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## Chapter One

# Pregnant Text and the Conception of the Khalsa

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Somewhere as a flower you bloom in floral glory  
Somewhere as a bumblebee you hover drunkenly  
Somewhere as a breeze you blow speedily  
When I don't know the way, how can I express you? . . .  
Somewhere like a deer you entice with your ways  
Somewhere like a woman you are adorned in beauty.

(BN, 1: 12–13)

**B**eginning with Guru Nanak (1469–1539), the Sikh gurus have left a vast literary legacy, which was collected in the Guru Granth, the sacred text of the Sikhs. It was compiled by the fifth guru, Arjan (1563–1606), and placed by him in 1604 in the Harimandir, the Golden Temple of modern times. While compiling the sacred volume, Arjan included the poetry of Hindu and Muslim saints that resonated with the voice of the Sikh gurus. The 1,430 pages of the text express the longing for the spaceless and timeless One in passionate poetry.<sup>1</sup> The tenth Sikh guru was acutely aware of the sensuousness of its metaphysical poetry, and just a day before he passed away in 1708, he endowed the Book with guruship for perpetuity. To this day, the Guru Granth remains the Body of the Gurus, the quintessence of their philosophy and ethics, and the center of all Sikh rituals and ceremonies.

Like his predecessors, Guru Gobind Singh was a superb poet, but in addition he was a great patron of the arts. The town of Paunta (from *pav*, the foot

of his horse implanted on the soil), which he founded on the banks of the River Jumna, became the center of a spiritual and cultural regeneration. The guru would hold poetry symposia and distribute awards. Many poets from different religious backgrounds gathered at scenic Paunta, and fifty-two of them, including Sainapat, Alam, Lakhan, and Amrit Rai, were permanently employed. Several Sanskrit and Persian classics were translated by the poets, who in turn were rewarded handsomely for their works. Later in his life, the guru made Damdama an important center of scholarly activities. Situated near Bhatinda in the Punjab, Damdama came to be known as the “guru’s Kashi”—the Sikh equivalent of the ancient Hindu center of learning and literature.<sup>2</sup> He spent several months in Damdama pursuing his literary aspirations amid men from different social strata.

Guru Gobind Singh’s own compositions, also esteemed very highly by the Sikhs, are preserved in the Dasam Granth (literally, the Book of the Tenth). With its 1,428 pages, the Dasam Granth is almost as large as the Guru Granth. However, it is very varied in its contents. The core of the work lies in the autobiographical *Bicitra Natak*, Candi poems, and devotional compositions like the Jaap, Akal Ustat, *Gyan Prabodh*, and *Sabd Hazare*. But it also includes a very large section on ancient Indian legends and myths, stories of moral instruction, and stories of immoral intrigue, many of them attributed to poets employed by him rather than attributed to the guru himself. It was compiled sometime after the death of Guru Gobind Singh in 1708, and it is not certain whether all that is there was written by him. Over the years the writings have elicited a lot of controversy and tension.<sup>3</sup> In 1950, the Sikh statutory body called the Shromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee officially accepted the Jaap, *Sabd Hazare*, Akal Ustat, *Bicitra Natak*, *Candi Caritra 1 and 2*, *Candi di Var*, and *Gyan Prabodh* as Guru Gobind Singh’s compositions. Some of the compositions, like the Jaap and Swayyai (the ten Swayyai constitute a segment of the Akal Ustat), have long been part of the daily Sikh prayers, and are essential to the Khalsa initiation rite.

These works helped to create the beliefs I was brought up with myself, and whatever scholars may say about their historical accuracy, they are an essential part of the Sikh religion, and it would be pedantic and offensive to ignore them. Their tremendous influence in shaping the personal and communal identity of the Sikhs makes it all the more important for me to try to see them from my perspective, as a Sikh woman. What does the literature accepted as the tenth Sikh guru’s by my tradition offer me? How does it speak to me? Rather than enter controversies about their authorship, I want to discern the feminine voice in those hymns that Sikhs across the globe recite and memorize and believe in as their guru’s own.<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter the focus is the *Bicitra Natak*.<sup>5</sup> It is precious because in the large repertoire of primary Sikh literature, the *Bicitra Natak* is the only

self-portrait. That we encounter Guru Gobind Singh—the way he saw himself and the way he wanted to be seen—is intriguing in itself. But with his panoply of artistic devices, the author also excites the reader's imagination and prepares us for creative ventures. Paradoxically, the exterior of the narrative, with its graphic battle scenes and clamorous sounds, softly whispers like a mother into our inner ear murmurs of love, creativity, empathy, and sublime beauty surrounding us all. The *Bicitra Natak* is not a linear historic account of Guru Gobind Singh's life and accomplishments; it is a stratagem by means of which we are inspired to recognize the Divine One and are motivated to respond ethically and aesthetically to the world in which we live. Personally, as I reach the end of the narrative, I am filled with the desire to see more, hear more, feel more, and to write and analyze. . . .

More immediately, the *Bicitra Natak* is very pertinent to our theme because the embryonic Khalsa is lodged in it, and life-giving oxygen and minerals for the birth of a healthy Khalsa circulate in its body. The text transcends all definitions, for *bicitra* (wonderful/amazing) in the title opens up the autobiographical discourse to a whole different plane of reality. It may not even fall under the genre of *natak* (drama) because it does not contain much dialogue, the hallmark of drama. The discourse is a magical mixture of biographical facts, literary imagination, and language—it is not meant to be a prosaic account of his life. Though scholars differ on the actual date of the *Bicitra Natak*,<sup>6</sup> they are unanimous that it was written prior to the momentous inauguration of the Khalsa believed to have taken place on Baisakhi Day 1699. The evidence from the text itself would put it sometime after 1696, the year that the Sikh guru fought against Mughal forces.<sup>7</sup> Pregnant with tension and excitement that have a larger meaning and purpose, the text is very significant in revealing the creative matrix to us. We learn about the spiritual and heroic character of the author, and, most of all, we get a glimpse into the genes and chromosomes of the Khalsa. The term “Khalsa” is not specifically mentioned, but we clearly recognize the guru's self-consciousness as it gestates in this fertile text. His own values and emotions become the nutrients that shape the physique and psyche of the future Khalsa. His vigorous meters and fiery descriptions produce heat and energy, vital to the growth of the fetus. This chapter functions like a sonogram: if we look through the *Bicitra Natak*, we see the embryonic Khalsa developing in Guru Gobind Singh's creative womb, and the nascent form that we recover in his pregnant text evolves into the Khalsa who will walk out of the mysterious tent at Anandpur on Baisakhi 1699.

Since Guru Gobind Singh's literary creation leads to the procreation of the Khalsa, our approach defies the patriarchal division between man's mental production of ideas and women's physical reproduction of species. In order to reclaim our past, feminist scholars propose that we look for the invisible

women. In our re-memory we look not just for invisible women but also look for the invisible womb of men. We must, of course, discover the feminine voice of hidden women. But I want to go even further and find the hidden feminine voice in Guru Gobind Singh's text. In order to detect the womb of men, we have to use a radical new technology, the sonogram.

The composition is obviously male. It is written in a male hand within a doubly patriarchal culture. In Guru Gobind Singh's milieu, the indigenous patriarchal society of northern India with the rigid classification offered by the caste system had succumbed to yet another system of patriarchal control—that exercised by the Mughals from outside of India. Established by Babur during Guru Nanak's lifetime (1526), the Mughal kingdom had become a large and powerful empire with Aurangzeb ruling in his might. Aurangzeb did not want any religious pluralism. In 1679 he reimposed the *jizya*, a tax that non-Muslims had to pay to live in an Islamic state. Unlike his grandfather Akbar, who abolished the *jizya* and introduced an interreligious *din-i-ilahi* (divine faith), or his brother Dara Shikoh, who sponsored the translation of several Upanishads into Persian, Aurangzeb tried his best to make India into an exclusively Muslim country. All those who did not practice Islam, including Guru Gobind Singh and his Sikh community, became victims of Aurangzeb's orthodoxy. He issued repressive edicts against non-Muslims.<sup>8</sup> All "Hindus," with the exception of Rajputs, were prohibited from riding palanquins, elephants, or thoroughbred horses. They were also prohibited from carrying arms.

In this politically and religiously patriarchal regime of Aurangzeb, superimposed on the socially rigid patriarchal structure of traditional India, emerged the Sikh guru's *Bicitra Natak*—a work validating and celebrating the self. In a society in which the masses had resigned themselves to the imperial powers and were sunk in a mood of self-denial and self-effacement, the author of the *Bicitra Natak* grandly narrates his life story. In detail, he describes his rich ontological, ethnic, historical, and genealogical background. In order to counteract Aurangzeb's hegemonic rule, the Sikh text tries to show off its own muscle and strength. One of Aurangzeb's edicts explicitly forbade non-Muslims to carry arms; the guru's narrative—as though in defiance—opens with the image of the resplendent sword. In its deliberate attempt to challenge the prevailing political injustice, the narrative tries to stay away from the personal side of the guru's life. We do not get details about his close family. We hear neither about his wives nor about his sons. Even his succession to guruship after the death of his father is quickly brushed aside. Most of the narrative space is taken by furious battles both real and mythological. We see lightning flashing out of spears, swords, and arrows, and we hear thunder blasting from conches, clarions, and kettledrums. A Western scholar remarks how Guru Gobind Singh's battles have "an epic grandeur with vividness of

detail which has hardly been surpassed in the literature of the world.”<sup>9</sup> The voice is bold and energetic; the tempo, heroic and martial. The guru worships the Divine in the image of fiery steel, and he valiantly fights with his men against antagonistic political and social forces.

How do we find female themes and motifs here? The task is undoubtedly daunting. But it is critical, because generations of Sikhs have been fed on this overtly “patriarchal” discourse, producing and reproducing male dominant structures in their society. The Khalsa has remained a brotherhood, almost a militaristic fraternity, from which women have been pretty much excluded. The mentality of the crusader or mujahedin distorts the ideology of the Khalsa. The hypermasculine readings dwell on the surface of Guru Gobind Singh’s text without looking into its deeper meaning and texture. Men immediately identify themselves with the guru’s male sex; they mistake his zealous call for human rights as simply a fight for male rights, and they have not the least consideration for women’s subordination and oppression. Furthermore, Guru Gobind Singh’s battles against an oppressive regime are misunderstood as battles against an *other* religion; forgetting Guru Gobind Singh’s pluralistic consciousness, Sikhs tend to misappropriate his commitment to pluralism as an exclusionist form of identity. The guru’s theological vision is neglected, and so is his compassionate and creative interior. Sikhs remember the fierce battle scenes depicted by the guru, but they miss out on how those very scenes lead to women, kitchens, sacred spaces, celebrations—to an authentic mode of life and living in our variegated world.

Augustine’s definition of autobiography, “a presencing of man in his deep,”<sup>10</sup> is very relevant, for what lies beneath the explicit text is even more significant. Our sonogram courses beneath the muscular exterior into the guru’s true subjectivity, and into the folds of his deepest interior where the Khalsa is lodged. Once we start looking through our sonogram, a different reality becomes apparent. In the interstices of his textual body flow Guru Gobind Singh’s human tenderness and compassion. In his womb we recover a powerful inclusivity and pluralism. In his metaphysics we discover a “theological” vision. In his imagination we find active women. In his aspiration we recognize the feminist urge to transform an oppressive society by changing the very sensibility of its people. The *Bicitra Natak* exposes us to the different and complex issues that were a part of the author’s psyche, and its fourteen chapters become a matrix for the ideology, the reflection, and the historical contingencies that grew into the Khalsa. The Khalsa is not born yet; but the text rhythmically resounds with the pulse and the heartbeat of the embryonic Khalsa. As we try to see the earliest images and hear those initial beats, we can identify the following six features: (1) theological symbol, (2) woman warrior, (3) biophilic ethics, (4) pluralistic genes, (5) battles of life, and (6) inspired body.

### Theological Symbol

The autobiographical *Bicitra Natak* does not begin with “I was born in” but rather with an exaltation of the sword. Most biographies divide the guru’s relatively short life span into six parts, which correspond to the six important places in his life (see appendix for a brief biographical account divided into the six traditional phases of his life). But Guru Gobind Singh does not passively surrender to such a rigid chronology. Clark Blaise rightly comments that the autobiographical subject is distinct from the biographical object “by reason of its adversarial relationship to time.” Blaise brings out the tension: “When autobiography fails, it surrenders to the artifice of creaky recollection, dutiful recitation, chronologically-correct-toe-dabbings into the flow of past events.”<sup>11</sup>

Instead of recounting his own birth, the *Bicitra Natak* is prefaced by the first guru’s articulation of “Ikk Oan Kar” (One Being Is), with which the Guru Granth opens. Thus, the very origins of the Sikh religion constitute the lining of Guru Gobind Singh’s literary uterus. The text starts out with honoring the sword: “Honor to the holy sword; I bow with heart and mind.” Guru Gobind Singh’s self-consciousness and the autobiographical facts he chooses to record flow out of his ardent devotion to the Divine One. What is unusual is the repeated emphasis that the brilliant sword receives. As noted by M. L. Peace, “In the literature of the world no other poet has ever praised the sword in such a way as Guru Gobind Singh has done.”<sup>12</sup> Now, the sword is not a new metaphor in the Sikh world, and here I will have to differ from Sikh scholars, including my own father, who contend that the guru provided “a new literary metaphor.”<sup>13</sup> The sword, as we will explore in chapter 4, appears in the Guru Granth itself, and its symbolic and metaphoric significance is expressed by Guru Gobind Singh’s precursors. But because the tenth Sikh guru is remembered as a military figure, the sword in his religio-aesthetic worldview is denied its scriptural significance and identified simply as Guru Gobind Singh’s physical weapon. The fact, however, is that Guru Gobind Singh carries on the traditional polysemantic possibilities present in the Granth. Throughout the *Bicitra Natak* (and this goes for most of his writing), he envisions the timeless and transcendent reality in the brilliantly shining form of the sword. “Symbol” in Sanskrit is *pratik*, literally “a pointer,” and the sword in Guru Gobind Singh’s verse is a pointer toward the Infinite One.

The sword ushers in both male and female images of the Divine, and serves as a theological as well as a theological symbol in Guru Gobind Singh’s religio-aesthetic *Weltanschauung*. He utilizes both masculine and feminine terms, which shows that he did not intend to limit it to a “father symbol” as Sikh scholars uphold.<sup>14</sup> There are no male restrictions in the fluidity of Guru

Gobind Singh's vocabulary: *khanda* and *kharag* happen to be masculine, but *kirpan*, *tegh*, and *bhagauti* are feminine. The sword points to the Infinite, which is neither male nor female, and when conceived in language, it is both male and female. Major thinkers of our century, including Paul Tillich, Mircea Eliade, Clifford Geertz, and Paul Ricoeur, have elucidated the paradoxical and multivalent quality of symbols, and how they elicit a host of different and even contradictory moods and motivations. It is therefore the "set of interpretations and the ways in which these are appropriated by an individual or culture—not the symbol itself—that finally shape a symbol's social and ethical implications or 'meaning'."<sup>15</sup>

Sadly, in the Sikh instance, interpretative categories have been appropriated only from one side, which has been the male side. The culture has reduced Guru Gobind Singh's manifold symbol of the sword to a mere "sign." (This is also true of the five Ks, the five symbols of the Khalsa, which we will discuss in chapter 4.) Instead of an opening into the Infinite as imaged by the Sikh guru, patriarchal society has selected and structured and shaped it, and made the sword to mean a male instrument. With its masculine denotations, the powerful female side of the sword and all her feminine associations and patterns are excluded. So this inspiring symbol for creativity with the capacity to function like a pen or a paint brush—an imaginative wand of sorts that can deliver exciting new horizons—ends up merely as an intimidating sign of male power. We need to apply women's agency as the interpretative category to remember Guru Gobind Singh's symbol. How is the sword appropriated by the guru? What is the religio-aesthetic matrix in which it was shaped? After all, why should we not celebrate *her* as a fecund womb?

The primacy of a mother, her being the first resort, surfaces in the opening verse of the *Bicitra Natak*. The guru is emotively drawn—with *hitu* (heart) *citu* (mind)—to the sword. She serves as a template for a dynamic interrelationship, an expression of maternal love and intimacy. As "sword" the unfathomable One is experienced in this life; the totally Beyond is seen by the eyes, held tightly in the hand. This is Guru Gobind Singh's "feminist" way of reaching out to the Transcendent and pulling That One into the day-to-day mode of existence.

We must see the sword in the context of Guru Gobind Singh's expansive mental horizon. It is *an* image lodged among his countless intuitions of the Divine. The very first canto (cited at the opening of this chapter) stretches our imagination. The infinite exists in myriad bodies—as a glorious flower, as an intoxicated bumblebee, as a speedy breeze, as an attractive deer, as a beautifully dressed woman. The guru recognizes the vast Infinite through concrete manifestations both male and female that exist in space and time. The sword belongs to this dynamic multiplicity and creativity, and it must not be truncated to a male instrument. Somehow Sikhs have neglected to

take note of these lovely forms in which the Transcendent is envisioned by their guru. The beautiful female figure introduced in this first chapter of the *Bicitra Natak*—“Somewhere like a woman you are adorned in beauty”—has left no imprint on the communal memory. This lovely passage is by no means as popular as it deserves to be, and I have rarely heard it being recited in Sikh congregations. Why does my community not stress such poetically exquisite passages with their powerful female affirmations and validations? These natural associations between women and the guru’s symbols, these very natural associations between his vision of the Divine and the female, are “artificially” turned off somewhere along malestream expressions and exegeses. The rich significance of female physicality overflowing in Guru Gobind Singh’s religio-aesthetic world is depleted.

The reader is drawn into a feminist symbolic of natality and flourishing. The sword that can shred and grind the mightiest of evil is at once the female creatrix, *sristi ubharan*, giving birth to various species:

You have produced the sweat-born, fetus-born, earth-born,  
 You have created the egg-born and the continents and the cosmos,  
 The directions and the earth and skies are from You,  
 You have spoken the four Vedas, the Qur’an, and the Puranas.

(BN, 1: 24)

The poet is constantly in awe of the inner impetus of natural energy and the overflowing vigor of the cosmos. We get a sense of his abiding joy in the wonder of life and his respect for all wombs, human and other. Birth is a wondrous process shared by diverse species—a natural happening out of sweat, fetus, earth, or egg. Creation here is not *ex nihilo*, it is not a command, or an artist designing and examining abstractly; rather, it is an inner dynamic of physical energy and overflowing—an embodying of life. The mother giving birth (be it a bird, an ant, or a mammal) flashes on our mental screen. Guru Gobind Singh’s verse coheres with contemporary feminist reminders of the interconnectedness of the ecosystem and of the web of life in our biosphere.

The above passage also unites procreation and creation. The biological birthing is immediately juxtaposed to literary productions, for That One is regarded as the author of all the scriptures, Eastern and Western. The Sikh guru acknowledges that the four Vedas, the Qur’an, and the Puranas share the Divine Composer. Hindus and Muslims in his society were divided on the authority of their sacred literature, and as a consequence, forced conversions and religious persecutions were rampant. Guru Gobind Singh brings home the point that the creator of the physical world is also the generator of all thought, the narrator (*kathayam*) in both the Sanskrit and Arabic languages. As we hear Guru Gobind Singh’s expressions of respect for the sacred texts of



the Hindus and Muslims, we also hear dualistic models collapsing and breaking. The tyrannical emperor he fights against may happen to be a Muslim, but the Sikh guru recognizes the Qur'an as the voice of the Divine. The different and distinct languages and religious systems emanate from a sole source, and thought itself is of and from the physical body. A "paternal symbolic" and "maternal semiotic" (a distinction we will explore in our final chapter) come together in his religio-aesthetic *Weltanschauung*.

Even for his own literary and artistic creation, the guru solicits the support of the sword. In his words, "I'll complete this text, only if you help me please" (BN, 1:1), the sword carries creative energies, for she assists him in stringing ideas and images together: *granth* (book) literally means something that is "bound" or "strung together." The sword is an instrument that connects, and her sharpness performs the role of a needle that sews and gathers and knits together the rips in the fabric of life. Body and mind are not divided, for the sword is not just a weapon used in physical self-defense but equally valuable for mental acumen. Guru Gobind Singh extols her for different facets of his life: for his very subsistence, for his triumph over tyranny, and for the composition of his text. He immediately juxtaposes the creator of all art to the wielder of the sword (1:3). His literary structures pulsate with the fecundity of the sword. Rather than an instrument of death and destruction, she becomes instrumental to rhythm, imagination, dynamism, and life itself. The sword is motion, not stillness; she is life, not death; she is birth, not end.

She is a very positive metaphor, for her piercing light of intelligence gets rid of nescience and dark brute force. The *Bicitra Natak* honors the sword for "comforting the good" and "scaring evil away." The infirmities of the psyche like ego, deceit, and desire are won over by the sharp and shining sword. She is the eternal light (*joti amandam*), she is the most powerful and luminous energy (*tej pracandam*). So luminous is the sword that the sun can barely equal her brilliance! The powerful weapon deflates arrogance, ignorance, and false consciousness; it illuminates our true consciousness so that we can give birth to compassion, truth, and reality. The geographical battlefields of the *Bicitra Natak* could very well be our own bodies, where contrary forces are at war with each other, and the sword is used to get rid of our internal pathogens and afflictions. In our feminist re-memories she is welded to female powers: like the womb the sword can hold life; like the womb, the sword can get rid of life.

The resourcefulness of the sword ripples out from the individual into the community. As the individual psyche becomes communal, the sword serves as the medium to disrupt the infirmities of society, and a womb for a new life of justice and freedom. Guru Gobind Singh's theological symbol fits in with his creative impulse. The sword would instill courage in the masses resigned

to political and social oppression; she would uphold righteousness and resist tyranny. His glorification of the sword was to secure the fulfillment of divine justice. Both at the symbolic and functional levels, the sword draws together word and action, text and battlefield, creation and destruction, male and female, personal and public.

Guru Gobind Singh's *Bicitra Natak* brings about a disclosure of the power of imagination, for the image, that was imprinted on the guru's mind soon became the instrument to shape Sikh moods and motivations. It became the center of Sikh rituals and ceremonies. On Baisakhi Day 1699, Guru Gobind Singh's artistic symbol entered the practical sphere. It cut the umbilical cord that constrained people within patriarchal restrictions. The newly born Khalsa was fed the *amrit* churned with the double-edged sword: this first drink, the "mother's milk," was made through and with the sword. Just as the mother transforms her own nutrients into nurturing milk, so the sword transforms water into *amrit*. Sikhs of both genders continue to be initiated into the Khalsa with water churned by a double-edged sword. Since the day of the Khalsa's birth, it is also worn by both Sikh men and women. It is one of the five gifts that the Khalsa received: some wear it as a tiny symbol studded in a comb tucked in the hair, others as a charm worn on a chain around the neck, and many carry a real sword varying in length. By having it touch their body, men and women should feel its *multivalent* vibrations. Faced with external hostilities and inner turbulence, her touch should bring them comfort and clarity. The sword extolled by Guru Gobind Singh in his *Bicitra Natak* has become an essential element of Sikh personality and religious ceremony. The artistic symbol gestated in his fecund religio-aesthetic matrix, and in the course of a few more than nine months, evolved into a maternal reality that was to feed, clothe, and sustain generations of Sikhs for perpetuity.

### Woman Warrior

The woman who figures quite explicitly in the *Bicitra Natak* is the mythological heroine Kali. In Guru Gobind Singh's milieu, the image of the goddess Kali was extremely popular and she was worshipped in the surrounding hills as Camunda, Bhadrakali, Durga, and Mata. The female figure belongs to an ancient tradition flowing far back to the banks of the Indus River. The Sikh guru was fascinated with her warrior aspect, and she was a heroine in many of his compositions. But her strong female presence has been very threatening for many of Guru Gobind Singh's readers and exegetes, who one way or the other have obliterated her from public memory.<sup>16</sup> The courageous mythological warrior is made utterly irrelevant in the Sikh world. Although she is not a

central character in the *Bicitra Natak*, she is a strong force throughout the drama, and I find her unexpected presence here even more telling than in compositions directly about her like *Candi Caritra* and *Var Durga Ki*. The female figure and her feminine energy, including both creation and destruction, passion and compassion, are deeply imbedded in Guru Gobind Singh's subconsciousness—so much so that Kali and her strength show up even when he is writing about quite different subjects and events.

There are several reasons why Kali would surface in his *Bicitra Natak*. Firstly, Kali devours Time. With scissors in her hand she cuts off the life span of all creatures. The personification of time would hold a special interest for the guru who constantly addressed the Ultimate as Akal (Timeless One). Since the entire first chapter of his *Bicitra Natak* is a praise of the Timeless One, how could the most spectacular goddess of time (Kali) not figure into Guru Gobind Singh's artistic horizon?

Secondly, she was worshipped by women and people of the servile and untouchable classes.<sup>17</sup> Her association with those excluded from orthodox Vedic rites must have touched a chord in the Sikh guru, for whom human equality was of paramount importance. As he aspired to rid his society of priestly hegemony, the goddess espoused by those on the margins would have appeared very attractive to him.

Thirdly, she is what Kant would describe as the "sublime." Not pleasantly beautiful, Kali is very conducive to evoking the *raudra rasa* (heroic mood), and so the ancient Indian goddess functions as an important aesthetic device for the Sikh guru. He writes the *Bicitra Natak* to incite courage in his readers and devotees, and Kali with her heroic character is utilized by the poet to accomplish his aesthetic goals.

Fourthly, he probably felt that the very process of importing from another tradition would act as "an anti-inertial" device and help his society to escape from the trap of its patriarchal structures. As Wendy Doniger insightfully reveals, other peoples' myths can contribute to the new life that we want to live ourselves. "But we may break out from all of these various prisons with the help of other peoples' myths, which, coming from outside our own closed system, may provide an external influence, an anti-inertial force, to move us off our own treadmill, our own track, onto an entirely new path."<sup>18</sup> The tenth Sikh guru wanted to move his stagnant society into a new world of freedom, and this popular mythic model from the Hindu world would have been a good device for animating his Sikh readership.

Fifthly, the image of the Hindu goddess would challenge the pervasive fanaticism of his milieu. In the oppressive regime of the fundamentalist Muslim emperor Aurangzeb, the Sikh guru freely retells the courage of a Hindu goddess! This is a daring gesture of rebellion on his part. I see him acting in ways quite like his father, the ninth Sikh guru, who gave up his life

for the sake of religious freedom—precisely, for the right of the Hindus to wear their sacred thread and practice their rites.

And most of all, how could his comprehensive aesthetic horizon exclude anybody or anything—he even sees the drunken bumblebee as the Infinite One! Guru Gobind Singh's expansive imagination follows the exciting goddess rather than excising her.

Actually, at the end of his *Bicitra Natak* Guru Gobind Singh informs the reader that he wrote it between his two *Candi Caritra* poems (BN, 14:11). Durga-Kali, the revered subject of *Devi Mahatmaya*, is the heroine of Guru Gobind Singh's *Candi Caritra* compositions. She is the central figure in *Devi Mahatmaya*, a Sanskrit work written in the sixth century (which forms chapters 81–93 of the *Markandeya Purana*). It is the most famous of all Hindu texts celebrating Durga-Kali's mythological exploits. This Puranic story of her titanic battle against the demons is retold by Guru Gobind Singh in his ornate Braj compositions, the *Candi Caritra* poems, and in his Punjabi work, *Var Durga Ki*, commonly known as *Candi di Var*. Even his *Akal Usat*, a hymn written in praise of the Timeless One, contains a panegyric to the prowess of the invincible goddess. The Sikh guru was very attracted to *her*, the kinetic energy of the Divine. Without her, there would be no creation, and without her, the male gods would have lost to the demons. The goddess legitimizes the war against injustice. In his poems on Candi, the Sikh guru recalls the classical Indian myth recorded in the *Devi Mahatmaya*, and amplifies the warrior role of the female protagonist with all his artistic zest and fire. The fact that he situates the *Bicitra Natak* between the two goddess poems affirms and substantiates her configuration in his artistic landscape, and in turn provokes and stimulates our senses to recognize other female associations and appropriations in his narrative.

Now, the goddess is not an incarnation who actually fights in Guru Gobind Singh's battles. Surely she is no Lord Krishna helping out the Pandu brothers in their battle in Kurukshetra. She is by no means literally present by his side. Nowhere in the text does Guru Gobind Singh worship or invoke her, and the goddess never descends (*avatara*) to help him out. The guru remains ever devoted to the singular, transcendent One—envisioned in a plurality of ways, including the form of a beautifully dressed woman. The reverential tone in which the goddess is extolled in Hinduism as the object of worship and ritual is absent in Guru Gobind Singh's discourse. The Hindu goddess is not idolized by the Sikh guru in any way. Without succumbing to any theory of incarnation, Guru Gobind Singh artistically and very playfully brings the ancient goddess into his poetry. Kali remains a classical paradigm of those who valiantly fight against injustice and ignorance. By vigorously retelling a female story from the past, the Sikh guru participates in the process of "remythologizing" put at the heart of the contemporary feminist movement by spokeswomen like Ellen Umansky and Bella Debrida.<sup>19</sup>

The *Bicitra Natak* carries direct references to the goddess's invincibility when attacked by the evil forces of Sumbha, Nisumbha, and Raktbija, an invincibility recorded in the *Markandeya Purana*. We get gory scenes of how the demons are "shredded into tiny, tiny bits by Time" (1:64) and how "they are killed by the sword of Time" (1:95). In the magical world of the *Bicitra Natak* we vividly see the goddess in action, and we also hear her. The tinkling *ghungaram* (bells) that ring through the drama lead us to imagine *her* body. Her laughter is loud and free. With "a skull-bowl in hand, Kali thunderously laughs in the skies" (3:23). She is heard again; "Devi thunders in the skies" (3:31). In later chapters of the *Bicitra Natak*, "the shrieks of Camunda and her attendants are heard in the battlegrounds" (8:18), and as the horses begin to dance, "Kali roars ferociously" (10:5). Her ankle bells, her laughter, her roar, and her clanging weapons demonstrate her power in different ways.

The sounds of Kali are an impressive contrast to silence, the prized virtue of women in Guru Gobind Singh's culture. In the guru's moral imagination the female breaks out of her "booby-trapped silence" and vigorously charges to deliver a just society. Whereas the Sikh guru could easily hear a female voice, his followers seem to have a tough time recognizing her, for Sikh patriarchs cannot bear to hear either the mythological goddess in their guru's compositions, or the voices of their daughters, sisters, wives, or nieces.<sup>20</sup> Kali's sounds announce liberty and freedom for a stifled people. Out of the millions of gods and goddesses of ancient India, it is Kali who roars against injustice, and she is the heroine who is bred in Guru Gobind Singh's literary production. It is often said that a child responds to sounds in the mother's womb: I read the aural depiction of the goddess in the *Bicitra Natak* as a prenatal technique for instilling fearlessness in the embryonic Khalsa.

Because the sound of his Kali goes unheard in Sikh circles, some scholars banish the goddess entirely from Guru Gobind Singh's imagination, claiming Hindu poets to be the author of his goddess poems.<sup>21</sup> Some, like D. P. Ashta and Trilochan Singh, concede the goddess's presence in his secular works but find her presence inappropriate in the devotional poems.<sup>22</sup> And some even convert her into a male figure! In translations of the *Bicitra Natak*, Time is invariably addressed as a male and presented in masculine terms and images, and only the male side of the formless Time is brought out and underscored. What is surprising is that even when the poet clearly has the goddess in mind, the translators give her a masculine identity.<sup>23</sup> This trend continues to dominate, and even an important contemporary work on the Dasam Granth distorts her female figure. This recent translation reads, "Fragmenter of the pride of Madhu (the demon), the decimator of Sumbh and keeper of white canopy over your head, O Lord, the weapons adorn your hands."<sup>24</sup> Now, in the original text there is no gender specification, no vocative such as "O Lord." The preceding acts of the goddess who destroys the demons imply that

the hands that hold weapons are female: *lasam hath atram* means “the weapons (*atram*) shine (*lasam*) in hand (*hath*).” Obviously, the poet means *her* weapons and *her* hands, but the English version accidentally interprets his words as referring to a supreme male lord. Such scholarly “accidents” recur with alarming consistency, because his poetic images are feared as worship of a goddess. Guru Gobind Singh’s poetic utilization of the mythological figure is misconstrued, and therefore erased.

Androcentric interpretations leave us impoverished artistically, spiritually, and morally. We distort the guru’s artistic landscape in which the female sword wielder is a fascinating literary protagonist; she is *not* the Ultimate who is the sole subject of Guru Gobind Singh’s belief and worship. At the same time, we sever ourselves from the maternal contact and protection extended by the female hand. Through his fabulous literary techniques, the guru incites us to imagine a woman’s body, drawing us to her strong female hand. We can see *her* flesh, *her* fingers as the source of his sword: “The sword in hand, crores of sins crossed over” (*BN*, 1:47). As long as we refuse to recognize the mythic heroine in Guru Gobind Singh’s poetry, we devalue the legitimacy and beneficence of female power in his religio-aesthetic worldview. I want to emphasize that the Sikh guru does not worship Kali.<sup>25</sup> Sikhs are rightly upset about the slightest hint of incarnation, but there is none here. Yet, at the same time, he artistically projects her female figure and energy. Now, there would be no problem if the guru were referring to a Hindu male god and his legendary activities. A Shiva or Indra or Rama would simply be understood as a literary device with metaphoric associations. As soon as the female is introduced, theologians and exegetes get all ruffled, and suspicions and fear of “Hinduism,” “polytheism,” or “pantheism” immediately begin to surface. The goddess Kali affects Sikhs at a visceral level, which her male counterparts do not.

Guru Gobind Singh’s remythologizing of the goddess discloses traits and unleashes energies that the poet and his readers, both men and women, could identify with and incorporate into their own lives. Male paradigms needed to be balanced by female paradigms. The rejuvenation of society depended on the actions of both men and women. The fact that Guru Gobind Singh was able to imagine a female hand holding the sword is a vital signifier that he could confidently see the instrument held in the hands of women in his own society. In fact, Sikh history records the case of Mai Bhago, who fought valiantly with the guru. She was from the Amritsar district of the Punjab. When she saw how some Sikhs of her area had fled rather than help the guru in Anandpur, she chided them for their pusillanimity. Mai Bhago led them back to fight for the guru, and she herself fought in the battle that took place in Muktsar on December 19, 1705.<sup>26</sup> During the period of Sikh persecutions that followed the guru’s death, women not only took care of their families but also fought courageously. The period is replete with the

heroic deeds and sacrifices of Sikh men and women like Mai Bhago. The guru who remembered the mythic woman warrior could have a valorous Mai Bhago by his side.

By refusing to acknowledge the artistic image of the goddess in their guru's literary horizon, the Sikh community only loses out. Staying blind to her image and deaf to her sounds, we weaken ourselves: we fracture the Sikh guru's universality that experiences the Infinite One, we fracture our community in which both men and women are equal, we fracture our self which contains both the male and the female, anima and animus. By obliterating Kali from Guru Gobind Singh's memory we give up a valuable paradigm to counter patriarchal theologies and patriarchal social systems that keep reinforcing each other. Sexism festers in the Sikh community. The prospect of translating Guru Gobind Singh's ancient Indian story into the contemporary social and political affairs of the Sikhs has not been realized, and unfortunately, "mythos" has not led to "ethos."

### Biophilic Ethics

In *Metaphors of Self*, the literary critic James Olney comments that the act of autobiography constitutes "a bringing to consciousness of the nature of one's own existence, transforming the mere fact of existence into a realized quality and a possible meaning."<sup>27</sup> The *Bicitra Natak* gives us a firsthand account of the author. The way he identifies himself and understands the meaning of his life can best be characterized as "biophilial." In contrast to necrophilia with its preoccupation on death and the other world, biophilia is literally a love for life. Feminist thinkers have appropriated it as a psychological and philosophical category to reshift the necrophilic imaginary rooted in misogyny. The feminist philosopher Grace Jantzen argues that in their love for the immortal, the spiritual, and the father, philosophers, mystics, and psychologists have hated the mortal, the physical, and the mother. Her comprehensive study *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy* incorporates the views of important Western feminists who condemn Freud's equation of the child's desire to control the mother's absence with Thanatos, the death drive. Jantzen cites Diane Jonte-Pace, who describes death as "the unrepresentable, the ultimate absence, is symbolized as woman; woman becomes through metonymy, death. . . ."<sup>28</sup> Jantzen, Jonte-Pace and their peers make us face the harsh reality that the obsession with death is linked to the obsession with female bodies.

The September 11 tragedy painfully brings home the point that the lovers of a God, conceived as male, were haters of women. The Al Qaeda hijackers were indeed obsessed with death. The eighteen-point "Last Will and Testament" of their leader, Mohammed Atta, reveals his joy at the

prospect of death. Preparing to meet death, Atta and his companions had their hair cut about an hour's distance from where I live in Maine. They were neatly shaved and eagerly awaited death. It is hard to fathom that these daring fighters had such disgust for—or fear of? —women! Point number 5 of Atta's will reads, "I don't want a pregnant woman or a person who is not clean to come and say good-bye to me"; number 11: "I don't want any women to go to my grave at all during my funeral or on any occasion thereafter."<sup>29</sup> In their love for death and a paradise somewhere out there, the earth and women are horribly despised.

The warnings of feminist scholars are extremely important in the context of our text, because what we have is a text full of battles and bloodshed. Death and the dead are everywhere. Could the *Bicitra Natak* be read as necrophilic? I am afraid such erroneous interpretations of the guru's text have found their way into Sikh society. The patriarchal psyche has remembered the guru's depictions of death as though life did not matter, as though body was not important, as though the guru's orientation was toward a heaven somewhere out there, as though women were irrelevant and inhuman. But to the contrary, the whole purpose of the birth of the Khalsa was to celebrate an authentic mode of existence here on earth with fellow men and women. We desperately need to see through the male surface of the *Bicitra Natak* in order to rectify our misinterpretations, and redirect ourselves.

In fact, our sonogram shows a person who deeply values a fruitful and abundant life on earth. We may recall his opening chapter celebrating the Infinite in the myriad forms of earthly existence—"Somewhere as a flower. . . . Somewhere like a woman." That One is the source of the flourishing world, and the resource of every embodied, gendered, situated self. We are drawn in by Guru Gobind Singh's respect for wombs from all species. His sense of wonder and joy resonant at the outset of his narrative—"You have produced the sweat-born, fetus-born, earth-born, You have created the egg-born"—lingers with his readers till the very end.

Even when he identifies himself, Guru Gobind Singh's love for life and living comes out strikingly. He is proud of his embodied self, the self that was born of his mother and father:

My father and mother worshipped the ineffable One,  
they meditated and contemplated in many ways  
They served the ineffable One,  
and the supreme Guru was pleased with them.

(BN, 6:3–4)

There is a hint here that the parents had some difficulties in having a child (actually, Gobind was the only child of Mata Gujari and Guru Tegh Bahadur). But both parents were devoted to the Divine, and their efforts bore a wonder-



ful result. Guru Gobind Singh does not point toward any immaculate conception. His was a birth in blood and placenta. In his re-creation of himself, the guru validates the physical and sexual mode of procreation.

He is adamant that he not be confused as an incarnation of the Supreme One.<sup>30</sup> He categorically identifies himself as personal slave (*dasa*) of the Supreme One and rejects all other appropriations: “If anyone calls me the supreme being, they shall fall into the pit of hell. Know me as the slave of That One, for there is nothing hidden in it. I am the slave of the highest Being...” (6:32–33). The guru enfolds his readers into his poetic enterprise and invites them to accept the dignity of human life and experience—finite though they may be.

Grounded in human history, he hears his divine call to launch a community that would steer people away from ignorance:

“I cherish you as my son, to propagate the Panth [Community]  
I have created you.  
Go there and launch Dharam [moral system], restrain humanity  
from ignorance.”  
I got up, my hands folded together,  
and with my head bowed, I responded:  
“The Panth will begin in the world when you help.”  
(BN, 6:29–30)

The earliest inklings of the Khalsa are visible here. The guru is endowed with a divine mission that can be consummated only through a community that will radically change the affairs of his contemporary society. Justice does not belong to another time and space, and the guru reminds us of the responsibilities we owe one another. His future organization is to bring out the best of humanity by erasing “ignorance” (*kubudhi*). We hear his commitment to a fulfilling life on earth. The guru accepts his mission in and through his body: his hands are folded together and his head is bowed.

Guru Gobind Singh’s mission is accomplished through love and emotions. Body is good. Senses are validated. Morality comes in life, through our bodies. The guru adamantly says: “I will not keep matted hair nor wear glass-rings in the ears” (BN, 6:51), “I will not blindfold eyes” (6:62) nor “shut my nostrils” (6:57), “I will not keep false faiths nor display acts of piety...” (6:52). These cultural codes for annihilating the body, shutting off the senses, and breaking all natural links with our bodies, with our families, and with our community are loudly rejected in the *Bicitra Natak*. Morality is not fostered in some distant cave or a faraway forest; rather it is practiced in the immediate world of here and now. The sensuous experience—with eyes, with ears, with nose—of the Transcendent One, constitutes Guru Gobind Singh’s sole method.

And the story of his life takes shape in a nexus of relationships that helped him in the “cultivation of the self”: “They nurtured my body in various ways; they gave me instructions of many different types” (BN, 7:3). The care of the body (*tan racha*) is instilled in him in his early years. In fact, the five Ks that he gave his Khalsa (long hair, comb, drawers, bracelet, and sword) are a means of taking care of the body, and must have their genesis somewhere in this early phase of Guru Gobind Singh’s life.

The guru also reminisces about the affection he received: “I was caressed by many different nurses” (BN, 7:2). Different arms must have cuddled him; different voices must have sung him lullabies. When he was born in Patna, he must have been raised by women from Bihar, and after his move with his family to Anandpur, he would have been brought up by women from the Punjab and the hill areas of Garhwal and Bilaspur. A variety of languages and accents and myths and legends would have echoed in the little person. Being nurtured by a variety of people in his childhood is likely to have contributed to Guru Gobind Singh’s open and embracing personality. The more love he received as a child, the more love the guru was able to give to others during his adult life. Having a healthy relationship with women in his impressionable years solidified his positive attitude toward the opposite sex for the rest of his life. Sikhs popularly recite his childhood friendship with Queen Mania, who had no children of her own. When the four-year-old Gobind promised that he would be like a son to her, Mania gave him grain. In recognition of the friendship between Gobind and Queen Mania, grain continues to be served in the community meal at Patna Sahib Gurdwara. Queen Mania may have introduced him to the mystery and power of procreation. Guru Gobind Singh’s subterranean self was constructed through his intimacy with women.

Guru Gobind Singh entered the variegated world with love and joy. The world blossomed with the Infinite, and he entered the blossoming world through the body of his mother. As he grew up he became actively engaged in upholding the morality and freedom of his society. The battles he fought were short-lived, and they were intended for the goodness and liberation of everybody, so that the intrinsic blossoming could be felt by his society. Our rememory of his autobiographical narrative fills us with respect for our mothers, a celebration of our entry into the world, a love for our own bodies, and a responsibility to make life fulfilling for ourselves and for our fellow beings. The clues that we find in the narrative are not inconsequential ones that can be ignored in the development of Guru Gobind Singh’s ethical philosophy; rather, they constitute his self-consciousness and the consciousness that he passed down to his future Khalsa. Above all else, it was by his obsession with life and living that he became pregnant with the Khalsa.

### Pluralistic Genes

The *Bicitra Natak* gives us a firsthand account of the author in which he looks at himself from diverse angles—spiritual, cultural, historical, and biological. The guru identifies himself as the servant of the One, as the descendant of legendary Indian kings, as the successor of Guru Nanak, and as the son of Guru Tegh Bahadur and Mata Gujari. The manifold past is very much alive in the author's consciousness, and those diverse and plural patterns of his own integrated personality are passed on to the Khalsa.

#### *Spiritual*

The Divine, of course, is the ground of Guru Gobind Singh's life and imagination, and is naturally regarded as his progenitor. This One is the common denominator of the universe, the voice of both Eastern and Western scriptures. The guru introduces himself as the "servant" of That One, commissioned to bring about justice in society. His notion of selfhood constantly retains its physical and metaphysical dimensions. Perhaps it was Guru Gobind Singh's feeling of transcendence that made him search deep inside of himself and express his birth into this world with the imagination of a poet and the insight of a philosopher. In chapter 6 of his work, the guru writes that on the lofty Hemkunt mountain, he became totally saturated in the One: "[F]rom two it became one form" (BN, 6:3). Absorbed in the Sole Reality, all his doubts and dualisms disappeared. In the intensity of his experience, the subject of the devotions and the object became One, and he experienced total unity. On their side, his parents were also devoted to That One. The Transcendent was the focal point on which his parents' and his own ardent devotions converged. As he was absorbed in that timeless moment (not in some previous birth), the parents lovingly conceived and received him. The infinite source was carried by Mata Gujari in her womb for nine months and entered this world.

That his divine source was both male and female was critical to Guru Gobind Singh's self-understanding. In his final canto, he experiences transcendent time in terms of a parental bond: "All human time is our transcendent father; all divine time is our biological mother" (BN, 14:5). The guru comes into this world not as a detached individual who is "thrown" but as the progeny of a couple who share a rich organic intimacy. He draws our attention to both dimensions of time—male (*kal*) and female (*kalika*)—for they are the father and mother who together constitute our world and reality. Every birth restores transcendent time into the seconds, minutes, and hours of our days, weeks, months, and years. Birth and being alive are therefore

natural phenomena completely contingent on time, which in nature and function is *both* father and mother. Thus Guru Gobind Singh recovers his physical identity lodged in the Divine.

The male and female dimensions are also equally vital to his intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and moral self-construction. In the very next verse he says, “Male mind is our guru, female mind is our mother who taught me all right action.” The word *man* (mind) defies either-or categories and means mind, heart, consciousness, spirit. All good action toward the human family is learned from this mental, spiritual, and emotional hub, which is personified by the figures of a male guru (*manua gur*) and a female mother (*mansa mai*).<sup>31</sup> This acknowledgment in the final canto of his autobiography discloses that all that the guru thought, all that he imagined, all that he sensed, and all the good deeds that he performed came from this reservoir flowing with male and female currents. His is a holistic notion of the self in which the female is not denigrated, denied, or repressed. Guru Gobind Singh’s integrated self-awareness vigorously contests the mind-body dualism, and in turn offers new livable possibilities for spirituality and action for men and women alike.

### *Cultural*

The Guru shows us his link with the soil and soul of India by connecting himself with the protagonists of both the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Guru Gobind Singh was born in India, he studied the classical Indian languages, and he was familiar with the ancient Indian literary and intellectual tradition. The *Bicitra Natak* amply illustrates that the guru was proud to inherit his extensive pan-Indian cultural legacy. There is an inner confidence in him that allows him to celebrate his selfhood *with* and not *against* his ancient past.

With all his narrative details, Guru Gobind Singh introduces us to his cultural ancestry, which goes back for more than two millennia. The guru claims, “[T]hrough self-discipline I landed at Hemkunt, the site bedecked by seven mountain peaks” (BN, 6:1). While we are introduced to his spiritual activities amid the beauty, sturdiness, and loftiness of the Himalayan locale, we are also introduced to his association with the ancestor of the Pandavas, since Hemkunt “was the spot where the Pandu king practiced austerities” (6:2). The guru must have cherished the Pandava clan because of their display of courage in the *Mahabharata*, in which they fought against the immoral forces of the Kauravas. When the Pandava brother Arjuna showed some reservation, Lord Krishna urged him to fight for the upkeep of Dharma, and his divine advice is enshrined in the Bhagavad Gita. For the Sikh guru, the Pandava undertaking was crucial. Immorality and injustice had to be quelled. But even more important was the sequence: intense contemplation by their greatest warrior preceded the mighty war fought by the

Pandava brothers in Kurukshetra. The Sikh guru's engagements follow a parallel path: only deep reflection and meditation prepare one to fight for justice; only after intense concentration did he create the Khalsa in the Shivalik Valley to fight oppression.

Simultaneously, he contextualizes himself within the framework of the other great Indian epic, Valmiki's *Ramayana*. In cantos 2–6 of the *Bicitra Natak*, the author traces the lineage of the Sikh gurus to King Aju, who is known to have descended from Raghav, a brilliant star of the Solar dynasty. Guru Gobind Singh describes the forefather as “a fabulous warrior and a fabulous archer” (BN, 2:20). But the guru admires King Aju for leaving behind all his wealth and power to King Dashrath and retreating to the forest to meditate. The combination of secular and spiritual aspirations is the striking characteristic of all the ancestors he mentions in the *Bicitra Natak*, be they Sodhis, Bedis, or the forefather King Aju himself. C. P. Loehlin tersely comments that there was a kaleidoscopic succession in which Guru Gobind Singh's warrior ancestors turned into scholars, ascetics into rulers, and rulers into ascetics.<sup>32</sup>

Interestingly, he traces the origins of the cultural centers of the Punjab—Lahore and Kasur—to Lav and Kush, the “sons of Sita” (BN, 2:23). Sita surfaces in the Sikh guru's memoir as the progenitor of civilization in northern India. He praises those cities of *madra desh*, the region between the Rivers Beas and Jhelum: “[S]uch is the grandeur of Lahore and Kasur that Lanka and Amravati were put to shame” (2:24). Sita's offspring gave birth to new cultural centers that would draw people from different geographical, linguistic, religious, and social backgrounds. In an earlier section of his narrative as well, the male Guru remembers the foremothers—the incredibly beautiful daughters Banita, Kadru, Diti, and Aditi. They were married to sages and gave birth to serpents, gods, and demons (2:17–18). He reminds us that “It was [Dashrath's] first wife who gave birth to Prince Rama “ (2:22). In a culture where genealogy is traced solely through males, the *Bicitra Natak* takes note of mothers, wives, and daughters. In fact, the Solar clan descends from the womb of Aditi, the female principle of creation or infinity.<sup>33</sup>

Clearly, Guru Gobind Singh's India is not divided into Hinduism, Buddhism, or Jainism; for the Sikh guru India represents universal morality, oneness, and justice. The Sikh guru burrows deep into India's heart and experiences her pluralism, which takes him out of provincialism and narrowness into a vaster and profounder reality. In his Akal Ustat he strikingly denounces the difference between Hindu and Muslim forms of worship and their sacred places, the temple and the mosque, proclaiming “all humans are one” (Akal Ustat, verse 86). When India was bleeding from the wounds of partition in the twentieth century, political leaders like Mahatma Gandhi tried to bring peace and harmony by reviving Guru Gobind Singh's vision.

According to Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, Gandhi got the idea for his popular public prayer “Ishvara and Allah are your names...” from Guru Gobind Singh.<sup>34</sup> Gandhi often claimed to be a follower of the Sikh guru, and because of his aspirations for a united India, he felt to be closer to the ideals of Guru Gobind Singh than to contemporary Sikh political leaders who wanted a separate Sikh homeland: “I had said to no one else than Master Tara Singh that I was the true heir of Guru Govind Singh and not he...”<sup>35</sup> We hear Gandhi lavishly praising Guru Gobind Singh: “He was a man given to charity, he was unattached, he was an incarnation of God,”<sup>36</sup> though Guru Gobind Singh would not have wanted anybody to go that far.<sup>37</sup> Just a few days before his death, Gandhi broke his fast for Guru Gobind Singh’s birthday (January 18, 1948). Clearly the Sikh guru’s pluralism and humanism had great appeal for Mahatma Gandhi in twentieth-century India.

Guru Gobind Singh’s own sense of the past continued into his future occupations and became embodied in the Khalsa members, who would remain in touch with their ancient roots. The first five initiates into the Khalsa family not only came from different sectors of society but also from different parts of India: North, South, East and West. The nucleus thus represents a wide and diverse spectrum of Indian culture. The universal morality and justice and the power of poetry embodied in India’s rich past had to be reproduced in the future. Indomitable warriors are made up of delicate poetry. Guru Gobind Singh’s ideal of the Khalsa was generated by the ancient figures that he remembered in his drama.

### *Historical*

The origins of the Khalsa are directly traced to the Sikh gurus. While maintaining his pan-Indian links, we find that Guru Gobind Singh is very specific about his Sikh genealogy. The detailed exposition of the Bedi and Sodhi families in chapters 2–4 of the *Bicitra Natak* is a logical progression to his Sikh origins, to the appearance of Nanak (BN, 5:4). Guru Gobind Singh devotes three and a half verses to Guru Nanak. But in those few words he underscores Guru Nanak’s pluralistic mandate, which must have made a deep impression on him.

First of all he celebrates Nanak as the founder of a new ethical order. In his own words, “[H]e launched *dharam* in this age” (BN, 5:5). By *dharam* Guru Gobind Singh means the Sikh way of life. He retains the traditional Sanskrit term *dharma* (that which holds together) to indicate that Nanak initiated something new and that “he popularized *dharam* [Punjabi version of *dharma*] in this world” (5:7). We have here an important testimony from Guru Gobind Singh that the first Sikh guru transformed his society and created a new energy, which became consolidated into a new religion. The tenth

Sikh guru maintained his ancient links and remained ever in close touch with the eternal wisdom of India, but the origins of his Khalsa are specifically rooted in Guru Nanak. In the new path launched by the founder of Sikhism, the *varnasharamdharma* upheld by traditional scriptures is overturned, and so the warrior is no longer limited to the Kshatriya caste; the fight for justice is not only Arjuna's dharma but action shared equally by all men and women, at all stages of life. Though Guru Gobind Singh's Khalsa would carry on the ideals of heroism and poetry from ancient epics, it would also be something radically different from any historical paradigm.

Guru Gobind Singh further compliments his predecessor for showing the way "to all good people" (BN, 5:5). Nanak made no religious, cultural, or social distinctions. The tenth Sikh guru emulated his inclusive approach and made it the very ground for his philosophy and ethics. People from different castes, different professional backgrounds, and different cultural parts of India could join the new family of the Khalsa. Their rebirth into the single caste of humanity was marked by their sipping *amrit* from the same bowl. This practical gesture started by the tenth Sikh guru on Baisakhi Day 1699 was modeled on his memory that Guru Nanak had received a bowl full of *amrit* from the Transcendent One (a metahistoric account that we will explore in more detail in chapter 3). Guru Gobind Singh had to ensure that nobody belonging to the human family was ever to be weaned away from that divine *amrit* first tasted by Nanak.

The final point that Guru Gobind Singh makes about Nanak's ministry is that he instilled Lahina as his successor.

Nanak gave his form to Angad  
He spread his religion in this world.  
Then he was called by the name of Amar Das  
Like one lamp lighting another.

(BN, 5:7)

Guru Nanak's disciple Lahina is made Angad, literally, a limb (from Sanskrit *anga*) of his own body. Guru Gobind Singh's lamp analogy has a precedent in the Guru Granth itself (GG, 966), and has also been used by Bhai Gurdas in his Punjabi ballads.<sup>38</sup> One flame kindles another. In spite of the fact that the gurus were born in different families (Bedis or Sodhis), Guru Gobind Singh categorically claims that the same light, the same message, and the same physicality was carried on from Nanak to Angad and to his successor gurus. The historical succession from Nanak to Angad etched in the tenth Sikh guru's memory was eventually reproduced by him: he made the Khalsa a limb of himself on Baisakhi 1699, and a day before he passed away, he invested the Granth with guruship. The corporeality of *angad* continued to sustain his vision and praxis.

*Biological*

The author continues with his historical account, depicting how each guru was embodied in the next till he comes to the ninth, Guru Tegh Bahadur (BN, 5:12). Here the narrative speaks of his biological father. With the mention of Tegh Bahadur, the poet's attention is instantly drawn to the ninth guru's martyrdom, and this tragic event reveals yet another layer of the Khalsa's fertilization.<sup>39</sup> The final four verses of chapter 5 of the *Bicitra Natak* form an intersection between the author's past and his present. The memory they recount and the sentiments that they express reveal how deeply affected he was by his father's phenomenal sacrifice for the sake of religious diversity.

Guru Gobind Singh's very first comment about his father is that "he protected the frontal mark and sacred thread" (BN, 5:13). Compassion and sympathy for others are the characteristics that stand out foremost in the mind of the son. Guru Tegh Bahadur was not a votary of either *tilak* (the mark on the forehead) or *janeu* (the sacred thread worn by upper-caste male Hindus). Yet, the ninth Sikh guru staked his life for the right of those who believed in them. The defense of these two religious symbols signified the right of each individual to practice his or her religion freely. The son is struck by the fact that his father overcame narrow religious barriers, and performed his "momentous deed" for the sake of people of another faith (5:14).

Guru Gobind Singh's admiration for his father's tremendous courage flows out in verses of haunting beauty. We hear in rhythmic assonance: "[H]e gave up his head, but did not utter a sigh" (BN, 5:13). In the next verse, "[H]e gave up his head but not his faith" (5:14). Again, "[A] deed like Tegh Bahadur's none has dared to do" (5:15). The *Bicitra Natak* does not go into any of the details of how Guru Tegh Bahadur was cruelly beheaded in public in Chandni Chowk, near the Red Fort in Delhi on November 11, 1675. Young Gobind, who was nine years old at that time, was far away in Anandpur with his mother.

Historians report that for fear of Mughal reprisals, the mutilated body of Guru Tegh Bahadur was left unattended in Chandni Chowk. At night there was a storm that helped Sikhs to escape with the bodily remains. Lakhi Shah, with the help of his son, lifted the headless trunk and carried it off to his home in a cart. Since open cremation would not have been allowed, Lakhi Shah set fire to his house, burning with it the body of the martyred guru. The spot is now the site of the popular Sikh shrine Gurdwara Rikabganj in Delhi. Bhai Jaita took the severed head and made a hazardous journey with his revered possession to Anandpur. Harbans Singh tenderly captures the tragic scene: "The rocks of the hills around Anandpur must have melted to see the dust-laden, severed head of its founder."<sup>40</sup> It was the nine-year-old Gobind who received the head from Bhai Jaita, and with due ceremony he cremated



it. No wonder the “head” is mentioned so often in those few verses in chapter 5 of the *Bicitra Natak*. And years later, on Baisakhi Day of 1699, when Guru Gobind Singh began the Khalsa institution with the call for a “head,” he must have been unconsciously remembering his father’s gift to humanity. The demand that stunned the Baisakhi congregation of 1699 was but what Guru Tegh Bahadur had already met in his lifetime. The pluralistic motivations of his father must have resonated deep within the son and eventually led to his ideal of the Khalsa, which would valorously defy all sorts of religious and social exclusions.

Guru Gobind Singh’s personal loss, pain, and anger were sublimated into a dynamic and creative mode of living. His father’s death did not make him vindictive, as is commonly assumed.<sup>41</sup> The *Bicitra Natak* throughout shows how Guru Gobind Singh remains full of love for the Transcendent One and for the beauty of the world around him. The notion that revenge of his father’s death became the dominant force behind his actions would be a gross misreading of his autobiography, a gross misinterpretation of the devotion he had for humanity at large, and a gross misunderstanding of the conception of the Khalsa. In fact, what his father was for him, Guru Gobind Singh became for the Khalsa. His procreation of the Khalsa was prompted by his feelings of compassion and love, and on Baisakhi 1699, he and Mataji become parents of their newly born Khalsa.

Guru Gobind Singh’s multifaceted identity was transferred to the Khalsa. The pluralistic genes from the Infinite Reality, from epic figures of ancient India, from the first Sikh guru, and from his own parents, Tegh Bahadur and Mata Gujari, would naturally flow into Guru Gobind Singh’s Khalsa. As the *Bicitra Natak* unfolds for us, the multiple sources of his own birth become the resources of the Khalsa. He erases all boundary markings, a strategy that is implicitly feminine, since such boundaries are a “part of patriarchy’s exercise of power, a power connected to ownership and deploying of identity politics that must know itself *as against* the other and fails to embrace what ‘could happen with others.’”<sup>42</sup> Guru Gobind Singh identifies himself by accepting himself as a part of human history, and our failure to recognize his total personality is our loss.

Like him, his Khalsa is fertilized by the Divine One and gestates in Guru Gobind Singh’s expansive religio-aesthetic *Weltanschauung*; while its cultural and ethnic cradle is ancient India with its manifold models of warriors and poets, the Khalsa is specifically rooted in the pluralistic vision of the Sikh gurus from Nanak to his own father. Guru Gobind Singh bred the Khalsa precisely to fight against monolithic structures and conceptual rigidities. When the orthodoxy and fundamentalism of the Mughal empire stifled diversity, the guru vigorously challenged the Mughals. The conception of Guru Gobind Singh’s Khalsa therefore needs to be remembered not in terms of

exclusivism, but in terms of pluralism. According to Diana Eck, a popular contemporary voice on the subject, “[T]he pluralist . . . stands in a particular community and is willing to be committed to the struggles of that community. . . . The challenge for the pluralist is commitment without dogmatism and community without communalism.”<sup>43</sup> The Khalsa he conceived would not simply tolerate people of other faiths; the Khalsa would try its best to create a space where different communities could live together freely and harmoniously. The Infinite would not be slighted or insulted in any *body* from any caste, class, religion, or gender.

### Battles of Life

Chapters 8 through 13 of the *Bicitra Natak* chronologically outline the battles of Bhangani and Nadaun, and the many skirmishes against the neighborhood hill chiefs and Mughal forces that Guru Gobind Singh took part in. The six chapters come toward the close of the *Bicitra Natak*, and each of them focuses on a particular battle and names and describes the warriors and their actions. This section of the *Bicitra Natak* has received considerable attention from scholars, who study it with the objective of gaining historical information about the specific battles and collecting biographical facts about Guru Gobind Singh. Our reading expectations are somewhat different, for what we want is to discern the poet’s sentiments and concerns, and to recognize the allusions to life and living that underlie his graphic battle scenes. It may very well be that we are following Virginia Woolf’s dictum “to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important.”<sup>44</sup>

In spite of all the vivid battle scenes and heightened dramatic scenarios, what we notice is the lack of divine rewards for the warriors. The guru who is so talented in depicting the scenes of this world has no descriptions of the “world of the gods” that he hastily mentions in connection with his father’s sacrifice (*BN*, 5:16) or with the heroic death of his men who bear the shots from their enemy (*BN*, 8:26). Guru Gobind Singh does not lead his readers away from our earthly setting to a paradise beyond with eternal delights awaiting his heroes. He makes no such promises to whisk us away from this world of ours. Nor does he offer any rationalization or legitimization for expansion and conquest. The guru is not fighting for any political aggrandizement or economic gains. There are no enticements of booty or territories of any size or kind. As a result, the various battles and skirmishes with their ferocious actions and blaring sounds do not possess either the intensity or the fervor of crusades or jihads.

The battles he takes part in are fought in self-defense. At the beginning of chapter 8 he writes, “Fateh Shah, the king then, was angry; without any

reason he made the attack on us" (BN, 8:3). The guru is not the aggressor, and is actually quite perplexed about his adversary's motives. So according to the *Bicitra Natak*, the fierce Battle of Bhangani (which took place in September 1688) was actually forced on the guru by Fateh Shah—without any purpose (*binu kaja*).

Similarly, the guru happened to go along with his neighbors in the battle that took place in Nadaun (March 1691). When his neighbor, the ruler Bhim Chand, saw his opponent Mian Khan coming down to strike him, "the king called upon me" (BN, 9:2). The guru casually repeats that he was asked to take part in the battle: "[A]ll the warriors were called; I was called too" (9:6). Evidently, there is no religious calling, only a plea from a neighbor. Guru Gobind Singh does not fight out of acrimony, and he does not fight for the sake of territorial conquest.

And once involved, he seems to enjoy his fights tremendously. Although he was the leader and commander of his forces, he was always in close proximity, fighting with and beside his people. Through his artistic sensibility the battlefields become playgrounds, and fright and terror are replaced in him by adventure and excitement. Death is made light of. It is not the ultimate concern, nor is it looked upon as an entry into another world. The guru's absolute mission is to make *this* world a better place with the help of the Transcendent One. His literary technique triumphs in heightening the reader's imagination and talents for creative action, and it induces an appreciation for this world with its domestic, seasonal, and sacred scenes and rituals. We sense in him a deep desire to connect the public and private worlds. The *Bicitra Natak* is not a simple autobiographical account. As Guru Gobind Singh works through the historical events, he plays upon the reader in many fascinating ways.

It is a mark of the guru's poetic genius that in his narrative of the brutal battles, he can evoke the colossal war fought in Kurukshetra, on the one hand, and the delightful pranks that Lord Krishna played in kitchens, on the other. His allusions to and evocations of ancient Indian figures and events has an altogether unique and powerful effect. While reading Guru Gobind Singh's narrative of the Battle of Bhangani, the reader is swept into the ancient and gigantic world of the *Mahabharata*: "Daya Ram, honored like the gods, fought furiously as though perfected by Drona in the great war" (BN, 8:6). Dronacarya was the great teacher who taught the skills of war to both Kauravas and Pandavas, the cousins who fought against each other in Kurukshetra. In his subtle way, Guru Gobind Singh not only praises his Brahmin ally Daya Ram for fighting valorously as though he were taught by Drona himself, but he also makes the point that a revered Brahmin can and does fight heroically. The instruction originally given to the Kshatriya princes is opened up to the other castes.

The compliment to Daya Ram is followed by one to Kripal (the maternal uncle of the guru), who finishes off a sturdy enemy as though it were child's play. The gruesome scene of Hayat Khan's death is framed with the lovely antics of baby Krishna (*BN*, 8:7). The enemy's shattered skull and the spilling out of the horrible gray matter is compared with the fragile pitchers of the cowherdesses from Brindaban and their scattered butter. The reader quickly moves back and forth between the bloody Battle of Bhangani and the warm, nourishing kitchens in Brindaban where baby Krishna would be stealing butter from the cowherdesses. The male space is linked with the female space; battlefields of crimson blood with kitchens flowing with white milk; the hurling of weapons with the churning of butter; the historical event with fanciful legends. Guru Gobind Singh's similes are not prosaic or hackneyed; his comparisons are couched in drastic contrasts that are then beautifully synthesized, as though the poet were using Mother Yashodra's wooden blender himself and bringing out rich new experiences for his readers.

In spite of its evocation of battle after battle, the *Bicitra Natak* probably does not shock its readers very much. The readers of his day were familiar with depictions of wars in Sanskrit and Persian literature and may have even witnessed the many battles fought between and among Mughals, Indians, and Europeans on their soil. His modern readers are also only too familiar with equally gory images. With guns and weapons chemical, biological, and technological all around us, and a constant bombardment of brutal images in movies, novels, news, documentaries, and video games, we are as a matter of fact quite anesthetized to violence. The horrendous attack on the World Trade Center was initially registered as but a scene from a movie! Obviously, the power of the guru's narrative is not in his gruesome depictions of battles—there have been far too many registered in our human history. Rather, it lies in the unique way he negates those usual scenes of blood and weaponry and opens the reader to nurturing vistas and life-sustaining utensils. The real shock to the reader comes when we are led from bloody battles to warm and comfortable spaces. It is upon entering our homes that we are challenged to rethink each experience in our own lives in new and different ways. Guru Gobind Singh's artistic strategy "reorients" us, and we begin to gather butterlike nutrients that come from the churning of Mother Yashodra. Instead of the deathly stillness that follows the hurling of weapons by warriors mythic and real, the guru awakens us to dynamic activities in our kitchens and offices. As we read on, the *Bicitra Natak* leads us to a reorientation of our familiar preconceptions, in a subtle way that has been nicely articulated by Wolfgang Iser, the famous exponent of the German school of reception theory:

The efficacy of a literary text is brought about by the apparent evocation and subsequent negation of the familiar. What at first seemed to be an affirmation of our assumptions leads to our own rejection of them, thus tending to prepare

us for a re-orientation. And it is only when we have outstripped our preconceptions and left the shelter of the familiar that we are in a position to gather new experiences.<sup>45</sup>

The sweeping and speedy patterns of evoking and negating familiar scenarios continue on, and the equally fierce battle of Nadaun culminates in Holi, the traditional spring festival of northern India. During this celebration, people throw brightly colored paint and dye on one another. They dance and they play practical jokes on one another. Friends and strangers, high and low alike, are sprayed, splashed, and smeared with reds, yellows, greens, and blues. With scenes of burlesque and merrymaking as the backdrop, Guru Gobind Singh describes the defeat of Alif Khan and his men. The enemies are repelled and thrown into a stream flowing from the River Beas. Those warriors left on the bank “sit as if [they] had just finished playing Holi” (BN, 9:19). He extends the analogy of Holi: “Their clothes are colored as if they had been having fun at the Phalgun festival” (9:20).

Holi is celebrated on the full-moon day of the month of Phalgun on the Indian calendar, just as winter mellows into spring. That mood of joy, that exhilaration, that anticipation of vitality that comes with spring, is re-created in Guru Gobind Singh’s description. The guru does not lead us to death or another world beyond death; his battles are not endowed with any heavenly promises of eternal life. His graphic descriptions open us to springtime with its change and finitude, and they stimulate us to create new possibilities in our world here and now.

The *Bicitra Natak* reveals the many facets of the author. While we hear him proudly and playfully relay the defeat of his enemies, we also hear his tender sympathy for the destruction caused by the battles, and the loss and suffering of the innocent. In chapter 10, he describes enemy troops stealthily preparing an attack in the middle of night. But the guru’s guard, Alam, came to the rescue: “Alam came and woke us up” (BN, 10:3). The word got around, and everyone got up, inebriated with the spirit to fight. Taken aback by the alacrity of the response, the enemy made a hasty retreat from Anandpur but avenged themselves on the neighborhood village of Barwa, wrecking it completely.

The guru felt compassion for the people of Barwa. The finale of his chapter is a unique simile in which we hear him sympathize with the innocent victims of Barwa, and we hear him poke fun at their enemy: “By Your strength they could not get us here, but they looted Barwa. Like the vegetarian who tries to make a rich curry out of a paltry leek” (BN, 10:10). We enter a kitchen again. Failing to acquire the hearty treasures of Anandpur, the khan and his men loot and pillage Barwa. They vent their fury at the poor and pathetic village, and like a cook with his vegetables, do their best to suck out all they can from the destitute villagers. We get a feel for Gobind

Singh's war ethics, which, scholars say, "allowed no looting, no raping, no killing of innocent civilians, no pursuit of the fugitive enemy, and no ill-treatment of war-prisoners."<sup>46</sup>

We enter spring festivals, we enter kitchens, and we enter temples. Guru Gobind Singh's artistic repertoire evokes a vast range of beautiful images. While recounting another fierce battle, he leads us into a religious space where "The arrows poured out sacred waters, the bows recited Vedic chants" (BN, 11:38). As warfare gets identified with religious activity, ceremonial rituals and worship are imported poetically into the din and clamor of the battle. The arrows in the *Bicitra Natak* perform the ceremonial adoration in which rose water is lovingly sprinkled over deities. The sensation of touch is accompanied by melodious sounds—the strongly strung bows recite Vedic chants! The guru poignantly fuses the battlefield with the temple, and all the fury of warfare with the serenity of sacred rituals and recitations. His multidimensional architecture refuses to erect any demarcations.

Ancient Indian religious motifs are very much a part of the mosaic of the *Bicitra Natak*, for Guru Gobind Singh does not see himself separate from the continuum of human history. His mental matrix is inclusive of all cultures. With his imagination soaring far above any religious or ideological boundaries, the Sikh guru explores new areas of human experience through new diction and meter. He weaves together the daring deeds of the goddess Kali and the colorful Holi, the baby Krishna's antics in Brindaban, and a lovely Hindu mode of worship to enhance the aesthetic effect of his narrative. Lord Shiva and other Hindu deities also figure prominently in scenes of gruesome battles. Guru Gobind Singh utilizes popular images and themes from Hindu mythology and culture in novel and unique ways. They illustrate his extraordinary breadth of vision, and in turn they enrich and expand his narrative, opening it up to wider and wider audiences. Charged with cultural significance, Guru Gobind Singh's literary devices vividly bring out his feelings of fury and tenderness. By mixing the events of his life with events involving popular mythic heroes and heroines, Guru Gobind Singh provides his narrative with a surrealist quality. We are turned away from the facticity of his narrative and become imaginatively involved in the actions of its mythical protagonists, and thus the reading of the *Bicitra Natak*, in Iser's words, "reflects the process by which we gain experience."<sup>47</sup>

Guru Gobind Singh's belief and devotion remain focused on the One that is ever formless and transcendent. His categorical statement

I will contemplate the name of the Infinite One  
And acquire the supreme light;  
I will not meditate on any other  
Nor recite the name of another.

(BN, 6:38)

resonates throughout the text. That One remains the guru's ultimate concern and his constant support. In the last chapter of the *Bicitra Natak*, he writes, "Deeming me your slave, you helped me, /By your hand, I was saved from all enemies" (BN, 14:2). Here again, he palpably feels the presence of the Transcendent One. The protection from his mighty enemies comes from the "hand" extended over him through all his trials and tribulations. The hand (*hathu*) is not specified as either male or female, and if it is sensuously felt by Guru Gobind Singh, it has to be *both* male and female. The primal touch he experienced was that of his mother's midwife, of his mother, and of his grandmother, and his first conscious memories were of his nurses who affectionately carried him around: "I was caressed by many different nurses" (7:2). How can we obliterate the female from Guru Gobind Singh's experience and imagination?

### Inspired Body

The *Bicitra Natak* rejuvenates the psyche so that reform in the real sense of the word can come about. As we all know, rules and regulations simply fail if there is not also a change in the consciousness of the people. The dedicated activist and founding editor of *Manushi* (a leading Indian journal of women and society), Madhu Kishwar, aptly comments that laws and regulations are useless gestures and concessions by governments.<sup>48</sup> Guru Gobind Singh probably understood this political reality, and so his literary discourse was aimed at radically changing his oppressed and subjugated society from within. The guru wanted to reach into the very marrow and psyche of his people, and through his passionate urge and his artistic devices, he achieves his effect.

The *Bicitra Natak* may not provide us with much biographical information. But the readers are stirred by his absorption in the Divine and by the titanic energy of his narrative. The work is more a disclosure of his self (*autos*) than of his life (*bios*). Through his splendid literary talents, the ferocious fights come together—at once gently and strikingly—with the playful, the festive, the very domestic, and the most sacred activities. The details of war do not leave the reader in fear or dread; they do not orient us to a world *out there*. His love for life dominates all his writings, and his descriptions excite the intellect, the spirit, the imagination, and the senses, inspiring his readers and directing them toward immediate moral action in their home, or their nation, and in the international community. The *Bicitra Natak* is not a call to fighting but to writing, speaking, painting, communicating, loving.

Guru Gobind Singh heightens his fresh images, his poignant similes, and his fantastic analogies by using a rhythmical tempo. Out of the nine *rasa* or moods elaborated in Indian art, Guru Gobind Singh uses the *raudra rasa*, the

martial mood, both as the content and as the form of his magical memoir. Actually, the *raudra rasa* pervades all of Guru Gobind Singh's compositions. His repetition of sounds like *bha*, *gha*, and *jha* reproduces the heavy sound of feats, and their alliteration, assonance, and consonance lend a stimulating rhythm and music to his narrative. He also uses quick and short meters to reproduce the speed of action. Through the dynamic rhythms readers are led into exciting landscapes. We become saturated with the frenzy of action, and feel creative currents flow in our blood and nerves.

The literary enterprise is vital to the guru. His engagement in battles does not deter him from his poetic productivity, and as the *Bicitra Natak* comes to a close, the guru is ready to begin his next project: "First I composed the *Candi Carit* describing deeds from toe to head; /In detail I told the story and now leaving these stories behind, /I wish to give praise again" (BN, 14:11). An ending expresses what is ultimately important to authors and what they want to leave with their readers, so this final verse reveals how vital the writing process was for Guru Gobind Singh. Perhaps as his autobiographical narrative comes to a close he feels a sense of loss and longs to start anew. The male guru who is fighting with and against men has an inner compulsion to tap into the recesses of his self and think about the actions of a female protagonist again. His adventurous spirit aspires to produce poetic expressions that have no utilitarian value; there is just the artistic abundance in him that he labors to give birth to. But he wants to conceive a topic that he has already dealt with extensively. And so the lasting impression he leaves on our minds is that of a poet who values mnemonic reverberations. His life story with its battles and war drums sketched surrealistically in the *Bicitra Natak* essentially ends up being the life story of a creative artist who wants to give birth to new patterns and tones by returning and remembering and re-creating the past. Indeed, we find here a justification for our own methodology: we re-member the past to make sense of it for ourselves. With him as our model, we enter his world from the depths of our own being. Guru Gobind Singh grants us the freedom to think about the past differently from the ways in which we have been taught to think.

It is a crucial insight into his personality that he has the need to reflect upon a female subject, and that he shares his thoughts with his readers. In this way he makes the point that women cannot and must not be forgotten. Her activities he described in an earlier composition, and now he looks forward to beginning another work in praise of Candi. In fact, written in 1684, *Candi di Var* is his very first composition, and his only major work in the Punjabi language.<sup>49</sup> Clearly, the image of the courageous woman is deeply imprinted on his psyche, and he returns to her again and again. Now, Candi does not come close to any romantic ideal. She is not the typical submissive female consort. The black goddess is not the stereotypically classic beauty,



who is white, smooth, and perfectly unblemished—as we see flashed endlessly in our glossy magazines—but her rage against exploitation and injustice and her powerful peals of laughter as she fights for freedom carry great significance for the Sikh guru. He values and welcomes her again and again.

Resisting the androcentric processes that have curtailed or suppressed the powerful role of ancient women, the Sikh guru tells the story of the mythic heroine in full detail—literally, from “toe to head” (*nakh sikh*), as he says! Merlin Stone and Bella Debrida have warned us about patriarchal influences curtailing and degrading the prestige of womanhood in many cultures. Guru Gobind Singh’s artistic canvas depicts his heroine in all her glory, and as Durga-Kali fights valiantly against injustice, she opens doors for other women to action and victory. She serves as a model for all of us—Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, Jew, or Christian. But male fears and phobias twist and transform the perception of Guru Gobind Singh’s poetic genius, constructing barriers along the vast range of his social and poetic imagination. Yet again, male scholars transform his female subject into a male deity. The final words of the *Bicitra Natak* read “I wish to give praise again,” but when these scholars translate it, they add the words “The Lord,” and force it to mean that the Guru will praise the Lord.<sup>50</sup> Alas, even Guru Gobind Singh’s forthcoming project, which he clearly specifies as another *Candi Caritra* poem on the legendary female figure (and this poem is actually the next one in the Dasam Granth!) is misconstrued as a project on a male god!

The guru seems to take up the role of his guard, Alam. As mentioned, when the Mughal troops tried to launch their attack in the middle of the night, “Alam came and woke us up” (*BN*, 10:3). Soon everyone was up and about, animated with a new kind of motivation. Similarly, through his literary compositions, the guru tries to awaken and quicken the spirit of his readers and hearers. The biographical event becomes a metaphor: in the dark night of rigid systems and hierarchical systems, we have to wake up and courageously face our oppressors. Guru Gobind Singh’s text is not a preparation for conquest or territorial expansion, but for vigorous defiance of oppression and tyranny. There are no economic benefits to be gained—neither the spices and rubber plantations of yesterday, nor the mines and oil fields of today. The aim is not power over others; the aim is self-empowerment. One has to stop being afraid of oneself and become heroic. Patriarchal structures with their “isms” of casteism, classism, racism, and sexism have to be faced squarely and confidently, and like the residents of Anandpur, we have to react immediately. Otherwise, the enemy advances even further, inflicting more and more casualties. Guru Gobind Singh’s resistance to exploitation and injustice is motivated by his love for this world. How could political, religious, and social oppressions destroy the abundance of life palpitating with the Divine?

It is also important to encounter the enemy face to face. The guru would never have proposed a nuclear holocaust, and the sword carries such importance precisely because she confronts the enemy closely and directly. During the Battle of Nadaun, the guru “gave up the gun and took the arrow in hand” (BN, 9:18). While meeting the “enemy”—be “he” psychological, social, or political—the guru’s experience shows we must reject mechanized techniques and instead foster our physical, mental, and spiritual faculties. The sharp sword embodies a rarefied sensibility. And just as all the residents of Anandpur got intoxicated, so must all the readers and hearers. No one, no male or female, is barred from hearing and being touched or provoked by his compositions. The fiery diction of Guru Gobind Singh has, of course, engendered outgoing and autonomous roles for Sikh men. But it was directed at women, too, so it is appalling that, in the popular memory, his narrative has been distorted to reduce Sikh women to passive and utterly dependent roles! The mnemonic effects should be the same for both male and female readers. They must hear the same rhythms, murmurs, and meanings in Guru Gobind Singh’s literature, and they must together follow the guru’s example and combat the deplorable sexism and inequities plaguing their society.

A magical mixture of history and imagination, the *Bicitra Natak* is a precursor to the institution of the Khalsa. While it discloses the values cherished by the author, it is also the way to the establishment of the Khalsa. The text is the fertile womb in which his readers are nourished and nurtured. The reorganizing and restructuring of his community envisioned in the Khalsa could take place only through a previous reorientation and revitalization. Without real commitment, institutions do not work. Guru Gobind Singh’s *Bicitra Natak* was the gestation process for transforming his contemporaries from within; his fervid literature was to enlighten and inspire his people.<sup>51</sup> Otherwise, how could there be the birth of a healthy Khalsa? Like modern feminists, Guru Gobind Singh appeals to the moral consciousness of his society. Reading or hearing his narrative quickens the heartbeat. It releases endorphins. It pumps out adrenaline. The text produces heat and food, the very things necessary for the conceptual and perceptual growth of his readers, making them physically and spiritually strong. Surely, art is not simply for art’s sake; rather as Leo Tolstoy said, the infected artist through his work creates a community. And so, through his magical poetry, Guru Gobind Singh wished to awaken the slumbering and passive masses and re-create a community of bold and creative subjects. Only when the people were internally strong would they be ready to hold the sword in hand—or the pen. He himself was ready and led the way; he took up the pen and went back to his poetry once more: “[A]nd now I wish to praise her again.” And his readers can follow him. As we scan the Khalsa lodged in the many folds of his autobiographical uterus, we too are fed by his life-giving muse, and are empowered to make exciting excursions into our own oceanic wombs.