

# Marriage Equality, Siri Singh Sahib Corporation, and LGBTQIA+ Inclusion

Position Paper

Commissioned by the Human Rights Commission, Siri Singh Sahib Corporation

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August 2024 (November 2024 update)

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# Introduction

## **Purpose & Aim**

The purpose of this position paper is to advocate for marriage equality and the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals within Sikh gurdwaras. Though the paper advocates for the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ Sikhs, the report does not provide a model or framework for what this “should” or “could” look like in practice. While debates about Anand Karaj norms are common among Sikhs, this report also does it make any statements about whether the existing Anand Karaj models that are practiced today are accurate or the ideal models of Anand Karajs. The report was commissioned by Siri Singh Sahib Corporation’s Human Rights Commission to better understand the hurdles to successfully implementing marriage equality. This paper examines the tensions between Sikh spiritual and political sovereignty, the equality guaranteed in Sikhi but not actualized in Sikh institutions, and the impact of colonialism and patriarchy on Sikh practices and institutions of authority. By addressing these issues, we aim to cultivate a more inclusive and equitable environment within the Sikh community. As a note, we use “report” and “position paper” interchangeably throughout the document.

## **Report Structure**

The report is organized into six sections. The first section frames the topic of marriage equality through the lens of Sikh sovereignty, histories of colonialism, and equality. The second section gives a formal framework for understanding tradition and authority in Sikhi – parampara, maryada, and rahit – that advocates may wish to use for future organizing efforts around marriage equality. The third section then integrates these two sections to explain how a patriarchal tradition (parampara) produces a patriarchal system of authority (maryada). We look to the ways in which patriarchal norms and beliefs have infiltrated Sikh spaces, beliefs, and practices, leading to actions that may not honor Sikhi’s foundational principles (rahit) of sovereignty and equality. The fourth section discusses how this patriarchal parampara can be perpetuated – through different forms of miseducation on gender and sexuality. The fifth section explains how ideas of purity and pollution can function within a patriarchal parampara, with documented examples from Gurbani kirtan. The sixth section wraps up the analysis by discussing concerns that Sikh advocates of marriage equality in Western nations have been implicated within contexts of homo-nationalism and pinkwashing as they work to make Sikh spaces more LGBTQIA+ inclusive. Specifically, when it comes to barriers to implementing marriage equality, we acknowledge the tensions between Sikh sovereignty as understood and manifested spiritually and politically, differing claims to authority, the received heritages of colonialism and patriarchy, and the effects of homonationalism.

## **Background: Siri Singh Sahib Corporation and Marriage Equality**

Sikh Dharma International (SDI) is a non-profit religious organization that was founded in the United States in 1971 under IRS Section 501(c)(3). In 1972 they created a Sikh Dharma Ministry called the “Khalsa Council,” to “serve the organizational, leadership, and spiritual needs of Sikh Dharma” (Sikh Dharma International [2016] 2023). The Khalsa Council functions as an international leadership body of Sikh ministers who are authorized to conduct religious rites like weddings and funerals.

The Khalsa Council meets twice a year, in the Spring and Winter, as an advisory board to guide Siri Singh Sahib Corporation. The topic of marriage equality was discussed during the April 2016 Khalsa Council meeting, with a motion passed urging SDI to permit same-sex Sikh marriage ceremonies, leading to the establishment of an LGBTQIA+ Task Force in September 2016. The topic gained momentum when the Administration of Guru Ram Das Ashram of Los Angeles (GRDA-LA) issued a statement in July 2020 advocating for marriage equality and requesting SDI's immediate support. Subsequent requests for a timeline to implementation from GRDA-LA and a Change.org petition in January 2021 further encouraged SDI, 3HO, and their overarching Siri Singh Sahib Corporation (SSSC) board to address the issue. They established a task force to research and report findings on "Marriage Equality in Sikh Dharma" and in April 2021 distributed a "White Paper" addressing the history, status, and questions around marriage equality to all Khalsa Council members prior to their Spring meeting. The report framed the topic of marriage equality through the lens of equality and LGBTQIA+ Sikhs receiving equal access to Sikh practices as other Sikhs:

"Our community includes LGBTQ Sikhs who expect to be treated as equals and partake in the blessings of the Anand Karaj. SDI and its constituents are also part of a global Sikh community which in general does not embrace marriage equality and whose highest authority has issued an edict against same-sex marriage. This paper is intended to inform our collective conversation as we navigate these differing perspectives" (Sikh Dharma International 2021, 3).

During the April 2021 meeting, the Khalsa Council heard testimonies from LGBTQIA+ Sikhs who shared the impact of discrimination and exclusion within Sikh spaces, and the Anand Karaj. These conversations built upon ongoing efforts to discuss SDI's responsibility to respond to the institutional harm and trauma that many Sikhs experienced under prior leadership (for reasons unrelated to marriage equality). An overwhelming majority in Khalsa Council passed motions in favor of marriage equality and the ability for ministers to conduct marriages within SDI/SSSC gurdwaras. They acknowledged marriage equality as a human right. Following the April 2021 International Khalsa Council meeting, the Human Rights Commission (HRC) was established to support foundational human rights initiatives, including marriage equality for LGBTQIA+ Sikhs. Since April 2022, the HRC has been working on implementing these objectives, culminating in the June 2022 "Equality in Marriage Statement," which advocates for the inclusion and acceptance of LGBTQ and interfaith marriages within the Sikh community (Human Rights Commission 2022).

Given this history, the HRC commissioned this position paper to illustrate barriers and pathways to marriage equality. The position paper was guided by a central question, "Why can't we implement marriage equality immediately?" The position paper was written with the intent of identifying a few specific, significant areas in which Sikhs may wish to focus their efforts to overcome hurdles for marriage equality. In the rest of the introduction, we review three things: (1) the basis for seeking guidance on marriage equality today, (2) Sikhs' concerns around homonationalism and pinkwashing, and (3) some common terms we use throughout the report that may be helpful for unfamiliar readers.

**(1) Basis for Seeking Guidance on Marriage Equality: SDI, SSSC, and Revisiting Human Rights as a Sovereign Khalsa Spiritual Nation** Since the inception of 3HO-Sikh Dharma in the U.S. in the early 1970s, the community's governing body have looked to Sikh sovereignty and authority, questioning how to address differences in Sikh doctrinal interpretations and mandates. In the early 1970s, Yogi Bhajan led students to Amritsar, with many receiving amrit and choosing to live a Khalsa Sikh lifestyle. This established the "Sikh Dharma Brotherhood" (now Sikh Dharma) in the U.S., and its constitution was unanimously approved by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) in 1976. However, by 1979, the SGPC raised concerns about certain Sikh Dharma practices that differed from the normative standard they had set forth (some of which included practices of yoga, allowing women to serve as Panj Piyare, and creating their own Sikh flag). To resolve this, the SGPC recommended they seek guidance from renowned historian, honored "National Professor of Sikhism" by the Akal Takht – Bhai Sahib Sirdar Kapur Singh. He had played a significant role in the 1973 Anandpur Sahib Resolution, advocating for Sikh self-determination and Punjab sovereignty.

In April 1979, Bhai Sahib Sirdar Kapur Singh attended a Khalsa Council meeting in Los Angeles, with the proceedings described in the 3HO Foundation Newsletter "Beads of Truth" (September 1979, No.3 Vol. 2) (3HO Foundation 1979). During this meeting, he emphasized Khalsa sovereignty, noting that Guru Gobind Singh granted authority to both the Guru Granth and Guru Panth, not to any one centralized body. He argued that true authority lay with committed Sikhs who live according to Gurus' teachings and discussed the lasting impact of colonialism on Sikh leadership. He described how the British had controlled gurdwaras and how the Gurdwara Act of 1925 imposed a British-style political system on Sikh institutions, criticizing the appointment of Jathedars by the SGPC. Sirdar Kapur Singh asserted that true Jathedars should be community-elected leaders based on their knowledge and spiritual integrity, not employees drawing salaries from the SGPC.

In response to these insights, the Sikh Dharma Secretary of Religion, Ram Das Kaur, asked how to respect Sikh authority while questioning individual leaders. Sirdar Kapur Singh advised that we bow to the Akal Takhat as a concept, but not to simply obey individuals if their directives contradicted Sikh teachings.

Based on the knowledge and insights shared by Sirdar Kapur Singh, the Khalsa Council ultimately declared itself a "Sovereign Khalsa Spiritual Nation" on April 17, 1979, one which pledged their allegiance to the Guru Granth and Guru Panth (3HO Foundation 1979). This declaration aligned with Sirdar Kapur Singh's views on Sikh "double sovereignty," which integrates both political and spiritual dimensions, resisting absolutist and corrupted claims to authority (Khalsa-Baker 2024).

Today, questions persist about the role of institutional authority in Sikh life, particularly when it upholds harmful systems. For instance 3HO and Sikh Dharma have been reckoning with the abuses committed by Yogi Bhajan, community leaders, and at boarding schools in India. However, attempts at compassionate reconciliation and reparations are being undone by the governing SSSC board that aims to preserve power and Yogi Bhajan's untarnished legacy. This is why in 2021, in an effort to repair harm, Sikh Dharma revisited the question of communal sovereignty in relation to institutional authority when the Khalsa

Council voted in favor of Sikh Marriage Equality, despite the Akal Takht's resolutions against same-sex marriage (hukamnama in 2005, and reaffirmed statement in 2009).

The move to declare one's community "sovereign" reflects ongoing human rights efforts to address the constraints of institutional bodies that may uphold harmful and unjust systems embedded in (cis-hetero)-patriarchy and colonialism. Reclaiming Sikh spiritual and political sovereignty, challenges institutional practices that have been corrupted over time and promotes a more inclusive approach to Sikh leadership and community life, emphasizing the core tenets of Sikhism including equality, humility, serving those in need, and standing against injustice. When working toward institutional change, it is necessary for institutions to ask themselves whether they have been corrupted by unjust systems and continue to perpetuate harm, both to ensure trust from other community members and to end the cycles of harm.

## **(2) A Concern for Sikhs Based in Western Nations: Homonationalism and Colonialism**

It is crucial to address barriers to equality by distinguishing between genuine efforts toward inclusion and those that serve imperialist agendas. While Western and colonial nations often advocate for LGBTQIA+ inclusion, they also simultaneously engage in imperialist and violent practices against other nations, a phenomenon known as "homonationalism" and "pinkwashing." In other words, nations in the West use LGBTQIA+ rights in their nations as tools to demonstrate that they are civilized, progressive, modern, inclusive, and democratic; therefore they are moral leaders and their global actions are justified. At the same time, the actions they are often justifying are imposing an imperial and/or neo-liberal agenda onto others. Homonationalism describes these power dynamics and how they play out in decision-making processes, while pinkwashing refers to the specific media practices used to place the pro-LGBTQIA+ countries in a better light.

Because of this, people have criticized those who advocate for LGBTQIA+ inclusion from Western nations as a form of colonialism, suggesting that LGBTQIA+ inclusion is a "Western" agenda or even equating LGBTQIA+ inclusion as a type of white supremacy. In Sikh Dharma's "White Paper," the author noted how, "The use of global gay rights to legitimize the Western liberal state not only deflects attention from other human rights violations, but often redirects censure against indigenous subjectivities for which Western colonialism is actually in part responsible" (Chang 2014, 314). This dynamic complicates the push for LGBTQIA+ inclusion within the Sikh community, as it can be perceived as an external imposition rather than a genuine internal development from Sikhs who may or may not be from LGBTQIA+ backgrounds. LGBTQIA+ advocacy groups caution that Western proclamations about LGBTQIA+ rights are important but not always the solution to greater equality and inclusion because, as the "White Paper" also quoted, "One of the most effective and consistent ways of discrediting LGBTQ people and our movement is to say that they are the result of colonial and Western imposition" (AFP 2021). Instead, these advocates emphasize the importance of working with local activists in order to understand what is needed in that context. It is important to be aware of these dynamics when marriage equality is being advocated for by the majority white and Western Sikh Dharma community since it informs the types of advocacy that could be pursued.

Nevertheless, supporting LGBTQIA+ inclusion within Sikhi is not only about aligning with values that declare all humans have inalienable rights in our ever-changing contemporary contexts (parampara), but also about honoring the foundational principles of equality and justice that are central to Sikh teachings (rahit). The true spirit of Sikh sovereignty involves acknowledging and rectifying historical and contemporary injustices to create an inclusive and compassionate community and sangat.

This final point then brings attention back to the advocates and their own context. When Sikh Dharma advocates for global human rights and Sikh sovereignty, they have to take into account the reality that abuses within their own community have been inadequately addressed. Due to the lack of acknowledgement and repair on the part of the SSSC governing body, advocates of marriage equality from within Sikh Dharma must be aware of the underlying agendas of the leadership. While advocating for marriage equality is worthwhile, it is possible that people may want to be *viewed* as pro-human rights, but without fully engaging in the difficult labor of addressing the documented sexual, physical, and psychological abuses by Yogi Bhajan and community members. We name this element explicitly in this report because, just as in the case of pinkwashing, we want people to be aware that it is possible to weaponize one's "inclusive" pro-human rights agenda to whitewash and pinkwash ongoing violations.

### **(3) Key term list (Adapted from the Sikh LGBTQIA+ Oral History Project Report)**

- **Cisheteronormativity:** a pervasive system of belief that centers and naturalizes *heterosexuality* and a *binary system of assigned sex/gender* where there are two rigid, distinct ways of being: (1) assigned-male-at-birth masculine men and (2) assigned-female-at-birth feminine women (from the Gender and Sexuality Campus Center at Michigan State University). Cisheteronormativity is associated with harm when it is compulsory, or when it is enforced onto people and communities that have more expansive ways of understanding the body, spirit/soul, and Divine. Queerphobia, transphobia, cisheteropatriarchy, and misogyny are different, but related, types of harm that can result alongside and from compulsory cisheteronormativity.
- **Gender:** a concept that exists across cultures, faiths, and history to describe aspects of our human experience. A person's gender is self-identified and can be a way to describe how they are able to move through life. It is a social construct, meaning that gender has real effects on one's life *and* its definition can change because social constructs are defined by people's beliefs. A person can speak about their gender in terms of their *gender identity*, *gender attribution*, and *gender expression* (from the Gender and Sexuality Campus Center at Michigan State University).
  - One's gender identity refers to one's internal sense of self (the foundation for who you are).
  - One's gender attribution includes all the tools and things that give meaning and significance to one's identity (e.g., clothing, faith practices, foods, hair, hobbies, makeup, sports).
  - One's gender expression is all the different ways those attributes are put together on the day-to-day to show a part of one's gender identity.
- **Gender, sex, and sexuality:** these are different words with different meanings that are connected. Gender is defined in this list. Sex is the designation that refers to a person's biological, morphological, hormonal, and genetic composition; based on this composition,

doctors will assign a sex to a person when they are born and the state will legitimate that assignment on legal documents (i.e., birth certificate). Family and stewards of care will then socially officialize that assignment. Sexuality describes a person's sexual feelings, thoughts, desires, identities, values, and behaviors (from [the Gender and Sexuality Campus Center at Michigan State University](#)).

- **Casteism:** this millenia-old system refers to an historic way of organizing and ranking life across societies and cultures in which undesirable qualities and work were associated with people of specific backgrounds based on their trade (what became known as 'castes'). The system and its rank-ordering is justified through spiritual or faith-based philosophy. While Sikhi itself denounces casteism, most Sikhs may practice casteism as a type of cultural, political, and economic hierarchy that maintains a historic rank-ordering of castes.
- **Diaspora:** the Sikh diaspora refers to the groups of people who do not live in the ancestral homelands in and around Punjab/Panjab before British colonization. A large portion of this diaspora migrated at some point from the historic Punjab/Panjab region in southern Asia where Sikhi was founded. Now the diaspora includes those who migrated themselves or are now migrant-descendants.
- **Human rights:** for the purposes of this document, human rights refers to the basic aspects of social, political, and economic life that all humans should have access to and be able to act upon (e.g., food, water, housing, education, infrastructure for living)
- **Marriage and equality:** the idea that consenting adults are also guaranteed to receive the benefits and recognition of marriage, and one's gender or sexuality does not affect that ability because marriage is not limited to opposite sex relationships
- **Miseducation:** Miseducation refers to (1) knowledge that is not correct (i.e., facts) or (2) the process of learning in a way that is not correct. Commonly, miseducations are based on assumptions, social or cultural stigma, stereotypes, and fear because these factors are misrepresentations. When misrepresentations are used as facts in a learning or educating process, the learners will receive a miseducation. People may not always be aware that they are providing a miseducation or that they may have received it at some point in their life
- **Patriarchy and hetero-patriarchy:** patriarchy is a way to organize society so that people are ranked in a hierarchy, but this hierarchy is a dominating system based on gender. Specifically, patriarchy subordinates womanhood and femininity, preferring manhood and masculinity to be dominating societal roles. Those who successfully align with either womanhood or manhood are then expected to behave according to the gender regime. Heteropatriarchy refers to the aspects of this gender-based hierarchy that are associated with heteronormativity (see definition of cisheteronormativity)



# Section 1

## **Sovereignty, Colonialism, and Equality**

There is a tension between the sovereignty with which Sikhi empowers Sikhs, the equality that is guaranteed by the faith but not actualized by the people, and forms of colonialism that Sikhs and Sikhi have had to confront. Contemporary topics on LGBTQIA+ inclusion sit within this tension because Sikhs and non-Sikhs from LGBTQIA+ backgrounds are not always extended honor nor respected for their sovereignty. Further barriers to actualizing the equality guaranteed by Sikhi among Sikhs include systems of patriarchy that affect not only LGBTQIA+ people but people of all genders.

Today, Sikhs across the globe are working to address the negative implications of colonization and its colonial logics on Sikh practices, authorities, and institutions. In an effort to actualize the spiritual integrity and equality professed in Sikh teachings, many Sikhs are working to decolonize Sikh philosophy, practice, and the institutions. These Sikhs argue that the logics that people practice to manage these institutions authorize particular interpretations of Sikhi, often within western, Christian, colonial, and patriarchal logics. Contemporary topics on LGBTQIA+ inclusion sit within this tension and power-knowledge dichotomy.

Like other communities and nations targeted by colonization, Sikhs have resisted, remade, inherited, and internalized colonial logics, which have influenced religious and social practices, institutions of authority, religious leadership and governance. During British colonization of India and the subcontinent, particularly through colonial administrators and Christian missionaries, (1858-1947), new 'religious' categories and centralized 'religious' governance were imposed on Sikh institutions. Efforts in the late 1800s and early 1900s culminated in new ways of managing Sikh relations, beliefs, and people, including the creation of bodies like the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC).

To gain freedom in some ways from colonization, different 'religious' reform movements, often spearheaded by colonial-educated indigenous elites, sprang up across the subcontinent at the time. Leaders in these movements found success with colonial officials when they used and adopted the English and Christian tools and logics to prove their philosophical-theological rationality and ethical civility within British Christian colonial constructs. While some indigenous elites may have wanted to maintain colonial rule, others utilized western constructs to gain freedom from colonial rule in the creation of an independent Indian nation.

During colonization, a new class of Sikhs educated within English Christian Missionary schools, recognized a need to establish Sikhi as a 'modern' and 'monotheistic' religion. To this group of leaders, doing so would enable the Sikh panth to be treated like a 'civilized' community by the British Christian colonizers. While they may or may not have wanted colonial rule, they did not draw on the liberatory ethos of Sikhi to overthrow colonialism in the subcontinent, as some of their contemporaries sought. These religious reformists named themselves the "Singh Sabha" (Sikh Movement) and had different bases and factions across the Punjab colony. By the end of the nineteenth century, some had provided

another re-interpretation and re-formation of Sikh philosophy, identity, and devotional practice, and this time within Christian colonial constructs. In these frameworks, their interpretations helped solidify a new 'religious' framework "Sikhism" that would be seen by the colonizers as an independent and 'rational' religion, like other 'modern religions' on the global stage. Adopting these reforms, Sikhs were perceived as modern and civilized and had a 'right' to sovereignty and freedom from British rule.

The creation of the SGPC during the colonial-era in 1925 further developed an official Sikh Code of Conduct, the Sikh Rahit Maryada (SRM) in 1945. It coalesced and adopted certain guidelines from historical rahit-namas while also erasing those aspects of lived practice that were deemed "transgressive" within the new colonial religious construct of "Sikhism." Even as the SRM had a basis in Sikh history and philosophy, the ways Sikh leadership chose to re-interpret Sikh history and philosophy into the official SRM was not necessarily based in Sikh history and philosophy. Some traditional practices that were viewed as too 'fluid' or 'open' were replaced with new normative standards and exclusionary boundaries. While religious boundaries helped to create a clearly defined Sikh identity and guide against open-ended interpretations, it has also led to the loss of traditional knowledge, practices, and spirituality deemed too fluid or transgressive by the newly established religious norms.

Within this colonial context of the early 1900s, Sikhs adapted. They effectively removed elements perceived as being outside of the newly established codes of Khalsa-Sikh normativity from Sikh practices and institutions. The work of one author of this report (Dr. Nirinjan Kaur Khalsa-Baker) addresses how these changes have created exclusion within Sikh practices like kirtan. For example, working to construct a 'pure' and homogenous Sikh identity, the colonial era Gurdwara Act of 1925 removed non-Khalsa Mahants and Udasis from managing the Harmandir Sahib and other historic Gurdwaras. They also removed the Muslim rababi musicians from doing kirtan in all Sikh Gurdwaras. In their place, the Khalsa-run Gurdwara management committee, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) was established in 1920, and it was determined that only male Khalsa Sikhs could perform kirtan at Harmandir Sahib and other historic Gurdwaras. Today, all the historic Gurdwaras in Punjab are managed by the SGPC while those in Delhi are managed by the Delhi Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (DGPC). These institutional bodies also run some of the Gurmat vidyala schools that train and employ the next generation of male religious authorities, the ragis and granthis within the historic gurdwaras in and around Punjab, the diaspora, and Harmandir Sahib (Khalsa-Baker 2019). They are responsible for transmitting Sikhi to their local sangats and leading ceremonies, like the Anand Karaj.

Dr. Khalsa-Baker conducted an interview with the late respected Principal Dyal Singh (1934–2012) of the Gurmat Vidyala at Rakab Ganj Gurdwara, Delhi. He noted how the shifting of authority to the SGPC during British colonization has negatively impacted the transmission, integrity, and preservation of traditional Sikh knowledge and practices.

"In 1925, the SGPC was created and began to manage the gurdwaras, including centers such as Harmandir Sahib and Tarn Taran, which they took over from Mahants [Udasis and Nirmalas]. The election system came in the Dharma. These people had no idea about Gurbani gyan [knowledge of Gurbani] or about sangeet gyan [knowledge of music], but they were all about money and

power. They didn't pay much attention (dhyān) to the Gurbani or music in the Guru's style (sangeet di gur shailee). The older ustads [respected teachers] passed away and there weren't any new educated people to take over." (Interview by Nirinjan Kaur with Principal Dyal Singh, translated from Punjabi, April 2, 2011)

While the first-generation members of the SGPC maintained a high level of spiritual integrity with regards to patronage, pedagogy, and scholarship of Sikh knowledge (vidya), over time the SGPC became dominated by political agendas. As elected officials, they no longer maintained nor invested in heritage knowledge (gyan). Instead they functioned within the western constructs of a "religious institution." (Khalsa-Baker 2019)

"[Today] the Gurdwaras are getting money from the donations, they are not using it towards teaching or doing research. The puratan maryada [tradition bearers] used to love sangeet, do research, and practice on their own. This is all over now. The people who are still around the Gurdwaras haven't done the whole study the way they used to do it and they don't know much about sangeet or raag gyan [spiritual-musical knowledge]." (Interview by Nirinjan Kaur with Principal Dyal Singh, translated from Punjabi, April 2, 2011)

This same sentiment was expressed by twelfth generation Sikh Kirtan musician Bhai Kultar Singh (son of the late Bhai Avtar Singh whose family has preserved and transmitted Sikh spiritual-musical knowledge since the time of Guru Arjan Dev Ji). He highlighted the systemic issues within the SGPC. He noted that those who have traditional knowledge are not able to change the system, and those who have been given the power to make institutional change have not been educated within the pre-colonial GurSikh knowledge systems (parampara), and therefore their authority is being guided by colonial logics (Khalsa-Baker 2019).

"The main trouble we have today, is that the people who know are not able to change it, and the people who can change, don't know anything. So the main blame I would give is to the system of people who come into control, controlling our entire community. The main reason is that we have elections instead of selections ... Since we have begun to elect our candidates, this problem started, the downfall of Sikh values started from that day." (Bhai Kultar Singh at Parliament of World's Religions, Salt Lake City, Utah, panel "Locating Gender Equality in Sikh Devotional Music" organized by Nirinjan Kaur Khalsa-Baker, October 19, 2015.)

From the report's perspective, this colonial history and its effects on Sikh practices, institutions, and leadership continue to create a tension within contemporary Sikh contexts - between the sovereignty with which Sikhi empowers Sikhs and the ability to actualize the equality that Sikhi guarantees *within* Sikh institutions.

## Section 2

### **(De)Colonizing Sikh Traditions of Authority: Parampara, Maryada, Rahit**

Contemporary efforts to decolonize Sikhi from its discriminatory practices, institutional barriers, colonial and patriarchal logics are crucial for achieving greater equality within the community. However there is resistance from entrenched leadership in gurdwara boards, SGPC, and Akal Takht, for example, that seeks to maintain the status quo by appealing to 'tradition.' This report questions what "tradition" means in these defenses, who is authorizing the use of tradition, and what values and systems are being upheld in defense of "tradition." In Sikh contexts, tradition is understood through three distinct yet interrelated concepts: **parampara**, **maryada**, and **rahit**.<sup>1</sup> Each of these concepts plays a unique role in shaping Sikh practices and interpretations. We interpret them in the following ways:

**Parampara** refers to tradition that is passed down over time, most commonly from teacher to student (guru-shishya parampara). It includes the transmission of living traditions of knowledge, education, and practices from one person or generation to another. Due to its living nature, it has the potential to be dynamic and adaptable, evolving to meet the needs of the community. There is no inherent normative (good/bad) meaning attached to tradition, though it can be used in positive and negative ways based on how knowledge and practices are taught, learned, and interpreted by teachers, ancestors, or within lived experience.

For instance, the Gurbani Sangeet parampara encompasses the musical heritage, kirtan practices, and spiritual insights passed down by knowledgeable experts through generations of Sikh musicians, scholars, memory-bearers, and mystics since the time of the Sikh Gurus. This is *learned* knowledge from *lived* experience of spiritual wisdom. In this way, it is a living knowledge system that is both diverse and consistent with a core logic linked to Gurbani - rooted in dignity, respect, humility, service and equality based on interconnected and pluriversal Oneness, Ik Onkaar. It offers an approach to Sikhi that is dynamic, creative, and adaptable, evolving to meet the needs of communities, and it is not arbitrary nor without significance.

Conversely, a parampara can also transmit harm when the power imbalance between teacher and student leads to abuse or when teachings are interpreted to justify harm, hierarchy, exclusion, and oppression. For instance, learned knowledge can be passed down over time by those who seek power rather than the living wisdom of the Guru Granth and Guru Panth. Alternatively, the learned knowledge could be based on harmful stereotypes or on partial understandings that were accurate in their time, but have since both been recognized as inaccurate or misleading. In these instances, such a parampara perpetuates ideas and practices entrenched in harmful and discriminatory systems that the Gurus sought to eliminate, such as patriarchy and casteism. An exclusive form of parampara stifles possibilities for continued

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<sup>1</sup> The interpretation of parampara, maryada, and rahit was taught to Dr. Khalsa-Baker by Bhai Baldeep Singh, 13th generation gurbani sangeet exponent.

learning and reinforces social injustices based on inequalities in society, deviating from the inclusive and egalitarian principles foundational to Sikh teachings.

In other words, parampara can nurture many different types of beliefs and practices.

**Maryada** refers to established traditions, customs, conventions, and norms institutionalized by political or religious authorities. Unlike parampara, maryada is often perceived as *static and unchangeable* by those in power. The *Mahan Kosh* describes it as a “seema” or boundary. For instance, the modern kirtan maryada at the Golden Temple, excludes women, Muslim rababis, and non-Amritdhari Sikhs from performing Gurbani Kirtan in the inner sanctum. It is justified by authorities as an unalterable tradition despite its relatively recent colonial-era institutionalization in the Sikh Rahit Maryada. Maryada is a code or prescription that is assumed to be unchangeable by those in power, who do not allow for changing contexts over time.

**Rahit**, on the other hand, refers to the foundational *ethical and spiritual guidelines* set forth by the Sikh Gurus, in Gurbani, taught by knowledgeable memory bearers, and enacted in lived practice. It is fundamentally rooted in the Sikh concept, Ik Onkaar - an inclusive and pluriversal Oneness that calls Sikhs to humility, selfless service, and standing against injustices. Any interpretation or practice that contradicts the Guru’s rahit is viewed as a deviation from core Sikh teachings. Rahit is considered a core of Sikh identity and practice and colloquially is used to refer to one’s “way of life” as a result.

Rahit in more popular understandings, combines the lived elements of parampara based in social-spiritual practices with the institutional elements of maryada based in leadership’s interpretations of historic social life. In these instances, Sikhs may refer to rahit as living in alignment with Ik Onkaar through a parampara and maryada they have been taught, know, and integrate into their daily life.

The tension between parampara, maryada and rahit is evident in contemporary issues within the Sikh community, such as the exclusion of women and LGBTQIA+ people from certain practices in Sikh spaces. While Sikhs in power use maryada to justify maintaining the status quo, Sikhs differently appeal to the Guru’s rahit to support their positions. Some highlight the need for practices that uphold the fundamental Sikh values of equality and inclusivity, while others highlight the need to preserve maryada as they know it. These different understandings of “tradition” are at the heart of ongoing debates around how Sikhs can be inclusive on topics of gender and sexual orientation in Sikh practices, revealing the patriarchal and colonial influences that have shaped modern interpretations, beliefs, and practices.

For example, when Sikhs in power appeal to an “unchangeable maryada” it maintains cultures of exclusion such as patriarchy and cis-hetero-sexism that affects all Sikhs. The perceived inability to change “maryada” has now become the official SGPC reason for why women should continue to be barred from performing Gurbani Kirtan in Harmandir Sahib. The Akal Takht jathedar publicly affirmed this stance that the “kirtan maryada at the Golden Temple is centuries old and cannot be altered easily” (Khalsa-Baker 2019, 269). This statement demonstrates that while maryada may be viewed as “unchangeable,” it actually *has changed* over time. An example can be seen in the Gurbani Kirtan

tradition where Muslim rababis were initially permitted and then barred from kirtan seva at Harmandir Sahib. While maryada is not “easily altered,” Sikhs can reconsider its continued significance to address the needs of the time while also upholding rahit. For example, there were huge debates about whether to install electric lights at Harmandir Sahib, or live-stream Gurbani kirtan into homes, with concerns over the loss of traditional practices or transgression of orthopraxic conventions. However, in both cases, maryada was able to be altered taking into account the contexts and circumstances of the times. In other words, while maryada is often *perceived as static and unchangeable* by those in power, and justified by authoritative leadership and institutional officials as unalterable to resist opportunities for change, there have been cases where Sikhs have adapted maryada to allow for changing contexts and greater inclusion.

Historically “tradition” has been interpreted through patriarchal logics by those in power. In a 2017 article in *Times of India*, Balvinder Kaur Saundh (chair of Sikh Women Alliance, UK) stated, “Guru Nanak and our religion gave us equality. It is the men who have interpreted it to control our religious scriptures” (Khalsa-Baker 2019, 269). Men have historically served as Sikh ‘ritual experts’ – granthis, kathakars, ragis, members of the SGPC, and Akal Takht jathedars – giving them the authority to interpret the Guru Granth Sahib and create and maintain maryada, such as religious normative prescriptions like the Sikh rahit Maryada. In related debates, while different points are made, Sikhs who seek to bar *both* interfaith and same-sex marriages use these same patriarchal and exclusionary logics.

We have highlighted nuanced understandings of tradition, authority, and sovereignty, that can help Sikhs to challenge oppressive notions of power that restrict religious spaces to men or dominating caste individuals. The framework of parampara, maryada, and rahit can be helpful to identify and address patriarchal practices, institutions, and logics that affect LGBTQIA+ folks.

From the perspective of parampara, maryada, and rahit, the report argues that patriarchal norms and beliefs can infiltrate teachings passed down through generations (parampara) and thereby affect how those teachings are institutionalized as normative or “correct” codes of conduct (maryada) and how Sikh ethical teachings (rahit) are interpreted and lived out in practice. Even though maryada and rahit are often considered unchangeable, it is a Sikh’s duty as a student to examine what type of knowledge or tradition they are receiving and preserving.

## Section 3

### **Patriarchal parampara that produces patriarchal maryada**

When parampara is influenced by patriarchal norms, it can lead to the creation of a **patriarchal maryada** (code of conduct) that perpetuates gender biases and restricts the participation and agency of women and other marginalized groups. A **patriarchal parampara** arises when miseducation is perpetuated by those who do not adhere to the egalitarian principles of Gurbani and the Guru Panth (living ethical practice). Instead, they transmit ideas and practices entrenched in harmful and discriminatory systems that the Gurus sought to dismantle, such as patriarchy and casteism. This type of **patriarchal parampara** can lead to the establishment of a **patriarchal maryada**, which restricts progress and reinforces social inequality. Because paramparas are based on learned and inherited knowledge adapted into one's life, people can continuously update a patriarchal parampara to maintain power while claiming the maryada has been unchanged.

### **Patriarchal Maryada in the Context of Gurbani and Anand Karaj**

Gurbani promotes a view of spirituality that transcends gender and focuses on the unity and equality of all beings who contain the light of the One beyond and within all forms. Sikh practitioners are called to live a life of spiritual union that goes beyond physical and societal constraints. This perspective challenges patriarchy and reaffirms the pluriversal and all-encompassing vision of the Sikh Gurus.

Dr. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh (Professor of Religious Studies at Colby College), in her book *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent* (Singh 1993), explores the embodiment of the feminine in the daily lives of Sikhs. She points to the fact that 'bani' (hymns or divine word) is feminine in gender. When Sikh practitioners recite, sing, and meditate on these hymns, they are engaging with the Guru-as-bani, embodying a feminine divine consciousness in thought, speech, and action. She adds that the male authors of Gurbani adopt a feminine subjectivity through their poetic voices, describing themselves as brides yearning for union with the Divine, their beloved Groom. This poetic code-switching underscores one way in which the Sikh Gurus experience themselves as the "bride," at the same time male and feminine. This perspective transcends biological and temporal binaries, suggesting that the Gurus perceived the body as fundamentally feminine. Such an understanding goes beyond mere questions of equality and touches upon the sovereignty of Sikh spiritual identity.

Union in marriage as elucidated in Gurbani transforms the individual body through a deep spiritual connection where both partners embody the One light in two bodies. This teaching promotes the idea that each body, irrespective of its gender, can become the bride, whose goal it is to experience the Blissful Union (Anand Karaj) with the One divine light, that is genderless, beyond form. This is one understanding that can emerge from a non-patriarchal, egalitarian parampara.

The authority and reverence given to the feminine principle in Sikh scripture has the power to challenge and transform patriarchal norms in social life. However, scholars have pointed out that promoting feminine principles does not necessarily translate into honoring the feminine in lived experience. Daniel

Boyarin (Professor Emeritus of Talmudic Culture at University of California, Berkeley), in his work "Feminization and Its Discontents: Torah Study as a System for the Domination of Women," argues that "male self-refashioning has consequences for women" by creating a "kinder, gentler patriarchy" that still remains non-egalitarian (Boyarin 1997, 157). Similarly, in Sikh practice, if the egalitarian feminine principle is only symbolically represented through the singing or reciting gurbani, but not enacted in everyday practice, then Sikhs continue to ensnare the feminine principle in a patriarchal maryada system.

For example, the Sikh Rahit Maryada (SRM) established in 1950 by the SGPC uses language that limits the union in marriage to a man and a woman (Chapter XI, Article XVIII), reflecting a time-bound decision rather than an inclusive understanding of the Anand Karaj. For instance, Sikhs' common justification is that the Anand Karaj – as a spiritual ceremony – is not documented as having been performed for same-sex couples by the Gurus themselves; to them, if the union were permissible, then the Gurus would have addressed it. Yet, Gurbani's feminine principle of the bride-groom is also not considered as the Guru's indicating permissibility in these types of debates. This interpretive choice is based in a patriarchal parampara – in which only a Sikh man and woman can be united through the Anand Karaj – that was then formalized into a maryada by SGPC officials. The language choice in the SRM underscores how a patriarchal parampara influences the interpretation and enforcement of patriarchal maryada. When Sikhs leave this unquestioned and unchallenged, they create barriers to marriage equality and full participation of LGBTQIA+ individuals within the Sikh community. While this report does not advocate for a specific form, model, or framework for the Anand Karaj, this analysis does show that it would be valuable for Sikhs to consider whether *existing* Anand Karaj practices are based in patriarchal understandings.

### **Patriarchal concepts and controls**

The patriarchal influence extends to how bodies are perceived and controlled within the community. Contemporary interpretations of maryada often involve controlling and protecting women's bodies from the male gaze, which views them simultaneously as sexual, pure, and polluted. This perspective restricts women's participation in gurdwara seva, such as leading kirtan, carrying the palki sahib, serving as Panj Piyare, or isnan seva inside Harmandir Sahib. Institutional officials and gatekeepers justify these patriarchal restrictions to women's voices and presence under the pretext of maintaining tradition and security. In doing so, they evade the importance of the male lustful gaze and assumptions about female reproduction as polluted.

Patriarchal authorities acting as gatekeepers to the Guru's court (gurdwara) continue to silence those voicing concern about the disconnect between the current patriarchal maryada and the Guru's rahit (as found in Gurbani) that promotes equality in lived practice. The dissonance between inclusive Gurmat philosophy and exclusive ideologies and practices creates what Natasha Behl (Associate Professor of Social and Behavioral Sciences) describes as "exclusionary inclusion" among Sikhs (Behl 2014). Exclusionary inclusion impacts women and women's bodies because they are controlled and confined within domestic life and the private sphere, limiting their participation and agency in religious and public life. This exclusionary inclusion can also be seen within the context of LGBTQIA+ folks in Sikh gurdwara



spaces. Sikhs have gained more awareness and acceptance of LGBTQIA+ folks, acknowledging the inclusive philosophy of the Sikh Gurus, yet due to historical patriarchal practices and customs (parampara and maryada), continue to discriminate against LGBTQIA+ folks in Sikh spaces.

## Section 4

### Miseducation

In this section of the report, we continue thinking about a patriarchal parampara from the prior section and shift the focus to ask, how could a patriarchal parampara influence Sikhs' understandings of LGBTQIA+ topics and inclusion? We argue that this parampara produces a miseducation of gender and sexuality. Miseducation refers to (1) knowledge that is not correct (i.e., facts) or (2) the process of learning in a way that is not correct. Commonly, miseducations are based on assumptions, social or cultural stigma, stereotypes, and fear because these factors are misrepresentations. When misrepresentations are used as facts in a learning or educating process, the learners will receive a miseducation. People may not always be aware that they are providing a miseducation or that they may have received it at some point in their life.

We believe it is helpful to think of the current debates around LGBTQIA+ inclusion through this lens of miseducation, as well, rather than only using a lens of ignorance or people not having enough information. We do this for a few reasons. Miseducations do not have to be intentional, but when they happen unconsciously or through formal institutions, like gurdwara programs or Khalsa schools, miseducations can have huge implications. Over time, miseducations can teach people to believe that a misrepresentation is reality or truth. Miseducations cannot be addressed simply by giving people new information (new facts) because miseducating people is a process, and therefore re-learning will also be a process. Miseducation also aligns with reminders in Sikhi that Sikhs should pay attention to what they are learning and teaching about the material world and not to be misled by false representations in this material world.

For example, a patriarchal parampara can be based on different concepts, such as honor, justice, respect, love, modesty, or violence, but what makes it patriarchal is that the tradition (parampara) is used to control people and society in order to create a hierarchical, dominating regime based on gender. Specifically, a patriarchal parampara becomes a patriarchal maryada that subordinates womanhood and femininity, preferring manhood and masculinity to be in dominating societal roles; those who successfully align with either womanhood or manhood are then expected to behave according to the gender regime. Those who fail to successfully align with either womanhood or manhood are commonly subjected to discrimination, removal, erasure, or eradication. For example, as one of the authors of this report found in her research (Khalsa-Baker 2019),

A Punjabi male's izzat is affected by their female relations whose 'value is generally associated with notions of honour ... modesty or propriety (sharam)' (Jakobsh 2014, 601). Jakobsh states that 'for this reason, as in all male-dominated societies, mechanisms of social control are firmly gendered' (602). In these cases, to uphold a family's izzat, women's purity must be 'protected' by controlling their bodies, actions and voices.

While not all Sikhs are Punjabi, Sikh institutions are heavily informed by the cultural context of Punjab since Punjab holds significant historical, ancestral, and heritage meaning for Sikhs. Thus, the concept of izzat as defined above would be an example of a patriarchal value that if used to teach others about Sikhs, womanhood, manhood, femininity, or masculinity, would result in a miseducation of gender and sexuality. In this example, a patriarchal parampara would teach that societies should be dominated by men, women's purity must be protected, and women's bodies are the focus of social control. These beliefs would then become institutionalized as normative within a maryada.

While we can identify the patriarchal values in this example clearly, they are not always directly obvious when they are put into practice. A straightforward example of a patriarchal parampara producing a miseducation is how the sangat in Darbar Sahib is split between two genders. It is unclear where and when this practice emerged, but as eleventh generation Hazoori Ragi Bhai Kultar Singh shared in an interview when discussing gender in general:

in Gurdwaras where one side is Bibian and one side is Gents. I think this is something new. If you go to any of the historical Gurdwaras in India, Darbar Sahib, Akal Takhat, Anandpur Sahib, Hazoor Sahib, there is no discrimination like that. People are sitting in whatever way they want to sit. There is no particular side which is given to ladies and gents. So this is something new. I don't know who has started this, but certainly there should be no discrimination. (Khalsa-Baker 2019, 260)

Even though Bhai Kultar Singh could not say that patriarchal values were the reason that people were segregated by gender in Gurdwaras, he shows that questionable practices can be perpetuated if we do not ask how and why we practice what we do as Sikhs. If we do not seek to understand our practices in our gurdwaras in order to find a greater understanding for why we do what we do and why we believe what we believe, then we can also ultimately justify a miseducation and become embedded within this miseducation. Therefore, it becomes very important *today* for Sikhs to identify if any type of miseducation began in the past and might be occurring in the present.

One common source of miseducation in Sikh and Punjabi history was colonizers implementing their interpretations of faith, gender, and sexuality onto Sikh and Punjabi communities and sangats. For example, the Sikh Dharma International (SDI) White Paper, entitled "Marriage Equality in Sikh Dharma" (Sikh Dharma International 2021), shares insights from Dr. Amy Bhatt (Associate Professor of Gender and Women's studies at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County):

"As the British empire grew more powerful in the Indian subcontinent in the early 19th century, so did their ideas about culture, society and law. Viewing local notions of sexuality as barbaric, British officials imposed Western, Judeo-Christian sexual norms on colonial subjects."<sup>59</sup> (Bhatt 2018)

Specifically, when India's Supreme Court was considering repealing a colonial-era law criminalizing homosexuality (i.e., Section 377), commentators said that India was catching up to the Western world.

But, as historian Harbans Mukhia argued in 2018, homosexuality was illegalized by the British when they began enforcing Section 377 in 1861:

The British brought their own rules to India, including Section 377 which banned homosexuality and made it a criminal act. This law was enforced by them but it didn't conform with India's attitude toward homosexuality. It was more to do with their Christian belief systems.”<sup>58</sup> (Pandey 2018)

This is particularly ironic because colonial officials implemented this legal homophobia for the purpose of colonization, but now these same Western nations often champion LGBTQIA+ rights to justify their own imperial agendas today. Yet, when the Supreme Court in India did repeal Section 377, the response from Sikh institutions (i.e., the Akal Takht) was to maintain the ban for Sikh sangats, not to decolonize Sikhs. In 2020, when an officiant performed a non-heterosexual union in a Gurdwara in Sacramento, California, the Akal Takht responded with disciplinary action against the officiant for performing the union and for how it was performed (Sikh Dharma International 2021). But, this was not an entirely new response from the Akal Takht since it has been formally against non-heterosexual unions since at least 2005. At the time, the Akal Takht Jathedar Singh Sahib Giani Joginder Singh Vedanti, issued a hukamnama in 2005 saying such non-heterosexual unions could not occur in Sikh tradition, that they were “an ‘anti-Gurmat’ trend that had no place in Sikhism and stated that it was not permitted under the Sikh Code of Conduct, or *rahit Maryada*” (Sikh Dharma International 2021, 5). More specifically, he shared his reasoning that revealed both a miseducation that he received about the topics of gender and sexuality, and a very patriarchal parampara informing this position. The 2005 hukamnama stated (emphasis added by authors of this report):

For Sikhs all around the world it is well known that there is no established place in the Sikh *rahit Maryada* for gay marriage. *Gay Marriage is a sickness of the mind. Gay marriage is against nature, which isn't even accepted by animals or birds. Now in breaking up family relations and marriages and instead of the welfare of humanity this is a sign of wiping out humanity.* Sikh Sangats should not get overzealous and have a tendency towards this and no Gurdwaras should have any gay marriages or have a connection with them with Anand Karaj or with Dharmic ceremony and no anti- Gurmat functions should be accepted. We need firm resolve to stay in the highest Sikh Dharma ideals and Sikh sangats are encouraged to stay with the ideology of the Siri Guru Granth with strength/steadfastness *for the benefit of humanity* hold this character/standard and be blessed with happiness by the Guru. (Sikh Dharma International 2021, 68).

The Jathedar and Akal Takht provide no actual basis in Gurmat for their position in this hukamnama other than alluding to *rahit Maryada* and general knowledge. The Sikh *rahit Maryada* they reference is the one that they have overseen since 1925 after the colonial-era Sikh Gurdwara Act altered Sikh tradition and gave governing authority over gurdwaras and Sikhs to a popularly elected central Sikh board. Furthermore, the Akal Takht parrots patently inaccurate statements about homosexuality – “sickness of the mind”, “against nature”, “isn't even accepted by animals or birds” – and then blames

LGBTQIA+ peoples for “breaking up family relations” and “wiping out humanity”. While LGBTQIA+ identities were once considered psychological disorders between 1952 and 1973 in the United States, they have since been re-classified by these same institutions. Furthermore, LGBTQIA+ identities are not classified as disorders, but as natural parts of human existence. In fact, research into animals has shown a great amount of diversity in sexuality and reproduction, with homosexuality being present in over 1,500 species, and over 51 species of primates (Gómez, González-Megías, and Verdú 2023). And finally, the claim that homosexuality is breaking up the family presumes that the family only exists in Sikhi and rahit Maryada for the purposes of reproduction. Even in the basic understanding of the concept of *grist jeevan* (honest living), the family exists in service to society and uplifting the disadvantaged; this is not contingent on any family member's reproductive fertility or on whether they are homosexual. Finally, the claim of homosexuality breaking up the family is patriarchal because this is the Akal Takht denouncing homosexuality in order to further control people’s bodies in Sikh spaces, particularly women’s bodies. According to the Akal Takht’s logic, if homosexuality is a threat to the family and reproduction, then homosexuality can be a threat to women because it does not let them reproduce by finding a male partner, and it is a threat to men because it leads men to seek male partnership over female partnership. Though the Akal Takht does not say that directly, the concern around homosexuality “wiping out humanity” indicates a very active concern over female reproduction. Therefore, the Akal Takht’s 2005 hukamnama, as written and explained, is functionally no different than the colonial era law instituted by the British through colonization. Hence, the hukamnama is inaccurate based on Gurmat because Gurmat does not limit the family’s function to reproduction, and it is patriarchal and *inaccurate about non-Sikh specific topics*, such as homosexuality. Furthermore, it is inaccurate to imply that all homosexual families do not live in grist jivan since there is evidence that shows homosexual families do live in grist jivan. Thus, this hukamnama serves to continue a miseducation about gender and sexuality, while also taking rights away from a specific population of Sikhs and attempting to deny them their sovereignty.

The Akal Takht reaffirmed this position in 2009 when the Delhi High Court ruled that prohibitions on same-sex relations were unconstitutional (Sikh Dharma International 2021). The Jathedar revealed how Sikh institutions had been organizing to enforce their ban since 2005. The SDI “White Paper” summarized that to the Jathedar Giani Gurbachan Singh, “gay marriages are not acceptable in Sikhism and have no place in Gurmat, and that the five Sikh high priests have issued strict directions to all gurdwaras across the globe to abide by the edict against same-sex marriage” (Sikh Dharma International 2021, 5).

While the Akal Takht can continue issuing hukamnamas based on miseducations, Sikhs themselves are challenging this miseducation in different ways. For example, the 2005 hukamnama alluded to a “common knowledge” among Sikhs that homosexual marriage has no place in Sikh practice. But this is not necessarily the case anymore, if it even was in 2005. The Sikh Research Institute published a report in 2020 based on a non-representative survey to the Sikh diaspora to better understand their knowledge on gender and sexuality. In the report, Sikhs

outlined a clear understanding that lust and sex are not synonymous — importantly, neither are sex and sexuality. There was also a clear consensus that Sikh institutions must play some role in providing nonjudgmental support and resources to Sikhs of all gender identities and sexual orientations. (Sikh Research Institute 2020, 5).

Importantly, by understanding lust and sex as *not* synonymous, these Sikhs show a different type of education, one that does not align with the Akal Takht Jathedars, and one that does not operate on patriarchal values. For the Sikhs that responded to the Sikh Research Institute’s survey, they were able to distinguish between sex, sexuality, and lust. This question was asked because it is common for many people – Sikh and non-Sikh – to think of these terms as equivalent. For Sikhs, it is critical to see them as different because, as the Sikh Research Institute report shared, this deeper understanding also helped them to better understand some of the nuances in Sikhi. For example, by understanding sex, sexuality, and lust as different concepts, Sikhs can understand that:

“Bani clarifies that no one is free from... lust, not even those who claim to have conquered it through asceticism... those who identify with IkOankar (One Universal Integrative Force, or 1Force) overcome lust (land on the world ocean’s shore). ...Again, lust affects all people, regardless of their standing, but it is within spiritual company, that fear of lust is eliminated” (Sikh Research Institute 2020, 7).

This interpretation does not lean on a miseducation of gender and sexuality and it is grounded in Sikhi itself. These two elements directly contrast the Akal Takht’s rationale in the 2005 hukamnama, which vaguely alluded to same-sex marriages being “anti-Gurmat” and asserted scientific inaccuracies. By leaning on a parampara that is not based in miseducation, but one based in a contextualized understanding of Gurbani, then Sikhs could become closer to the Guru’s teachings:

Although classically religious moral pronouncements tend to fall on extreme ends of the spectrum [right versus wrong], Bani transcends binaries and classifications of the sacred and the profane; instead, it encourages active engagement with the world while warning against indulgence... The word in the Guru Granth Sahib for indulgence (Kam, or lust) is often translated in popular English translations as “love of fornication” or “attachment to sex” specifically. This translation narrows the message of Bani in favor of clear moral pronouncements and rules (Sikh Research Institute 2020, 8).

In other words, miseducations are important to identify and challenge because they can be actual hurdles that Sikhs must overcome in order to understand Gurmat more deeply. Furthermore, if miseducations are not challenged, then Bani can be used to control other people’s behaviors and bodies in potentially harmful ways.

From this perspective, when Sikhs challenge and abandon their miseducations around topics, including gender, sexuality, and LGBTQIA+ inclusion, we are able to focus on our relationships with the

Guru/Jot/Baani. When we think of lust separately from sexuality or sex, we can see that lust is something that affects all Sikhs when it comes to overindulgence, which is:

Anything that distracts one from that connection and Identification [with IkOankar]... is classified as the overindulgence in pleasure with a large opportunity cost that Bani warns against. It is not just sexual pleasure, which can be the problem. If any of the various pleasures of life that are manifested are taken to the extreme, one will not have room for Identification with IkOankar. If one is overly indulgent, too busy enjoying life's pleasures, one will not have room to enjoy divinity (Sikh Research Institute 2020, 12).

Though both the 2005 hukamnama and the Sikh Research Institute report seek to find deeper connection with Guru ji through Gurmat, they use different parampara to arrive at their conclusions. While the Akal Takht used a patriarchal parampara grounded in miseducation of gender and sexuality to define reproduction as a Sikh family's and marriage's purpose, the Sikh Research Institute used an inclusive parampara grounded in an accurate education of gender and sexuality.

## Section 5

### **Patriarchal Parampara and Maryada: Purity and Pollution**

In this section of the report, we continue thinking about a patriarchal parampara from the prior section. We shift the focus to ask, how could a patriarchal parampara influence Sikhs' understandings of purity and pollution, and could these understandings of purity and pollution be related to how Sikhs treat LGBTQIA+ topics and inclusion today? We argue that a parampara, which produces a miseducation of gender and sexuality, can also be based in understandings of purity and pollution that continue to subordinate womanhood and femininity (patriarchal). These understandings of purity and pollution become a hurdle to full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ Sikhs because Sikhs adopt miseducation when they consider LGBTQIA+ Sikhs as impure and polluted. If LGBTQIA+ Sikhs are considered impure and polluted, then people can feel more empowered to exclude and marginalized LGBTQIA+ Sikhs. Sometimes in conversations, Sikhs can separate gender and sexuality and think that topics of gender equality are distinct from and unrelated to issues of sexual equality. But it is fundamental to remember that LGBTQIA+ inclusion works alongside gender equality because it enables people to be treated fairly and not based on stereotypes and miseducations about gender and sexuality.

We review one publicly documented example of this phenomenon in Gurbani sangeet. We did this because Gurbani sangeet is an important part of Sikh life, there are open conversations about gender equality in this context, it is a publicly-oriented part of Sikh life that represents Sikh values in practice to Sikhs and non-Sikhs, and it is a research speciality for one of this report's authors (i.e., Dr. Nirinjan Kaur Khalsa-Baker). Even though we focus on this context, we emphasize that we cannot describe the full range of experiences with purity and pollution in Gurbani sangeet or Sikh spaces. We use this one context to help readers consider other contexts in which a patriarchal parampara may not be as easily observed. We discuss this context because it is helpful in illustrating how ideas of purity and pollution are used to exclude women broadly, which contributes to LGBTQIA+ Sikhs' exclusion (e.g., queer and trans women, most directly). While not all of the examples have to do with sexuality or LGBTQIA+ inclusion directly, the context does relate to gender. When it comes to LGBTQIA+ inclusion and gender equality, homosexual and trans women's gender-based experiences are incredibly important to consider, for instance, alongside how people of any gender are treated based on stereotypes of femininity and masculinity. By considering these experiences with assumed gender norms, we can better see how patriarchy emerges in people's lives.

A common Sikh space where a patriarchal parampara is openly operating is in Gurbani kirtan. Despite statements of equality, Gurbani kirtan remains the domain of Sikh men – “ragi Singhs” (and presumably cisgender men) (Cassio 2014). The justifications given for why women are not allowed or empowered to do Gurbani kirtan in Darbar Sahib – as one example – are based on the objectification of womanhood and femininity as impure and sexual. For context, there was – and still is – a culturally common practice of “veiling the female body” in northern parts of present-day India that carried different meanings (e.g., cultural norms of modesty and religious commitments, social control over women, women's ability to hide their political strategizing) (Atwal 2020). This practice of veiling did not have a basis within Gurbani,



but was more common in other actively practiced faith traditions. When it came to doing kirtan though, Dr. Harjot Kaur, a female Punjabi Sikh Dharma minister, Sikh kirtan musician, and family physician, framed the problem within the context of purity and pollution based on her experiences. She witnessed how men would sexualize the female figure and the female form, calling their own “impure” thoughts a “distraction,” and then thinking women are to blame and expecting women to change their behavior. In her experiences, when speaking to a “ragi that [she] really respected - he is a late ragi, he used to play in the Darbar Sahib,” he shared, “It is just the shape of the woman” that is a distraction (Khalsa-Baker 2019, 260). While women may have veiled themselves for different reasons (e.g., casteism, privacy, modesty) across other cultures in the past, even though Sikh theology and philosophy do not have this belief, there are different types of “veiling” that occur in Sikh spaces and practices. For example, the idea that women should be hidden in certain public spaces in specific ways found some reality in the context of Sikh women’s exclusion from Gurbani sangeet and other sevas within the Darbar Sahib.

These types of conversations also play out publicly, in addition to private, individual conversations between a teacher and student. For example, there is a commonly discussed 2017 televised debate over the topic on Punjabi Zee News networks’ India News Punjab (Khalsa-Baker 2019). One justification among many offered by Sikh men, such as former SGPC member Bhai Amarinder Singh, is that women did not do kirtan during the time of our Gurus, so why would that change 400 years later? Another justification was that women are allowed to do kirtan in other parts of Darbar Sahib, such as Manji Sahib, so why must women be allowed to do kirtan in the inner sanctum at Darbar Sahib? By grounding his justifications in specific instances of Sikh history, commentators like Bhai Amarinder Singh use these snippets of historical exclusion to justify a patriarchal parampara that creates a patriarchal maryada that continues to exclude women today. While Dr. Harjot Kaur’s ragi thought the female body was a threat and distraction, Bhai Amarinder Singh publicly disagrees with this male gaze but finds an entirely different set of justifications to still exclude Sikh women. For example, in this debate, Bhai Amarinder Singh cited Guru Arjan Dev Ji’s life to justify his exclusionary parampara:

“but I believe that Guru Arjan started the tradition [of men doing kirtan], in all the other Gurdwaras there are women allowed to sing, but at Darbar Sahib, why do women need it? ... With folded hands, I say we should not change the conventions there. There are so many conventions, even men want so many things, but we are not able to change that” (Khalsa-Baker 2019, 272).

In choosing to not question why his entire belief system promotes and naturalizes subordinating women, Bhai Amarinder Singh shows how openly a patriarchal parampara and maryada can work by using history as a way to defend a patriarchal way of Sikh life. Furthermore, if this patriarchal way of life goes unquestioned, people like Bhai Amarinder Singh also prevent Sikhs from learning about their own history unless it conforms to the patriarchal parampara’s interpretation of tradition.

Bhai Baldeep Singh (13th generation exponent of the Gurbani sangeet parampara whose family has passed down musical and spiritual knowledge since the time of the fifth Sikh Guru), disagrees with this justification and instead argues that Sikh women are excluded because people have concerns of

women's *purity* during menstrual cycles. He criticizes this position of menstrual impurity and says it is based on bodily ideas of impurity and does not engage with the pollution of the mind: "This whole thing about the menstrual cycles and all this, that paradigm does exist around the Darbar Sahib, it's utter nonsense. There is plenty of filth which is intangible filth which men carry into the Darbar Sahib every day. People like me have questioned that. It is not just the 'tangible filth'" (Khalsa-Baker 2019, 262). When we think about how the mind is polluted and do not exclusively use gender-based assumptions or stereotypes, then people of all genders can be viewed as polluted. This lesson of his shows what a non-patriarchal, inclusive parampara passed down from the time of the Gurus looks like in practice: ensuring the full sovereignty of women. Bhai Amarinder Singh lamented that men and women were both disadvantaged, pitting people against each other because, to him, women should conform to men's beliefs like men do because men also cannot change everything to their liking. Bhai Baldeep Singh gives us something else. If all our minds can be "polluted" by "intangible filth," then we can all work together to challenge this by rejecting patriarchal ideas and justification. But, if Sikhs use patriarchal ideas to focus on tangible filth and think women's bodies need to be controlled to ensure purity, then women and femininity would continue to be dominated and controlled by men. Bhai Baldeep Singh's caution is important for interpreting history too. Sikh researcher and professor Dr. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh (Professor of Religious Studies at Colby College), reminds us that simply because something *took place* in the past does not mean that it was the appropriate way to act, behave, or believe. For example, while "menstruating women [were] tacitly forbidden" from doing the daily practice of awakening (*prakash*) and resting (*sukhasan*), this conflicted with Sikh philosophy *at that time* (Singh 2011, 118). Now in some contexts, women are respected to make the decision on their own, but this tacit exclusion remains at Harmander Sahib (Khalsa-Baker 2019).

In contrast to Bhai Amarinder Singh, Bhai Baldeep Singh suggests looking to an inclusive, non-patriarchal parampara that is already present and based in Sikh theology, history, and philosophy. A key difference is that Bhai Baldeep Singh begins from the assumption to prioritize equality, and acknowledges that women and femininity should not be subordinated to manhood and masculinity as is clear within Sikh belief and practice. Bhai Amarinder Singh does not allow for this to be considered because he is focused on prioritizing what he thinks is *maryada*. And even when he does consider the alternative priority of equality, he deflects that point to say Sikh women should be like Sikh men who do not complain about what they cannot change. Effectively, it is not Sikhi itself being debated, but the position of women and femininity in Sikh spaces and in relation to Sikh men who currently control and influence Sikh institutions and policies.

While these are only a few examples in one context – public debates televised globally and anecdotes from individual experiences – show how Sikhs can use ideas of purity, pollution, and sexualization to control two important things: how much access women have to meaningful Sikh spaces, such as *seva* at Darbar Sahib, and dictate how women are allowed to behave in Sikh spaces, such as how they look and where they are allowed to do *kirtan* and other *sevas* (e.g. *palki*, *isnan*). This exclusion is harmful to Sikh women and Sikhi. Sikh women's agency and sovereignty is dictated based on Sikhs' stereotypes of womanhood and femininity, and on the necessity for gender domination out of 'safety', 'protection', and 'security.' For individual Sikh women, such exclusionary and controlling ideologies means that they must

negotiate the psychic, emotional, and economic burdens of being subordinated and considered less than by their own community. This patriarchal dynamic is similar to one that LGBTQIA+ Sikhs and Sikhs from marginalized castes describe when they try to make Sikh spaces more inclusive and safe for all Sikhs. Though there is not systematic, published research on this yet for LGBTQIA+ Sikhs and Sikhs from marginalized castes, the lived experiences of Sikhs from different gender and caste backgrounds provides some information. Their experiences suggest that when a patriarchal parampara is treated as a maryada, inclusion is non possible.

## Section 6

### **Homonational, Pinkwashing, and Sikh Advocacy from the West**

In this section of the report, we move to thinking about how to take action for LGBTQIA+ inclusion based on the discussions of a patriarchal parampara and maryada from the prior section. We ask, how can we as Sikhs in the West think about advocating for LGBTQIA+ inclusion when considering histories of Western colonization and contemporary Western imperial politics? When we say “the West,” we refer to it in the context of Sikh history: predominantly referring to the US, UK, and Canada and their geopolitical allies, and other common migratory destinations, like New Zealand. While the conclusion will offer suggestions to consider for next steps in promoting LGBTQIA+ inclusion, this section focuses on providing a framework for organizing LGBTQIA+ inclusion efforts. This framework provides a way for Sikhs based in the West to think about the power dynamics associated with trying to change Sikh institutions based in the Asian subcontinent, a concern raised in the Sikh Dharma International (SDI) 2021 “White Paper.”

Western nations and Sikhs within them tend to be more vocal about promoting LGBTQIA+ *inclusion* when it comes to liberal and left national politics, and increasingly more vocal about maintaining LGBTQIA+ *exclusion* when it comes to conservative national politics. In some cases, such as the United States and United Kingdom, left or liberal national governments are vocal about promoting inclusion because these governments specifically persecuted LGBTQIA+ peoples in the past. Yet, regardless of these nations’ political leadership, these nations can also use their own evidence of LGBTQIA+ *inclusion* against their geopolitical enemies. When Western nations do this, often referred to as *homonationalism* (homo-national-ism), they leverage their non-allied countries’ LGBTQIA+ *exclusion* as a reason for justifying Western imperialism (Puar 2017). This is a documented practice, and is commonly used to describe Western nations’ practices that downplay their own imperialisms while uplifting their purported LGBTQIA+ inclusive policies. Pinkwashing is another related practice that commonly refers to Israeli public relations practices that emerge from homonationalism, or “a deliberate strategy to conceal the continuing violations of Palestinians’ human rights behind an image of modernity signified by Israeli gay life” (Schulman 2011). This historic dynamic complicates Sikh advocacy for LGBTQIA+ inclusion based in the West because Punjabi policies and Sikh institutional policies remain invested in a cultural stigma against LGBTQIA+ Sikh inclusion, in part because they are perceived as an extension of Western imperialism.

This is not an abstract or theoretical concern. For example, SDI passed two motions at the April 2021 International Khalsa Council meeting aimed at LGBTQIA+ inclusion. The first motion “advised Sikh Dharma International (SDI) to recognize LGBTQIA+ marriage in its Gurdwaras and to authorize its ministry to perform Anand Karaj marriages for LGBTQIA+ couples” (Human Rights Commission 2022, 1). The second motion created and funded a Human Rights Commission to support the first motion. At the same time, SDI also released their 2021 report – “Marriage Equality in Sikh Dharma: A White Paper” – and outlined some of the reasons why LGBTQIA+ inclusion hit roadblocks among some Western Sikhs, including fears of *Western paternalism and colonialism*. In other words, marriage equality efforts in Sikh spaces had stalled because advocating to change Sikh institutions in the southern Asian subcontinent for

LGBTQIA+ inclusion raised concerns among Sikhs in the West. Supporters and opponents of marriage equality were worried that if they pushed for LGBTQIA+ inclusion, they would be part of a vocal minority of individuals living in the West who were telling people – that their nations formerly ruled – that they were wrong and need to change to become better. They did not use the term “pinkwashing” to describe their concerns, but that was what was holding back further advocacy.

At the same time, Sikhs’ efforts to promote gender equity in Western nations is also providing a challenge to gender norms in Sikh spaces. For example, among the 3HO-Sikh Dharma community, Sikh women are able to serve as “professional touring Sikh kīrtan musicians, as ministers who officiate Anand Karaj wedding ceremonies, serve as the panj pyare in the Amrit baptismal ceremonies, fulfill all ritual and ceremonial roles within the Gurdwara, and serve as the heads of Gurdwara boards and Sikh-run businesses” (Khalsa-Baker 2019, 249). More broadly, Sikh women and Sikh girls can be more involved in Gurdwara activities in Western nations, particularly as youth advocacy has increased, but this is not guaranteed and it varies from Gurdwara to Gurdwara with “ceilings” that limit their participation in leadership positions. Some elements of these inclusive practices align with what is already ongoing in the subcontinent, while other practices done by Sikhs in the West do not.

While supporters of LGBTQIA+ inclusion and gender equality maintain their commitment, some supporters of LGBTQIA+ inclusion (not necessarily gender equality) are cautious on how to move forward. The caution emerges from their desire to not have Sikhs in the subcontinent experience their support for inclusion as a form of Western paternalism and colonization through homonationalism. This is particularly important given the historic power imbalances that prioritize the needs of Western nations, the Global North, and white people. For example, while some reforms of Gurdwaras were supported by Sikhs in the early 1900s, British colonials played a part in re-organizing Sikh and Sikhs’ way of life in ways that have left unresolved intergenerational, intracommunal harms: learning centers (bungas) around Darbar Sahib were demolished, Sikh schools of learning lost their patronage, British-run educational institutions were created, and the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee was created to rule Sikh life (to name a few) (Khalsa-Baker 2019; Murphy 2013).

These efforts for promoting LGBTQIA+ inclusion in the West were further complicated in June 2022 when the Siri Singh Sahib Corporation Human Rights Commission released a statement on three foundational truths. These truths were grounded in Sikh philosophy and attempted to put forth a non-patriarchal, inclusive parampara that excluded no one from the Anand Karaj on the basis of caste, race, ethnicity, gender identity or sexual orientation; this parampara also rejected forced marriages and accepted interfaith couples (Human Rights Commission 2022). In this inclusive parampara, they did not want marriage to be “used as a vehicle to continue prejudice and oppressive social hierarchies,” but wanted marriage to be “used as a vehicle of social equality and spiritual liberation” (Human Rights Commission 2022, 1). And because “the Divine dwells within the Creation, equally, within all beings,” the Anand Karaj is “meant to form those families that can embody the Infinite Wisdom of the Sikh Gurus” (Human Rights Commission 2022, 1). While the Commission grounded their position in parampara based in Sikh philosophy and an accurate education of gender and sexuality, these actions were in contradiction to

Akal Takht's hukamnamas, which are based in a miseducation of gender and sexuality and an unclear reading of Sikh philosophy.

Understanding the frameworks of homonationalism and pinkwashing will not produce marriage equality in SDI spaces, but it will address a more fundamental issue that makes marriage equality a challenge for all Sikh spaces. That is, the framework guides our thinking and organizing towards working with people based in the Asian subcontinent, such as LGBTQIA+ Sikhs and their allies. There are two aspects to consider for supporters of marriage equality and full LGBTQIA+ inclusion in Sikh spaces: (1) while homonationalism and pinkwashing are real, it does not mean that Sikhs based in the West *cannot* promote LGBTQIA+ inclusion in Sikh spaces, (2) because homonationalism and pinkwashing are real, Sikhs based in the West should prioritize their advocacy around what LGBTQIA+ Sikhs and their allies in the subcontinent need. Recall, if LGBTQIA+ supporters fear enacting a form of colonization, then it is worth promoting what folks who would be subjected to this 'colonization' need, and assessing whether that is marriage equality or something else. Since homonationalism and pinkwashing are both based in prioritizing the needs of Western nations, the Global North, and white people, considering these two aspects intentionally for future advocacy would directly challenge homonationalism while promoting inclusion.

# Conclusion

We conclude our report with some possible suggestions for action. Our position paper emphasized the importance of challenging patriarchal paramparas and miseducations of gender and sexuality, which Sikhs may defend and justify as maryada. We believe advocating for LGBTQIA+ inclusion requires considering the issues discussed in the preceding six sections because each of these issues, in their own ways, can limit our ability to honor Sikhs sovereignty and actualize the equality guaranteed by our faith, especially when it comes to Sikhs from LGBTQIA+ backgrounds. While advocates seek to change policy, this policy work must also be accompanied by efforts to connect Sikhs who are both supportive and resistive towards LGBTQIA+ inclusion.

We wrote this position paper focusing on how Sikh institutional leaders justify exclusion – what claims do they make, what authority do they draw on for their claims, and how resistance to change is practiced. Justifying exclusion – whether outright exclusion or exclusionary inclusion – due to a historical precedent, does not take into account the revolutionary vision of the Sikh Gurus. Our Gurus stood against oppressive systems that harmed and subjugated others based on gender, caste, and religion. They rejected historical practices, norms, and customs about purity and pollution that created hierarchies and exclusion. Just because people have justified exclusion and discrimination in the past, due to cultural norms and miseducations, does not mean it has to continue today.

When broadly thinking about tackling issues of miseducation, advocates in SDI may consider:

- Creating strategies or programming to address each of these issues, separately and systematically. If focusing on challenging miseducations, recall:
  - **Parampara** can have positive implications because it embodies the cultural and historical continuity of Sikh philosophy and ethical practices through generations. It can also be a conduit through which patriarchal norms are perpetuated, as traditions may sometimes be misinterpreted or selectively interpreted to justify gender-based, LGBTQIA+-based, caste-based, and other forms of discrimination.
  - **Maryada** is meant to preserve the integrity of Sikh practices through ethical guidelines that govern Sikh life. It can be influenced by a “patriarchal parampara,” resulting in exclusionary practices and enforcing codes of conduct that contradict the egalitarian ethos of Sikhi.
  - **Rahit** is intended to guide Sikhs in living a life aligned with the values of gurbani. When interpreted through a patriarchal lens, it can lead to practices and beliefs that do not reflect the ethos of equality and pluriversality inherent in Sikh teachings.
- Reconsidering how education is practiced in Sikh spaces: who receives the most educative energies (Sikh and non-Sikh allies, Sikhs, or LGBTQIA+ Sikhs), who receives the most work of educating others, and what practices and pedagogies bring different groups of people who think and act in divergent ways together
- Create safety practices and protocols for the entire sangat if there is concern about backlash for practicing inclusion

Beyond this, we also include two important resources. First, community organizer and scholar Harleen Kaur created [a guide](#) – titled “Mapping our Roles in a Social Change Ecosystem: Sikh spaces & M4BL edition” – to help people think about their role in fights for liberation through Gurmat principles. Second, we include recommendations and resources compiled by Kaur Life for all Sikhs when it comes to LGBTQIA+ inclusion (kehal 2021). These recommendations and resources are focused on building capacity for change in order to successfully implement LGBTQIA+ inclusion. We invite you to be mindful of pinkwashing and homonationalism as you engage your efforts, especially since this is an ongoing, real concern among marriage equality advocates and resisters. The fundamental recommendation from LGBTQIA+ activists in faith-based spaces has been similar: put your money, time, and support into the hands of actual people seeking broader inclusion, and ensure that LGBTQIA+ Sikhs are able to safely practice their faith-based spiritual sovereignty.

#### For LGBTQIA Sikhs

- Find spaces and organizations that provide some space to breathe. Check out [Sarbat’s](#) or [Sher Vancouver’s](#) virtual and in-person events and see if any of them resonate with you. If you’re more comfortable with digital spaces, some of these platforms may share helpful resources: [Queer Punjab](#), [Queer South Asian Woman’s Network](#), [Asra](#), [Tarakī](#), [Sher Vancouver](#), [3HO Sikh Marriage Equality](#), [Sikh LGBTQIA+ Oral History Project](#).
- Create communities with others where all of your identities can be honored and respected. We are stronger together. While Sarbat is based in the UK, their list of [resources](#) is a great starting place to potentially find support closer to you.
- We are our best advocates and, unfortunately, that often means knowing more than we need to know. For those who are able and willing to take on these more active fights – whether because you can afford the risk or because you cannot afford not fighting – read materials and listen to content that can help you articulate your needs and viewpoints to others with your urgency. Remember how our fights are tied to the fights of many other communities, as well.
- Find out what taking care for yourself means and what you need to safeguard your mental health.
- Engage in activities that help you feel complete, whether that’s protesting against the bills, or rejuvenating with times of silence.
- Use your skills to organize and push back against these exclusions.

#### For Allies

- **Learn:** Read about ongoing anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation around religious exemptions and understand their detrimental impacts. A great starting place is to read all the list of resources from [Armaan](#). Find a fellow student with whom you are comfortable being vulnerable and making mistakes, and go through them together.
- **Check out these Kaur Life articles on related topics:**
  - [Transgender Sikhs Risk Losing Gender-Affirmative Healthcare: Understanding Why that Matters](#)
  - [Policing the Bodies of Transgender & Queer Sikhs](#)
  - [How to Transcend Gender & the Violent Mind](#)
  - [When Will Caste-Oppressed and Queer and Trans Folks Find Liberation in Sikh Spaces?](#)
  - [Who is a “Sikh”? How people use caste & cisheteronormativity to gate-keep Sikhi](#)



- [How to Create a Panth that Supports Caste-Oppressed and Queer and Trans Folks](#)
- [The Panth's Mental State – Part One – Assessment](#)
- [Why Do We Deny Our Fullness? Exploring Gender in Sikhi](#)
- **Listen:** Listen to the communities you are trying to help, let them take the lead and you follow, give them space.
- **Speak Up:** Speak to your family and friends about these issues. Even if you do not know anyone who identifies as part of the LGBTQIA+ communities, that does not mean someone near you would not benefit from learning more about the world we live in.
- **Fund:** Set up recurring donations for initiatives being led by LGBTQIA+ communities near you. It could be housing or health initiatives (two very big, recurring issues) – find out what LGBTQIA+ communities in your area are fighting for. Start local.
- **Volunteer:** Find organizations that support LGBTQIA+ initiatives and volunteer with them.

When advocating for change, people may have fears for different reasons, each of which can be addressed in some way, individually and/or collectively. Fears do not need to be hurdles to doing justice-oriented work because they teach us about ourselves too. They can offer information about what types of preparations are needed to guide the ways we move forward because our fears can help us identify what disrupts our investment in justice. For those who feel that fear to act is their current state of being, beginning points for thinking about safety, potential retaliation, and building capacity for support around marriage equality could include:

- Establish trust in institutional processes
  - Acknowledging and addressing harms perpetuated within one's own community and institution
  - Healing communal and institutional trauma
  - Revisiting and revising ethical standards and practices
  - We are able to affect change in our immediate sphere of influence when we practice what we preach
- Recognize the emotions that are guiding and informing people's behaviors
  - Recognizing that change is uncomfortable for those who are privileging from the status quo
  - Patriarchy, male dominance and izzat (honor) play a large role in gatekeeping, silencing and controlling women, femininity, and deliberations about inclusion and change
- Establish clear norms of inclusion based in Sikhi and incorporate them into institutional processes for change
  - Make it clear that exclusion goes against the equality professed by the Sikh Gurus
- Be attuned to how human authority operates within Gurmat-guided deliberations and processes of liberations
  - Maryadais not unchangeable; it has changed over time
  - The Sikh Rahit Maryada (SRM) has never been singular, even though it is informed by Sikh history and the Guru's life. Instead, recognize that multiple rahit maryadas have existed.

- SGPC is an elected religious body that oversees gurdwaras in Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and the union territory of Chandigarh. Different Gurdwara Management Committees are responsible for their state or territory.
- Per some existing arguments, excommunication is antithetical to Sikhi  
<https://asiasamachar.com/2023/07/05/the-legitimacy-of-excommunication-in-sikhi-the-case-of-professor-gurmukh-singh/>
- The SGPC selects the Akal Takhat Jathedars who appoint other Takhat Jathedars
- Be aware of historical precedents
  - There are historical examples of defying Akal Takhat gurumatta declarations. Recall:  
<https://www.sikhbulletin.com/Bulletins/SikhBulletinMayJun2008.pdf>
  - Understanding the SGPC process to address transgressions exist in which Sikhs can ask for forgiveness (tankah), penance, and pledging allegiance
- Learn from how communities of additional faith, cultural, transnational, and colonially-displaced backgrounds have approached marriage equality
  - If marriage equality is federally legalized within the united states, failure to meet the call could cause the government to remove religious tax-exempt status
  - Federal laws against sex-discrimination include sexual orientation discrimination
  - Be mindful of how right-wing and ethnonationalist movements in the united states use religious exemptions laws to enshrine and defend white Christian nationalism and supremacy, both in the united states and globally

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