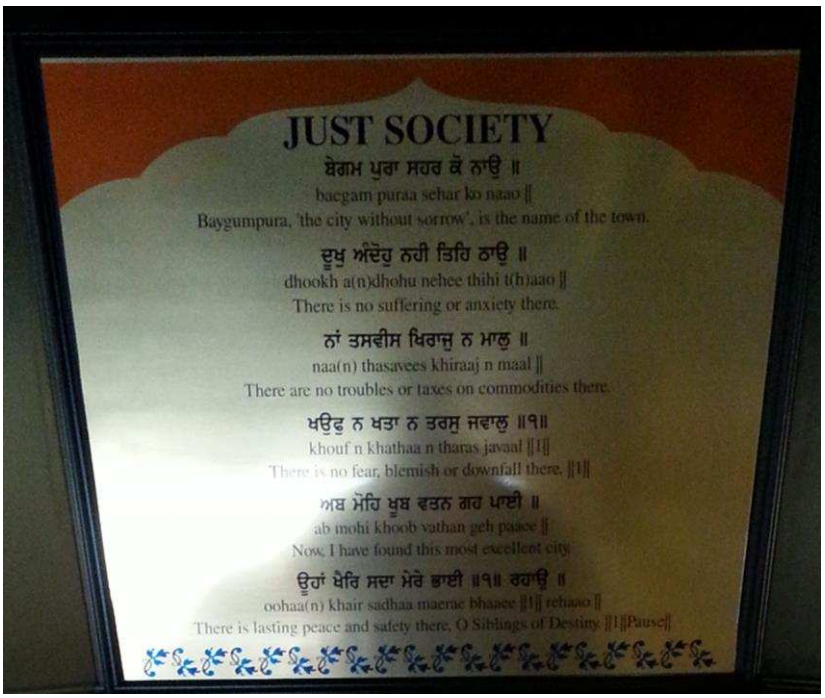

Image 3: A photograph of a display in a Sikh museum (© J Singh)

The story is similar in other digital formats as a cursory analysis of the numerous Gurbani mobile phone apps which have been developed in recent years shows. Mobile phone apps including Sikhitothemax, DhurKiBani, GurbaniAnywhere, Gurbani World, iSikhi, GurbaniDB and iSearchGurbani all use the Sant Singh Khalsa translation. Whereas reviewers regularly comment on the features provided by these various apps (Singh, N, n.d.) few have noted that all the apps use the same underlying translation:

The consequences of this linguistic change are yet to be fully understood. Writing about the politics of translation, Mandair highlights how the rejection of Sikh terms such as sikhi, gurmat and dharam in English translations in favour of western terms transforms the action-oriented Sikhi into a rigid object 'Sikhism' in a process of 'religion-making' which began "during the colonial period through a process of inter-cultural mimesis between Sikh and European scholars disguised as natural translation" (2014: 6). Further research on how the use of Judeo-Christian terminology (including God, heaven, hell and angels) in English

translations impacts on adherents' understandings of the Sikh tradition is necessary. Indeed, aspects of the Sant Singh Khalsa translation re-emphasise the 'Christian Norm' (Joshi 2006) for Sikhs in diaspora, where Christian concepts are uncritically taken as the definition of religion.

As already explained, it is important to recognise that for Sikhs, the issue of translation is fundamentally different than for many other traditions, given the emphasis on the personhood of the Guru (Dusenbery 1992: 388). Furthermore, as Dusenbery explains, the Gurmukhi (lit. from the mouth of the Guru) script in which the compositions of the Gurus are written, means that the very words of the Guru simply cannot be translated into another language as the sound of the shabads (words) in their original form have a particular aesthetic and quality, which would simply be lost in translation (Dusenbery 1992: 390). It is for this reason that increasing numbers of Sikhs in diaspora are engaging in gurbani santhiya classes which teach the correct pronunciation of the shabads of the Gurus.

Conclusion

This examination of the digital Sikh tradition online and of the emergence of the 'Digital Guru' has highlighted how the digital environment has impacted on the way in which Sikhs now engage with their religious tradition. Focusing on its impact on the authority of religious texts within the Sikh tradition, it appears that the digital environment is enabling Sikhs to engage with the Guru Granth Sahib but in a very specific way. Whereas English translations of the Guru Granth Sahib are allowing those with limited knowledge of Gurbani and Punjabi to engage with the text, there has been little process or discussion within the Sikh tradition as to the impact of this engagement and of the pros and cons of the various English translations. Indeed, purely by the fact that it was the first freely available, downloadable digital, searchable, online translation, the Sant Singh Khalsa translation has by default become the most used English translation by Sikhs across the world. Given that Sikhitothemax is present in most gurdwaras it will take the development of new downloadable translation software with high quality features to change this situation.

In terms of its impact on religious authority, the easy online access to English translations allows Sikhs to bypass traditional authority structures including gurdwara functionaries and kathakaars (preachers) to engage with gurbani themselves. Indeed, while many of the survey respondents were positive about the impact of English translations, less than ten percent of the respondents noted any issues with using translations. However, those that did hoped that engagement with the translation would "encourage interest in trying to read gurbani in its original format (gurmukhi) for the highest level of understanding." One respondent observed that "it is impossible to translate Gurbani while retaining the original

depth of meaning and poetic verse. English translations are very limited and rarely reveal the inner, deeper meanings of Gurbani."

It is clear that the influence of the Sant Singh Khalsa translation will depend very much on the amount of effort which an individual is prepared to make to understand gurbani and the accessibility they individuals have to other resources both online and offline. Even though there are English translations available online, these are often not as easily accessible as the Sant Singh Khalsa translation and do not have the benefit of being linked to a piece of downloadable software. Nevertheless, the srigranth.org website for example does enable access to the Manmohan Singh translation as well as links to Mahan Kosh Encyclopedia, Gurbani Dictionaries and Punjabi/English Dictionaries. The digital environment has also allowed Sikhs around the world to access discourse about particular shabads and compositions by a number of Sikh kathakaars with the Sikhnet 'Gurbani Media Center' one of the largest repositories of kirtan online listing over 14000 tracks by 544 different artists. Again, this allows those who wish to gather a variety of views on particular compositions the ability to do so, although again, the majority of the discourse is unsurprisingly in Punjabi.

The accessibility of this material does however, depend very much on the ability of Sikhs to read and understand the 'sacred language of the Sikhs' (Singh P: 2014). Indeed, my research has also highlighted that even though many Sikhs may not learn Punjabi as children, the desire to understand the teachings of the Gurus, leads many to learn Punjabi in adulthood (Singh J: 2012), leading to other types of interpretations of gurbani becoming more accessible to them. The onus therefore is on Sikhs themselves to address the current situation in which the Sant Singh Khalsa translation and the Sikhitothemax software are still the only free, easily accessible translations available despite being released in the early 2000s.

Although there have been a number of recent campaigns focusing on the satkaar (respect) of the physical Guru Granth Sahib (Satkaar, 2011) it is clear that an even more urgent type of respect which needs addressing is the satkaar of the 'Digital Guru' and of the importance of developing accurate and nuanced translations. Rather than uncritically using a single translation across numerous digital platforms and developing new apps and new ways of engaging with this translation it is imperative that Sikhs now use their technical skills and technological innovations to enable access to this and other translations and in this way develop a corpus of the Digital Guru. In this regard those interested in teaching and learning about the Sikh tradition must emphasise that the usage of English translations can only be a 'first step' in understanding the writings and teachings of the Gurus.

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