

Article

The Institution of the Akal Takht: The Transformation of Authority in Sikh History

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Abstract: The Akal Takht is considered to be the central seat of authority in the Sikh tradition. This article uses theories of legitimacy and authority to explore the validity of the authority and legitimacy of the Akal Takht and its leaders throughout time. Starting from the initial institution of the Akal Takht and ending at the Akal Takht today, the article applies Weber's three types of legitimate authority to the various leaderships and custodianships throughout Sikh history. The article also uses Berger and Luckmann's theory of the symbolic universe to establish the constant presence of traditional authority in the leadership of the Akal Takht. Merton's concept of group norms is used to explain the loss of legitimacy at certain points of history, even if one or more types of Weber's legitimate authority match the situation. This article shows that the Akal Takht's authority, as with other political religious institutions, is in the reciprocal relationship between the Sikh population and those in charge. This fluidity in authority is used to explain and offer a solution on the issue of authenticity and authority in the Sikh tradition.

Keywords: Akal Takht; jathedār; Sikh institutions; Sikh Rehat Maryada; Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC); authority; legitimacy



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1. Introduction

The Akal Takht, originally known as the Akal Bunga, is the seat of temporal and spiritual authority of the Sikh tradition. The Akal Takht is literally translated as the "Throne of the timeless one." The foundation of the Akal Takht was laid by Guru Hargobind after the execution of his father, Guru Arjan, by the Mughal Regime. The exact date that the construction started is disputed, sometime in between 1606 and 1609 (Dilgeer 1980, p. 20). Since then, the Akal Takht has served as the political center of the Sikh tradition. Guru Hargobind would sit on the Takht, or throne, and hold court to give his commands, listen to queries, and have bards sing heroic ballads. The Takht was initially built twelve feet high as a challenge to the Mughal government, as only superior government officials were permitted to sit on elevated platforms and address the populace. It was likely built higher than typical Mughal thrones to signify the higher authority that the Guru possessed in comparison to the Mughal rulers, as the physical elevation of a person is a sign of royalty, sovereignty, and respect in South Asia.

When the young Guru Hargobind received the guruship, he adorned himself in royal clothing and a kalgi¹, differentiating himself from the previously more humbly dressed gurus. He requested two swords from Baba Buddha, which he named *mīrī* and *pīrī*. *Pīrī* represents spirituality and devotion, while *mīrī* represents sovereignty and temporal power.² The sword of *mīrī* was slightly shorter than the sword of *pīrī*, signifying the superiority of spirituality over temporal power. However, the presence of both signify the importance of both spirituality and temporal power within the Sikh tradition. This was the point in history where the Guru instructed Sikhs to carry arms and the first Sikh militia arose (S. Singh 2011, p. 2403). With the use of the *Chaur* (royal whisk), *Takht*, *chandōā* (royal canopy), and the Guru holding court at the Akal Takht, it ran as typically as any South Asia royal *darbār*, or court.

The idea of *mīrī* being connected to *pīrī* can be seen within the design of the Darbar Sahib complex as well. The two *nishān sahibs*, or flags, outside of the Akal Takht are slightly different in length, with the *nishān* representing *mīrī* being slightly shorter than the *nishān* representing *pīrī*; the two *nishāns* are connected by a circular insignia with the inscription of “Ik Onkar and Khanda” to show the connectedness of the two structures. Another example of this significance is how Harmandir Sahib, or the Golden Temple, is visible from almost all angles of the Akal Takht, but the Akal Takht is not visible from any part of the Golden Temple. This signifies the importance of religious and spiritual consciousness, while addressing temporal issues and the ignorance of the temporal world while focused upon one’s own spirituality; in the Sikh consciousness, secular temporal power does not exist, and must be conducted with a religious mindset.

Today, the Akal Takht does not hold power over a state or direct power over any state affair, but it represents the spiritual and political affairs of the Sikhs. The Akal Takht issues commands to Sikhs, holds the power of banishment, brings forward Sikh issues to governments, holds ultimate power over the gurdwaras in Punjab, and holds the authority to command gurdwaras and congregations across the world. Many powers of the Akal Takht have been delegated to the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), but the Akal Takht holds superiority in the eyes of Sikhs. This view of superiority will be explained later in the article.

Scholars have written about the intertwined nature of spirituality and politics in the Sikh tradition and the lack of secularity in the Sikh psyche (P. Singh 2019). Sikhs have been actively working in the temporal realm since the inception of the tradition, with the first instance being Guru Nanak challenging Babur in his *Babarvāni*.³ However, there is a lacuna in scholarship on the origin of the authority of the Akal Takht, the institution specifically built for the representation of the temporal authority of the Sikh body, into the politicized institution that it is today. The purpose of the article is to argue that the Akal Takht has not been a static institution with consistent amounts of authority, but rather an institution that has behaved according to the expectations of the larger community and political powers in play in order to retain authority and legitimacy in the Sikh community. The institution of the Akal Takht has not been static; it has had shifts in authority and public opinion throughout history, and it has navigated the change of the institution into what it stands as today. Since the founding of the Akal Takht, wider Sikh temporal activism has typically been centered around the Akal Takht; however, there have been instances of it taking place away from the Akal Takht, and even against the institution of the Akal Takht itself. The article will address these trends throughout history.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

1.1.1. Symbolic Universe

Berger and Luckmann (1966) highlighted that institutions are the outcomes of social constructs. Active institutions exist in symbolic universes, a set of beliefs held by society and considered to be common sense or self-evident knowledge. The institution often goes unquestioned, as it is supposed to be the way that society is. In order for an institution to enter the symbolic universe, the process of legitimization must take place, where the ideas of the institution are passed on to different generations. Berger and Luckmann explained the process as follows:

1. Incipient legitimization: society accepting that the institution is a part of the norm in the society. This is a pre-legitimization level, as it is the starting of an institution and the contemporary society is already accepting of it, either through pressure, hearsay, supernatural inspiration, or legal change.
2. Theoretical legitimization: the institution being justified through methods such as, but not limited to, folklore, stories, history, and folk tales. This is the first step towards legitimising the institution in the fabric of ongoing society.

3. Legitimation in bodies of knowledge: the institution is recognized across differentiated bodies of knowledge. The knowledge of the institution is formalized in its transmission to others.
4. Symbolic universe: the institution is fully habitualized and integrated into the fabric of society. Human experience takes place within this universe, with it becoming impossible for it to operate outside of the institution (Berger and Luckmann 1966, pp. 94–95).

This framework was used by the authors to describe the institutionalization of large societal behaviors. However, I use this framework to examine the legitimization of the formal institution, the Akal Takht. The incipient legitimization of the Akal Takht took place with the authority of Guru Hargobind⁴. As the Guru of the Sikhs, his command was considered sacred, and contemporary Sikhs regarded the Takht as the political institution for Sikhs. The folklore, histories, and stories involving the Akal Takht and its superiority emerged during and after this time. For Sikhs, the Guru is equal to God, as highlighted in the verse “*guru paramesaru eko jānu*” (GGS, p. 864), meaning “know the Guru and God as one”. Therefore, when the command of the Guru is transmitted through the folklore, histories, and stories, Sikhs instill them in their hearts as the command of God himself. This helps to solidify the legitimization of the institution of the Akal Takht in the fabric of Sikh Society. Muslim and Sikh bodies of knowledge and literature accepted the legitimacy of the Akal Takht. Sikhs wrote about the authority in their literature, Mughal and Durrani forces would specifically attack Harmandir Sahib and the Akal Takht during battles and invasions, knowing that it is the spiritual and political center for the Sikhs. As time went on, Sikhs and non-Sikhs accepted the Akal Takht as the center of authority of Sikh tradition which led into level four of legitimization, where the institution of the Akal Takht became a part of the symbolic universe in the Sikh universe, wherein it became the seat of Sikh temporal and spiritual authority.

1.1.2. Authority

Authority is the legitimate and socially approved use of power. Although the legitimacy of the institution itself has been established in the Sikh tradition, it does not necessarily establish authority over the Sikh masses, although it does help aid in it. The authority itself is held by the *jathedār*, or leader, of the Akal Takht, as the *jathedār* is the person who holds the power invested by the Akal Takht, so the legitimacy of the Akal Takht alone is not enough to provide the formal institution with authority. Unlike the pope, the *jathedār* of the Akal Takht is not considered to have godly revelations, but is simply viewed as a mouthpiece for the Khalsa, who is also subject to fallibility. The *jathedār* of the Akal Takht is the highest recognized spokesman of the Sikhs, and, with the help and cooperation of four other Sikhs, can make commands and official decisions on behalf of the Sikh *Panth*.⁵

Weber’s three types of authority are defined as below:

- (a) Traditional authority: this authority is derived from lines of tradition, social customs, and cultural norms. This is typically an authority that has been habitualized into society and has become a part of the symbolic universe.
- (b) Charismatic authority: this authority comes from the charisma and personality of an individual leader. Their charisma is typically seen as superhuman, which sets them apart from the average person.
- (c) Rational-legal authority: this authority is based on the formal states of government, written laws. This the most familiar source of authority today, usually in the form of modern governments (Weber et al. 1964, p. 328).

Although the established legitimacy in the symbolic universe does not establish authority for the Akal Takht, it does aid in legitimizing its authority. The authority of the Akal Takht is constantly supported by traditional authority, given the fact that the Akal Takht, being an authoritative institution, is a part of the symbolic universe of the Sikhs. Its existence and God-given status go unquestioned by the Sikh body. However,

the legitimization of the authority of the Akal Takht has been swayed by both charismatic authority and rational-legal authority since its inception. I will discuss the various trends of this shift in section two of this article. The addition, or lack thereof, of Weber's other types have caused the authoritativeness of the Akal Takht to fluctuate throughout its history.

It is important to keep in mind the difference between authority and coercive power. Authority is when a society voluntarily allows an institution to exert power, whereas coercive power does not need the permission of society to operate and relies solely on violence to operate its power. The Akal Takht itself has not relied on coercion to assert its power over the Sikh populace.⁶ It has relied on its own authority and the faith of the Sikh populace to maintain control. In many instances, it has also relied on the state to carry out the Akal Takht's orders and decrees. In other cases, within and outside of India, individuals have taken it upon themselves to use coercion to implement the commands of the Akal Takht. They received this inspiration as they accepted the authority of the Akal Takht. The Akal Takht itself does not dispatch forces to enact its decrees through coercion, but rather, it is self-inspired people, who have accepted the authority of the institution, who have attempted to enact the order of the Akal Takht through coercion. Instances of all of these will be found in section two of this article.

Though these factors help to provide the Akal Takht with its initial authority, this legitimized authority is sometimes pushed back upon and even delegitimized by the Sikh body. As noted earlier, authority is the legitimate and socially approved use of power. Barnard (1968, p. 168) explains that authority is not within the hands of just those in charge, nor is it in the hands of the subjects of said authority, but it is a social relationship between the two entities. This means that the authority does not lie in the hands of the leading party but in the reciprocal relationship of communication between both sides. Merton (1968, p. 394) expands on this in his analysis, illustrating that authority does not come with unconditional power, but that it must exist within the norms of the group it exists in. The authority is allowed to push the boundaries of the group norms, so long as it stays consistent with the larger collection of previously existing norms, which allows for seamless cultural evolution over time. Merton explains that when those in authoritative positions act outside of the norms of the group, the leader(s) start to lose authority among the group. This leads people to start disregarding the authority, and can even lead into larger social movements to overthrow existing authority.

Applying the above theories to the Akal Takht, the institution of the Akal Takht was legitimized into the symbolic universe of the Sikhs. This allowed for the Akal Takht to have legitimized authority among the Sikh populace in accordance to Weber's traditional authority. Throughout history, the institution of the Akal Takht has been able to leverage charismatic and rational-legal authority to strengthen the legitimacy of its authority. However, as Barnard's and Merton's theories explain, the Akal Takht must act within the group norms to retain legitimate authority. The article will cover the evolution of the Akal Takht throughout history, and the fluctuations in its relationship with the Sikh community and beyond.

2. Akal Takht in History

2.1. The Akal Takht from Guru Hargobind to the Execution of Bhai Mani Singh, 1606–1738

In 1609, shortly after establishing the Akal Takht, Guru Hargobind was arrested on the orders of Jahangir for taking on royal attire, using the Akal Takht as a royal *darbār*, and creating a Sikh militia, although the official arrest warrant was for an unpaid fine that was imposed upon Guru Arjan (G. Singh 1949, p. 38). During the Guru's imprisonment, Bhai Gurdas was given control of the Akal Takht and the militia by the Guru (B. Singh 1997). However, with the Guru still being alive, Bhai Gurdas was not given the same authority as the custodians of the Akal Takht would be given once the guruship was given to the Guru Granth Sahib. Sikhs saw Guru Hargobind as the only authority of the Akal Takht and other Sikh shrines, regardless of his absence. With the Guru captive in Gwalior, activism from the Akal Takht did not end. Baba Buddha led processional chaunkis (singing of hymns)

from the Akal Takht to protest the captivity of the Guru until his release from captivity in 1612 (P. Singh 2011, p. 118).

Guru Hargobind's reign in Amritsar and in the Akal Takht did not last long. In 1630, Guru Hargobind had to leave Amritsar for Kartarpur, near Jalandhar, and later went to Kiratpur in the Himalayan Sivalik foothills due to his battles with the Mughals, as Amritsar was constantly being attacked from nearby Lahore (Mandair 2013, p. 49). During this time, the descendants of Prithi Chand⁷ had taken over the shrines of Amritsar, including the Akal Takht. His offshoot sect stayed in control of the Akal Takht well into the eighteenth century.

It is likely that Guru Har Rai and Guru Harkrishan never visited Amritsar and spent most of their time near and around Kiratpur. In November 1669, Guru Tegh Bahadur had attempted to enter the Darbar Sahib complex after receiving the guruship, but was stopped by the followers of Prithi Chand (Dilgeer 1980, p. 30). He paid his obeisance from the outside walls and rested right outside the Akal Takht. That place is now marked by Gurdwara Thara Sahib.

It is important to keep in mind that during this period, the institution of the Akal Takht did not hold any authority over practitioners of the mainstream Sikh tradition. The Sikhs viewed authority as being completely invested by God in the Guru and followed the authority of the Guru. It was the Guru's traditional and charismatic authority over the Sikhs that held supreme. Guru Tegh Bahadur's trip to Amritsar, even when it was under the control of a rival group, shows that the space itself was still considered sacred and a part of the Sikh symbolic universe, but the authority had left the institution. Merton's theory would explain that due to the mainstream Sikh group norms being violated by the absence of the Guru or Guru-appointed leader and the Prithi Chand's sect acknowledging of someone else as the successor of Guru Nanak's guruship, the authority of the Akal Takht was no longer valid; the institution had gone leaps and bounds beyond Sikh group norms by debarring the Guru from his rightful throne.

Not much is known about the history of Amritsar during the life of Guru Gobind Singh or during Banda Singh Bahadur's period in Punjab. It is likely that the Akal Takht stayed under the control of Prithi Chand's decedents. It was not until 1721 that Mata Sundri sent Bhai Mani Singh to Amritsar to become the custodian of the Akal Takht after tensions between the Bandai Khalsa and the Tat Khalsa⁸ were taking place in Amritsar over the caretaking of the Darbar Sahib complex. When Bhai Mani Singh came to Amritsar as the custodian of the Akal Takht, he mediated the issues between the two groups and passed a *gurmata*, or decree of the Guru, in favor of the Tat Khalsa (Johar 1977, p. 57).

Bhai Mani Singh is the first person in history who could be considered the "*jathedār*" of the Akal Takht in the mainstream Sikh tradition. Though that was not an official title given to him, he fulfilled the duties of what the *jathedār* of the Akal Takht today would do. Bhai Mani Singh was a successful mediator between two contesting groups, and this was possible due to the legitimacy and authority that he had as a leader. Putting aside whether or not everyone present considered him to be the rightful leader of the Akal Takht, especially since the dispute was between two competing groups, Bhai Mani Singh was a person who had gained some clout throughout his lifetime. The fact that he was associated with four of the Gurus; was the father of five sons who had died in battle with Guru Gobind Singh; was the head scribe of the recompiling of the Guru Granth Sahib; and was the official representative sent to Amritsar by Mata Sundri, the wife of the Guru, gave him credit among the masses. These experiences gave Bhai Mani Singh authoritative legitimacy as per Weber's charismatic authority. Although there are no records of Bhai Mani Singh's personality, for someone with so much experience, the ability to solve a conflict that the people themselves could not solve, and an endorsement from the Guru's own wife must give some insight into the type of personality and charisma that Mani Singh must have possessed. With the authority that must have been granted by his charisma, and the endorsement of Mata Sundri, Mani Singh took leadership of the Akal Takht, and therefore the Khalsa, legitimizing his authority over the Sikh tradition even further with

the traditional authority that the Akal Takht brought along with it. This established the first legitimate control of the Akal Takht in the mainstream Sikh tradition.

Under the leadership of Mani Singh, the tradition of *Sarbat Khalsa* was started. Sarbat Khalsa was a deliberative assembly where the entire Khalsa was to gather at the Akal Takht to make decisions on behalf of the community. The Sarbat Khalsa allowed for the people to be involved in the proceedings of the Akal Takht, thus solidifying the reciprocal relationship between the people and the authority, making the Akal Takht's authority very stable. Sarbat Khalsa would take place twice a year at the Akal Takht on Vaisakhi and Diwali. The next major gurmata that was passed was in 1726, where it was decided that the Khalsa would raid and loot Mughal treasuries, armories, trade transport, and kill informers. This decision was made after a well-respected Sikh, Bhai Tara Singh, was killed by a Mughal official (Dilgeer 1980, p. 33). The Sikhs took the gurmata to heart and started to plunder Mughal property. This led to Zakariya Khan, the governor of Lahore, pushing back against the Sikhs. As the number of rebellious Sikhs continued to increase, Zakaria Khan attempted to calm the tensions by offering the Sikhs a *jāgīr* and the choice to appoint a Nawab. At the Sarbat Khalsa of Vaisakhi 1733, the *jāgīr* was accepted by the Khalsa and Kapur Singh was selected to be the nawab (Grewal 2002, p. 89).

With the patronage of the *jāgīr*, the Khalsa reorganized into the Buddha Dal, consisting of older veterans, and the Taruna Dal, consisting of younger men, at the next Sarbat Khalsa. The Khalsa was flourishing in Amritsar, as Sikhs in hiding and from other parts of the subcontinent were beginning to move into Amritsar. With members increasing rapidly, Nawab Kapur Singh and other leaders had trouble keeping the Khalsa in control. Some fringe members of the Taruna Dal began to confiscate taxes from areas where the dues were for the Mughals. This act upset Zakariya Khan, which led him to confiscate the *jāgīr* from the Sikhs and reinstate orders to oppress and kill Sikhs (Dilgeer 1980, p. 34). Many Sikhs left Amritsar but continued to raid Mughal properties in smaller groups (Grewal 2002, p. 90).

Mani Singh, still the custodian of the Akal Takht and Harmandir Sahib, attempted to organize Diwali in Amritsar in 1738. The governor of Punjab allowed the celebration to take place with a demand of 5000 rupees. When the Sikhs gathered, they felt that the Mughals were planning an attack on the celebration, so they dispersed before any festivities could commence. Bhai Mani Singh then refused to pay the 5000 rupees, as the event never took place. Zakariya Khan responded by sentencing Bhai Mani Singh to death by having his body cut limb from limb (Dilgeer 1980, p. 34). Even through hardships, the Khalsa continued to act upon the gurmata passed by the Sarbat Khalsa at the Akal Takht. It shows the sacredness and validity of the authority that the Sikhs had placed in the institution, where they would go to dangerous levels to continue to live up to the gurmata that were passed under its authority.

2.2. The Misl Period 1738–1799

The Akal Takht was without leadership for some time, as the Sikhs had dispersed from Amritsar in the face of persecution. Sikhs continued to plunder and raid the Mughals. In 1745, with the death of Zakariya Khan, the Sikhs had the opportunity to hold a Sarbat Khalsa on Diwali. The Sikhs regrouped and continued their battles against the Mughals. In 1746, the *Chhōtā Ghallūghārā*, or small genocide, took place. In the year after this, another Sarbat Khalsa took place where the decision to continue to fight the Mughals to fortify Amritsar was made. In 1748, another Sarbat Khalsa was held where the Khalsa was reorganized into 11 Misls, each with their own leadership and armies (Gupta 2001, pp. 89–90).

Sarbat Khalsa and the passing of gurmata continued to happen until 1757. In 1757, Ahmad Shah Abdali's forces tore down Harmandir Sahib and the Akal Takht. Baba Deep Singh led an army towards Amritsar to attempt to rebuild the Harmandir Sahib and the Akal Takht. He was killed upon reaching the Darbar Sahib complex (K. Singh 1963, p. 145). The Akal Takht and Harmandir Sahib were eventually rebuilt by the Sikhs. It

was followed by back and forth battles between the Sikhs and Mughals, Sikh executions, battles with the Durrani empire, executions by the Durrani and Mughals, and numerous destructions and rebuildings of the Akal Takht and Harmandir Sahib. Regardless, the Sikhs continued to grow their militias and grow their control over the Punjab region. It is also during this period that the oldest written Hukamnama from the Akal Takht is found. It was addressed to the Sikhs of Patna requesting funds for the rebuilding of the shrines in Amritsar (Dilgeer 1980, p. 40). After Durrani's last defeat in Punjab, the Sikh confederacy became the uncontested rulers of Punjab. The Sikhs were holding uninterrupted Sarbat Khalsas at the Akal Takht for the first time in history.

Once the Misl were established, the practice of Sarbat Khalsa started to fizzle out. The initial change came from amending Sarbat Khalsa from being a gathering of the whole Khalsa to just the leaders of the Misl. Once inter-Misl feuds began, attendance at the Sarbat Khalsa slowly declined until they finally ended (*Brief History of Sikh Misl n.d.*, pp. 13–14).

This period of history was the most concerning for the existence of the Sikhs. It is also when the power and authority of the Akal Takht was utilized the most to make decisions for the Khalsa. The gurmata, cooperation, and consistent meetings allowed for the Sikhs to establish their rule in Punjab. There is a lack of evidence of a specific custodian or *jathedār* of the Akal Takht, and this might have to do with the Guru-centric nature of the gurmata and Sarbat Khalsa. This idea is emphasized with the initial minting of coins by the Sarbat Khalsa, where the coins were Guru-centric, devoid of the names of any of the chiefs. Though the Sarbat Khalsas were attended by all, Dhavan (2011, p. 147) notes that those making decisions were the chiefs of the Misl, which proves that hierarchy within the system existed, and so some form of leader or mediator must have existed. I argue that the leadership of the Takht, at least during the Sarbat Khalsas, were under Nawab Kapur Singh during this period, given that he was often the chief leader of the various regroupings of the Khalsa and the fact that the Sarbat Khalsa dying out of practice coincides with the retirement and death of Nawab Kapur Singh. This theory does leave a blind spot on as to who was handling the day to day operations of the Takht; however, it is likely that it might have been under the custodianship of Udasi Mahants. Although history leaves us with a blind spot on his leadership, it is quite clear that it was because of Kapur Singh that the Khalsa was able to organize in the ways that it did. Kapur Singh may have derived his authority over the Khalsa from his initial appointing as nawab by Bhai Mani Singh, and the character that enabled him to ever reach that position. His authority would, then, be derived from both traditional and rational-legal authorities, as it was the initial *jāgīr* that gave Kapur Singh any power at all. This is a shift from the lack of rational-legal authority under Mani Singh's tenure as the custodian of the Akal Takht. After Kapur Singh's retirement and the lack of a proper leader, they no longer had the means to or motivation to organize Sarbat Khalsas, as the Misl became more focused upon their individual autonomy and territories. With the Khalsa growing larger and a lack of centrality, Sarbat Khalsa most likely became too difficult to hold regularly. In its later years, the idea had become symbolic, where only the leaders higher in their ranks would attend, thus not even living up to the name *Sarbat Khalsa*. The Akal Takht's authority dwindled as the average Khalsa became less involved in the Sarbat Khalsas, as it had shifted the reciprocal relationship between the people and the institution into non-existence. Ranjit Singh officially abolished Sarbat Khalsa in 1805.

2.3. *Sarkār-e-Khālā* 1799–1849

In 1800, Akali Phula Singh, along with an army of 2000 Akali Nihangs proceeded into Amritsar and took control of the Akal Takht (Kaile and Singh 2009, p. 43). During Akali Phula Singh's tenure as the *jathedār* of the Akal Takht, he punished Ranjit Singh twice, once for marrying a Muslim woman who did not convert and once for offering a used canopy to the Akal Takht. Ranjit Singh accepted the punishment both times. Only one Sarbat Khalsa took place during the Sikh Empire, which was for the settling of an issue between a Maratha refugee and the British in 1805. The Sarbat Khalsa issued a gurmata in

favor of the British, and soon after, Ranjit Singh officially abolished Sarbat Khalsa (Hoti 1966, pp. 135–46). Akali Phula Singh is known to have been a very charismatic warrior and leader according to popular Sikh rhetoric. He led an army of thousands of nihangs and fought alongside the Sikh Empire. Phula Singh stopped a battle from taking place between the Sukerchakia and Bhangi Misls on the battlefield and mediated a negotiation instead (B. Singh 2010, p. 146). Though not recorded, it is likely that Phula Singh took care of day to day activities at the Takht and settling issues between Sikhs and Sikh groups as the leader of the Akal Takht. Oral history among Sikhs shows that Phula Singh was a charismatic person. With the help of the traditional authority that comes from holding the seat of the Akal Takht, Akali Phula Singh's tenure as *jathedār* was supported by charismatic authority. His authority in the Akal Takht remained mostly political and in relation to the larger *Sarkār-e-Khālāsā*. It does not seem like the Takht handled many issues of the larger Sikh populace itself, at least in public ways.

After Phula Singh's death, a Khalsa Sikh did not take control of the Akal Takht. It was individuals from the Udasi sect who had become the caretakers of the Takht (Lorenzen 1997, p. 57). It is likely that they may have been appointed by Ranjit Singh himself, as the Udasis were the most patronized group by the Sikh empire (S. Singh 1985). The Udasi mahants came into control of almost all historic gurdwaras. During this time, a painting of Guru Hargobind was installed at the Akal Takht to be worshipped. Worshipers would regularly worship idols and pictures in the various gurdwaras in the Darbar Sahib complex (Oberoi 1994, p. 104). These caretakers of the Akal Takht did not hold any legitimate authority over the Khalsa, as their practices were outside of the group norms of the Khalsa. The Khalsa found its leadership amongst their own *jathas*, or groups. However, the Udasis played a massive role in the pluralism of the various religious traditions in Punjab.⁹ This is a point in time in which, although the Akal Takht existed in the symbolic universe of the Sikh psyche, the authority of the institution had diminished in the eyes of the Khalsa due to it stepping outside of the larger group norms of the Khalsa tradition.

2.4. British Raj 1849–1947

When the British conquered Punjab, they took control of historical Sikh shrines, including the Akal Takht. Until 1869, the caretaking of the shrine would stay with those already at the Darbar Sahib complex. In 1869, the British appointed a caretaker, called a Sarbrah, as the leader of both the Akal Takht and Harmandir Sahib. The Sarbrah had the authority to issue hukamnamas, or commands, to the Sikhs. Being appointed by the British, the Sarbrah would often be a mouthpiece of the British. The goal of the British was to keep the status quo at the Darbar Sahib complex, so the image and idol worship continued. Although idol and picture worship started before the British Raj, it was already a step outside of the group norm of Khalsa Sikhs. This idol and picture worship would be the first of many steps outside the group norms of the Khalsa that the Akal Takht would take (Dilgeer 1980, p. 54).

When reformists in the Singh Sabha started to rise, the Akal Takht was quick to react. The Sarbrah of the Akal Takht banished Gurmukh Singh of the Lahore Singh Sabha for opposing practices such as idol and picture worship in the Darbar Sahib complex and opposing Khem Singh Bedi¹⁰ sitting on pillows in the congregation. Gurmukh Singh still continued his publishing and preaching. There are numerous instances of the caretakers of the Akal Takht and Harmandir Sahib refusing to let in, refusing to do ardās (prayer of request) for, and banishing members of the Lahore Singh Sabha¹¹ or its offspring organizations. People of lower caste were not allowed to give or receive prasād at the Darbar Sahib complex and were only allowed into the complex at certain times of the day.

The week after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the caretakers of the Darbar Sahib complex honored and conducted the pahul ceremony for General Dyer. The pahul ceremony is the ceremony that initiates an individual into the Khalsa. Dyer was given permission to cut his hair and smoke tobacco by those that conducted the ceremony, even though those acts are major transgressions of the Khalsa code of conduct (Colvin 1929, pp. 201–2).

After this, General Dyer was given a *siropā*, or honorary scarf, by the Sarbrah of the Akal Takht. The pahul ceremony of General Dyer and the failure to do the sevā, or service, of the Guru Granth Sahib one evening at the Akal Takht infuriated many Sikhs. A meeting took place in August 1920 in the Darbar Sahib complex, demanding the resignation of the Sarbrah. The Sarbrah apologized for his transgressions and resigned. Another Sabrah was appointed; however, the mistreatment of the lower castes and the continuation of idol worship still upset many Sikhs. Although the authority of the institution technically should have existed at this point in history, as the Takht had its original traditional authority and the legal-rational authority established by the British Raj, Merton's theory would explain how the caretakers of the Akal Takht had taken so many steps outside of Sikh group norms that no sense of authority in the institution remained among common Sikhs. The relationship between the Sikhs and Akal Takht had been startled by these steps outside of the group norms.

In October 1920, Khalsa reformers stormed and took over the Akal Takht from the Sarbrah and other caretakers of the Takht. Right after, the British appointed a 36-member committee, comprised of Sikh aristocracy, to take care of the Darbar Sahib complex. In order to negotiate a long-term solution, the Central Sikh League called a meeting in the Darbar Sahib complex, where ten thousand Sikhs attended. At this meeting, a 175-member committee was elected to form a committee to manage all gurdwaras across India. That committee was called the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (Grewal 2002, p. 158). The committee has controlled the Darbar Sahib complex and appointed the *jathedār* of the Akal Takht since then. The Akal Takht once again became the center of Sikh politics and activism, with frequent meetings and decision making taking place. The Akal Takht would be the home of the Sikh struggle throughout the Gurdwara Reform Movement. That same year, the Akali Dal was formed at the Akal Takht (Dilgeer 1980, pp. 161–62). The British formally accepted the SGPC as the caretakers of the Darbar Sahib complex in January 1922 (Grewal 2002, p. 160). The Akal Takht became even more active than it was during the Sikh Misl period.

Although the Sarbrah were the caretakers of the Takht, most Khalsa Sikhs did not accept their authority as legitimate. The Sarbrah were taking steps outside of the group norms by partaking in idol worship, caste discrimination, obeisance to the Bedi family, the honoring of the perpetrator of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, and the banishment of any Sikh who would speak against the practices of the Darbar Sahib complex. For the first time in history, the Sikhs mobilized against the caretakers of the Akal Takht and instated a new leadership structure. This new structure was legitimized by rational-legal authority, along with traditional authority, as the SGPC ran through legal structures. With the establishment of a controlling body made by the people, the Sikhs had a working reciprocal relationship with the Akal Takht where they felt that their input was valid and that the Takht was no longer taking major steps outside of Sikh group norms.

The SGPC continues to run through the legal system of India today. The charisma of the Akali leaders helped to solidify the support of embedding the Akal Takht into the legal system through the creation of the SGPC. Since the success of the Gurdwara Reform Movement, the Akal Takht is able to legally control the gurdwaras of Punjab, Chandigarh, Himachal Pradesh, and Haryana through the SGPC¹². The other Takhts, in Anandpur, Patna, Talwandi Sabo, and Nanded, were also given positions of status; however, it remained the status quo that the Akal Takht reigned supreme.

2.5. Partition of Punjab until Operation Bluestar 1947–1984

Upon Indian independence, the Sikhs focused on establishing a Punjabi speaking Suba. With the banning of Punjabi Suba slogans, many Akalis, members of the SGPC, and the then *jathedār* of the Akal Takht were arrested. This led to the first invasion of the Darbar Sahib complex by the Indian state in 1955. Punjabi Suba agitations were centered around the Akal Takht up until the establishment of the Punjabi Suba in 1966 (Dilgeer 1980, p. 80). In 1975, the Akal Takht led agitations against the state of emergency enacted by Indira

Gandhi, which lasted two years, after the ban on political activities was lifted (Dilgeer 1980, p. 84). This authority was a continuation of what was established with the founding of the SGPC.

On Vaisakhi 1978, a group of Sikhs from the Akhand Kirtani Jatha and the Damdami Taksal, under the leadership of Bhai Fauja Singh, went to protest outside a Nirankari congregation, where the Sikh gurus and scriptures were being subject to disrespectful rhetoric. Attendees of the Nirankari congregation attacked the protesters, and thirteen of the protesters were killed (Mahmood 2010, p. 79). The Akal Takht released a hukamnama on the 10 June 1978 condemning the attack and instructing Sikhs to avoid and not to associate with individuals from the Nirankari sect (R. Singh 2003, p. 77). This hukamnama is still binding today, and practicing Sikhs continue to not associate themselves with Nirankaris.

In 1982, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale sponsored the Akalis through the *Dharam Yudh Morcha* to pressure the Indian state to accept the Anandpur Sahib Resolution.¹³ A year later, Bhindranwale, with other armed Sikhs, moved into the Darbar Sahib complex to lead the movement from the Akal Takht. In December of 1983, Bhindranwale relocated to the Akal Takht itself. It was from here that Bhindranwale stockpiled the building with weapons and prepared for attacks from the Indian state. Bhindranwale and his followers, including men and women with small children, battled from the Akal Takht during Operation Bluestar, making the complex, once again, a battleground between the reigning government and Sikhs. It was during Operation Bluestar that the Akal Takht was destroyed by the Army tanks. Although Bhindranwale was never the *jathedār* of the Akal Takht, nor ever claimed to be, he used the building of the Akal Takht as a way to establish legitimacy and help support his charismatic authority with the traditional authority of the Akal Takht.

2.6. 1984 to the Present

After 1984, the Sikhs were in a distressed situation. There was a group of people, predominantly from the Damdami Taksal, who had attempted to take control of the Akal Takht and the Darbar Sahib Complex after an attempted *Sarbat Khalsa* in 1986. Although partially successful, their control over the Akal Takht was handed back to the SGPC. Since 1984, there has been a tense relationship between various Sikh organizations regarding whether or not the SGPC is a valid group representing the issues of the Sikhs, especially among diasporic and radical Sikhs. This tension continues until today, especially with the new competing *jathedars* of the Takhts instated by an attempted *Sarbat Khalsa* in 2015.¹⁴ These two *Sarbat Khalsas* had attempted to lay claim to the authority of the Akal Takht.

The tension in the community in regard to the Akal Takht and the SGPC stem from 1984 and the idea of whether or not the Akali Dal and the SGPC are partially to blame for Operation Bluestar. Sikhs, especially in the diaspora, have taken issue with the SGPC's management of the Takht. On the other hand, the Akali Dal continues to win the SGPC elections, showing that the Akal Takht management does have local approval, at least since the last election; however, there does seem to be more people standing in opposition to the Akali ticket in the forthcoming SGPC elections. The split in approval of the Akali Dal's control of the SGPC has been heightened since Gurbachan Singh forgave Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, a sect leader who had impersonated Guru Gobind Singh and the Sikh initiation ceremony. However, the approval of the SGPC's management of the Akal Takht has become more stable after Harpreet Singh was enacted as acting *jathedār*. With the disconnect between diasporic Sikhs and Sikhs in India, there seems to have also been a disconnect in group norms on what is acceptable for the Akal Takht and its authority, which has caused the disconnect between whether or not the authority of the Akal Takht can be considered legitimate.

3. Conclusions

The Akal Takht has undergone many transformations since its inception by Guru Hargobind. The Gurus left behind no structure or instruction on the running of the

institution, so Sikhs had to figure out how to run the institution *ad libitum*. The Akal Takht has had periods of supreme authority and periods of absolutely no authority. It is the relationship between the caretaker of the Akal Takht and the general populace that has determined the amount of authority that the Akal Takht is able to yield.

The institution gives caretakers and leaders the means to lead; however, it is the actions of the leaders and their relation to the populace that ultimately lets them retain, gain, or lose legitimate authority. Bhai Mani Singh was able to gain legitimate authority with his ability to mediate between the Bandai Khalsa and the Tat Khalsa. Nawab Kapur Singh used his charisma and leadership skills to maintain a grip and proper reciprocal conversation and compromises in tension filled Sarbat Khalsas; although after his death, without a suitable leader, the institution no longer operated in the same way, leading to the extinction of the Sarbat Khalsa in the Sikh Confederacy and the official banning of it by Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Akali Phula Singh was able to regasp the authority of the Takht, but without the same political standing that the Takht had during the confederacy. Without an official way to appoint a leader of the Akal Takht, the leadership was, in a way, random and sporadic.

It was when the mahants took over the Darbar Sahib complex that we started to see the norms of the Khalsa being challenged in the Takht. The mahants during the British Raj held no legitimate authority over the Khalsa. The British appointed Sarbrahs were even further from the group norms, thus causing Khalsa Sikhs to organize and overthrow the sarbrah system. The establishment of the SGPC allowed for the Khalsa to take back control of the Darbar Sahib complex and all other gurdwaras, while establishing acceptable *jathedārs* of the Akal Takht, once again making the institution active, and adding legal-rational legitimization to the authority. However, with the increase of the internal politics of the SGPC, the *jathedārs* did not continue to hold legitimate authority among the Sikh populace.

Bhindranwale's period in the Akal Takht reestablished the Akal Takht as the militia center and made the Akal Takht the literal political center of Sikh activism and armed conflict. Although he was not the *jathedār* of the Akal Takht, his charisma in his speeches lent him more legitimized authority than the *jathedār* of the Akal Takht himself. This shows that the authority of the Akal Takht was not limited to the appointed leader of the institution. Bhindranwale had more of a sway upon the Sikh population during his time in the Akal Takht than the *jathedār* did.

During the 1986 and 2015 Sarbat Khalsa, we saw a split in the leadership of the Akal Takht for the first time, with certain Sikhs aligning with one side over another. The SGPC *jathedār* had the legal authority over gurdwaras, and many individuals and gurdwaras still choose to align themselves with the leadership appointed by the Sarbat Khalsa, showing that not even the legalities enforced by the state can impact who people choose as their legitimate authorities.

Berger, Luckman, and Merton's theories help us understand the basis of where legitimate Sikh authority is derived from, and how it has been unstable throughout time. The symbolic universe keeps the Akal Takht within the loop of the Sikh psyche, even in uncertain times when the institution of the Akal Takht stepped outside of group norms. Even at the most dire stages, the Akal Takht continued to remain a central part of the Sikh tradition due to how embedded it is within the Sikh symbolic universe. It is through Merton's theory of group norms that we are able to understand why the authority invested the Akal Takht has not stayed static, but has had a spectrum of varying statuses among the community throughout history.

This is evidence of how fluid this institution has been and continues to be. When statements in the Panth are made about Sikh Rehat Maryada being the only acceptable maryada due to its endorsement by the Akal Takht, one must reference the history of the Akal Takht. Then, the realization is made that the power of the Akal Takht is invested in the agreement of the majority of the populace. When there is a large portion of the Khalsa that does not agree with the Sikh Rehat Maryada, the authority of the Takht no longer exists, as the Takht has pushed beyond the group norm. Rather than blanket statements about the

sanctity and the authority of the Akal Takht being made, the history of the institution must be observed.

Today, the Akal Takht represents the Sikhs across the world, but only Sikhs in Punjab have the right to vote in the SGPC elections. This causes a bigger rift between the authority of the Akal Takht being accepted by all Sikhs. When the interests of Sikhs in India and abroad do not correlate and group norms between the two groups continue to grow apart, the disconnect of the Akal Takht with the greater Sikh populace will continue to grow. This may cause the need for the SGPC and the Akal Takht to reorganize in a way that allows Sikhs in the diaspora representation in the Akal Takht and the SGPC in order to continue a proper reciprocal relationship between the institution and the people, especially as the structures of authority and legitimacy continue to change as time passes.

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Notes

- ¹ A kalgi is a feather or cluster of feathers worn on the turbans of South Asian royalty.
- ² The word *mīri* is derived from the Arabic أمير (*amīr*), which is translated as king or prince. The word *pīri* is derived from the Persian پیر (*pīr*), which is the name used for a Sufi saint, used often within South Asia.
- ³ *Babarvāni* is the collection of hymns by Guru Nanak addressed towards the first Mughal emperor, Babur. A more detailed analysis of *Babarvāni* can be found in “Speaking Truth to Power: Exploring Guru Nanak’s Bābar-vānī in Light of the Baburnama” (P. Singh 2020).
- ⁴ The theory can also be applied to the legitimacy of the Guru. Guru Nanak had gained a following and claimed supernatural inspiration, thus embedding himself in the incipient legitimization step. With Guru Nanak being embedded into this process, and eventually inserting himself into the symbolic universe of many Punjabis, he gained legitimacy, which he passed on to the following Gurus. His authority is further justified through Weber’s types of authorities, which are still to be discussed.
- ⁵ The gathering of five Sikhs represents the Sikh institution of the *pañj piāre*. The official gathering of five Sikhs are seen as the physical representatives of Guru Gobind Singh and are given the authority to make decisions for the community. Local congregations may gather five respected Sikhs to make decisions for their respective area. The gathering of five Sikhs at the Akal Takht, with the *jathedār* of the Akal Takht leading, is seen as the highest authority. Today, the *pañj piāre* making decisions at the Akal Takht typically consist of the *jathedār* of the Akal Takht, the *jathedār* of Takht Damdama Sahib, granthīs of Harmandir Sahib, and sometimes the *jathedār* of Kesgarh Sahib, Anandpur (McLeod 1989, p. 58).
- ⁶ Though the institution has owned the means to violence at various points in its history. The Akal Takht houses and has housed many weapons has had the disposal of Sikh militias before the colonizing of the Sikh Empire. There are, however, no instances of the Akal Takht using its access to violence to assert its power over the Sikh people. The access to violence was typically used to protect Sikh lands from invaders.
- ⁷ Prithi Chand was the oldest son of Guru Ram Das and brother of Guru Arjan. Sources written by Prithi Chand’s sect suggest that Prithi Chand was a devout follower of Guru Arjan and was the rightful heir of the guruship after Guru Arjan, and that miscreants attempted to give the guruship to Guru Hargobind instead. Mainstream Sikh sources refer to Prithi Chand as a jealous older brother who was sour at Guru Arjan receiving the Guruship, and started his own sect, being a challenger of the Guru. Regardless, the Prithi Chand sect (also known as Miharvanias, after the son of Prithi Chand, or derogatorily as Minas by mainstream Sikhs), was a major parallel sect throughout the seventeenth century (Syau 2014).
- ⁸ Bandai Khalsa and Tat Khalsa were early sects of the Sikh tradition coming about after the death of Guru Gobind Singh. The Bandai Khalsa believed Banda Singh Bahadur to be the eleventh guru, while the Tat Khalsa held that Guru Gobind Singh gave the Guru Granth Sahib the guruship.
- ⁹ Due to the Sikh Empire being a minority rule, Ranjit Singh utilized various methods of attempting to keep the peace. One of these methods was the propagation of syncretic thought, like that done by the Udasis. According to Haklai (2000), blurring the lines between the majority and the minority is an important method in keeping minority rule. Groups, such as the Udasis, did just that.
- ¹⁰ A descendant of Guru Nanak, founding member of the Singh Sabha.

- 11 The Lahore Singh Sabha was a reformist group whose goal was to remove all Hindu-like practices and traditions from the Sikh tradition and reinforce the institution of the Khalsa.
- 12 To read more about the origins and political structures of the SGPC and the Shiromani Akali Dal, refer to “Ideological basis in the formation of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee and the Shiromani Akali Dal: exploring the concept of Guru-Panth” (P. Singh 2021).
- 13 Elaboration on the Anandpur Sahib Resolution was done by K. Singh (2004) in “The Anandpur Sahib Resolution and Other Akali Demands”.
- 14 The resolutions for the 2015 Sarbat Khalsa can be found at: <https://www.sikh24.com/2015/11/11/official-resolutions-from-sarbat-khalsa-2015/> (accessed on 27 May 2021).

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