

Article

# Presence and Absence: Constructions of Gender in Dasam Granth Exegesis

Robin Rinehart

Department of Religious Studies, Lafayette College, Easton, PA 18042, USA; rineharr@lafayette.edu

Received: 15 October 2019; Accepted: 12 November 2019; Published: 19 November 2019



**Abstract:** Controversy has swirled round the writings attributed to Guru Gobind Singh in the Dasam Granth, for not all Sikhs agree that he composed the entire text. Disputes about the Dasam Granth and its status have addressed the fact that many of the text's compositions are concerned with gender with respect to the nature of both divinity and humans, thus playing a key role in the ongoing construction of notions of gender in Sikhism. Female voices, however, have been largely absent from this discourse despite the presence of two key gender-related themes—the figure of the goddess/sword [*bhagautī*], a topic throughout the text, and the nature of women [*triyā caritra*], the subject of the longest composition in the Dasam Granth. Through analysis of the intersection of the presence of goddesses and women but the relative absence of female voices in Dasam Granth exegesis, this paper demonstrates that the ongoing reception of the Dasam Granth has been a site for both proclaiming idealized constructions of gender equality, but also instantiating constructions of femininity that run counter to this ideal.

**Keywords:** Sikhism; gender; gender construction; Dasam Granth

## 1. Introduction

“The wiles of women are so unfathomable that not even the Creator can figure them out.”<sup>1</sup>

*Caritropākhiān* 332:26 [CP], Dasam Granth

The proclamation that Sikhism supports gender equality is often made in contemporary discourse, as for example, in this statement from the website [sikhwomen.com](http://sikhwomen.com): “Sikhism is unique in recognizing unequivocal equality for all human beings and specifically for both men and women.”<sup>2</sup> Such statements are often made, as here, with an implicit or explicit comparison to other religious traditions that have not always championed gender equality, whether in their early history or in current practice. The ideal of gender equality, however, can at times seem challenging to reconcile with particular aspects of Sikh history, as the quote about the “wiles of women” above suggests. An analysis of portions of the Sikh text known as the Dasam Granth, along with the exegetical discourse surrounding the text and

<sup>1</sup> Translation by the author.

<sup>2</sup> Sikhism at times is contrasted with Hinduism, e.g., “The concept of equality of woman with man not only gave woman an identity of her own but tended to free her from all kinds of fetters to which she was bound in the Hindu society” (Kaur n.d.). For another example, see the article “Guru Granth Sahib Ji—Torchbearer Of Gender Equality” at <https://www.sikhphilosophy.net/threads/guru-granth-sahib-ji-torchbearer-of-gender-equality.23932/> Viewed 30 September 2019. Some authors distinguish between a fundamental gender equality and differing social roles: “Sikhism does consider men and women to be different by virtue of their gender. However this does not imply superiority of one sex over the other. Men and women are equal under the eyes of God and should therefore be given equal opportunity. No position in Sikhism is reserved solely for men. Women can take part in prayers and serve as Granthi. Sikh women can also take part in any political role they feel fit to accommodate.” See also “Role of Women in Sikhism, <http://www.wahegurunet.com/role-of-women-in-Sikhism>” (Sikhwomen.com n.d.). Viewed 25 June 2019.

its reception, illustrates the complexity of realizing the gender equality ideal while at the same time accounting for aspects of the Dasam Granth's content. While material that relates directly to gender roles and at times explicitly comments on them is present in the text, suggesting that in some way it may bear on the ideal of gender equality, explorations of how this material relates to this ideal was for a long time largely absent in Dasam Granth discussions, though the question of gender equality and the Dasam Granth has in recent years made its presence felt in some online discussion forums related to Sikhi.<sup>3</sup>

The Dasam Granth, or "Book of the Tenth [Guru]," is a text attributed to the tenth Sikh guru, Guru Gobind Singh (1666–1708). However, not all Sikhs agree that Guru Gobind Singh composed the entire text, leading to what is often called the "Dasam Granth controversy," a contentious debate that has shown no signs of abating from the late nineteenth century right up to the present. The controversy centers on specific components of the text's content, especially its retellings of stories familiar from Hindu mythology, which raise questions for some about the nature of the boundary between Sikhism and Hinduism.<sup>4</sup> Although Sikh commentators discussing gender equality in Sikhism often explicitly contrast the Gurus' views on gender with those of the wider Hindu culture, which they see as less supportive of gender equality, it has been rare for commentators on either side of the debate to invoke some notion of gender equality as a criterion for deciding the Dasam Granth authorship question. This would seem to suggest that in the discourse of constructing community boundaries and self-definition, gender equality has not achieved as high a level of priority as these other factors.

Nevertheless, two key gender-related themes are part of the Dasam Granth controversy—one is the figure of the goddess/sword [*bhagautī*], a theme throughout the text, particularly in portions of the Dasam Granth that relate the exploits of the goddess Durgā or Caṇḍī, and the second is the nature of women [*triyā caritra*], a central topic of the longest composition in the Dasam Granth. Disagreements about the Dasam Granth and its status have addressed the fact that many of the text's compositions are concerned with gender with respect to the nature of both divinity and humans, and as such play a key role in the ongoing construction of notions of gender in Sikhism. However, these disagreements have not used the gender equality ideal as a central criterion for evaluating the Dasam Granth, and, until relatively recently with the rise of online discussion forums, female voices have been largely absent from this discourse. Given this intersection of the presence of goddesses and women but the relative absence of female voices in Dasam Granth exegesis, this paper explores the gender-related content of the Dasam Granth, demonstrating that the ongoing reception of the Dasam Granth has at times been a space in which the gender equality ideal is simply not a key factor, and that portions of the text itself may be read as instantiating constructions of divinity, femininity, and gender roles that may run counter to this ideal. However, as the issue of gender has achieved greater attention and prominence in Sikh discourse in India and the Sikh diaspora, there have begun to be voices proposing interpretive strategies that seek to reconcile some of the seemingly vexing aspects of the Dasam Granth, especially *Caritropākhiān*, with the value of gender equality.

The Dasam Granth, 1428 pages in the standard print edition, is a series of varied compositions in the Brajbhāṣā, Punjabi, and Persian languages, the majority of which may be dated to the 1680s and 1690s.<sup>5</sup> Some sections, such as the opening *Jāp Jī*, a series of verses praising a formless God who cannot be named, and the 1705 "*Zafarnāmā*," Guru Gobind Singh's missive to the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb chastising him for failing to keep his word, are relatively uncontroversial. Significant portions of the text relate stories familiar from the Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa, Purānas, and other tales generally associated with Hindu traditions, and as such their authorship has been questioned by those who

<sup>3</sup> For an introduction to the types of discussions found online, see <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-controversy-of-the-Dasam-Granth>, or the various links at <http://www.sikhawareness.com/search/?q=dasam%20granth>.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, (Jaggi 1965, 1966), in which he argues that much of the Dasam Granth is derived from the Hindu Puranas.

<sup>5</sup> For further details regarding the Dasam Granth, its composition, compilation, additional compositions not found in the standard edition, and subsequent debates, see (Rinehart 2011).

believe that Guru Gobind Singh would not have chosen to compose poetry on such subjects.<sup>6</sup> There are also three separate compositions that depict the goddess Durgā or Caṇḍī's battles against a series of demons who were usurping the power of the gods, each roughly following the outline of the *Devī Māhātmya* portion of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāna*. Some Sikh critics have questioned the authorship of these compositions as well<sup>7</sup>, but others who accept Guru Gobind Singh as the author argue that while these goddess compositions serve a specific purpose, they do not advocate worship of a Hindu goddess.<sup>8</sup> The longest composition within the Dasam Granth is also the most hotly contested. *Caritropākhiān* is a series of 404 *caritras* or "character sketches"<sup>9</sup> that is sometimes also referred to as "*Triya Caritra*," or "Character Sketches About Women." Many of these stories are graphic in their depiction of male/female interactions and sexual escapades, leading some to question whether Guru Gobind Singh would have written in this vein and hence cast doubt on *Caritropākhiān*'s authorship.

Though many parts of the Dasam Granth generate heated debate, *Jāp Jī* and other passages are a regular part of Sikh prayer. For example, the opening verses of *Vār Durgā Kī* (also known as *Caṇḍī dī Vār*, the "Ballad of Durgā" or "Ballad of Caṇḍī"), one of the compositions about Durgā, are used as the first part of the *ardās* prayer, and the "*Bentī Caupāī*" hymn comes from a passage in the closing tale of *Caritropākhiān*. Various verses from the Dasam Granth are used in Khalsa initiation rites as well, and stories from *Caritropākhiān* may form the basis for devotional singing or *kīrtan*. While Sikhs may not always be familiar with the text in its entirety, portions of it play a critical role in everyday Sikh liturgy and ritual. Indeed, the Dasam Granth is sometimes referred to as the "second scripture of the Sikhs."

In exploring Dasam Granth discourse with respect to gender, it is important to take note of the overall context within which the Dasam Granth controversy is situated. Sikh theology describes God as formless, nameless, and beyond comprehension, yet nearly all the names and terms that point at God are masculine in gender. When a grammatically feminine term that may refer to the deity such as *bhagautī* is used, it often generates a specific type of analysis focused on the gender of God that does not occur when male terms for the deity are employed.<sup>10</sup> Sikhism in theory is open to people in leadership roles from any gender identity, but the Gurus were all male, and most *granthīs* and other leaders have been male. Khalsa initiation is open to both women and men, but the first five people to receive that initiation, the *Pañj Piāre*, were all males. The Dasam Granth is a text composed by a male author or authors (depending on one's view on its authorship), and it tacitly addresses a primarily male audience. When addressing matters of gender, it does so from a male perspective; *Caritropākhiān*, for example, is situated within a frame story involving a male king, his son, and his male ministers, and the stories themselves are addressed to males. While some critics reject *Caritropākhiān* outright on the grounds that its graphic nature renders it incompatible with Sikhi<sup>11</sup>, debates about this composition often focus on whether the stories of *Caritropākhiān* are appropriate specifically for women to hear or read, indicating that some commentators believe that there should be gender inequality with respect to access to particular subject matter.

Although key aspects of the Dasam Granth controversy are directly related to gender, for most of its history, the controversy has not centered on finding instances within the text in which gender

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., (Jaggi 1965, 1966). A later, more polemical version of this argument is made in Gurbakhsh "Kala Afghana" Singh's 1995 six-volume text, *Biprān kī Rīt Ton Sacch dā Mārag* (Amritsar: Sri Akal Sahay Society).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Madanjit Kaur's article "Devi Worship Story: A Critique" ([https://sikhinstitute.org/fundamental\\_issues/ch13.html](https://sikhinstitute.org/fundamental_issues/ch13.html)). Kaur argues that the *devī* compositions were the work of Guru Gobind Singh's court poets.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the (Kohli 2005) "Introduction" to *The Dasam Granth: The Second Scripture of the Sikhs written by Sri Guru Gobind Singh* (Delhi, India: Munshiram Manoharlal).

<sup>9</sup> Within *Caritropākhiān* itself, the phrase "*triyā caritra*" or "women's *caritras*" is also used, and sometimes the composition is referred to by this title. It is difficult to capture fully the term "*caritra*" in one English word; it may refer to a specific deed or behavior, or characteristic (hence the use of the term "wiles" as one translation) or more broadly to a person's nature or character.

<sup>10</sup> For a summary of Sikh analyses of the usage of *bhagautī*, see Jaswant Singh Neki and Giani Balwant Singh's entry "*Bhagautī*" in Harbans Singh, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Sikhism vol. 1* (Patiala, India: Punjabi University, Patiala), pp. 319–22.

<sup>11</sup> (Kohli 2005, p. xxxii), for example, did not include *Caritropākhiān* in his 2005 English translation of the Dasam Granth, arguing that its tales of "crafty and wily women" were simply not in keeping with Guru Gobind Singh's character.

equality by any definition is mentioned, or on using the ideal of gender equality as a criterion for analyzing the text or assessing its authorship. Portions of the text itself present complex pictures of female and male natures that do not always thoroughly mesh with the notion of equality between the sexes, however it might be defined. The authorship debate about the text has typically not used assertion or denial of gender equality as a criterion. The scholarship and exegetical commentary on the Dasam Granth, both by Sikhs and others, has been for the most part written by males. Online discussions and debates about the Dasam Granth are predominantly male, though with increasing numbers of female voices in recent years. However one may understand gender equality, in the context of the Dasam Granth controversy, it does not mean equality of representation. Stating these facts is not meant to challenge the Sikh *ideal* of gender equality, but rather to highlight the gap between this ideal, and the reality that the ideal has not been fully realized within the ongoing Dasam Granth discourse.

Generally, statements about gender equality in Sikhism point to specific verses in the Guru Granth Sahib, such as Guru Nanak's verses regarding the fact that "man is born from woman" and that from woman, kings are born.<sup>12</sup> Such statements also highlight key female figures in Sikh tradition, such as Guru Gobind Singh's wife Mātā Jīto, who stirred the *amrit* for the *Pañj Piāre* at the establishment of the Khalsa, and women such as Māi Bhāgo who valiantly fought in battle. Such statements may also note that there are no restrictions on women taking leadership roles in Sikh practice. Yet such instances of female leadership are more the exception than the rule. The underlying understanding of gender equality at times seems to focus mainly on equality with respect to spiritual ability, and equality with respect to the availability of roles within religious practice. However, it is often less focused on why the gender equality ideal has not been fully realized in terms of women, for example, taking more leadership roles. To borrow the terminology used by (Sponberg 1992, pp. 8–18) in his analysis of attitudes towards women and the feminine in early Buddhism, Sikh tradition preserves a multiplicity of voices or perspectives regarding gender. These include, significantly, soteriological inclusiveness—the notion that both women and men are capable of spiritual liberation—but also institutional androcentrism, i.e., the dominance of men and male perspectives in the institutional structures of Sikhism. These different perspectives exist simultaneously and at times in tension with one another. Institutional and social forces as well can hinder the realization of ideals such as gender equality.

Doris Jakobsh, in her study of gender in Sikh history (Jakobsh 2003, pp. 8–18) identified four principles that are at work in Sikh conceptions of gender, and these principles provide another means of highlighting the multiplicity of perspectives identifiable in the Dasam Granth controversy. The principle of silence—the lack of female voices, the lack of evidence recording their experiences and perspectives—is illustrated, for example, by the fact that there is silence within the text regarding a female perspective, especially in the case of *Caritropākhiān*, narrated by a male for a male audience. Negation, the phenomenon whereby heterogeneous voices that may challenge a dominant narrative are downplayed, is illustrated by the fact that in those contexts in which gender equality has become a dominant narrative, the aspects of the Dasam Granth that seem not to support gender equality may simply remain unacknowledged or be downplayed. (It is worth noting, however, that Sikh interpreters who challenge Guru Gobind Singh's authorship of some or all of the Dasam Granth have occasionally invoked the negative portrayal of females in *Caritropākhiān* as evidence that it cannot be the work of a Sikh Guru.<sup>13</sup>) Accommodation is a principle or process whereby contemporary commentators seek to accommodate values that are currently important, such as gender equality, by giving them more prominence in the past than those values might have had. Highlighting the usage of the concept of "*bhagautī*" as a celebration of the feminine aspect of divinity—and therefore illustrative of the gender

<sup>12</sup> Sri Guru Granth Sahib p. 473. Widely available online in Punjabi transliteration with English translation; see, e.g., <https://www.sikhnet.com/oldsikhnet/siggs/translation/0473.html> <http://www.sikhawareness.com/search/?q=dasam%20granth>.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Rattan Singh's 1966 analysis of *Caritropākhiān*, in which in addition to highlighting internal inconsistencies within certain *caritras*, he argues that Guru Gobind Singh would not have written such stories (Jaggi 1966, pp. 155–65).

equality ideal—is one example of the principle of accommodation with respect to the Dasam Granth. The principle of idealization involves glorifying infrequent examples of female leadership, participation in battle, etc., as normative when such examples are actually rather rare; this happens when the few examples of women fighting in battle in *Caritropākhiān* are accorded prominence (discussed in further detail below). Further, it is worth noting that the complexity and delicacy of the Dasam Granth controversy illustrates a principle of silence in another way, not simply with respect to gender equality, but in terms of efforts to quell or even silence controversy, as in 2000, when the *jathedār* of the Akāl Takht issued a directive requesting that Sikh scholars simply not comment publicly on the Dasam Granth (because the controversy had become so heated).<sup>14</sup> Female figures and statements about gender are present in the Dasam Granth, but the issue of how these aspects of the construction of gender and the nature of gender relate to the controversy itself has for much of the history of the controversy largely been absent, especially with respect to gender equality.

For the purposes of this analysis, “gender equality” will be understood broadly to mean the perspective that men and women should enjoy the same rights and opportunities, and that they are equal in terms of their spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical potential and/or capabilities. It is of course possible to define a more circumscribed version of gender equality; one could, for example, posit that females and males are equal in terms of spiritual capability, but that they may fulfill different social roles, or that while females and males should have equal opportunities, they may have different characteristics and abilities that lead them in different ways. Indeed that is a strategy that some interpreters have adopted, particularly in analyzing the stories in *Caritropākhiān*.<sup>15</sup>

## 2. Bhagautī and the Role of the Goddess in the Dasam Granth

The term “*bhagautī*” appears frequently throughout the Dasam Granth, particularly in the invocatory phrase “*sri bhagautī jī sahāī*” [“with the aid of revered *bhagautī*”] which occurs at the beginning of a number of Dasam Granth compositions.<sup>16</sup> Placed in the wider context of Brajbhāṣā and early modern Hindi literature, this term is a form of the Sanskrit word *bhagavatī*, a feminine noun derived from the root *-bhaj*, which is also the source of terms such as the masculine noun *bhagavān* (“lord” or “god”) and *bhakti* or devotion. In this wider Indic context, *bhagavatī* most often means “goddess” and indeed this phrase occurs at the opening of many Dasam Granth compositions, including those that relate stories about the goddess Durgā or Caṇḍī. It is also familiar because it occurs in the opening lines of the *ardās* prayer, drawn from *Vār Sri Bhagautī Jī Kī* [a.k.a. *Vār Durgā Kī*], one of the three compositions concerning Durgā or Caṇḍī’s battles against demons in the Dasam Granth. While some readers may be tempted to understand “*bhagautī*,” therefore, primarily to mean “goddess,” especially as a title for Durgā or Caṇḍī, within Sikh discourse and Dasam Granth exegesis, it is more frequently taken to mean “sword.” In other words, the figure who in Hindu mythology is understood as a goddess is in Sikh exegesis generally understood in a more instrumental sense as a weapon wielded by the supreme deity. Or, *bhagautī* may be interpreted in an even more abstract way.<sup>17</sup> Pritpal Singh Bindra, for example, includes a note regarding the usage of the term “*bhagautī*” in his translation of the *Caritropākhiān*; he explains that while it may be perceived in the material form of the sword, it in fact is “Shakti” and “represents the celestial authority and eternal power” (Bindra 2002, vol. 1, p. 13).

<sup>14</sup> See (Rinehart 2011, p. 49).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Pritpal Singh, “Sri Guru Gobind Singh Sahib Jee on women in the Charitropakhyān,” <https://sikhunity.wordpress.com/2014/01/14/sri-guru-gobind-singh-sahib-jee-on-women-in-the-charitropakhyān/>. 14 January 2014. Viewed 2 October 2019. Pritpal Singh argues that the poet composing the *caritras* did not see the image of females as sexual in nature, but rather it was “libertines” such as the king in the composition who cannot see women in their true form, in which their positive power is formidable.

<sup>16</sup> These include *Akāl Ustati*, *Caṇḍī Caritra*, *Caṇḍī Caritra Ukti Vilāsa*, *Vār Durgā Kī*, *Gīān Prabodha*, *Caubīs Avatāra*, *Rudra Avatāra*, and *Sastra-nāma-mālā*. *Caritropākhiān* includes the similar invocatory phrase “*sri bhagautī ai nāma*.”

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, the entry for “*bhagautī*” in (Nabha 1990) *Mahān Kosh*, p. 901.



The use of the term *bhagautī* in the three Dasam Granth compositions that relate the goddess Durgā or Caṇḍī's defeat of demons (and which refer explicitly to the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*) does suggest that at least one level of interpretation, the term refers to or can at least have a very clear connection to a goddess—in other words, to some aspect of divine power construed as a female figure. In the *Devī Māhātmya* section of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* that provides the broad outline from which the Dasam Granth's three goddess narratives are drawn, the focus clearly is on a goddess, who was created by the gods specifically to defeat demons who are otherwise invincible, and part of the purpose of telling her deeds is to promote reverence for and worship of the goddess. Indeed many other Sanskrit and vernacular versions of these goddess stories include verses that detail the benefits that accrue to those who worship the goddess and recite the verses about her deeds.<sup>18</sup> The Dasam Granth, however, notably does not include similar verses, and in Sikh discourse the stories are generally taken as inspirational tales for warriors that nonetheless do not promote goddess worship. By emphasizing that these Dasam Granth compositions do not advocate goddess worship, of course, this discourse, even when interpreting *bhagautī* more abstractly, tacitly acknowledges that these stories, however one chooses to interpret them, may indeed be read as concerning a goddess.

When the term *bhagautī*, which elsewhere denotes the goddess or *devī*, is taken in the Sikh context to mean “sword,” the more direct associations with a female deity fade, and the grammatically feminine “sword” becomes an instrument or tool of a greater, more abstract (but grammatically masculine) divine power. In the context of the tales related in the Dasam Granth, if *bhagautī* is taken in the sense as a sword rather than a goddess, as a weapon (a theme emphasized in another Dasam Granth composition, the *Sastra-nāma-māla*), there is still the implication that the feminine sword, or *sakti*/power is secondary; in other words, while male terms can point towards the formless (and by definition therefore presumably beyond gender) God, a female term cannot. Some commentators, even while noting that the term *bhagautī* does indeed occur in compositions that depict Durgā's slaying of demons, have suggested that even though the term is grammatically feminine, it does not refer to a “Female.” The entry for “*Bhagauti*” on the “Sikh Encyclomedia” webpage SikhiWiki illustrates the wide range of interpretations.<sup>19</sup> For example, one definition of *bhagautī* provided there is “one who knows Bhagavant (i.e., God)”; another is the “intuitive and discerning mind” which cannot be a female body because it is a spiritual (and therefore not corporeal) form; another is that *bhagautī* is the divine command. The gist of each of the explanations provided is that *bhagautī* in the Sikh context does *not* refer to a goddess or an explicitly female conception of divinity. One commenter on this webpage, highlighting the complex of the concept as well as the effort to distance *bhagautī* from the idea of a goddess, “This is indeed a very difficult topic handled very intelligently.”<sup>20</sup>

A key aspect of the difficulty seems to be the fact that *bhagautī* is a grammatically feminine word, which in other contexts does refer specifically to a goddess. In the Dasam Granth, its usage occurs within compositions that retell stories about that goddess and her battles, but the interpretation that has gained more traction is one that downplays the representation of a female deity in favor of a more abstract understanding of *bhagautī*. Similar explanations of the figures of other Hindu male deities mentioned throughout Sikh texts, such as Indra and Viṣṇu, point out that Sikhism does not advocate worship of them. Presumably, therefore, one could make the parallel argument that Indra or Viṣṇu are not male when mentioned in a Sikh context in which God is understood as formless, but this

<sup>18</sup> At the close of the *Devī-Māhātmya*, the goddess proclaims that those who recite the hymns about her deeds will not suffer from misfortune, poverty, the threat of enemies, fires, or floods, and so forth. See (Coburn 1992, pp. 79–81).

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.sikhi.org/index.php/Bhagauti>. Viewed 23 September 2019. SikhiWiki is a site sponsored by SikhNet.com, an organization formally incorporated in the United States with a global staff. For further information, see <https://www.sikhnet.com/about>.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Talk:Bhagauti>.

argument is emphasized only with respect to the female deity.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, however, in the case of *bhagautī*, there is also an effort not only to emphasize that the goddess is not to be worshipped, but also, significantly, to distance one's interpretation of *bhagautī* from anything associated with the female or feminine.<sup>22</sup>

One exception to this tendency to downplay or make abstract the idea of *bhagautī* is the work of Sikh scholar Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh, who has written extensively about Guru Gobind Singh and the figure of Durgā. Rather than downplay the depiction of a deity who is clearly female in other contexts, she has emphasized Guru Gobind Singh's choice to devote significant attention to tales of the goddess in the Dasam Granth. She mentions the goddess Durgā as "Guru Gobind Singh's favorite literary subject," which he chose deliberately to validate "the female experience in the society, aesthetics, and religion of the Sikhs" (Singh 1990, pp. 245–46).<sup>23</sup> She sees his retelling of Durgā's story as "unequivocal acknowledgement of women's power," arguing that she is "singled out by the Sikh Gurū as the model of moral force and martial prowess—for both men and women" (Singh 1990, pp. 248–49). Her analysis is that Guru Gobind Singh deliberately chose the story of Durgā as an affirmation of female power, for Durgā triumphs even when the male gods have been vanquished, and that she became a paradigm to "abolish unjust political authority and social inequalities and to forge a new structure based on the values of egalitarianism, justice, and freedom" (Singh 1990, p. 252). She includes *bhagautī* among the terms used for the sword, and in her reading, Guru Gobind Singh's recollection of Durgā is a "metaphor within a metaphor" that provided encouragement to Sikhs who had struggled under political subjugation. Noting the usage of the term *bhagautī* in the *ardās* prayer and in the invocatory line of various Dasam Granth compositions, as well as the fact that both Sikh women and men carry the *kirpān* or sword, on her reading Durgā, (that is, a conception of the divine with feminine connotations) in a metaphorical sense, is still recalled by Sikhs (Singh 1990, p. 261). For Singh, this is a recognition of the feminine principle, and as a metaphor within a metaphor, as goddess and sword, *bhagautī* signifies victory over evil, not just in battle, but also in overcoming negative psychological forces (Singh 1990, p. 263). She has also argued (Singh 2005, p. 120) that Guru Gobind Singh, in his Durgā compositions, made Durgā and her sword interchangeable, suggesting that it is not necessary to remove the goddess or female aspect of divinity from the concept of *bhagautī*.

Nikky Singh's analysis illustrates the possibility of viewing the presence of *bhagautī* in the Dasam Granth as multivalent and supporting the value of gender equality in terms of representing the deity, but this particular reading has not as yet, at least, assumed much prominence in the continuing Dasam Granth controversy. Interpretations that abstract the female deity into a weapon or instrument, thereby downplaying the female or feminine aspect, are more common, although, as noted above, there is not a similar effort to downplay the maleness of deities such as Indra or Viṣṇu.

### 3. *Caritropākhiān*

This composition, which comprises about 40% of the Dasam Granth as a whole, is often characterized as being focused on "the wiles of women," and as such is of course relevant to constructions of gender. Some of the *caritras* are graphic in their description of sexual encounters, and to avoid the controversy over its content, some printed versions and translations of the Dasam Granth simply leave it out. But there is more to *Caritropākhiān* than just explicit stories. In his

<sup>21</sup> Sikh interpreters of the Dasam Granth do sometimes emphasize that any mention of Hindu gods or goddesses should not be read as a call to worship them, but unlike with the goddess, there is no effort to dissociate the Hindu gods mentioned as not being male.

<sup>22</sup> For a parallel analysis of the nature of God and gender in a context in which the normative theological understanding is that God is beyond gender, yet most frequently described with grammatically masculine terms, see the chapter "God: Reimagining the Unimaginable" in Judith Plaskow's 1991 classic *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (HarperCollins).

<sup>23</sup> For a similar discussion within a broader analysis of the "feminine principle" in Sikh conceptions of the transcendent, see (Singh 1993), especially Chapter 4.

study of the Dasam Granth, (Loehlin 1971, p. 49) categorized the stories of *Caritropākhiān* as follows: there are 78 which concern the bravery, devotion, or intelligence of women; 269 which concern the deceitfulness and unscrupulousness of women; 26 which concern the deceitfulness of men; 10 which concern gambling, drinking, and opium use; and 19 which are retellings of well-known folktales. This accounting illustrates the variety of the *caritras*, but also shows that a substantial number of them indeed do in some way focus on women as deceitful or unscrupulous. Many of the *caritras* include characters and stories familiar from other sources, including the Hindu epics, Sanskrit story literature, and occasionally Persian traditions as well. In his 1959 study of the Dasam Granth, Dharam Pal Ashta identified eight main sources for the *caritras*: the Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa, Purānas, historical stories of Rajput women, the *Pañcatantra*, Persian texts, popular tales, and stories from Pathan and Mughal times (Ashta 1959, p. 151). Among the well-known folktales that are retold in *Caritropākhiān* are the love stories of Sassi and Punnū (*Caritra* 101), Hīr and Rānjhā (*Caritra* 98), Sohnī and Mahīwāl (*Caritra* 101), and Mirzā and Sāhibān (*Caritra* 129).

It is not just women who are often portrayed as unscrupulous in *Caritropākhiān*; male religious leaders of various backgrounds, including Hindu *sādhus* and swamis and Muslims *pīrs* and *qāzīs*, are shown to be duplicitous at times, and none too bright either. J.C. Oman, in his 1905 study of *The Mystics, Ascetics, and Saints of India*, translated five of the *caritras* concerning sadhus and their “amatory intrigues with ranis [queens]” to illustrate the fact that there is some skepticism about renunciators and their commitment to the rules of celibacy (Oman 1984, pp. 83–91).

Sikh scholar R.S. Jaggi, who produced some of the most important scholarship on the Dasam Granth, argued in his early work (Jaggi 1966, pp. 154–64) on the text that some of the events described in the *caritras* were simply not in keeping with Guru Gobind Singh’s personality, largely due to the explicit nature of many of the stories depicting various sexual indiscretions, and that they also contradicted teachings about gender equality from the Guru Granth Sahib. On these and other grounds (such as the use of different pen-names by the poet, such as Siām, Rām, and Kāl) he concluded that Guru Gobind Singh could not be the author of this particular composition. Pritpal Singh Bindra, in a short paper entitled “Could Guru Gobind Singh Write Such Things” (Bindra 2000) characterized the contents of many of the *caritras* (as well as some of the Persian *hikāyats* that follow *Caritropākhiān* in the Dasam Granth) as “pornographic” and “ludicrous,” and also decried the references to intoxicants such as alcohol and opium. He also published the only full English translation of *Caritropākhiān* with the subtitle *Tales of Male-Female Tricky Deceptions*, opening the text with the statement “I leave it entirely to the judgement of the readers to ascertain whether such language and such stories could emanate through the mind and the pen of Guru Gobind Singh who has endowed us a unique code of living a moral and courageous life” (Bindra 2002, Author’s Note). His earlier statement seems to suggest that the translation was meant, through making the stories more widely available in translation, to demonstrate that the subject matter of these stories was such that one should not entertain the possibility of such a text being the work of Guru Gobind Singh. It is worth noting that in both instances, though reading the text with a quite critical eye, these Sikh authors did not specifically assess *Caritropākhiān* with respect to gender equality. Rather, it was primarily the sexually explicit nature of the *caritras* that they found troubling. Using the principle that gender equality is a core tenet of Sikhism, one argument that could be made is that if the stories in *Caritropākhiān* do not illustrate or otherwise endorse the value of gender equality however it may be defined, this could be an indicator that the stories are best not understood as the work of a Sikh Guru. However, other than the concern that the portrayal of women in *Caritropākhiān* is at times too graphic in its depiction of human sexuality, and therefore should not be read by or recited in the presence of women, analyzing the contents from the perspective of gender equality has typically not been a feature of the discourse.

Among Sikh interpreters who do accept *Caritropākhiān* as the work of Guru Gobind Singh, there are varying explanations of the nature of its content. For example, some argue that the text was meant specifically for the moral instruction of [male] soldiers away from home, or more generally for the moral instruction of men. This view, like that of those who reject *Caritropākhiān* as the work of Guru



Gobind Singh, reads the text from a specifically male perspective, and is not an analysis of the text with respect to the principle of gender equality. Singh (1967, pp. 251–62) in his interpretation of *Caritropākhiān*, suggested that rather than reading the *caritras* as being about men and women, one could read them metaphorically with the female characters representing the human body, and the male characters the intellect. Arguably, such an interpretation moves closer to the ideal of gender equality insofar as it does not attribute specific, negative characteristics and tendencies to women, but even so it perpetuates a very common gender stereotype that identifies “the female” more closely with the physical and “the male” with the intellectual, and thus is difficult to reconcile with the ideal of gender equality.

What, then, do the *caritras* suggest about this mysterious nature of females? Viewing representative examples of *caritras* through the lens of gender equality illustrates aspects of the depiction of gender in this composition, and suggests ways in which these stories could potentially enrich the discussion regarding representations of gender in Sikh texts. The opening *caritra* within *Caritropākhiān* is a lengthy account of the battles of a goddess, characterized more abstractly as “*sakti*” by some commentators.<sup>24</sup> In the midst of a detailed description of a battlefield scene, the opening *caritra* includes the statement that the mysteries of a child in the womb, a king, and a woman cannot be solved [*Caritropākhiān* 1:44], the first mention of such mysteries. After this opening benedictory section, the second *caritra* introduces the frame story for the text as a whole.

A king, Citra Singh, married an *apsarā* or female celestial being, and the two had a son named Hanvant Singh. But after some years of wedded bliss, the *apsarā* chose to forsake earthly life and return to her heavenly abode. Devasted, Citra Singh searched far and wide for a woman who looked like his *apsarā* in order to replace her, and when such a woman was located, his military forces fought a battle to win her hand in marriage, killing the young woman’s father. Successful in battle, the king then wed a second time, but his new wife found that she was more attracted to her stepson Hanvant Singh than her husband. When she sought to seduce her stepson, and he rebuffed her attempts at romance, she angrily scratched her own face and then told her husband that his son had tried to force himself on her. The king, at first believing his wife’s account of what had happened, resolved to kill his son, but his minister sought to calm him down by explaining that women’s natures [*triyā caritra*] are difficult to understand [CP 2:30]. Somewhat mollified, the king put his son in prison instead rather than execute him, and then had him brought out of his prison cell daily to hear the minister provide instruction in the form of stories.

This frame story clearly shows that the stories are crafted for a male audience in order to understand various mysteries of life including the nature of females. The female character, the king’s new wife, is not a part of the discussions, nor is her perspective portrayed, though one could surmise that it might not be surprising that a young woman would find a young man in her age range more attractive than the presumably much older king. Her husband, the king Citra Singh, chose her solely on the basis of her appearance, and killed her father to win her. The underlying gender framework portrayed here is one in which a woman is under the control of her father, and subsequently her husband, and in this story, at least, the woman has no agency in the selection of her marital partner. The young woman is characterized not so much as an individual, but rather according to a generic female nature that men must know about and be wary of, even if, as the minister explains, they cannot fully understand it. Granted, the portrayal of the king and his minister is not particularly detailed either, but in contrast, there are no blanket assertions about the nature of men’s characters beyond their susceptibility to women’s machinations. The frame story as a whole, with its assertion that women’s natures are mysterious, seems to run counter to the notion of gender equality (and indeed arguably, the Sikh principles of warfare, traced to Guru Gobind Singh, according to which battle should be waged for just cause [*dharam yuddha*], and that in the context of battle women must not be molested in any

<sup>24</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the opening *caritra*, see (Rinehart 2011, pp. 114–16).

way). Many of the *caritras* that follow also may seem difficult to reconcile with the ideal of gender equality, however it may be defined.

Most often, the *caritras* portray males as rather hapless, helpless figures who are routinely outwitted and deceived by clever women. For example, *Caritra* 42 depicts an elderly Muslim *pīr* or holy man in Multan. Because the *pīr* and his wife Rustamkalā did not have a son, Rustamkalā went to another local *pīr* and requested the blessing of a child because her husband was so old that he could not perform sexually. She requested that this other *pīr* give her a clove, meant to symbolize the blessing of a pregnancy, and then secretly she and this *pīr* had sexual relations. Nine months later Rustamkalā gave birth to a son. She managed to fool her husband into thinking that the child was his, and likewise the *pīr*'s followers spread the word that he had the power to grant a woman's wish to bear a son. The female character here is thus portrayed as quite effective in her scheming, and the portrayal of the *pīr*s is rather irreverent as well; Rustamkalā's husband thinks that he has fathered a child, and the other *pīr* is content to have people believe that his blessing allowed a childless woman to conceive. It is also worth noting that the story specifically mentions the desire for a son, not a child or a daughter.

In a similar vein, *Caritra* 107 relates the tale of a Jat couple, Jodhan Dev and Main Kuari. Main Kuari would sneak out at night to meet a lover while her husband slept. One night, she returned home to find that thieves had broken into the house. She roused her husband and chastised him for not waking up sooner to chase away the thieves. After they and some neighbors successfully managed to fend off the would-be robbers, Jodhan Dev praised his wife for her actions, completely unaware that his wife had earlier slipped away for her extramarital escapade. It is implied in this and many other *caritras*, including the frame story, that some, perhaps even many women, are inclined by nature to pursue multiple sexual partners and cover up their actions through deceit. Thus an implied principle here concerning gender roles is that while women should have only one partner, their nature is such that they will seek others, and that therefore men must ever be watchful of them. It is the woman's nature or character that is seen as more problematic than that of the men who engage in extramarital sexual relationships with women. Women are defined by their sexuality to a far greater degree than are men. While the minister often advises that men should be wary of women, there is no parallel advice for women regarding men, even though they are of course just as much involved in the intrigues the *caritras* relate.

Throughout the *caritras*, there are occasional, passing comments on women's and men's natures in general. For example, *Caritra* 20 is about a beautiful woman who deceived her loving husband. The woman was entertaining in her home a raja who had become enchanted with her, but when her husband arrived, she disguised the raja as a pillow on the bed where she and her husband slept that night, the raja sneaking away in the morning with the husband none the wiser even though his wife's lover had been in bed with them all night. This *caritra* closes with the minister's opining that even the wise men of this world are fools if they fall in love with women. Two key underlying presuppositions of this view are that women and men are different by nature, and, given that women's behaviors or natures are risky to wise men, they are clearly not equal. Such *caritras* do not seem to present male/female relationships that are grounded in a principle of equality, or would require a more detailed model of gender that in some way accounted for differences in male and female behavior while still maintaining that they are equal.

Among the occasional asides about the character of women and men's helplessness before them, there are also comments about the fact that even the gods are unable to understand fully the ruses that women concoct. *Caritra* 332 ends with the observation that women's *caritras* (here, the term *caritra* implies a component of a person's overall character, namely the ability to deceive, i.e., feminine "wiles") are limitless, so much so that even the creator cannot fathom them. Similarly, *Caritra* 336 closes with the assertion that not even Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva, or the very creator who made women can understand their fickle nature. Men and even the gods are helpless before a woman's power to deceive and get her way. As such, the responsibility for sexual indiscretions is placed almost entirely on women, although the men in the stories are willing participants as well, even if they do not fully realize what is going on.

*Caritra* 395 is the tale of a merchant's daughter who was unable to seduce a prince who had captured her fancy. Undaunted, she summoned a ghost to torment the prince, and finally the prince's father sought the assistance of someone who could scare away the spectral being disturbing his son. The young woman then disguised herself as a man, proclaiming that he had the power to save the prince from the ghost. While in disguise as a man, she announced to the king that the only way forward was for the prince to marry a specific woman who had the ability to chase off the ghost—that is, marry the merchant's daughter herself. And so she was able to wed the man she desired. This *caritra* ends with the comment that even the creator is astounded at the range of women's schemes. Thus there is a power that women have that even the gods cannot fully understand or control, and this power, clearly connected to their sexuality, is manifest when women's desires are not met within the bounds of marriage.

The *caritras* are not entirely negative about women's actions. Some present women who fight valiantly in battles, or cleverly outwit thieves and other miscreants. Nor are the *caritras* wholly positive about men's actions either; as the above examples show, often the men in the *caritras*, whether village peasants, mighty kings, or even gods are shown as thoroughly gullible and susceptible to women's schemes. Overall, *Caritropākhīān* suggests a rather cynical view of human nature, both male and female. Even so, its abundant stories of women deceiving men suggest that women are responsible for sexual acts in a way that men are not, that men are by nature helpless in the face of female scheming, and that they therefore must protect themselves against it. This, after all, is the point of the frame story for the text (although, interestingly, the frame story is not taken up again after the early *caritras* other than the occasional reference to the minister relating the tales). While Sikhism overall is a householder religion that does not promote renunciation and celibacy (with the exception of groups such as the Udāsīs), the *caritras*, particularly in their retelling of stories familiar from elsewhere in India's story literature, draw upon an Indic conception of human sexuality in which females are an impediment to male spiritual progress (particularly the progress of the male renouncer), and a resultant gender framework in which the responsibility for regulating sexual desire and attraction is placed squarely on females, who are cast as temptresses. Women's sexual allure accords them great power over men, but it is considered only with regards to how it affects men. The implicit concern is for the moral behavior and spiritual progress of males; females figure in only insofar as they are obstacles to male attainment. This is another way in which the principles espoused in *Caritropākhīān* can seem difficult to reconcile with a notion of gender equality.

The cases of women who disguise themselves as men to fight in battles illustrate another component of the ambiguity or multivocality inherent in models of gender in Indian cultures and beyond. In *Caritra* 96, a Pathan woman chastises her husband for his cowardice in shying away from a battle. She then dons his clothing and fights fiercely in a skirmish, boldly plucking arrows out of her body and shooting them back at the enemy. After the battle, she leaves her husband because of his cowardice. *Caritra* 102 relates the tale of Kaikeyī, one of King Daśaratha's wives (and mother of Bhārata) as portrayed in the Rāmāyaṇa, wearing the uniform of her husband's chariot driver and fiercely protecting Daśaratha in a battle against enemies. On the one hand, the fact that a woman can fight valiantly and hold her own on the battlefield against men portrays women as both physically powerful and strategically adept. But the fact that a woman must disguise herself in a man's clothing to do this shows that she cannot make use of these abilities while acting as a woman. In all such examples, the woman tacitly accepts this gender difference because she makes a point of disguising herself as a man before using her own battle skills. Thus in the *caritras*, women and men are not entirely equal with respect to the possibility of fighting in a battle.

This gender distinction extends to mythological females and goddess figures as well. In the closing *caritra*, number 404, an extended narration that spans the four cosmic eras or *yugas*, a battle involving both gods and humans is described. In this battle, a female being was born from amidst the flames fanned by the striking of weapons against one another. This mighty female soon realized that there was no male worthy of being her lord and controller, so she vowed to perform extensive meditation and

austerities in order to locate or manifest such a lord [*pati*]. Despite her incredible power, she is depicted as recognizing that she must have a lord to control her—she is a female figure who is unwilling to consider herself independent. In this *caritra*, notably, there is some representation of a female figure’s perspective and thought process, whereas in the other *caritras* women’s thoughts are typically reported only with respect to their desire to ensnare or deceive some man. This female figure born of fire does exercise her own agency, but it is for the express purpose of finding a male figure to exercise control and authority over her. If we read such *caritras* in light of the ideal of gender equality, the equality does not apply to the ability of females to fight independently in battle as females—tacitly, it is only men who may do so, and even the most powerful of female beings willingly seeks male authority.

Although throughout the *caritras*, the minister-narrator makes occasional comments about women’s natures, he rarely draws explicit morals from the stories. *Caritra* 380 concerns a queen who cavorted with a prince, partaking of opium and cannabis, concealing her behavior by convincing her mother that the prince was a female friend, and her husband that the prince was her mother. The *caritra* closes with the minister’s reckoning that “No one can fathom the mysteries of women.” Here, too, the story is adopting a predominantly male perspective, because of course, women presumably can fathom their own mysteries, and perhaps those of other women as well, as the *caritras* themselves suggest given that women in these tales often conspire together. But there are no parallel stories in which women learn about the mysteries or vagaries of the male character; indeed there is no generic “male” character presented that is analogous to the “female” character or nature.

Several *caritras* relate popular romance stories, depicting another aspect of gender relations. *Caritra* 98 describes the love of Hīr and Rānjhā. There are multiple versions of this popular Punjabi love story from Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh authors, the most celebrated being Waris Shah’s 1766 version.<sup>25</sup> The basic outline of the story is that a handsome young Jat Muslim, Rānjhā, and a stunningly beautiful Jat Muslim young woman, Hīr, fall passionately in love. But Hīr’s family disapproves, and so marries her to another man. Rānjhā then disguises himself as a yogi or fakir so that he can visit her. Some versions of the story end happily with the young couple reunited; in others, Hīr is killed and Rānjhā dies from grief. Hīr’s love for Rānjhā is sometimes interpreted as an allegory for the soul’s quest for union with the divine.

In its version of the Hīr/Rānjhā story, the Dasam Granth version incorporates characters familiar from the Hindu epics and Purāṇas. Rānjhā is introduced as a young man who appears to be a Jat Muslim peasant but is in fact the son of a king and queen. Hīr has assumed human form on earth as a Jat Muslim, but in reality she is Menakā, a beautiful *apsarā* who had distracted a sage from his meditation [the sage, though not named here, is Viśvamitra in other stories about Menakā], leading him to curse her to be born on earth as a Jat. This sage also foretold that the god Indra would be born as Rānjhā. Hīr happened to meet Rānjhā when he was out grazing cattle, and the two fell immediately, madly in love. Hīr’s family was so concerned about her ceaseless fixation on Rānjhā that they rushed her into marriage with another man, and then sent her to live with her new husband and his family. But Rānjhā disguised himself as a mendicant so that he could visit Hīr in her new home, and then spirited her away. The two died and went to heaven, where Rānjhā resumed his form as Indra, and Hīr as Maneka. As in the frame story, there is an *apsarā* who falls in love with a human, though here the human is really a deity who has taken human form. The *caritra* describes a mutual, all-consuming love that challenges social conventions. Hīr, like the *apsarā* in the frame story, is willing to flaunt social convention and the wishes of her family to meet her true love. As in other popular Punjabi romances, the female heroine tries to take some control of her own destiny, and romantic love has a power that challenges and can sometimes overcome social norms. Unlike other versions of the story where Hīr is killed and Rānjhā dies of grief, the two die, but they die only to their human existences, to be reunited in their celestial forms. Intriguingly, these *caritras* do not include any commentary from the minister

<sup>25</sup> For a fascinating analysis of this and other similar stories, see (Mir 2010).

about women's natures. In a sense this story is at odds with some of the other *caritras* in which a male's passionate love for a female is portrayed as foolish. In these retellings of popular romances, such love is celebrated, though often doomed to fail on earth.

Is it possible to reconcile these kinds of stories with an ideal of gender equality? This is fundamentally dependent on how exactly one defines gender equality, of course. There are particular interpretive moves a commentator could make that might bridge the gap between the *caritras'* assessment of female character and the ideal of gender equality in Sikhism. In the wider context of the Dasam Granth controversy, one strategy would be to argue that because the *caritras* generally do not accord with the principle of gender equality, the poet who produced the composition must therefore not have been Guru Gobind Singh. But as noted earlier, even among those who reject *Caritropākhiān* as the Guru's work, the gender equality ideal has only very rarely been cited as a contributing rationale for rejecting the composition. For those who do consider Guru Gobind Singh the author, another possibility would be to posit that gender equality obtains only in situations in which women are acting according to particular dharmic norms. That is, one could argue that the women in the *caritras* are not due equal status not because they are women, but because their particular behavior has made them ineligible, whereas more virtuous women would be accorded equality with men. One commenter in a Dasam Granth online forum makes a version of this argument by suggesting that the moral of the *caritras* is that "one" [implicitly male] can trust one's wife and evolved and spiritual women, but not "lustful women."<sup>26</sup> Such arguments, however, limit the breadth of the equality ideal, and, as in the example cited here, are typically made from a specifically male perspective. And it would presumably imply that males, too, should be held to such a standard, but the men in the *caritras* for the most part are not held equally responsible for their various sexual peccadilloes, though they are willing participants.

In any case, however one might reconcile the ideal of gender equality with these stories, it remains the case that the *caritras* represent a male perspective, with a male storyteller gearing his advice towards a male audience (the king and his son). There is no report of any instruction provided to Citra Singh's wife, for example, though arguably she too might benefit from moral guidance, and indeed it is her actions that are the impetus for storytelling. Another means of realizing the ideal of gender equality would be to interpret or retell the stories from a female perspective, exploring what women could learn from the stories of other women's behavior. But this perspective is not represented in *Caritropākhiān*, even in those *caritras* in which it is men who are acting deceitfully, nor is it an approach taken in the interpretive discourse surrounding this composition. Thus if one implication of gender equality is that the stories within sacred texts are equally relevant to males and females, the *caritras* do not fully accord with such an ideal. A key underlying theme of the entire composition is that women are obstacles to good leadership (implicitly male leadership). The frame story presents a king and his son who are in conflict with one another, but their conflict is not resolved through an examination of their own actions. Rather, it is implicitly resolved through a focus on women's behavior. The minister is effectively teaching the lesson that the father and the son can restore a good relationship if they both learn from the stories about women's devious characters.

Some Sikh commentators have highlighted the specifically male perspective of this and other parts of the Dasam Granth in the extensive debates that take place online in various Sikh forums. For example, in a 2015 discussion of *Caritropākhiān* on the *sikhawareness.com* site, one commenter, using the name "CdnSikhGirl," expressed skepticism about the authenticity of the text, and asked how the Dasam Granth in its entirety could be seen as a universal text for all Sikhs given that *Caritropākhiān* contains a message that is meant for male leaders. Further, this commenter asked, why were there no

---

<sup>26</sup> <https://answers.sikhnet.com/question/210/chritropakhyan-of-dasam-granth/>. 2012. Viewed 25 June 2019. For another version of this approach, see Sanjam Kaur, "Charitropakhyan and I, a Woman." <https://sikhunity.wordpress.com/2014/01/06/charitropakhyan-and-i-a-woman/>. Viewed 30 September 2019.



warnings to Singhnis (i.e., female Sikhs) to be wary of males?<sup>27</sup> A later commenter on the same thread sought to address this concern by suggesting that Sikhs should understand the title of the text not to refer simply to “wiles of women,” but to “wiles of humans.”<sup>28</sup> Addressing the same issue in a different way, another online commentator, Sanjam Kaur, in an article posted on another Sikh website, wrote about reading *Charitropākhiān* in its entirety with her two daughters, arguing that the text challenges its readers or listeners to acknowledge that both men and women can commit evil acts, even though girls growing up might hear more about men’s potential to act badly. Kaur did not interpret the *caritras* as critical of women, but rather as intended to help both men and women understand how to live the householder’s life without being unduly influenced by the lustful influences of the popular culture surrounding them.<sup>29</sup> Her approach is akin to those who make a distinction between spiritually adept women and lustful women, with the additional strategy of placing the blame for sexual misconduct on the influence of popular culture (and not necessarily a specific component of the female character).

Other commentators have presented similar interpretations that, while not explicitly defining gender equality, seem to presuppose an understanding of gender equality that nonetheless ascribes different roles to males and females, or alternatively could be seen as presupposing that humans have as yet to foster a society in which the ideal of gender equality has been fully realized. Pritpal Singh’s short online piece “Sri Guru Gobind Singh Sahib Jee on women in the Charitropakhyān” argues that there is a “primitive male-dominated social order” which views women as sexual objects, and that it is this social structure that creates the environment in which men constrain women, thereby pushing them towards destructive acts rather than allowing the female’s “peerless strength” for the “growth and betterment of humanity.” Pritpal Singh sees *Charitropākhiān* as calling males to decide whether they choose “destruction or “progression,” for “the path to equality of men and women leads to progression, while inequality will most certainly be about destruction and chaos.”<sup>30</sup> As in Sanjam Kaur’s argument, the responsibility for the poor behavior of women depicted in *Charitropākhiān* is displaced onto some component of a surrounding social structure which implicitly is at odds with Sikhi. These recent online analyses of the Dasam Granth do suggest that the issue of gender equality in *Charitropākhiān* is becoming more prominent in the ongoing controversy about the text overall.

#### 4. Conclusions

The increasing availability and accessibility of online forums discussing Sikhi have created a space for a wider range of people, including increasing numbers of women, to join the debate about the Dasam Granth. Put another way, the presence of gender-related themes in the text is now complemented by the presence of women’s voices and more focused attention on gender construction. These lively and at times contentious online arguments and counter-arguments reflect the growing tendency to explicitly incorporate the Sikh ideal of gender equality in this controversy, adding an important component to the existing scholarly literature which for the most part has been silent on such matters. As the examples explored here suggest, thus far the emphasis has been on understanding how the notion of the female character or female behaviors as depicted in *Charitropākhiān* might be reconciled in light of the gender equality ideal. Interestingly, with the notable exception of the work of scholars such as Nikky Singh, there has as yet been less exploration of the complex issues related to gender and divinity that are raised by the goddess compositions and the usage of the term *bhagautī* in those and

<sup>27</sup> CdnSikhGirl. Response to thread “Charitropakhyān or Erotica? viewer discretion advised.” 26 July 2015. <http://www.sikhawareness.com/topic/16831-charitropakhyān-or-erotica-viewer-discretion-advised/>. Viewed 25 June 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Guest, Response to thread, “Charitropakhyān or Erotica? viewer discretion advised.” 26 July 2015. <http://www.sikhawareness.com/topic/16831-charitropakhyān-or-erotica-viewer-discretion-advised/>. 27 July 2015. Viewed 25 June 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Sanjam Kaur, “Charitropakhyān and I, a Woman.” <https://sikhunity.wordpress.com/2014/01/06/charitropakhyān-and-i-a-woman/>. Viewed 30 September 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Pritpal Singh, “Sri Guru Gobind Singh Sahib Jee on women in the Charitropakhyān,” <https://sikhunity.wordpress.com/2014/01/14/sri-guru-gobind-singh-sahib-jee-on-women-in-the-charitropakhyān/>. 14 January 2014. Viewed 2 October 2019.

other sections of the Dasam Granth. Given, however, that the Dasam Granth controversy as yet shows little sign of waning, that notable absence may as yet make its presence known.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## References

- Ashta, Dharam Pal. 1959. *The Poetry of the Dasam Granth*. New Delhi: Arun Prakashan.
- Bindra, Pritpal Singh. 2000. Could Guru Gobind Singh Write Such Things? Paper presented at Sikh Educational Conference, Toronto, ON, Canada, September 22.
- Bindra, Pritpal Singh. 2002. *Chritro Pakhyaan: Tales of Male-Female Tricky Deceptions from Sri Dasam Granth*. 2 vols. Amritsar: B. Chattar Singh Jiwan Singh.
- Coburn, Thomas. 1992. *Encountering the Goddess: A Translation of the Devī-Māhātmya and a Study of Its Interpretation*. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications.
- Jaggi, Rattan Singh. 1965. *Dasam-Granth kī Paurāṇik Prṣṭhabhūmi*. Delhi: Bharati Sahitya Mandir.
- Jaggi, Rattan Singh. 1966. *Dasam Granth dā Kartritav*. New Delhi: Panjabi Sahit Sabha.
- Jakobsh, Doris R. 2003. *Relocating Gender in Sikh History: Transformation, Meaning, and Identity*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Kaur, Upinder Jit. n.d. Role and Status of Women in Sikhism. Available online: <https://www.allaboutsikhs.com/sikhism-articles/role-and-status-of-women-in-sikhism> (accessed on 25 June 2019).
- Kohli, Surindar Singh. 2005. *The Dasam Granth: The Second Scripture of the Sikhs written by Sri Guru Gobind Singh*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
- Loehlin, Clinton Herbert. 1971. *The Granth of Guru Gobind Singh and The Khalsa Brotherhood*. Lucknow: Lucknow Publishing House.
- Mir, Farina. 2010. *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Nabha, Bhai Kahn Singh. 1990. *Gursabad Ratnākar Mahān Kosh*. Delhi: National Bookshop.
- Oman, John Campbell. 1984. *The Mystics, Ascetics and Saints of India: A Study of Sadhuism, with an account of the Yogis, Sanyasis, Bairagis and other Strange Hindu Sectarrians*. New Delhi: Cosmo Publications.
- Rinehart, Robin. 2011. *Debating the Dasam Granth*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sikhwomen.com. n.d. Equality. Available online: <http://www.sikhwomen.com/equality/index.htm> (accessed on 25 June 2019).
- Singh, Taran. 1967. *Dasam Granth: Rūp te Ras*. Chandigarh: Guru Gobind Singh Foundation.
- Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur. 1990. Guru Gobind Singh's Idea of Durga in his Poetry. *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 2: 243–67.
- Singh, Nikky Guninder Kaur. 1993. *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Version of the Transcendent*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Singh, Nikky Guninder Kaur. 2005. *The Birth of the Khalsa: A Feminist Re-Memory of Sikh Identity*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Sponberg, Alan. 1992. Attitudes Towards Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism. In *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*. Edited by Jose Ignacio Cabezon. Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 3–36.



© 2019 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).