Introduction

The idea for this book came while I was listening to a concert in Delhi highlighting some of the ancient musical instruments of India, in particular the *rabaab*, a stringed instrument of exquisite sound and beauty. Its haunting notes transported me back five hundred years to the very beginnings of the religion known as Sikhism, when a mystic known as Nanak composed hymns expounding the glory of the Divine. Accompanied by the Muslim minstrel Mardana playing the *rabaab*, Nanak—known later to his followers as Guru Nanak—wandered the vast countryside of what was then the northern reaches of India, areas located today in the modern nation-states of Pakistan and India, singing and playing hymns to the Divine. Nanak chose the universal language of music to give expression to the inexpressible nature of the Ultimate and humanity’s relationship to it.

It is said the Sikh tradition began with music. When Nanak, at the age of thirty, entered the river Bein for his morning bath, he miraculously disappeared. The story relates that, during the three days he was absent from the world, Guru Nanak was ushered into the presence of the Divine and offered a cup of the nectar of immortality. Upon drinking the nectar he suddenly understood the core of spirituality. After returning from his heavenly sojourn, his first words were, “There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim.” It is as though he understood that these identifiers that so often act as barriers between people are blinders to what is truly important, to the essence of true religion. Loving the Divine, attuning oneself to the Divine, according to the guru, goes beyond sectarian divisions, beyond the rational confines of the mind. True devotion to the Divine is a matter of the heart. The power of that experience in God’s presence was utterly beyond the capability of mere words, and so Guru Nanak turned to music to give *voice* and *meaning* to his vision. Sikhs honor that vision by making *kirtan*, the communal singing of hymns, the pivotal aspect of Sikh congregational life.

As a scholar of the Sikh tradition and an educator, I have often been frustrated by the disparity between how Sikhism and Sikhs are
presented in textbooks and the lived realities of Sikhs that I have observed in numerous travels in India and through extensive interaction with Sikhs. Textbook representations are often incomplete, portraying an overly homogeneous image of what it means to be Sikh. Or, the differences between Sikhs and Hindus and Muslims, and in some cases, the animosity between them, are exaggerated. Yet when visiting India the ease with which members of these communities interact, worship, or celebrate together can be striking. Certainly this has been my own experience. While tensions, occasionally violent, between the different religious groups of India exist and will continue to exist, they are often actually political in nature. The relative lack of tension tends to get lost in an overemphasis on these incidents of animosity, leaving readers with the false impression of permanent chasms separating the religious communities in India.

The first time my family and I went to Amritsar to visit Harimandir Sahib, also known as the Golden Temple, a group of university students offered to accompany us to this most sacred shrine. One young man was especially enthusiastic about our first visit and entertained us with stories about the history, significance, and architectural styles of Harimandir Sahib. We wandered along the promenade surrounding the pool, marveling at the beauty of the temple’s white marble gleaming in the sun and its shining golden dome. We made our way across the causeway over the pool to the Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred scripture at the heart of the temple.

The temple interior is stunning, with gorgeous brocade surrounding the holy book; the adoration on the faces of devotees and deep sense of peace there were striking. As we left, I questioned our young guide about his own response to Harimandir Sahib. To my surprise, he was not a Sikh but a Muslim! I commented on his speaking of the shrine as if it were holy to him. He replied, “I love the Harimandir as though it were my own. I worship there, I am welcome there. I bow before the Guru Granth Sahib because it contains the poetry and wisdom of Muslims and Hindus. It is a truly universal scripture.” When I expressed my amazement at the diversity of our student guides, the Sikhs in our group put their arms around their companions and insisted that “here we are all brothers.” Clearly, an openness toward all regardless of creed or caste that is central to Guru Nanak’s
message and to this dynamic tradition continues to reverberate across the centuries.

Similarly, visitors to the Durga temple in Patiala, Punjab, may witness there Sikhs making offerings to the goddess—even though Sikhs reject the worship of images! Sikhism is monotheistic, and Sikhs insist that their reverence of scripture should not be perceived as worship but instead as an intense act of respect to their guru. In fact, one can observe Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims intermingling at places of worship, especially during festivals and the many religious celebrations throughout the year. The horrors of the partitioning of India and Pakistan and its attendant slaughter of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs are especially sad in light of this more usual ease. Operation Bluestar in 1984, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi sent troops into Harimandir Sahib to flush out militant Sikhs who had taken refuge there, represents another example of Hindu and Sikh antagonism with tragic results. Many Sikhs vowed never to forget or forgive the attack. Despite this intermittent communal violence, Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims continue to live peaceably in Punjab and other parts of India.

If discerning the boundaries between religions in India is at times difficult, internal differentiations can also be complicated. I had the privilege of accompanying a Sikh friend to a famous holy center in Punjab called Bhaini Sahib, the nucleus of the Namdharis. Namdharis rose to prominence as revolutionaries during the time of British rule in India; Bhaini Sahib represents the ideals of Sikhism as interpreted by the Namdharis. Adherents wear white, often hand-spun traditional Punjabi clothing, live communally, and revere their living guru, who is understood as a necessary guide in the modern world. My companion and I were granted an audience with Satguru Jagjit Singh, the aged leader of Namdharis worldwide; his powerful but gentle presence seemed to fill the room.

Though often criticized, and sometimes ostracized, by some mainstream Sikhs because of the Namdharis’ belief in a living guru and their rejection of the Guru Granth Sahib as the final and ultimate authority for Sikhs, I was also struck by how easily mainstream Sikhs mingle with Namdharis at Bhaini Sahib. Visiting Sikhs also offered obeisance to Satguru Jagjit Singh and joined in the
singing resounding throughout the center. Most Sikhs take great pride in their brave Namdhari brothers and sisters who stood up to British rule long before Mohandas Gandhi’s Quit India Movement. When I asked my Sikh companion why he came to Bhaini Sahib, he answered that coming to the center “gives me peace.” This lesson in the religious diversity of the Sikhs has stayed with me and taught me the importance of avoiding speaking of Sikhism as a homogeneous faith and tradition.

**ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK**

When considering the length and content of the chapters in this volume, I was reminded of a conversation I had had with a Sikh friend about what is central to Sikhs in their tradition. He suggested that if I were to ask an average Sikh in the Western world—a restaurant owner in Boston, a factory worker in Birmingham, a bank teller in Rome, or a university student in Canada—about an aspect of Sikh history, I would be amazed at how knowledgeable they would be about their history. It is indeed intriguing how primary Sikh history is to those of Sikh heritage. This is not accidental. The *ardas*, the formal petition or request that concludes virtually every Sikh ritual or religious gathering, recalls various aspects of the Sikh past. Because of the prayer’s centrality in devotional and congregational life, Sikhs cannot but remember their own glorious history, especially the martyred heroes who died for the sake of justice and devotion.

This preoccupation with Sikh history is also mirrored in Sikh studies. Although some recent scholarship has argued that Sikh history has become *too* much the focus of academic study, to the detriment of other aspects of the discipline, the reality is that the study of Sikh history continues to offer a fruitful arena of research. It is highly unlikely that this focus will wane in the near future. For these reasons, the history of the Sikhs forms the largest portion of this volume.

Nonetheless, I begin with an overview of the main textual sources of the Sikh tradition. As noted, the Guru Granth Sahib is, at least for mainstream Sikhs, at the center of all religious devotion, and it is there that the discussion of Sikhism begins. After the introduction to this and other important texts, and the importance of music in its structure and organization, chapter 2 turns to the history of Sikhism.
It begins with the marvelous stories associated with the founder of Sikhism in the fifteenth century and concludes with the momentous election of India’s first Sikh prime minister in 2004.

Chapter 3 describes the teachings, rituals, practices, and festivals of the Sikh religion. Issues of Sikh identity are also explored, an important feature of Sikhism both historically and in the present day. Chapter 4 takes up various aspects of Sikh society, focusing on the Sikh homeland of Punjab in northern India. For Sikhs, the family unit is the backbone of society; the family system and social patterns, including caste within Sikhism, thus also take a significant share of this chapter. Chapter 5 is devoted to the Sikh diaspora, an important subject given the increasing population of this community worldwide. Chapter 6 considers the diversity of Sikh identity, specifically distinct groups included under the umbrella of “Sikhism.” The volume concludes with a brief look at Sikhs and Sikhism in the twenty-first century and beyond.

The term “Sikh” means “learner,” and in my exploration of Sikhism, I see myself as a learner, a student of a tradition that I have come to love, one that in my own spiritual journey has urged me to the heights and depths of self-discovery. It has stirred yearnings toward what Sikhs call the *anhad shabad* (unstruck melody), that mysterious music pervasive in the universe generated by the Divine and heard only by the soul. I invite you to join me in this exploration of a little-known though rich tradition that has much to offer an often troubled world.