

Super Singhs and Kaurageous Kaurs Sikh Names, Caste and Disidentity Politics

Jacob Copeman

Susan Bayly (Chapter 2, this volume) writes of intellectual exchange as ‘a bridging of worlds, not necessarily successfully or completely, but with at least the possibility of boundaries crossed and the generation of ties’. Naming practices can be employed as means of doing both precisely this and its opposite. Names frequently bridge (families, cultural forms, times), but bridges, and name-bridges too, may be burned – most dramatically in cases of ‘toponymic cleansing’, typically after regime changes, when the renaming of streets, places and monuments can remove unwanted associations in enactments of symbolic retribution (Azaryahu 2011), but also in cases where the composite religious connotations of boundary-crossing names are expunged in favour of singular onomastic signage (Copeman 2015; see also Bayly 2004; Banerjee 2008). In this chapter, ‘name exchange’ principally refers to the straightforward substitution of one personal name for another. However, reflecting anthropological work that shows how names and titles can form political, ritual or economic resources exchangeable between specific exchange partners (Codere 1950; Harrison 1990), the chapter also considers attempts to restrict certain personal names from exchange (Weiner 1992), even the mode of exchange that is an exchange *for* rather than an exchange *between*, thereby causing such names to resemble a form of intellectual or cultural property comparable to protected brand names (Hayden 2011) or proper names as used in commercial trademarks (Harrison 1999). Name exchange is thus a particularly layered instance of exchange, because while a name can in itself form a bridge or tie between worlds, exchanging one name for another also involves sometimes controversial displacements, assertion of boundaries and disputation concerning ownership and use rights. It is therefore unsurprising that such name exchanges frequently both arise out of and prompt charged debates and *intellectual* exchanges.

The foundational exchange of names on which this chapter is based took place in 1699 when Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and final living Sikh Guru, enacted the birth of the Khalsa (order of initiated Sikhs).¹ It was then, in Anandpur, that the guru, ‘through a dramatic hoax, demanded the ultimate test of loyalty to his person as a holy man’ (Gold 1987: 21). Asking for volunteers to offer him their heads in a test of faith, he secretly substituted goats for the five disciples who stood up ready to sacrifice their lives. It was here also that the famous five distinctive symbols that identify Sikhs as Sikhs were adopted – *kesh* (long hair), *kara* (bracelet), *kangha* (comb), *kirpan* (sword) and *kacha* (underclothes). At the same time, in a template meant to be followed, each of the disciples exchanged his family and community (caste) name in favour of ‘Singh’, a name typically used by the prestigious Rajput caste, which is associated with martial, lordly ideals and claims Kshatriya descent. One of the four major *varnas*, or caste groupings, of ‘idealised human callings’, Kshatriyas are ‘usually associated with rulers and warriors, but also includ[e] seigneurial landed groups’ (Bayly 1999: 8). The exchange thereby entailed taking the symbolic form of a prestigious name from one zone of the culture and moving it to another.² ‘Distinctions of caste, class, and family profession are therewith abolished’, says Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh (2005: 56), and ‘a new egalitarian and kindred identity announced in the new family name of Singh’. However, while the resounding importance of the ‘five K’ identity markers has received sustained and illuminating scholarly attention (e.g. Uberoi 1991), and so has the ideal-typical Sikh body that bears them (e.g. Axel 2001), analysis of the guru’s act of renaming and its consequences remains comparatively insubstantial. This insubstantiality is puzzling given how richly resonant and imbued with meaning the name Singh and names more broadly are for many if not all Sikhs. The equivalent caste-obviating name for a Sikh female, Kaur, is equally as resonant and meaningful as the male Singh with which it forms a pair in a multi-layered symbolic complex. At the same time, Kaur and Singh each possess their own specific histories, values and connotations.

This chapter explores the tensions as well as creativity in the ways Sikhs both in India and the diaspora use, change and debate what to do with those apparently innocent male and female identity markers, Singh and Kaur. It aims to provide a composite portrait of these names – ethnographically and historically informed, but far from complete – through discussion of a series of condensed accounts of Sikh ‘name exchanges’ in which one name is exchanged for another. These name exchanges both emerge from and precipitate intellectual exchanges. Further, they generate forms of exchange value. If, classically speaking, exchange value is the value acquired when objects are exchanged for one another, expressed in money and price, the exchange of names produces a different kind of exchange value, one that is qualitative rather than quantitative. For instance, the foundational name exchange enacted by Guru Gobind Singh, as classically understood, aimed to mix the four castes into one and fashion Singhs as one family and thereby to instil the value that all were equal in race and creed (K. Singh 1952). It follows that Kaur/Singh are as much

disidentity as identity markers, undoing identity on one level while remaking it on another – a reminder of solidarity’s entwinement with estrangement and disidentification (Stasch 2009). These names, alongside the five Ks, allow Sikhs to present – to be treated, or counted – as ‘one thing, something that, before it was thus unified or counted, was neither unified nor particular’ (Hallward 2003: 5; Badiou 2006).

The meanings, values and uses of the names Singh and Kaur are far from fixed and have been discussed and debated for centuries. These debates have particularly focused on their non-use, re-use, or over-use, and the name exchanges presented here must be understood as set within and precipitative of further orders of (intellectual) exchange in the form of critique and counter-critique. To reiterate, vibrant debates and intellectual exchanges both give rise to and in turn are precipitated by practices of name exchange. Such debates and exchanges are not solely cerebral but grounded in strong and potentially volatile affects, alerting us to how emotions are intertwined with the more reason-oriented aspects of intellectual exchange, supporting the latter by ‘providing [them] with salience and goals’ (Blom and Lama-Rewal 2020: 3). These affects and desires are linked to identifications, which must be understood with reference to broader historical processes and structures as well as the emotive force and impact they bring to such debates. Caste is one such salient identification. The most frequently heard complaint concerning Kaur/Singh among both orthodox Sikh reformers and the ‘ordinary’ west Delhi Sikhs I have spent time with³ is that their disuse is strongly linked to a resurgence of caste identities. The concern is that Guru Gobind Singh’s exchange of names at the birth of the Khalsa is being reversed, with caste names increasingly reinstalled and Kaur/Singh dropped: the value of equality thereby is lost and that of caste affiliation enhanced through this reversal of the founding exchange of names.

Yet concerns over the nature and use of these names go beyond their vexed relationship with matters of caste, even as caste logics remain difficult to withstand. Following this, a key focus of the chapter is on the role of government agencies, not caste, in suppressing Singh and Kaur due to their almost limitless recurrence and consequent inability unambiguously to individuate their bearers. Unable to countenance such common and therefore ‘improper’ names (Deseriis 2015) – which from an orthodox Sikh standpoint is precisely the point of them – schools or passport agencies demand alternatives, which often take the form of caste names. Forming a striking modern parallel with colonial censuses, which scholars have widely argued ‘inscribed identities’, especially ones of caste, ‘that their subjects were behoved to fulfil’ (Bhogal 2014: 283), use of caste names apparently is rising among Sikhs, but not necessarily due to a resurgence of ‘caste mentalities’. Further, orthodox Sikh parents I know in Delhi bemoan their children’s distaste for Singh and Kaur, which they consider archaic and embarrassing. Connectedly, debates precipitated by particular instances of name exchange focus on the ability of Kaur and Singh to act as simultaneous bridge and border with Hinduism and bulwark against moral degradation. Naming practices and concerns about naming practices therefore

participate in what has been described as a larger 'crisis' of Sikh identity (Duggal 2015), itself the subject of a series of ongoing and highly emotive intellectual exchanges. However, counterpoised to such exchanges, and apparently in contrast with the opening up of these names at the birth of the Khalsa, is another set of arguments about who can be permitted to use them. Intellectual exchanges here centre on whether baptism is a formal requirement for eligibility to bear these names and their status as a kind of cultural property, and whether they should be disbarred from use by non-Sikhs or those who engage in behaviour considered to reflect badly on Sikhism. Attempts to police their usage show how debates and exchanges centring on names can switch easily from concerns about these names not being used enough to their being used too much or by the wrong kind of person.

Like the Japanese cherry blossoms analysed by Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney (2002), Singh and Kaur are symbols with a very large field of signification that is neither frozen in culture nor a linear progression through time from one meaning to the next (282). Some of these meanings compete and are logically incompatible with one another – in which case fierce debate and argument can and does arise. Understood as instruments of equalization, they have been viewed as capable of challenging the normative order, offering new possibilities (ibid.: 57). However, viewed as Sikh possessions, perceived instances of their misuse can provoke feelings of impugned honour and moves towards their policing. Connectedly, many Sikhs see their main value as providing distinct identity markers – helping to distinguish Sikhs from and defend against the influence of Hindus and thereby maintain (separate) community. Others still see their primary importance as means for instilling and displaying self-respect and martial prowess.

The relative salience of these different meanings and values crystallizes in acts of name exchange at particular moments in time. To exchange one name for another reflects, enacts and produces value(s) and value judgements (Lambek 2008). This chapter is arranged through description of such exchanges as a means of illuminating the role of names in the formulation and reformulation of Sikh values. We shall see how, in addition to being the subject of exchanges, names may also be withheld from them and act as bulwarks against undesired cultural exchanges. They also engage in forms of exchange with their bearers, affecting and being affected by them. Writing of the fictional works of Israeli author S.Y. Agnon, Shira Hadad (2012: 5) finds that names are encountered in his texts 'at moments of extreme failure or distortion'. Among the exemplary name exchanges considered in this chapter we find ones that provoke accusations of distortion, failure and inauthenticity – disuse of Sikh/Kaur is often understood, for instance, as a failure to commit to being fully visible as a Sikh. But the exchanges, taken together, suggest that concealment of one's Sikh-hood via naming practices is never simply concealment. Rather, practices of concealment entail becoming visible in other forms – for instance, as a Hindu, or as a unique individual visible to bureaucratic apparatuses, or as a caste-bearing person visible to one's caste brethren, or as fashionably visible

within spaces of modernity. However, the chapter is equally concerned with moments of ‘coming home’ to Sikh/Kaur to become fully visible as Sikh once more. Here, then, rather than a singular equation with failure, it is more helpful to think of moments of name exchange in terms of newness and decision. A new name is a record and consequence of a decision (not necessarily made by oneself) about the self that one wants to be, or that one wishes another person to be (for instance, one’s child). Such decisions, as noted, reveal and produce value(s). The decision-event (Humphrey 2008) of a name exchange produces value in its providing a name capable of mediating between who one is and who one feels one should be.⁴

Those who engage in the affectively charged dialogues, encounters and interactions prompted by instances of name exchange include but are certainly not restricted to Sikhs understood as intellectuals or intelligentsia. The varied interpretations and values of Kaur/Singh described here are debated in the mode of ‘reasoned passion’ and ‘passionate reason’ (Carsten et al. 2018: 8) in Sikh periodicals, magazines and online forums of both Indian and diasporic origin – a kind of ‘virtual *sangat* (congregation)’ that holds particular interest for bypassing traditional authority structures (Jakobsh 2014a: 224) – and also within and around the west Delhi *gurudwaras* (Sikh places of worship) where I have conducted ethnographic research since 2012, and the chapter draws on data from all these sources.

Historical Background

Although Sikhism is widely thought of and often spoken of by Sikhs themselves as a casteless religion, it is nonetheless common for members of the community to think and speak of themselves and others using the caste terms ‘Sikh Jats’, ‘Sikh Khatris’ and so on, and especially to retain an awareness of who is and is not of Dalit/ex-untouchable descent. Sikh naming practices lie at the heart of the religion’s ambivalent and paradoxical attitude to caste. The relationship of Singh/Kaur with caste was ambiguous from the beginning, for as has been widely noted, the pre-existing association between the title ‘Singh’ and Rajputs makes it possible to view the initial baptism ceremony as being less a move towards putative castelessness than one towards martial ‘Rajputization’. An educational tract on ‘Sikh Castes’ explains that the convention by which Sikh men take on the name Singh and women Kaur ‘is an extension of the Hindu Rajput or Kshatriya tradition into Sikhism in addition to some other aspects of Rajput martial culture like “Jhatka” [single blow animal killing], “Shastar Tilak” [weapon carrying], etc. which are preserved in the traditions of Nihang and Hazoori Sikhs to this day’ (Singh ‘Panthi’ n.d.).⁵ But even so, the tract explains, this was not to devalue the other three *varnas*. Entrants into Guru Gobind Singh’s new Khalsa order were to embody idealized versions of all four of them, but since ‘fighting for both one’s life and faith was the greatest need in era of Gurus ... the Kshatriya part of Sikh’s identity got more

highlighted in Sikh society' (ibid.). Obviously, embodying the best aspects of each *varna* suggests less the destruction of caste than a kind of enfolding or sublation of it, and historians and Sikh thinkers continue to weigh up whether the correct Sikh attitude to caste is to adopt the position that castes do exist but are equal (i.e. *casteism* should not exist), or conversely that castes are not to be recognized at all and therefore all caste markers must be removed (i.e. caste itself should not exist). Moreover, the association, already mentioned, between 'Singh' and Rajputs lends Sikhism an air of Rajputism, notwithstanding the diversity of the caste makeup of adherents. I point to these different understandings simply to show that prior to present-day debates about the use of caste names by Sikhs, there were already ambiguities concerning Sikh approaches to caste, not least in respect of the name Singh: the very name which some see as levelling caste has been viewed by others as a marker of Rajputization.

However, Singh and Kaur are historically meaningful in further ways besides that do not strictly relate to caste. As already suggested, the conferral of Singh and Kaur is remembered to have been not only a means of caste-elision in accord with drinking from a common bowl but also an act of 'nominative uplift'; for the name 'Singh' means 'literally a lion, and metaphorically a champion or warrior' (Cunningham 1918: 73), and 'Kaur' princess – a Punjabi equivalent of the Rajput term 'prince' (*kanwar*) (Jakobsh 2014b: 597). They are designed to be – and have been experienced as – powerful, vitalizing names: names that have life in them (Prytz-Johansen 2012: 114). This is how a Sikh woman in her twenties explained to me the importance of the foundational exchange of names:

When the Sikhs were fighting the Mughals we had small-small names like Billu, Tillu, Kalu, Neela, Peela – not impressive names like the Mughals. A [Mughal] name like Bakhtavur Khan is very impressive and intimidating. Guruji said: How can we fight the Muslims when our names are small but theirs are great, very big names? *You* should also have heavy and good names. Then at the Khalsa he created Kaur and Singh and his name was changed from Gobind Rai to Gobind Singh. Now, if someone listens to the name, it is heavy, it is Singh. With big, heavy names your strength becomes more.

Other Sikh friends also used the word 'heavy' (*bhari*) to refer to the properties of Singh and Kaur. Meanwhile, complementing the exchange of these titles for divisive caste-title suffixes, 'little' first names such as Billu, Tillu and Kalu were to be replaced by weightier, grander-sounding first names. Indic connotations of 'heavy' include mass, density and energy (White 1984: 56). Bestowing the heaviness and density of 'Singh' was to imbue the *panth* (Sikh community) with a martial impermeability and reminder of the need for courage.

A politically active Dalit Sikh in his thirties also spoke to me of the transformative effect on Sikhs in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of the guru's granting of Singh and Kaur. The new name imbued Sikhs with what he termed 'name spirit': 'the name Singh gave them strength, that "I am a lion"

kind of spirit'. He even went so far as to couple together the sword and the name as comparably important acquisitions for readying Sikhs for coming battles: 'He [the guru] has given the sword, He has given the name'. A further significant aspect of this new name spirit was the unrestrictedness of its uplifting effects: 'In Indian history, Dalits [former untouchables] cannot use this name "Singh". Someone has a very derogatory name; [but] suddenly his name is *this!*', he exclaimed. One can see why for a Dalit activist such an opening up or making democratic of a prestigious name was worthy of note. 'The most common of the distinctive names in use among Rajputs' (Cunningham 1918: 73), 'Singh' was now no longer exclusively for use by this caste. This opening up of the name could also be viewed as a means of borrowing 'name spirit' from Rajputs (or as Rajputization) even as the name no longer becomes associated only with this community. But from the viewpoint of my Dalit respondents, use of 'Singh' suggests less the aping of a distinctively Rajput name than its subversion and it being made to open up beyond itself. As Opinderjit Kaur Takhar (2005: 94) writes of the new initiation ceremony, 'they shared *amrit* from a common bowl: something highly alien to the Hindu caste system. Eradication of *zat* [sub-caste] names in favour of Singh and Kaur meant that an individual's *zat* could no longer be distinguished by one's *got* (family name). Thus, initially at least, Sikhism appealed very much to the lower castes who underwent initiation via *khande-di-pahul* [baptism] and became Sikhs'. Sikhs thus transferred to themselves, via the name-titles Singh and Kaur, some of the charisma of the Rajput. Further, if the title affects the initiate (conferring on them its 'name spirit', a sense of nominative uplift and appreciation of equality), the initiate affects the title – its connotations begin to extend well beyond the Rajput: the title and the people who bear it emerge hand in hand (Hacking 1986).

If taking on Singh and Kaur was meant to de-differentiate internally within the *panth* by downplaying caste distinctions between Sikhs, they were – in part, and in conjunction with other symbols – meant externally to differentiate by distinguishing Sikhs from non-Sikhs. One produces the other: Sikhs must not be individuated (nominatively) so that Sikhism can be so. The name, then, was a key aspect of the guru's marshalling of the corporate imagination in both the external (differentiating) and internal (de-differentiating) senses just noted. Specifically in respect of de-differentiation, Guru Gobind Singh is reported to have said that with the new name-titles and five K symbols, 'never again would Sikhs be able to conceal their identity as they had done when his father was executed' (Fenech and McLeod 2014: 8).⁶

The origin of the use of Kaur is less clear, but probably also connected with the imperative of external differentiation. Cunningham (1918) mentions many Sikh females named Kaur, but says nothing about the significance or provenance of the name-title. In this, Cunningham's history shares features with early Sikh prescriptive texts that focused on male ritual codes and identity and 'are either highly contradictory or silent about women's inclusion into the Khalsa' (Jakobsh 2014b: 596). Doris Jakobsh (2003, 2014b) provides helpful clarity here, noting that concern with the male 'Singh' completely eclipsed the

matter of female Sikh names in the early days of the Khalsa. If the injunction that Sikh men must always use their full names (i.e. not omit the suffix 'Singh') is quite clear, so far as female names are concerned there is silence – Sikh women are referred to simply as 'Sikhnis' or 'Gursikhnis' (2014b: 596). It is in the nineteenth century that 'Kaur' starts to become visible as part of an effort by the Sikh reform movement, the Singh Sabha, to rewrite history and construct religious boundaries (Oberoi 1994).⁷ Presenting evidence of the historical convention of using Devi as a suffix of Sikh female first names, as was also the case for Hindu women and which had actually received sanction in the Prem Sumarg,⁸ Jakobsh (2014b: 598) shows how Singh Sabha reformers took to recording the name of one of Guru Gobind Singh's wives, previously known as Sahib Devah, as Sahib Kaur, before finally in 1950 the order was included in the Sikh code of conduct (*Reht Maryada*) that Kaur should suffix the given name of all female infants, just as Singh should suffix all male given names. 'Devi', evidently, was too Hindu-inflected. Consequently, if 'Kaur' is elusive in historical accounts of the formation of the Khalsa, there is a good reason for this.

Meanwhile, in *The Birth of the Khalsa* (2005: 55–56), Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh states, with revealing elusiveness, that in addition to the guru's hailing of Sikh men at the foundation of the Khalsa as 'Singhs', 'Sikhs also mention that on that day Guru Gobind Singh gave the name "Kaur" to Sikh women'. In a later work she states that, just as 'men received the surname Singh, women received the surname Kaur', but also that 'the exact historical origins of this tradition [regarding Kaur specifically] are obscure' (N-G. K. Singh 2011: 52). This ambiguity results from Singh's desire to read a feminist message into the conferral of 'Kaur' as the guru's gift of freedom from the lineage of fathers and husbands (2011: 106; 2005: 187), an argument that is hampered by a lack of supporting historical evidence. This is not to criticize Singh, who is clear that her analysis is at the level of mythos and the recovery of lost potentials. What is important here is less historical certitude regarding whether or not the guru gave the name Kaur to Sikh women, or the intentions of the Singh Sabha innovators who assert that he did, than the fact that contemporary Sikh feminists hold a powerful understanding of Kaur as a key asset in their framing of the Sikh faith as one that is particularly progressive in its approach to sex/gender precisely because 'as "Kaur," a woman retains her identity for her whole life ... [s]he does not have to adopt the name of her father at birth nor that of her husband at marriage' (N-G. K. Singh 2011: 106). Yet we must note the ambiguity of the freedom that this name confers: if it frees its bearer from patriarchal and caste norms, it does so even as it binds her to a particular religious faith. The 'inaugurative power of name-giving' (Humphrey 2006: 173) is not excised but relocated.

However, the interpellation is not straightforward. Sikh religious boundary construction remains an ongoing project subject to an array of challenges, contradictions and ambivalences both reflected in and accentuated by personal naming practices. The Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) is the Sikh *panthic* body that manages *gurudwaras* in Punjab and Haryana and formal custodian of the *Reht Maryada* or Sikh code of conduct. In her work on

Sikh group formations, Takhar (2005: 27) discusses this code's provision that 'Boys are to be given the name Singh and girls the name of Kaur'. If the code is applicable to *amritdhari* Sikhs, namely Sikhs who have been initiated into the Khalsa, Takhar asks, what of those Khalsa Sikhs who do not consistently follow the code's prescriptions? Equally, what of those outside the Khalsa fold who *do* follow them?⁹ Consider the case of names among the Ravidasis, Dalit (usually Ramdasia¹⁰) followers of the outcaste saint Ravidas (c. 500) whose works feature prominently in the *Adi Granth*, the principal Sikh scripture. Some Ravidasis bear names characteristic of Hindus (e.g. Anita Devi, Ram Lal) while many more bear Singh and Kaur – yet Ravidasis are neither Hindu nor Sikh in any straightforward sense, and are certainly not *amritdharis*: 'It is interesting to note that though many Ravidasis retain Kaur and Singh in their names, these same individuals emphatically claim they are not Sikhs but Ravidasis' (ibid.). Conversely, self-identifying Sikhs may well not bear Singh or Kaur, which is one of the key problematics addressed in this chapter. This can confound others' attempts to define and stabilize religious identities. For instance, not bearing these names has the potential to count against Sikhs in the event of their seeking refugee status, with Australia's Refugee Review Tribunal in 2005 having sought clarification on precisely this question, asking: 'Would someone whose name is not Singh and who does not exhibit any external signs of Sikh religion (e.g. uncut hair) plausibly be a Sikh?'¹¹ Such cases remind us that the names Kaur and Singh are not and never have been failsafe indicators of their bearers' religious identities. But still, and as we will see below, certain mainstream Sikhs lay claim to these titles as a special class of intellectual property or 'inalienable possession' (Weiner 1992) as if they were theirs alone. Full of shifting significances, Singh and Kaur are names that Sikhs have borrowed but that are also, and significantly, theirs.

We have seen, then, how the ceremonial exchange of Singh for caste names at the birth of the Khalsa was at the same time an exchange of a single caste name in place of several: the internal levelling of identity took place under the sign of the Rajput whose values the exchange was designed creatively to appropriate. The values displayed and advanced by the exchange included formal equalization within the *panth*, separation from non-*panth* elements, novel access to a prestigious name for those whose caste backgrounds were usually associated with demeaning ones, and elevated martial density and courage. The later exchange of Kaur for Devi might initially have reflected a will to differentiate, but the exchange has since accrued further (progressive feminist) values.

It is values such as these that disuse of Kaur and Singh threatens. With such disuse, complains Sikh commentator G.P. Singh (2003), it appears that people 'want to hide their Sikh identity'. This 'hiding' – as we will see in this chapter – can take many different forms across different scales. G.P. Singh himself connects this 'disturbing trend' with the 1947 partition of India and particularly the anti-Sikh violence that followed the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. He is right that many Sikhs in present-day Delhi can cite examples of family, friends and acquaintances who in 1984 changed both their names and

appearance. Several Sikh army officers at the time are said to have changed the ‘Singh’ they bore to the similar but more Hindu-sounding ‘Singha’ or ‘Sinha’: at least one of them continues to bear the altered surname, though for others the dropping of Kaur/Singh and shorn hair were only temporary. ‘They came again as “Singh” and “Kaur” when it was safe to do so’, an elderly female respondent told me. Other respondents spoke about the violence of partition and 1984 as tests of commitment separating the wheat from the chaff: those who, in the face of mortal danger, cut their hair and changed their names – especially those who continued to cut their hair and use their new names after the immediate danger had passed – are considered to have failed these tests. In this way, these tragic episodes caused certain ‘unripe’ ones to be ‘shed’ (*kache pille*). It is not clear, however, that the cause identified by G.P. Singh for disuse of Kaur and Singh is as salient now as it was in the 1980s and 1990s. This chapter suggests other reasons for such disuse. I turn now to more recent episodes of name exchange set within the give and take of interchanges about names and identity in the contemporary Sikh world.

Exchange 1: Avtar Singh for Mr Makkar

In 2005, in a minor twenty-first-century reproduction of the foundational name exchange enacted at the birth of the Khalsa, an individual known as Mr Makkar was renamed Avtar Singh, with his caste name dropped for the non-caste-disclosing Singh. Insofar as the drift towards disuse of Kaur/Singh and take-up of caste names had encouraged the creation of a countervailing movement towards renewal of Sikh identity, there was nothing especially unusual about the exchange. Koonal Duggal (2022) discusses the case of the Punjabi pop singer Vinaypal Buttar whose music videos have depicted the co-implication among Sikh youth of loss of identity markers such as unshorn hair and a slide into moral degeneracy typified by consumption of alcohol and weakened commitment to communitarian practices such as *seva*. In one video Buttar’s own personal journey of restoration is depicted as he moves from ‘*gunahgar*’ (sinner, transgressor) to a process of contemplation, finally to full identity and identifiability as a reformed Sikh subject. Marking the transition, the now turbaned singer took to introducing his live performances with the declaration: ‘*Vinaypal Buttar siga ji main, hun Vinaypal Singh ban gaya*’ (‘I was Vinaypal Buttar, now I am Vinaypal Singh’) (ibid.: 7).

Buttar/Singh is particularly scathing of the spiritual backsliding of the *panth*’s principal authority figures, or *jathedars*, whose power and corruption is markedly prevalent within the very institutions meant to uphold its moral precepts. Indeed, the reason I foreground the exchange of Singh for the caste name Makkar is precisely because the exchange took place on the occasion of Makkar/Singh’s appointment as head of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC). Recall that the SGPC is the custodian and guarantor of the *Reht Maryada* (Sikh code of conduct). On the face of it, the exchange of names

simply showed him obediently complying with the rules of the organization he now headed. At the same time, that the head of the same body that devised the *Reht* should need to enact self-reform invited reflection. Why was he even considered let alone elected to such a position of authority if the quality of his adherence was so evidently suspect? For the reforming Sikh youths in Delhi whom I know, what was particularly noticeable was the apparent reluctance with which Mr Makkar (as was) dropped his caste surname, suggesting that it was precisely the many newspaper advertisements offering him congratulations the day after his appointment, which addressed him simply as 'Avtar Singh', that forced his hand. The notices of congratulation were pointed: to (re)name him was to correct his name. For many of my Sikh acquaintances in Delhi, the apparent hesitance of the head of one of the highest of the Sikh temporal authorities to abide by such a basic teaching was depressing but not surprising – after all, they said, such appointments had long been reduced to the politics of influence and wealth. At the same time, the episode was recalled to me with sadness and regret for its exemplification of the larger condition of the tradition: if figures within the very lofty institutions tasked with upholding the teachings of the gurus cannot be trusted to abide by such a basic one as that concerning the bearing of names, it merely hints at the scale of the degeneration elsewhere.

The critique is not altogether recent. A contribution to the monthly journal *The Sikh Review*¹² titled 'Caste among Sikhs: Dichotomy between Belief and Practice' (Lal 2000) cites a letter written to the journal in 1978 from a correspondent named Ganda Singh, which refers to a 'disease of separateness' in the land that has 'not only adversely affected the Muslims and Christians, but has also spread in a worst form among the Sikhs, who were expected to uproot it altogether. Guru Nanak had condemned caste-ism as *phakkar*, or nonsense. To abolish all caste and sectarian differences, Guru Gobind Singh had given to his followers the common surname of Singh, and desired them to recognize the entire mankind as one caste – *manas ki jat sabh ekai pahchanbo*. But the baneful influence of Brahminism in this respect is so strong in the country that caste-ism is also penetrating into the reformist sections of the Sikhs, the Singh Sabhaites, the Akalis [Sikh politicians], the Chief Khalsa Diwanists¹³ and the members of the SGPC, and other Sikh institutions' (ibid.: 11). The disease of separateness – separation within the fold (in the form of resurgent caste names and therefore, presumably, 'caste mentality') – implies the unwanted opposite 'outside' of it: a collapsing of the boundaries (so laboriously constructed over previous decades and centuries) between the Sikh fold and Hinduism, the paradigmatic locus of 'caste mentality'. This is not only because the former comes to share characteristics with the latter, but also because the basis of affiliation becomes insecure: caste names cut across the two folds; a Dhillon, Arora or one of many other caste names may equally belong to a Hindu or a Sikh. To whom, then, is one affiliated most closely? Do caste allegiances interfere with, supersede or override religious ones? For some Dalit Sikh activists they certainly do, as we shall see now, with an exchange of names signifying an exchange of allegiances.

Exchange 2: Chokha Mukta for Bhupinder Singh

It is a commonplace to note that the act of naming a child symbolically transforms bare human life into personhood, that is, an individual with a history.¹⁴ But which history? The answer may not be straightforward. In India the information conveyed by personal names tends to be that of the caste and/or religious backgrounds of their bearers; place of origin, too, might be communicated. However, if Hindu names normally disclose both caste and religion, the case of Sikh names is different. Correct use of Kaur and Singh – their use instead of rather than as well as caste names – elides caste identity. For most Sikhs I know in Delhi, that is their main purpose. In its ideal form, a Sikh's name discloses religious but not caste lineage. Some individuals of Sikh background, however, find reason to make visible in their names a different identity. This is most striking in the case of Sikh-background Dalit activists. A naming episode recounted by Manpreet, a male Dalit activist who hails from Uttarakhand but now lives in Chandigarh, vividly demonstrates this. He told me:

There was a lot of struggle when our son was born. My parents said we will take his name from the Sikh rituals, from the *Guru Granth Sahib* [involving the random opening of the book for the first letter of the name]. My father went to the *gurudwara* [to get the name], and the name was such a disgusting name. It was Bhupinder Singh. This was the name that was given. I did not go to the *gurudwara*, I did not perform anything. I said I will not accept it at all. My father said you have no rights on this issue.¹⁵ I rejected it. My wife and I had already decided we would give him the name Chokha [short form of Chokhamela]. Chokhamela is not a Sikh name at all. Chokhamela was a Dalit poet.¹⁶ He is a role model. Before Guru Gobind Singh, before Guru Nanak, there was Chokhamela. A great Dalit poet. We thought, if he [will be] a boy, we will give him this name. We had to struggle hard. My mother, father, mother-in-law, sisters and brothers were all angry with me: 'What is this name?' 'This is not a Sikh name at all.' I said, 'He is our role model. I want to revive my memories of him; it will always remind me, you know, which community I am from.'

In rejecting the possibility of a Sikh name for their son, the boy's parents prioritize caste over religious lineage. Not only is this exchange a reversal of that enacted as a template at the birth of the Khalsa, it also reverses the more common strategy of Dalits exchanging their own caste-revealing name for either a generic surname (such as Kumar) or a nominally upper-caste one (such as Sharma) in order to 'pass'. The reasons for this are understandable. Names that convey the Dalit backgrounds of their bearers may be derogatory (Paik 2011) and/or count against them in job applications (Thorat and Attewell 2010). Dalit educational or labour migration to a city where one is unknown can become an opportunity to exchange names in this way. However, forming part of a wider countervailing activist strategy of prideful assertion (Gorringer 2010), Chokha's parents do the opposite: they foreground Dalit identity in

their child's name to 'remind' them of 'which community' he is from in the singular.

But the name Chokha both is and is not a caste name; it has its own condensed history that is irreducible to a singular identity despite the intentions of Chokha's parents. On the one hand, in disavowing the Khalsa template, Chokha's parents reverse the originary name exchange and reinstitute visible caste. But on the other, while Chokha was indeed a figure from a marginalized community, the name is in fact fashionable among upper-caste and -class cosmopolitans, and the surname they gave him – Mukta – which Manpreet himself had adopted while a university student, is not a caste name. Rather, Manpreet adopted Mukta, which means 'liberation', after reading Ambedkar as a teenager in order to signal his freedom from caste and religion (rather than release from rebirth as in more conventional usages). Evoking South Asian paradigms of renunciation, rationalist and progressive figures have drawn on an imagery of freedom in bestowing names. The daughter of noted Maharashtrian rationalist Narendra Dabholkar was also named Mukta in the sense of 'freedom from superstition'. This is similar to the process that led Independence leader Maulana Kalam Azad to adopt the pen name 'Azad'. As he wrote (1959: 3–4): 'I passed from one phase to another and a stage came when all the old bonds imposed on my mind by family and upbringing were completely shattered. I felt free of all conventional ties and decided that I would chalk out my own path. It was about this time that I decided to adopt the pen name "Azad" or "Free" to indicate that I was no longer tied to my inherited beliefs'. Connectedly, several Sikh-background atheists I know choose to bear caste names rather than Kaur or Singh. This can seem counter-intuitive, since atheist activists loudly proclaim their anti-caste fight, with many declining to use caste names (Copeman 2015). These Sikh-background atheists, on the other hand, faced a progressive naming dilemma, finally choosing, like Manpreet Mukta, caste names over ones that draw a veil over caste but are 'religious'.

In light of this, we can see how the name Chokha Mukta condenses two different phases in Dalit thought and activism. Manpreet describes his own earlier adoption of Mukta as 'childish' and 'romantic'. It was a conscious attempt to build bridges via naming; a means to go beyond 'community thinking', especially caste: 'that "everyone should be an Indian first" sort of feeling'. Though he is nostalgic about this phase in his life and sees his adoption of Mukta as 'not a stupidity', he now holds the strong opinion that 'any effort of hiding caste cannot lead you anywhere. I think you should be very vocal that I belong to this community – either you like me or dislike me, it's your wish. I don't care'. Not dissimilar to larger global trends in which racial colour blindness is considered passé and separate identity asserted as the basis for political mobilization (or 'social justice'), Manpreet says it is better for Sikhs to 'have history in their names'. Referring to Jat and Khatri Sikhs – the former typically dominant-caste cultivators of Punjab-Haryana, the latter prosperous traders – he goes on: 'It should be in the public domain what these people are and that

they have this cultural capital. Maybe now they become sensitive and want to use only Singh, but that history should be there. I have looted the resources and suddenly I am saying I have left all these things' (rolls his eyes). The name Chokha Mukta thus enfoldes two key but very different strategies that a single individual adopted at different historical moments: one of seeking to overcome divisions of identity – now seen as ill-equipped for a newer phase of assertion – and another of acknowledging and reinstating them.

The case is illustrative of the broader Dalit Sikh activist response to the reformist effort to revivify Kaur/Singh. To such activists, the effort is too close to – indeed, can be understood as the Sikh variant of – the broader effort over decades to combat caste discrimination through policies of caste blindness, an approach they consider to be obsolete and discredited. Indeed, Satish Deshpande, whose work finds a strong reflection in the views of the Dalit Sikh activists I know, is quite clear that state programmes of caste blindness and social justice are 'conflicting policies' (2013: 32). As Jasminder, one of Manpreet's colleagues, told me: 'Singh and Kaur were given to us Sikhs with good intentions but the need of the hour is different. Those who are trying to bring them back may also have good intentions ... [But] caste is a tool for me to fight – if I don't have that then where I will go?' That is to say, Dalit activism requires 'conspicuous caste' not caste blindness, and this overtakes the Sikh reformist attitude to naming practices.

The Dalit Sikh activist critique of the Sikh reform effort can take on a sharper edge still. Reformers, they say, hardly ever practise inter-marriage among the Sikh castes; indeed, endogamy is still the norm. If they were serious, according to this line of thinking, they would not only drop their caste names, they would go beyond this and marry outside their own caste communities.¹⁷ Indeed, several activists used the word 'alibi' in reference to the Sikh reform agenda's approach to names. Eliminating caste names in favour of Kaur/Singh allows reformers to show or claim adherence to the egalitarian spirit of Sikhism while continuing to enact the exclusion that continues to mark Dalit Sikhs' experience of the religion; 'They don't see us as true Sikhs; I was repeatedly told (or as one Dalit Sikh quoted by Kalra and Purewal (2020: 123) put it: 'Though I can recite all the verses of the Guru Granth Sahib, they would still not count me as one of them. Sikhism has been captured by the *jats* (non-dalits)'). The suggestion is that it would be less hypocritical for such reformers to keep, not drop, their caste surnames, and further that the reform attempt is well in keeping with a religion whose 'ideological self-image [as] without caste' (Jodhka 2004: 172) notoriously is not matched by practice. For this reason, while many Dalit Sikhs continue to see an extraordinary egalitarian potential in the ideology of Sikhism (Hans 2016), the activists I know who maintain links with it do so with much ambivalence.

The exchange of the name Chokha Mukta for Bhupinder Singh thus marked an exchange of allegiances that produced value for Manpreet Mukta in terms of its capacity to remind him of his community (notably in the singular) and coherently map onto a wider movement of Dalit assertiveness. But it is

important to note that Sikhism and Punjab have their own rich and varied histories of striving for versions of ‘blindness’ to community distinctions, quite apart from post-Independence governance and urban middle-class strategies to stop caste coming into the public sphere and thereby having to negotiate over its position. This tradition ranges from Guru Nanak’s mystical attempts to move beyond socially named selves in statements such as ‘There is no Hindu nor Muslim’ (Bhogal 2007: 107) to Sufi singer Abida Parveen’s invocation of Sufi poet and philosopher Baba Bulleh Shah’s (1680–1757) desire to ‘go to that place where everybody is blind where none knows your name or caste’ (*‘Chalve Bulleya othe chaliye jithe saare anne na koi saddi zaat pichane na koi sanu manne’*) (Duggal 2015: 4) to revolutionary fighter Udham Singh’s adoption of the name Ram Mohammad Singh Azad, ‘a name that invoked the three major religious communities of the Punjab – Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh – as well as his anticolonial sentiment’ (Mir 2010: 2–3). It is this tradition as much as the post-Independence one criticized by Deshpande and others (e.g. Jodhka and Shah 2010) that Manpreet Mukta displaces in his exchange of names.

Another significant constituency of Sikh background individuals who frequently make visible in their names an identity other than, or in addition to, Sikhism is the Jat caste grouping of cultivators and landholders in Punjab and Haryana. As with Dalit Sikh activists, the reason for this is assertion. But it is assertion of a very different kind in that its starting point is from an already existing position of strength. Considered by Sikh Dalits, Khatri and others to have ‘captured’ Sikhism, Jat dominance extends to other areas of Punjabi life besides, with their existing socio-economic ascendancy having enabled them to reap the successes of the Green Revolution of the mid to late 1960s. Celebration of Jat identity is an utterly mainstream element of popular culture in both Punjab and the Sikh diaspora; for instance, it is a central ingredient of pop music (Dhanda 2009; Duggal 2015). In light of what has been described as ‘the Jat insistence on marking caste over religious, linguistic, regional, or other identities’ (Mooney 2013: 315), it is of course unsurprising that if Punjabi Jats bear Singh and Kaur at all it is predominantly as middle names followed by caste surnames. Consequently, non-use of a caste surname in Punjab tends to signify either that one is a highly diligent Sikh, such as a professional *ragi* who is held to higher religious standards than others (Kaur 2011), or indeed a Dalit ‘with something to hide’. The London-based Sikh influencer Jagraj Singh, who before his early death in 2017 had amassed a large following for his explanatory YouTube videos, described the problem as ‘Sikhi¹⁸ vs. Punjabism’, with the culture of the state – dominated by Jats – militating against the ideals of the religion founded there. Though strongly encouraging use of Kaur/Singh and disuse of caste names, Jagraj Singh’s position was moderate: for him, knowledge of one’s caste background or *gotra* should be maintained in order to avoid marriages between inappropriately close kin; it was not caste but merely caste pride that must be extinguished.

Exchange 3: Ramit Bains for Ramit Singh

Jat diaspora *bhangra* star Jazzy B, though he does not use a caste name, conforms to the above description in his non-use of Singh. Though the hyper-masculinity exhibited in Jazzy B's persona and music videos is perfectly congruent with the celebration of Jat identity in pop music just mentioned, his name nevertheless shows how Sikhism can be de-emphasized by itself without a caste identity necessarily being reinstated in its stead or causing that de-emphasis in the first place. Jazzy B was clearly the inspiration for a cartoon character named Jazzi C who featured on pedagogical posters displayed on *gurudwara* walls in Punjab and Delhi in the mid 2010s (Figure 5.1). Referencing the Punjabi taste for global travel and relocation, the cartoon is set in a visa-passport office (a pivotal location of the name's corruption, as we will see below). The white desk worker who greets the young Punjabi male is a picture of confusion ('????' as the speech bubble has it) because, though wearing a turban and therefore seemingly identifiable as a Sikh, his customer has a trimmed beard (he is also wearing sunglasses and holding a *tabla* and miniature sitar). 'Hello Mr. Singh, what is your name?' 'My name is Jazzi C', is the response. The desk worker's assumption that the youth's surname is Singh is incorrect: his confusion deepens. A boy wearing a topknot, a witness to the scene and representative here of a more devout strain of Sikh youth, turns to the viewer to make explicit the cartoon's didactic message: 'In making us "Singhs", the guru transformed us from cowardly hyenas into lions. But now, not only have we left behind our Sikh appearance, we're also removing "Singh" from after our [given] names'. Caste is neither mentioned nor insinuated, and indeed, no caste name has been added; it is simply Singh that has been dropped. For the fashion-conscious Sikh-background male, the cartoon



Figure 5.1. 'In making us "Singhs", the guru transformed us from cowardly hyenas into lions.' © Jacob Copeman.

suggests, Singh stands for that which is embarrassingly outmoded. The spatio-temporal dimension of this requires emphasis: in Punjab, in particular, the fate of a person's name can be foregrounded in narratives of rural-urban migration and loss of roots, as in the lyrics of a well-known Punjabi pop song sung by Satinder Sartaj: 'On reaching the city the village boy turned urbane ... See how the youth of today has gone astray. They no longer take pride in the gurus' glory. "Gurmeet Singh" has turned "Garry." ... Sit down and think: ... why have the leaves become the enemy of the branches?'

'Now it is the fashion [*riwaaz*] not to have Singh-Kaur; the youth especially, they abbreviate their names. We don't have *phechan* [identity] like that anymore....' I was told this by a Sikh male in his mid sixties in Delhi and it can stand for the many reasonings I heard that imputed disuse of these names not to caste sensibility but to something else: the desire to be modern. Nonetheless, caste still enters the picture in the form of the names that tend to be used to replace those that are discontinued; and since the displaced names are markers of Sikh identity, they become a site of anxiety concerning the proximal influence of Hinduism. In addition to expressing sorrow concerning an increase in beard trimming among Sikh males, one Sikh writer complains that 'Many Sikhs now feel shy to use "Singh" or "Kaur" in their names. You come across names like Harjit Soni, Birinder Kohli, Gurdeep Gill, and so on, without using "Singh" or "Kaur". It appears they want to hide their Sikh identity. This defeats the very purpose and the spirit in which Khalsa was created as one brotherhood' (G.P. Singh 2003). What is more, according to many understandings I encountered, one's name and one's moral conduct are not isolates: a negative change to one might negatively affect the other, as we shall see.

Contemporary embarrassment about Kaur/Singh is of course the reverse of the origin story of the names, according to which their conferral by the guru produced powerful vitalizing effects that raised much-needed self-respect. For many Sikh-background youths their connotations are now very different. In France, argues Baptiste Coulmont (2014), soon after lower-class parents start mimetically to give middle- and upper-class associated names to their children, they lose their value as signs of distinction for their original upper- and middle-class conferrers, and the cycle begins again. Naming practices thus exhibit marked fashion dynamics. In an era in which the Indian prime minister wears an exorbitantly expensive suit emblazoned with hundreds of iterations of his own name, and business signboards loudly proclaim their owners' names where they might once more modestly have featured the names of their grandfather or father (Pinney 2004; Shukla 2013), Singh/Kaur can seem to offer the very opposite of distinction.¹⁹ Coulmont also suggests that a primary motivation for name changes in France is to take on a 'younger' name. French name changers change names associated with earlier generations: 'they take a first name that implicitly signifies their belonging to a younger generation (compared to the generation implied by their previous first name)'. If, in France, this 'allows one to be perceived as younger than before', for Sikh name changers the concern is to signify belonging to the current generation via discarding the onomastic

residue of an earlier one. It is another way of attempting to be perceived as younger than before.

It is not only Sikhs who do this. Notaries I have accompanied in west Delhi report that the most common reason for changing a name, apart from marriage, is to acquire a more tasteful, less 'backward'-sounding one. But a further possible contributing factor for Sikhs is the widely popular middle-class tradition of Sardarji (or Sant Banta) jokes – decades long but strongly revived in the era of social media – which ridicule the inability of Sikhs to negotiate modern mores adequately, with Sardarjis the 'spatio-temporal foil' through which tellers disclose their own successful negotiation of them (Hall 2019: 499). Often sexualized, and featuring linguistic mishaps due to the imputed inability of Sikhs to command modern admixtures of English and local languages, Sikhs – and Sikh men in particular – are invariably situated in them as simple, rustic and outside of discourses of modernity (ibid.: 497). Many such jokes play on phonetic misunderstandings of 'Singh': a turbaned man climbing over a fence is asked, 'Why are you trespassing?' 'I am not Trespa Singh, I am Jaswanth Singh.' Beach settings feature prominently in such jokes as globalized, English-dominant leisure spaces open to misreading by the rustic Sardarji (ibid.: 500): an uncomfortable-looking turbaned man walking on a beach is asked by tourists in swimwear, 'Sir are you relaxing?' 'No, I am Zail Singh.' While Sikh intellectual and humourist Khushwant Singh's own telling of the jokes is often posited as an alibi by current tellers, almost all the Sikhs I know in Delhi intensely dislike them. Some experienced them as part of wider patterns of bullying while at school. While their effect on use and disuse of Singh/Kaur is difficult to gauge, it is notable that when a Sikh lawyer asked India's Supreme Court to ban Sikh jokes in 2016, she not only equated the jokes with racial abuse but also said: 'My children are humiliated and feel embarrassed; they 'do not want the "Kaur" and "Singh" tag with their names.'²⁰

A Delhi Sikh male in his late forties, a property dealer, recounted to me how his two sons, now in their mid twenties, stopped using Singh during their college years because, they told him, it made them feel 'backward'. It was they, not their parents, who took the initiative in resuscitating their caste name (Bains) as a 'family surname'. Though their use of the term 'backward' suggests a possible caste dimension to their actions, their father insisted to me that their dropping of Singh was simply a matter of modern style – their wish to be onomastic moderns (even some of the teenagers I spoke with who attended Singh Sabha schools expressed embarrassment about having to use Kaur and Singh, implying that were it not for strict parents and school policy they might be inclined to shed them). Style is an overdetermined word: it is frequently invoked as code for moral degradation (Cohen 2011), and this is exactly what the pained father suggests has been the consequence of his children's name change: 'Those who believe in Sikhism keep the name Singh, but those who don't believe in it, they think [that] to name [should be] according to their own freedom. They say to keep [the names Kaur/Singh] is fundamentalist. They think they should have a modern style. If Ramit [one of his sons] remains "Singh" he can't smoke and

take liquor'. He turned to English to express his point with a poetic flourish: 'If he doesn't have the name then he also doesn't have the shame [of drinking and smoking]'. For Ramit's father, then, the name is understood connectedly as both a binding force and as a prophylactic against modern excesses: bowing to modern nominative style by ceasing to use Singh is a stepping stone towards ceasing to adhere to a code of acceptable behaviour. Being shed, the name spirit of Singh can no longer perform its sentinel function in the sense of an 'ought' identity to aspire to.

Yet personal names seem to weigh more heavily on their bearers than in the sense of a mere linguistic or semiotic 'ought'. Consider the narratives of Sikh parents who, when their children were small, did not insist that they took Singh and Kaur and later express their regret at this, noting its fateful consequences. One woman in her late fifties told me she sincerely regretted not giving her two children, one girl and one boy, 'Kaur' and 'Singh'. If she had done so, she is sure they would not have cut their hair and, in her words, 'practically become Hindus'. Rather than 'substance-code' – the term employed by McKim Marriott (1976) and others to highlight how in South Asia exchanges of substance (food, water, bodily materials) govern behaviour and affect personhood (see also Sarbadhikary, this volume) – we find understandings of a kind of 'name-code', with name-sign and bearer exchanging properties and forming a dynamic whole. Kaur and Singh are thus sentinel presences that provide a kind of immunity to Hinduism. In consequence, their removal can lead to 'immunodeficiency' (reduction in connective force among and towards the *panth*). To quote just one impassioned chatroom debater on the topic: 'I'm not saying other faiths are lower or not spiritual. I'm saying if people don't choose to have [Kaur or Singh] in their name, they will stray away from Sikhi, which is happening a lot.'²¹ That other faith almost always is Hinduism as both cause and effect: its influence causes disuse, or else 'practically becoming Hindu' is cast as the eventual effect of such disuse, even in cases where 'fashion' is advanced as the primary cause.

Exchange 4: Jasmeet Kaur for Jazz

If names are folded together with commitment, action and conduct, the onomastic reform effort comes to appear particularly urgent. As we have seen, however, traditional reformist organizations such as the SGPC are suspect due to politicking and their domination by Jats. Youth dissatisfaction with these structures, particularly in the diaspora, has led to the creation of entities such as the US Jakara Movement, which organizes student conferences (Jakobsh 2014a). Also of note is the International Institute of Gurmat Studies' (IIGS) yearlong programme of Sikh youth camps across the world, whose camp registration forms state, rather admonishingly, 'Applicant's Name: Sardarni/Sardar (Just the name, NO Castes Please) _____'. Explicitly addressing matters of pride and fashion, the Mr Singh International Turban Pride Fashion Show, held annually

in Amritsar in the form of a male 'beauty contest' with contestants competing in fitness, talent, attire and 'correct manners and knowledge of tradition', pointedly refers in its title not only to the major visible accoutrement of the *panth* but also the name Singh.²² Meanwhile, the Bollywood blockbuster *Singh is Kinng* (2008) received praise for its celebration of Sikh values and foregrounding of the 'name spirit' of Singh, even if some commentators frowned on the trimmed beards it featured;²³ and the popular Sikh clothing company, 1469, which sells cultural products that mark an 'ethnicized selfhood' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 139), similarly valorizes the name Kaur in its line of 'Kaurageous' t-shirts.

Sikh film festivals have also been a notable means of responding to fears concerning dilution of Sikh identity, including the rejection of Kaur/Singh as a question of fashion. Of particular interest here is a short film titled *Karizmaa of Kaur*, submitted to a 2013 festival of Sikh film, which depicts both the fashionable denigration of Kaur and its recuperation as a vital bearer of name spirit (or 'karizmaa'). Directed by Ravneet Kaur, it is set where it was produced, in Mumbai. First we meet a turbaned woman, the turban an unmistakable sign that she is a Sikh and not ashamed of it.²⁴ She drives to work in a high-end Mercedes, with *kirtan* (Sikh devotional songs) playing on the stereo. She arrives at a modern office building where she enters a room of company directors. As she takes her seat serenely at the head of the table, the titles announce that she is 'Satnam Kaur, Managing Dir., Adhamang Pvt. Ltd.' Pointedly, her first name, Satnam, means 'true name'. Clearly, she has reached the highest rung of the ladder not in spite of the discernible signs of Sikhism that she bears, but in large measure because of the strength and grace they afford her.

Another female employee – heavily made-up and clearly bored by the proceedings – comes into view. In the office she is known simply as 'Jazz'. But Satnam Kaur turns to her: 'Jasmeet, I would like you to personally monitor this project'. As her (clearly Sikh) name is voiced, Jasmeet is a picture of squirming embarrassment. Later, on a balcony and in private, away from the meeting, Jasmeet is still upset: 'I'm so irritated. I mean how could she. I still can't believe it. She called me Jasmeet. That, too, in front of everyone. *Kissi ko bhi mera yeh nam nahi pata ta aur ab pure office me phel gaya hai* [No-one knew this name of mine and now it has spread through the whole office]. You know, I feel so embarrassed. *Mujhe to ghin aa ti hai is naam se* [this name makes me feel disgusted]. It's so outdated'. Her boyfriend Rahul approaches and teasingly asks: 'So, how's my Jasmeet darling?' 'Shut up Rahul', she replies. '*Tum bhi?* [You too?]. Rahul: 'Oh my god. You are taking it so seriously!' Jasmeet: 'If I don't get serious what else should I do? So much embarrassment in the office. And at home, my great sister [*meeri mahan sister*] Tejbir Kaur Khalsa. All the time she's lecturing me. "Go to *gurudwara*, do *simeran* [remembering God]".

One of Jasmeet's friends says to her: 'When I was coming to the office today there was a big crowd outside the *gurudwara*. Is there a festival of you Sikhs today?', in response to which Jasmeet shrugs. 'My psycho sister was forcing me to go to *gurudwara* today. She goes and does the *porcha* [i.e. performs service, or *seva*, in this case mopping] like a servant, ugh. We are young. We shouldn't

be like our CEO ... even in the office *Ram-Nam* [repetition of God's name] continues'. Meanwhile we see the MD on the cover of *Entrepreneur* magazine, and a scene featuring Satnam in the roles of good mother and daughter-in-law as she assists her mother-in-law in telling her son stories about the guru the day's festival will glorify. The child says: 'Like the *sahibzadas* [sons of the final living Sikh guru, Guru Gobind Singh], I will love my Sikhism, and bring glory to the name of my mama and papa [*nam roshan karna*]. After Skyping her husband on her iPad, Satnam Kaur listens to *kirtan* while getting ready to attend the *gurudwara* where she will humbly serve food; Jasmeet by contrast is applying her makeup to a soundtrack of loud music for a different kind of evening out. Gazing at herself in the mirror, her intimacy with her truncated name is apparent: 'Jazz, you are looking gorgeous. Muah'.

Later we see her drinking beer at a disco. On leaving with her boyfriend Rahul, some male youths pretend to help her open the car door. 'Oh Madam Ji. Shall we help you? You were having a lot of fun inside. Have some fun with us.' At this sexually threatening behaviour, Rahul simply runs away. Surrounded by the youths, her sister's pious voice comes into her head. 'Only God's name will save you when everyone else abandons you.' She starts to pray. The two charismatic Kaur's thus combine: first, her sister's advice to pray, and then – apparently in consequence – Satnam Kaur, having left the *gurudwara*, arrives on the scene. Her formidable charisma causes the youths to quickly depart in fright. Jasmeet is grateful and contrite: 'Today I realize why Guru sahib has given us this form [*swaroop* – i.e. the turban] and the sword'. Satnam replies: 'We are Sikhs and Sikhs are always learning, and from today you have learned how to live'. Having asked for forgiveness in the *gurudwara*, and now back at work in a headscarf, her hair in a plain pony tail, Rahul asks her: 'Jazz, what has happened to you? And I'm sorry *yar*. If I stuck around yesterday those people would have killed me'. Jasmeet responds: 'Someone who can't protect himself, how can he protect me? And by the way my name is Jasmeet Kaur. Don't ever call me Jazz again'. Finally, a textual reminder is emblazoned on the screen: 'Don't forget your real identity. Only a real Kaur can be: charismatic, brave, and complete in all aspects', and Satnam – true name – Kaur is momentarily depicted in each of the multiple roles that the name Kaur appears to lubricate and finesse: daughter-in-law, mother/wife, *sevak*, worshipper and CEO. It is a parable of names: she whose name is 'true name' combines with God's true name (contiguous with – the very form of – God himself in Sikhism and parts of Hinduism) at a time of danger to return Jazz to the names Jasmeet and Kaur. Satnam's son's wish to bring glory to the name of his parents stands as a metaphor for the larger story of which it is a fragment: the name of the Sikh inheritance can only be glorified if its adherents continue to bear its name(s).

The film thus depicts how 'Kaur', far from being a mark of backwardness, is an asset for flourishing within modernity. Satnam's professional success, technological skill, charisma and bravery are not hindered by her name and 'complete' Sikh identity, quite the opposite. Conversely, Jasmeet's concealment of name and identity – her shedding of Kaur and disfigurement of a conventional

Sikh first name – stands, like the case of Ramit, for a corrupted engagement with modernity. But the film is recuperative, the name re-enlivened as ‘Jazz’ becomes ‘Jasmeet Kaur’. The name spirit or charisma of Kaur works a kind of sympathetic magic, both saving and being (re)adopted by Jasmeet. The exchange value generated by substituting Jasmeet Kaur for Jazz lay in its revelation of Kaur as embodying an inherent compatibility between Sikhism and an ability to flourish in modernity. Here the name offers something more than an ideal to aspire to. A notion of name-code better captures the sense of names’ capacity to act on code, transforming and engendering transformation (Hadad 2012: 5). But the process is not one-way. We now consider cases that provide a stark contrast with those considered so far, since rather than encouraging use of Kaur, Sikh authorities here seek to discourage its use by those they consider unfit to bear it – precisely because of the fear that code might act on the name, sully it.

Exchange 5: Hard Kaur for Taran Dhillon

In 2018 the successful Canadian-origin Bollywood actress Sunny Leone released a biopic series based on her life story titled *Karenjit Kaur – The Untold Story of Sunny Leone*. Controversy immediately arose, with Sikh leaders demanding the biopic’s title be changed to remove ‘Kaur’. The problem, for protesters, was Leone’s former career as an adult film star. As tweets sent by Delhi’s SGPC head put it: ‘Kaur is a surname that has been given to Sikh girls and women by Guru Sahibs. To use it for publicity stunt and depict the porn-life of a celebrity is derogatory for Sikhs all across the world. If the title of the series is not changed, we will be forced to take our protest to @ZeeTV offices and take a stern stand against the team behind the series.’²⁵ Her former career meant she didn’t ‘deserve to share “Kaur” with the other pious women of the Sikh community.’²⁶ While not strictly an exchange – she continues to use Sunny Leone as her stage name – her sudden striking onomastic assertion of the little-known fact of her Sikh heritage precipitated attempts to police the name Kaur as a kind of cultural property, with rights of usage restricted to those determined by authorities to be legitimate bearers. Yet Leone also had many defenders within the Sikh fold – why, Sikh feminists asked, does Punjabi rapper Yo Yo Honey Singh, whose lyrics glorify violence and male chauvinism, not encounter similar attempts to police his bearing of Singh? A case centring on perceived misuse rather than disuse of a Sikh name, it exemplified how group conflict may arise over the use or ownership of religious symbols (Harrison 1999: 249), raising questions concerning honour, misogyny, the name as a form of possession, and the vulnerability of names.

These matters had also come to the fore a few years earlier when the Punjab-origin UK hip hop artist Taran Dhillon began to gain recognition in the early 2000s. Her case differed from Leone’s in that it was her stage name – Hard Kaur – not her ‘real’ name, that caused offence. Here the profaning of the

sacred name had a double character. As with Leone, the behaviour of its bearer was considered to sully the name (Dhillon's documented liberal use of expletives, open consumption of alcohol, sexual frankness, immodest dress and so on); but in addition, Dhillon's coupling of Kaur and 'hard' produces not only a connotation of 'tough Sikh female', which she undoubtedly is,²⁷ but also one of hardcore pornography.

A petition launched on the Change.org website demanded that Dhillon remove the suffix Kaur from her stage name. Signatories dwell in their comments on her alleged unworthiness to bear the name as encapsulated in the offensive incongruence between its *ought*-ness and the *is* of her behaviour: 'She does not deserve to class herself as a Kaur with the behaviour she puts up'; 'Her actions are not living up to gracious name of Kaur'; 'Her behaviour, her abusive language, her dress code is an absolute disgrace ... The surname Kaur is given to us by our 10th Master, meaning Princess, Lioness representing high morals, ethics and living by the [*Reht*] *Maryada*. Hard Kaur does not represent any of this ... rather the opposite'; 'If you want to use Kaur your moral standards should be royal, e.g., language, wearing clothes...'²⁸

Recalling our earlier discussion of the ability of code to act on name, other comments bemoan the reputational damage to the name Kaur and Sikhism more generally by Dhillon bearing it: 'She has continuously behaved inappropriately and put up a bad name for all Sikhs all around the world'; 'She is tarnishing our name!'; 'Misguides public and media as to what a Kaur stands for'. Other key words repeated in the comments include 'mockery', 'hurtful', 'filthy', 'abusing', 'insult', 'disrespect' and 'shame'. We find an echo here of the classical Brahmanical understanding that forms of exalted language – words, text and other sound-forms – are as vulnerable to pollution as bodies if uttered, read or borne by the unfit (Parry 1985; Lamb 2002).²⁹

Overlaid in the responses just cited are themes of desecration, reputational damage, honour, shame and vulnerability. Veena Das (2015) explains how names are sites of vulnerability on account of their iterability: a personal name is 'both mine and out of my control' (ibid.: 3). The doomed bids to wrest back control of Kaur in the cases of Leone and Dhillon suggest something of this vulnerability. For brand names, vulnerability comes from the mimetic ability to copy the name and use it for an inferior product, or to take a similar sounding name and thus to steal a part of the name and the market share (Das and Copeman 2015: 11). Kaur/Singh are similarly vulnerable in that their status and function as both personal names and sacred objects that participate in the entities they represent seems to give them a particularly heightened potential to cause injury, if 'misused', to the larger collectives they stand for. In Annette Weiner's famous schema, inalienable possessions are 'imbued with the intrinsic and ineffable identities of their owners which are not easy to give away' (Weiner 1992: 6); indeed, such items may be held back from circulation. If we think of Kaur as a kind of inalienable possession for Sikhs, the problem is that, as a name, it is one that cannot easily be kept out of circulation and away from unsanctioned bearers. The fear, of course, is that illicit associations arising from

the use of Kaur – as a personified form of cultural property (Kaneff and King 2004: 14) – by improper bearers might in time compromise or even overcome its sanctioned associations.

This begs the question: is Singh as much of an inalienable possession as Kaur? It is true that Singh seems less subject to attempts to constrain its usage than its female counterpart, thus suggesting at least the possibility of a misogynistic double standard. As was noted earlier, visual aspects of Sikh identity have tended to receive far more scholarly attention than linguistic ones. In the case of Taran Dhillon, the two thematics converge, since her ‘immodest dress’ and eschewing of the traditional Indian headscarf (*dupatta*) of idealized Jat female style, which connotes modesty, respect and humility (Mooney 2011), is counted as one of the ways in which she dishonours Kaur. Honour is a marked cultural value among Punjabi Jats and, as elsewhere, women far more than men are tasked with maintaining it. Following this, perceived breaches that cause shame are far more likely to be concentrated on the bodies and persons of Jat Sikh women (Jakobsh 2015). Something of this is seen in the responses to both Leone’s and Dhillon’s uses of Kaur discussed above. However, outrage is not the only Sikh reaction; rather, Kaur finds itself at the centre of ‘competing communities of interpretation’ (Chidester 2018: 13), with progressive Sikhs – often, though not exclusively located in the diaspora and well aware of the gendered nature of Jat honour codes – providing a starkly contrasting mode of commentary. Comments accompanying a 2007 interview with Dhillon on the Sikhchic website – popular in the diaspora, particularly among young Sikhs – demonstrate this. One, from a male Sikh in Malaysia, states: ‘Grow up, babe. The word “Kaur” doesn’t belong to you to get you on stage. You are obviously using it to attract attention.’ A second comment, from a male Sikh based in Birmingham, UK, contests this interpretation: ‘Wow, the level of misogyny is incredible. The amount of Sikh singers who get on stage with the name “Singh” doesn’t attract any comment. As soon as an independent woman expresses herself she gets abuse from insecure sexists.’ But not only male Sikhs object. I quote a UK-based Sikh woman: ‘As a Kaur myself, I would rather she didn’t denigrate my name, the meaning of which I am rather proud of. I am the equal of my brothers in all that we do. But that does not give me or any Sikh woman the right to tarnish our good name, given to us by our Guru Sahib. Respect it, or don’t use it!’ Note the phrase ‘my name’, reflecting once again Kaur’s inalienability and consequent ability to reflect back (positively or negatively) on its common owner. The progressive voice of the moderator responds: ‘So, we as Sikhs have the right to demand others who we consider “bad” to change their names? How about all the non-Sikhs in India who use the name “Singh” and also live lives far short of our ideals? You may need to think this one out a bit.’

The moderator rightly asserts that an existing gendered honour code is extended to the name Kaur in a way that is not seen in the case of Singh. But Singh and Kaur are not absolute equivalents. As the moderator asserts, many non-Sikhs use Singh. This is much less true of Kaur. Singh is very much a Sikh name but everyone knows it is not only a Sikh name but the surname for an

array of individuals and groupings – Rajputs, various ‘OBCs’ (Other Backward Classes), Dalits who have taken it on in place of derogatory names, and so on. Kaur, on the other hand, is a much readier identifier than Singh of Sikh-hood. While some non-Sikhs use Kaur, this is far less the case than with Singh. This is not, of course, to justify attempts to exert control over Kaur that are absent for Singh, but to seek to understand why there might be an additional felt imperative to do so in the case of Kaur that is not ipso facto reducible to a sexist double standard.

A further way some Sikhs seek to place restrictions on usage of Kaur and Singh is disclosed in one of the comments attached to the petition demanding that Dhillon cease using the name Kaur, which states: ‘Kaur should only be used when *amrit* has been administered’. According to this view, Kaur/Singh should be assumed only after one has undergone the baptismal ritual (which features the ceremonial imbibing of sacred nectar, or *amrit*) and joined the Khalsa. While it is true that *amritdhari* Sikhs are bound more scrupulously to wear the five Ks, and that Khalsa identity has a normative influence on mainstream Sikhism, vast swathes of non-Khalsa Sikhs bear these names, and experience no contradiction or pushback in doing so (Takhar 2005). During fieldwork in Delhi, neither Khalsa nor non-Khalsa Sikhs thought the issue an important one – far from restricting usage, the primary effort was to encourage take-up of Kaur/Singh, as we have seen.

However, increasingly influential online constructions of Sikh identity, Jakobsh suggests, have contributed to an inflationary enlargement of claims to purity and exactitude (2014a: 232). Jakobsh is writing in respect of female take-up of the turban in the diaspora, but the observation also applies to viewpoints concerning usage of Kaur/Singh. For instance, far from encouraging participation in these names, young Italian Sikhs claim that *amritdhari* Sikhs alone are ‘true’ Sikhs and ‘Singh’ is reserved for this group: ‘If you aren’t “baptized” you can’t ... even let other people call you “Singh” ... you aren’t even a “Sikh” (Balginder, 23-year-old *amritdhari* male, born in India, in Italy since he was nine years old)’ (Bertolani 2015: 215). Rajvir K., a nineteen-year-old *amritdhari* girl (born in India, in Italy since she was ten years old), is equally strident: ‘[In ancient times], everybody had his family name before being “baptized” ... and people adopted the name “Singh” only after being “baptized” ... Only nowadays the children of a “Singh” receive the name “Singh” ... only nowadays! Therefore, in my opinion a person who is not “baptized” can’t have the name “Singh” (ibid.). The problem, in this view, is that what properly are titles earned through initiation have been devalued via their routine inheritance as family names. If they are markers of equality at all, this can only be so within, not outside, the Khalsa. Their main function, instead, should be to mark the exclusivity of ‘full’ Sikh-hood – a condition, as was noted earlier, that is usually equated with bodily markers, but which I suggest also possesses an important linguistic component.

I focus now on a debate between UK-based Sikhs in an online discussion forum that once again follows on from an instance of name exchange.

Characterized by both reasoned argument and affects and desires, we see how one woman, Divneet, responds to such claims of exclusivity, describing her recent adoption of Kaur (presumably in place of a caste surname) using a passionate rhetoric of empowerment. 'I have Kaur in my name, but did not before. I had added [it] myself. Are you saying I don't deserve it? Try stopping me from keeping it ... How on earth are people going to get close to Sikhi, if you going to say they don't deserve it ... At least it's better than not having it and being confused as to what faith we belong to. Some people go and convert to other faiths if they don't have in their name, *coz gwacheo hunde* [they are lost]. With Singh or Kaur in [their names] they will be grounded to stay where they are, somethin is better than nothing'. But a stern reply states: 'What is a name without the significance of carrying it, but just a false label? You can stick a Ferrari badge on your Fiat but it ain't a Ferrari ... When someone is introduced as XYZ Singh/Kaur, I need to be able to rely on them to hold the values of Sikhi ... The name is not something that one "deserves," that is a very egotistical view. The name is a responsibility.'³⁰

In this view, Kaur and Singh must function as transparent signs of initiated Sikh-hood. Divneet, on the other hand, understands the bearing of Kaur in a less exalted manner as an aid for embarking on a path towards a fuller expression of her Sikhness. 'Kaur' provides a quiet sense of oughtness and affinity with the identity she seeks to bring herself closer to. She replies: 'I feel good that I have [Kaur] in my name now ... Now I have it, I want to know more about Sikhi ... If Waheguru [God] wants they will bless me with Amrit, if they don't they won't, but at least I am taking steps towards it, and my putting Kaur in my name is a great start I think for myself'. If the name has injurious effects – a theme that has preoccupied a number of poststructuralist theorists³¹ – here they are apparently focused less on the bearer than on the witness whose demand for a kind of 'dogmatism of the signifier' (Jameson 2005: 180), according to which the meanings of Kaur and Singh would be fixed, stable and assigned definitive content, is unmet. The answer is to restrict usage of the titles to Khalsa Sikhs – a proprietorial stance that of course obscures Sikhs' own borrowing of the names from Hindu Rajputs. Divneet, conversely, sees Kaur not in Bourdieu's (1991) terms as a name that informs her in an authoritative way of what she is and must be, but as a self-chosen guide and reminder of her heritage and what she can be in relation to it – the name's inaugurative power is desired and taken on voluntarily as part of an attempt to make of herself a certain kind of person, because it is as such a person that, on reflection, she thinks she ought to live (Laidlaw 2002: 327). This is the value produced through adoption of Kaur for Divneet, one that is hardly congruent with the depthlessness of a 'false label'. Meanwhile, if those who for the sake of purity would restrict Kaur/Singh only to Khalsa Sikhs are successful, the result, almost certainly, would be to increase the use of caste names in their place. Indeed, this is what tends to happen when such restrictions are put in place, as we shall see in our final set of exchanges.

Exchange 6: Sathnam Sanghera for Sathnam Singh

Classrooms, and school registers in particular, are classic onomastic ‘scenes of instruction.’ With teachers intervening to make student names fit certain requirements (most frequently of legibility but also sometimes purity), students can come to learn, frequently for the first time, the connotations of their own and others’ names, and thereby about the broader operation of names as identifying marks which, ‘by the application of a rule, establish ... that the individual who is named is a member of a preordained class (a social group in a system of groups, a status by birth in a system of statuses)’ (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 181). Manuela Ciotti’s Chamar³² informants recounted to her how when Babasaheb Ambedkar’s father first took him to school he was asked to write the child’s name on the register.³³ ‘At that moment, people came to know that the child was a Chamar [Dalit]. Ambedkar was abused and sent back home with the excuse that studying was sin for him’ (Ciotti 2006: 905). In schools in the Sundarbans, schoolteachers may remove Islamic elements from student names that had formerly possessed both Islamic and Hindu associations (Jalais 2010). No longer an onomastic indicator of composite religiosity or ‘the bridging of worlds’, the purified name becomes an artefact of exclusive religion.

Young Sikh adults I know in Delhi recounted to me a different ‘pedagogy of the name.’³⁴ On the very first day they had attended their orthodox Singh Sabha school, their teachers had refused to countenance the caste surnames they had gained admission with, writing only Kaur or Singh on the school register. The subtractions were not superficial. Having left school, they continued to bear the names their teachers had insisted on; moreover, some recalled how at the time their parents had followed suit and discarded their caste names as well. Smiling, they explained to me how, as a consequence of the teacher’s purifying elimination of caste surnames, class registers might contain four Gurpreet Kaur – distinguished in the register as Gurpreet Kaur 1, Gurpreet Kaur 2, Gurpreet Kaur 3 and Gurpreet Kaur 4 – plus three similarly differentiated Jasmeet Singhs, for instance. Former classmates often still think of each other in these numeric terms!

As a Sikh-run school, the teachers in this case had some licence to ‘correct’ their students’ names by making them accord with orthodox Sikh requirements. Sikh experiences in mixed schools in Delhi or the diaspora can be just as onomastically pedagogical, but with very different – indeed opposite – outcomes. In his poignant comic memoir of growing up in Wolverhampton in the 1980s, Sikh-background author Sathnam Sanghera recounts his own first day at a school which, though mixed, mainly comprised Indian-origin students. As the teacher takes the register, she begins to despair at the number of Kaur and Singhs: ‘Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear ... This won’t do at all. Now then ... Can those of you called Kaur or Singh provide me with a surname, please?’ Most other students could provide a surname in the form of a caste name, but Sathnam could not.

'Sath-nam? Is that how you say it?'

'Yes, miss,' I lied.

'Your surname?'

'Singh, miss.'

'Come on now, don't be a silly sausage.' A ripple of giggles across the room. 'Everyone has a forename – mine, for example, is Hyacinth ...' More giggles. 'Most people have a middle name ... mine, for example, is Edna ...' Open laughter now. 'Yours is Singh. And you should also have a surname or family name. Like *Jones*?'

Sathnam agrees to go home and ask his parents what his surname is. His mother resists: "“Your surname is Singh,” she said eventually... “It means lion. A name shared by every Sikh man and a name to be proud of... Don't you remember the story I told you?”" In response, Sathnam decides to press his point 'by exploiting my mother's instinctive and total respect for authority. "My teacher says I must have a family name," I ventured'. His mother finally tells him to ask his elder sister who must herself have gone through a similar experience when she began school. In this way he eventually learns his 'family surname', Sanghera, which he has to practise saying on his way to school the next day. In the process, Singh apparently becomes not even the middle name his teacher suggests it really is, but is lost altogether in favour of Sanghera, a caste name. Far from the removal of caste names we saw in the case of the Singh Sabha school (an echo of the same process enacted at the founding of the Khalsa), here use of caste names is reinstated in the classroom.

The episode is recounted humorously and without rancour. However, it points towards a different means of policing Kaur/Singh than those discussed earlier – one that is institutionally and bureaucratically driven. We encounter two conflicting 'rights': the 'right to control one's name' versus the right of the state to identify its citizens (Coulmont 2014: 503). The 'becoming legal' (Deseris 2015: 23) of the proper name is of course central to the story of the modern state. The institutionalization and fixing of surnames by colonial governments saw the name enter 'a whole network of apparatuses (demographic records, criminal records, tax records, voting records, immunization and health records) through which the state can both identify an individual and deploy a series of calculations and operations whose domain and target is the population' (ibid.). Specifically in India, the colonial complaint was that family surnames were too recurrent, contributing to a native propensity for impersonation (Singha 2000).

Indeed, to exchange numbers for caste names in the Singh Sabha school was implicitly to acknowledge precisely the problem of recurrence, but as a specifically Sikh rather than pan-Indian difficulty. The complaint finds many forms of expression. The reviewer of a book featuring numerous Sikh protagonists might complain of confusion caused by the number of Singhs (e.g. Cannell 2018).

Owen Cole (1994) observes that despite the prized ability of Singh/Kaur to elide caste, ‘a glance at a London telephone directory with its many columns of Singhs, or reading an article by “Harbans Singh” in a Sikh newspaper (there are at least six theologians or journalists who share the name, to my knowledge)’ quickly reveals the disadvantages. ‘Consequently, many Sikhs will use the *got* [subcaste or clan] name.’ Cole’s final remark reflects both Sathnam Sanghera’s experience and the standard argument I heard in Delhi, namely, that uptake of caste names among Sikhs is not the result of some sinister resurgence of caste pride but simply a solution to a bureaucratic problem.

Sikh temporal authorities recognize the difficulty but for obvious reasons are unwilling to endorse use of caste names to remedy it. They propose as an alternative the addition of a place name as an individuating suffix to Singh/Kaur. Such toponymically adjusted personal names may feature the name of a village, neighbourhood, town, state or even country from which the bearer hails, as in the names of senior Akali Dal politician Parkash Singh Badal (Badal is a village in Punjab), Manjeet Singh GK (after the Greater Kailash colony where he lives in Delhi), and Akali leader Jasjit Singh UK (who had previously lived in the UK). This, then, is the theologically sanctioned solution to the problem. But its use among Sikhs as a solution to the problem of ‘name concentration’ (Pina-Cabral 2012) is far rarer than the reinstatement of caste names.

Exacerbating the difficulty is the Punjabi taste for travel and relocation that precedes, but has also been accelerated by, intervals of intense persecution of Sikhs in the country. As was noted earlier, visa and passport offices are known to be key sites of the ‘problematization’ of Kaur/Singh. This came dramatically to light in 2007 when it was revealed that the Canadian immigration service had refused to accept Kaur and Singh as surnames for the previous ten years. As a 2007 *Toronto Star* news report stated:

[Finally] one of the most common surnames in Canada, imbued with religious significance for millions of Sikhs around the world, is now, after yesterday’s reversal of a 10-year policy, deemed acceptable by the Canadian government. For the past decade, Indian immigration applicants with the surname Singh or Kaur were told by the Canadian High Commission in New Delhi that their names, too common to process quickly, would have to be changed ... It’s not known how many people have been affected. Liberal MP Ruby Dhalla (Brampton-Springdale) says in the past three years she’s received about 500 complaints from constituents whose family members were told to change their names when applying to immigrate... [A]ccording to statements from the department, the policy asking for a different name was meant to help speed up applications and prevent cases of mistaken identity due to the commonness of Singh. It said its New Delhi visa office had reported ‘very few complaints’ about the request and explained that most Singhs or Kaur often have an additional family name, even if it is not often used, that can be easily added to their passport. ‘If you have to change your name to come here, we have to ask ourselves, “Are we really celebrating all the great things that are hallmarks of this multicultural country?”’ said Dhalla.

The episode, placed alongside similar reports from the United States and Sanghera's experience in a UK school, shows how migration and diaspora have often increased the visibility of caste in Sikh names. But it is not only diasporic administrations that take issue with the generality of Kaur/Singh. Scores of Delhi-based Sikhs I spoke with reported taking up a caste surname only after finding that the Indian passport authority refused to countenance Singh or Kaur as family names. The process becomes self-fulfilling: on hearing of their fellow Sikhs' name-related difficulties in the passport office, they pre-emptively make the change themselves. Strongly implied, once again, is that it is not pride but the mundane demands of officialdom that cause the (re)adoption of a caste name.

It is difficult to determine whether the bureaucracy-led visibilization of caste in Sikh names causes its substantialization. The evident ability of a Sikh passport applicant to call on a caste title as a means of 'solving a bureaucratic problem' demonstrates well enough that prior processes of making caste onomastically invisible barely if ever caused Sikhs to become unaware of it.³⁵ In light of wider processes of caste assertion and the 'unfashionableness' of Kaur and Singh for some young Sikhs, bureaucratic aggravations might provide welcome cover for some Sikhs to alter their names in a way they already secretly wanted.

The dynamics described here recall longstanding bureaucratic exercises involving the caste-wise enumeration of local populations, particularly the colonial census beginning in the nineteenth century, which scholars argue was not simply referential but, in fact, generative (Peabody 2001: 821). Though debate persists about the effects of such numerical collection of data on caste (Bayly 1999), it is a widely shared view among scholars of South Asia that by means of nomenclature and census, the British inscribed identities that it was incumbent on their subjects to fulfil (Bhagal 2014: 283). While people do not simply become the labels attached to them (Biehl and Locke 2010) – Sikhs bureaucratically pressured to use caste names may refuse to identify with them, or otherwise redefine or redeploy them – the parallel with the colonial census is nonetheless striking. Administrative demands for surnames other than Kaur/Singh, similar to the census, cause what may be unelaborated categories to become more 'pronounced and visual' (Sengupta 2018: 67), an outcome starkly at odds with the orthodox Sikh aspiration of not wanting to 'sort themselves out.'³⁶ For bureaucratic agencies, homonymy is a pathology, a personal name worthless if it does not individuate (Pina-Cabral 2012: 18). Guru Gobind Singh's foundational name exchange, on the other hand, sought to produce a kind of value – disidentification – that bureaucracy computes only to the extent that it knows its task is to 'correct' it. To return to Cole's point about the disadvantages of 'six Harbans Singhs': for my Sikh friends in Delhi, this multiplicity is precisely the point; the scope for prideful egoism is diminished via the multiplicity of the single name versus the multiplicity of different names desired by visa and passport authorities. The Canadian immigration service backpedalled,

as we have seen, and demands for onomastic distinction made by equivalent authorities elsewhere are uneven. Together, however, such agencies have forced many ordinary Sikhs to make difficult decisions concerning their names.

Conclusions

A key concern of Susan Bayly's multifaceted work on intellectual exchange has been to nuance (and frequently to contest) reductive characterizations of colonial and postcolonial intellectual exchanges as 'mere exercises in power-knowledge, conceived solely as a means of dominating voiceless Asian Others' (2009: 192). My concern here has been different but complementary. First, the chapter has sought to show how the exchange of names generates for Sikhs both different forms of exchange value and significant intellectual exchanges. Focused on cherished identifications, these intellectual exchanges are frequently both reasoned and emotive, cerebral and volatile. While the role of visa and passport offices in the revival and objectification of caste names brings to mind existing scholarly treatments of the colonial census, name exchanges more typically take place on the basis of active reflection and decision, with new names value-producing instruments for mediating between what one is and what one might hope to be – whether this entails a movement towards esteemed Sikh values or not. Second, we come to see how such active bearing of names can call into question pervasive depictions of them as merely dominating or forming instructions to their bearers.

What is exchanged when one name is taken on in place of another are ideas, values and allegiances. We have seen how name exchanges can both bridge worlds and also burn such bridges. We have also seen their ability not only to mark but also produce, challenge and negate value(s). In the case of bureaucratically enforced name changes, an exchange value is generated (unambiguous individuation) that can only come at the cost of the negation of traditional Sikh values of caste-elision and being 'counted-as-one'.³⁷ Passport and visa authorities compel a decision between two forms of visibility. To be fully visible as a Sikh is to enact a form of concealment from bureaucratic authority. To become visible to bureaucratic authority forces a form of concealment of one's Sikhness. Indeed, an appreciation of concealment as something more than itself – as a process of becoming differently visible – crosscuts the exemplary name exchanges discussed in the chapter. This important theme goes back to the founding of the Khalsa. 'The point of the five Ks', writes Cynthia Mahmood, 'was to ensure that Sikhs would not be able to shirk their duty to defend their faith by blending unnoticed into a crowd' (1996: 44–45). Since the founding of the Khalsa, becoming fully visible as Sikh has tended to involve the onomastic concealment of one's caste origin, while making visible one's caste origin has been to run the risk of concealing one's Sikh-hood. These concerns form points of discussion within impassioned yet reasoned debates about both bureaucratically-driven and fashion-induced name exchanges, with orthodox

commentators expressing anxiety that concealment of Sikh markers, including but not limited to names, causes Sikhs to become visible as Hindus. Fashionable disuse of Kaur/Singh is thus far from being a frivolous matter.

This chapter has examined reasons why young Sikhs in particular might consider bearing Kaur and Singh an unattractive proposition (their perceived archaism, discordant relationship with individualism, association with the rustic Sardarji of Santa Banta jokes, etc.), but also some of the means employed to recuperate them as indispensable sources of dynamism and charisma in ‘an achievement-conscious society’ (Bayly 2014: 496). Both dynamics are visible in the 2017 Punjabi movie *Super Singh*, which features a protagonist, Sajjan Singh, who uses the name Sam to fit in more easily with his friends in Canada, where he has moved to study. His ‘inauthentic’ deviation from Sikh values and signifiers is embodied in his wish to marry Kathy, a white Canadian woman, and especially his willingness to cut his hair to please her. Meanwhile, on a visit home to Punjab he discovers he has superpowers. At the hairdresser – an emotionally charged space in the Sikh imagination – it is revealed, once he takes it off, that it is his turban that is the source of his powers. He comes more fully to realize that Kathy’s expectations of him demonstrate disrespect of his Sikh culture and values. In consequence, he doesn’t cut his hair after all and, as with the exchange of Jasmeet Kaur for Jazz discussed earlier, he ‘comes home’ to the name Sajjan Singh, discarding its inauthentic anglicized variant while also deciding to ‘help others to realise who Singhs are and thus to become [like him] *Super Singhs*.’³⁸ In this way the film not only participates in an effort to rehabilitate pride in Sikh markers in the face of ‘Indian jokes featuring Sikhs as the punch line’ and Bollywood depictions of ‘bumbling Sikh sidekick characters’,³⁹ but enacts the dramatization, replete with humour, sadness, indignation, shame and pride, of a key line of thinking within the intellectual exchanges that we have seen are generated by name exchanges.

While it is notable how quickly debates can seem to switch from concerns about these names not being used enough to their being used too much or by the wrong kind of person, these seemingly different imperatives are not necessarily contradictory: it is important to take up these names, but in the right way. Here, too, visibility and concealment arise as key thematics. Certain responses to the use of Kaur by Taran Dhillon and Sunny Leone imply that perceived ‘bad Sikhs’ should indeed conceal their Sikhness. To attempt to force them to cease bearing Kaur is to treat it as a form of intellectual property as if it had not been borrowed from elsewhere; the earlier exchange is hidden or denied (Bercovitch 1994; Rio 2007). In the case of debates about restricting rights of usage only to those who have undergone baptism, non-baptised bearers of Kaur/Singh are accused of generating a problematic opacity that compromises an onlooker’s ability properly to discern Khalsa Sikh-hood. However, such a view of their value forms but a fragment of their strikingly plural significance, a significance that is in constant motion and that continues to accrue resonances and to display and produce value(s) – both in specific instances of onomastic exchange but also as the dynamic focus of a broader

give and take of vibrant intellectual exchange within the worldwide Sikh community.

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Jacob Copeman is Research Professor, University of Santiago de Compostela, Distinguished Researcher (Oportunius) and Senior Researcher at the Centro de Investigación Interuniversitario en Paisaxes Atlánticas Culturais (CISPAC), Santiago de Compostela. His most recent monograph, co-authored with Dwaipayan Banerjee, is *Hematologies: The Political Life of Blood in India* (Cornell University Press, 2019). His most recent edited collection, co-edited with Mascha Schulz, is *Global Sceptical Publics: From Non-religious Print Media to 'Digital Atheism'* (UCL Press, 2022). He is principal investigator of the ERC-funded project 'Religion and Its Others in South Asia and the World: Communities, Debates, Freedoms'.

Notes

1. 'Over time, "Khalsa" and "Sikh" have become synonymous terms, and even though only a minority of Sikhs are formally initiated into the Khalsa order, all Sikh men and women trace their personality, name, religious rites, and prayers – what they do, what they wear, how they identify themselves – to this liberating Baisakhi [Punjabi harvest festival] of 1699' (N-G. K. Singh 2005: xi). See also Copeman and Banerjee (2019: chapter 6) on this pivotal event and the iconography associated with it.
2. A paraphrase of Greenblatt (1995: 229).
3. A mix, mainly, of *khatri* (stereotypically trader), *jat* (stereotypically cultivator) and Dalit (former untouchable) Sikhs.
4. See Laidlaw (2014). In this, names as intellectual exchange objects perform a function somewhat similar to exemplars, as described by Robbins (2018).
5. Nihangs are an armed Sikh warrior order.
6. Guru Gobind Singh's father, the ninth Sikh guru Guru Teg Bahadur, was executed on the orders of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb in 1675. I note that some Sikhs see the reformist focus on names and external symbols as being at odds with Sikh teachings. 'According to the gurus' thoughts [*sikhi sikya gurvichar*], one devout Sikh woman in her sixties told me, 'what matters is inside [the devotee] – their thoughts and their faith. We should not

- be bothered about labels and symbols.' Scholars, too, have observed how the predominant focus on external symbols – hair, names, swords and so on – inaugurated at the birth of the Khalsa led to a tension between it and countervailing teachings that seek a movement beyond such things (Fenech and McLeod 2014: 8; Bhogal 2007: 107; Takhar 2014: 352).
7. The Singh Sabha, a Sikh revivalist movement founded in the nineteenth century, sought to remove Hindu influences from Sikhism.
 8. An eighteenth-century manual elaborating a 'Sikh way of life'.
 9. For instance, the Namdharis and Nirankaris (see S.K. Singh 2017: 21; Copeman 2009: chapter 4), who are otherwise controversial among mainstream Sikhs for continuing to revere living gurus.
 10. 'A Sikh of the Chamar (leather-working) caste; an Outcaste Sikh' (Fenech and McLeod 2014: 259).
 11. Refugee Review Tribunal Australia – RRT Research Response (Number: IND17527). Country: India. 26 September 2005: <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4b6fe2090.pdf>.
 12. *The Sikh Review*, begun in 1953 and published by the Sikh Cultural Center, Kolkata, and whose content occupies a borderland between the academic and the popular, features contributions from Sikhs in both India and the diaspora.
 13. The Chief Khalsa Diwan, which oversees various branches of the Singh Sabha, is primarily a Sikh educational and cultural body.
 14. A paraphrase of Paul Carter (1987: xxiv).
 15. In many Indian traditions, elders choose the names of newborns. See Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003).
 16. See Zelliott (1981) on Chokhamela.
 17. Reformist efforts here might be taken more seriously were it not for Dalit Sikhs' continued exclusion from numerous *gurdwaras*, key Sikh leadership positions, inter-caste violence, prohibitions on inter-marriage and so on (the very things that at least in part explain the striking growth of less exclusionary *deras* in Punjab and Haryana – see Takhar 2005; Duggal 2015; Kalra and Purewal 2020). See Bayly (1999: 18–19) on caste in casteless religions.
 18. 'Sikhi' is an informal term, which tends to be used by adherents rather than non-Sikhs, for the Sikh religion.
 19. *Firstpost*, 28 January 2015.
 20. *Business Today*, 26 April 2016.
 21. For a 2013 discussion on 'Sikhs not using Singh and Kaur as their last name', see <https://www.sikhsangat.com/index.php?/topic/70467-sikhs-not-using-singh-and-kaur-as-their-last-name/page/3/>.
 22. *Daily Mail*, 12 December 2012.
 23. Review of *Singh is Kinng*, available at: <http://rajeevmasand.com/admin/reviews/our-films/singh-is-kinng-review>.
 24. See Jakobsh (2015) on female Sikhs and the turban.
 25. See collection of related articles and comments on Twitter, available here: <https://twitter.com/i/moments/1018828931934380032?lang=en>.
 26. *The Wire*, 18 July 2018.
 27. For details of her difficult upbringing, see sikhchic.com/article-detail.php?id=336&cat=4.
 28. Comments on the Change.org petition: 'HARD "Kaur" – Real Name: Taran Dhillon: Remove the Suffix "Kaur" from Her Stage Name'. See https://www.change.org/p/hard-kaur-real-name-taran-dhillon-remove-the-suffix-kaur-from-her-stage-name/c?source_location=presentation.
 29. A corollary of which is the capacity of certain names to cause pollution to their utterers or viewers (Banerjee 2008; Jaoul 2008).
 30. It is commonly understood that while Khalsa Sikhs should take on Singh/Kaur, there is also no bar to non-Khalsa Sikhs using them.

31. Most notably, Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida.
32. A Dalit, traditionally leather tanning community.
33. Ambedkar, though a Dalit, was in fact a Mahar.
34. This phrasing draws on an earlier article by the author that similarly sought to unpack the pedagogical implications of personal naming practices (Copeman 2015).
35. Though in Sanghera's account it appears that the bureaucratic push towards a family name other than Singh may have thwarted the chance he had to be ignorant of his.
36. At least, within the *panth*. After Bowker and Star (1999).
37. After Badiou (2006); see also Humphrey (2008).
38. Review of *Super Singh*, available at: <https://www.cinestaan.com/articles/2017/jun/17/6474>.
39. Review of *Super Singh*, available at: <https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/movies/2017/06/20/super-singhs-star-diljit-dosanjh-says-its-the-less-dark-knight.html>.

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