Objects, Ethics, and the Gendering of Sikh Memory

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In this essay I consider a range of objects and the stories they tell about Sikh women in the early modern period. In these object stories, Sikh ethical formations are created and performed, and we see women as ethical actors. The ways in which women are remembered in this form therefore allows us entry into larger discussions, about gender and about ethical subject formation, both gendered and not. This essay is thus organized around the remembering of women through objects and the stories these objects tell.

In a recent book Doris Jakobsh has argued that the history of women in the Sikh tradition has largely been either ignored or erased, idealized or abstracted. Thus, while some apologists both within and outside of the tradition “repeatedly insist that women and men are inherently equal in the Sikh world view, in reality, historical writings contain virtually nothing about women, apart from minimal asides referring to the occasional exceptional woman.” In addition, women in general have not occupied and still do not occupy prominent positions of public power in the tradition, with a few notable exceptions. Thus, rhetoric extolling a kind of “feminism” within the writings and ideologies of the Gurus—as done, for example, in the work of Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh, and as is common in popular discourse—seems not to provide a full accounting of the ways in which gender has worked in the differential formation of female and male Sikh subjects, with enduring consequences for women today.

I enter this debate by examining objects that provide particular moments in the telling of the lives of Sikh women to discern what is at stake in the telling and showing of such stories. These objects are revered
for their representation of women, and they especially tell the ways in which women acted in the world, the stories they created with their lives, and the relationship of these lives to the Gurus of the Sikh tradition. The stories of women’s lives and their interaction with the Sikh Gurus are thus lived, enacted, and remembered through objects. These representations and the practices associated with them, I believe, have constituted a primary mode of the Sikh discursive formation of “tradition” in the terms articulated by Saba Mahmood with reference to Islamic tradition, following Talal Asad, who explains that “the past is the very ground through which the subjectivity and self-understanding of a tradition’s adherents are constituted.” In other words, the past has been—and in many ways continues to be—a primary mode through which men and women have been constituted as Sikh. The objects discussed here were said to have been used by early modern women, continue in the present to narrate the past, and in so doing, constitute the present. As we, in Joan Scott’s words, confront “the politics of existing histories” in order to understand how gender operates within them, these objects and the women whose lives they tell may allow us to understand not only how gender operates in the writing of history in the Sikh tradition, but also how it is tied to a larger ethical project.

In this essay I present two exemplary cases, one well known in Sikh circles and the other less so, and examine how the objects related to these two late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century women reflect a broader form of ethical intervention known by the general term of seva, or service. Women have been represented as religious agents within certain kinds of historical narration, attested to through objects associated with their service, in relation to this larger arena of action and meaning. This realm is available across gendered lines, but at the same time has constituted a location for the articulation of gendered Sikh subjects. Thus the historical narration made manifest in the object provides the locus for the articulation of ethical engagement, both gendered and not.

A woman who serves

I begin with the story of a woman who serves: Mai Desaan, remembered today in Chakk Fatih Singhwala, a small village in District Bathinda in
Punjab, India. The story of Mai Desaan is a tradition that remains fairly
local to the Malwa region in Southwest Indian Punjab; it does not figure
in most academic histories of the Sikh *panth*, or community. Yet, if you
visit the site today, you will find a large Gurdwara, or Sikh congregational
site, under construction, designed to house a number of objects that relate
to the tenth and final living human Guru of the Sikh tradition. Objects
at the site include a *manji* or cot, on which the final of the ten living Sikh
Gurus, Guru Gobind Singh, is said to have sat; a *tawa*, or large cooking
surface, said to have belonged to Mai Desaan, which she used to make
bread for the Guru; a low chair, said to have belonged to Mai Desaan,
upon which the Guru’s wife Mata Sahib Devi sat; and a silk *dastar* of Guru
Gobind Singh and other clothing belonging to the Guru and his wife. The
site thus features a wide array of objects, and a number of users of these
objects, including the Guru’s wife, and members of the head family of the
village, for whom the village was named. Mai Desaan is one of this latter

The site is not unusual in the way it gathers together objects related
to the Guru for veneration and public remembrance. Objects related to
the Gurus and other heroes and martyrs are collected and revered in pri-

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private homes and in sacred sites across the Punjab, as well as in the broader
Sikh diaspora in India and farther afield. Such objects are also collected
by others outside the Sikh community, usually by those who have shared
some relationship with the Sikh Gurus or other important persons in the
tradition, and who revere the objects received in commemoration of this
connection. Such collections constituted a way in which the Guru (the
ninth and tenth Gurus in particular, but also earlier Gurus) substanti-
ated relationships with followers and allies, through gifting practices that
mirrored royal gifting practices (known as *khil’at* or *siropa*), using such
exchanges to materialize and concretize relationships, especially commu-
nity membership, and to establish authority. Collections like this are now
displayed in family homes, as well as in royal contexts, and consist of a wide
range of objects: clothing, chariots, weapons, and shoes. All are associated
with the ten Sikh Gurus, martyrs, or other revered persons. Weapons are
the most common form of memorial object, but, as seen in this site, memo-
rial objects take multiple other forms.
Objects related to the wives of the Guru are not common, but are collected alongside objects specifically related to the Gurus themselves. This presence of objects associated with the Guru’s wives reflects not only their importance in relation to the Guru, but also the importance of the Guru’s wives themselves. For example, the wives of the Tenth Guru led segments of the community during the troubled years after the tenth Guru’s death.\(^9\) Sikh historians have thus had good reason to tell the story of the community around the wives of the tenth Guru.\(^{10}\) In the case of Mai Desaan, however, we find the representation of a woman who had no other relationship with the Guru but one constituted by seva or “service” to him.

First, a bit more about her: Mata\(^{11}\) Desaan was the widow of one of the patriarchs of the Chakk Fatih Singhwala family. She was childless, resulting in a lower status for her within the family. When the Guru visited this village and this family, he exposed this and other intrigues in the family, such as the estrangement of two brothers. His acceptance and valuation of Mai Desaan’s expression of devotion raised her status in the family as an honored servant of the Guru. These events are remembered today, as well as in the past, by, for example, the mid-nineteenth-century historical text by Santokh Singh, the Gur Pratap Suraj Granth, which includes a description of the meeting of the Guru with an unnamed “woman of the house,” who gifted the Guru with a shawl.\(^{12}\)

As this first case demonstrates, seva constitutes a way in which women have been written into Sikh histories, especially local traditions of historical representation centered around material culture. The objects of Mai Desaan’s service to the Guru constitute her legacy, in the present. These objects are revered, moreover, within a mode of ethical practice that is central to the tradition itself in general terms.\(^{13}\) This service is gendered and reflects Mai Desaan’s female position within the family at Chakk Fatih Singhwala—as the domestic objects in question attest—but the importance of seva is also general.

**A woman who fights**

Attention to the gendered workings of service invites the examination of our second example, the case of another woman who is better known
within Sikh tradition: Mai Bhago, who fought in battle for Guru Gobind Singh. She is remembered at Nander, a Takhat or administrative center in Maharashtra, India, associated with the death of Guru Gobind Singh. Her story, too, is one of devotion and service, and is remembered in sacred site and object, as well as in popular histories from the nineteenth century to the present. Mai Bhago is remembered for fighting alongside the Guru, dressed as a man, and for shaming many of the Guru’s fighters to return to his side for a brilliant last stand (which was ultimately lost). Aside from records in conventional histories of her role in military conflict, Mai Bhago is also remembered through material means at Nander, a form of remembrance that seems uniquely able to make room for women. At Nander, a prominent shrine exists in her honor, and a wide array of weapons she is said to have used is collected and displayed. The material memory of Mai Bhago is constituted, therefore, by the weapons she used in battle, her means of serving the Guru. Many of these are so large that they were unlikely to have been handled by any individual, so in a sense their materiality more broadly references the battle itself, rather than an individual fighter. Regardless, the shrine and its weapons succeed in articulating the memory of this woman in martial terms, when weapons, in general, are usually associated with men.

Mai Bhago, too, is included in the mid-nineteenth-century text the Suraj Granth, where her story is provided in the midst of narratives of local devotees: how she followed the Guru as an ascetic, wandering about without clothing until the Guru intervened. Mai Bhago is therefore remembered as a model devotee who has lost all sense of anything but the object of her devotion, and is remembered alongside other great servants of the Guru. Mai Bhago is thus valorized as a model servant of the Guru, in the guise of a warrior. At the same time, she is also remembered within the kinds of memorial traditions that account for Mai Desaan, a much less prominent woman: centered around the practice of service.

Still, there are significant differences between them. Whereas the objects Mai Desaan used demonstrate her fulfillment of feminine duties in service (as elements of domestic life and her work in the kitchen), Mai Bhago is valorized for a more traditionally masculine form of service (fighting for the Guru in battle). Thus, Mai Bhago is remembered in essence
for the ways in which her behavior mimics that of men; she deserves to be remembered for not being “womanly.” As Lou Fenech has pointed out, she taunted the Guru’s warriors with her womanhood, disparaging men who lacked bravery by calling them “women.”¹⁴ We cannot, therefore, perceive her position as normalizing or even valorizing femaleness in a martial context. Mai Bhago is constituted historically as an exceptional woman in her manly behavior and in the ways her actions, by virtue of her sex, challenged men to live up to a code of manliness that was not supposed to apply to her.

Conclusion

Both Mai Desaan and Mai Bhago thus are gendered by the service for which they are remembered: Mai Desaan is remembered for feminine service, and Mai Bhago for reinscribing gendered formations of service through behavior unusual for a woman. Yet, as Mai Bhago’s narrative operates among those valorizing male devotees, it is important to consider how she was like both men and women in her service to the Guru. She served the Guru as a woman, but also as a Sikh. This is one aspect of her character that can be generalized: the primacy of service to the Guru, and its constituting force for the devotee, particularly within the memorialization process itself. This process is thus tied to the ethical project of Seva, and it is expressed in both of these two cases through objects—weapon, tawa, stove—which memorialize the women who serve.

Understanding the ways in which seva provides for the telling of herstory within a more comprehensive representation of relationships and service, reveals, first, an ethical field of action central to Sikh tradition, and second, a field of action that allows for the participation of female actors as women. The narration of these women and the objects that tell their story occupy an alternative form of historiographical space in the telling of the story of the formation of the Sikh subject through seva. By appreciating the role these objects have in this larger narrative, and, in relation to them, the roles of women as devotee and as actor, as warrior and domestic, we write women into Sikh histories in a way that works within gendered and also generic formulations of being Sikh, expressed through the objects of service.
Notes


5. After the death of the tenth Guru in 1708, the sacred canon has occupied the office of the Guru for the community.


7. Such practices were also common within sufi lineage formations. See *Robes and Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture*, ed. Stewart Gordon (New York: Palgrave, 2001), and Gordon, *Robes of Honour: Khil'at in Pre-Colonial and Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

8. Reverence for objects related to honored persons is widely observed in South Asia and is not particular to the Sikh tradition. Reverence for objects related to the Gurus is present within both formal institutional religious spheres, such as Sikh Gurdwaras or congregational centers and Takhats or administrative centers, as well as informal ones, such as private family collections.

9. For example, orders to the community known as *hukamnamas* were issued in the name of the Guru’s wives. See pp. 34 ff. and 197–231 for examples in Ganda Singh’s *Hukamname: Guruu saahibaan, maataa saahibaan, bandaa singh ate khaalsa ji de* (1967; repr., Patiala, Punjab: Publication Board, Panjabi University, 1999).

10. There is debate over the number of the wives of the Guru, which I do not address here, but most historians accept that he had more than one.

11. She is known as both Mai and Mata; both mean “mother.”

