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Let's Meet at the *Langar*: How the Sikh Community has Persevered and Thrived in the US

By: Sean Tanabe

ABSTRACT

Despite being the fifth largest religion in the world, Sikhism continues to be misunderstood. This research looks at the diaspora of Sikhs, specifically from Punjab to the United States of America. The goal is to illustrate the components of their experience – when, why, and how they came, along with reasons why Sikh struggles have eventually developed into triumphs. It is clear that a focus on community has been an overarching theme of their resolute success. However, that community has experienced nuances of division within itself, due to developing relationships with tradition that inevitably follow diaspora and modernization. Misplaced strife faced in the aftermath of 9/11 is also examined. Research was drawn primarily from academic writings and articles, government documents, a joint study by the Stanford Peace Innovation Lab and Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund, and personal interactions with Sikhs. By understanding the Sikh Diaspora, one is able to view a case study of where globalization, tradition, and modernization meet.

Keywords: Sikhism; Diaspora; United States; Immigration History; Globalization; Modernization

Sikhism is a monotheistic religion that was founded in the late 15th century by Baba (Guru) Nanak. Though a religion, the essential core of Sikh beliefs may be better described as ethical, rather than theological. As I will illustrate with specificity, this is an important distinction to make. Sikhs are a Punjabi ethnic group in the process of turning into a global community. The Sikh focus on community is an integral component of their Diaspora, development thereafter, and resolute success. The Sikh Diaspora has undoubtedly been an arduous experience, as Sikhs have been susceptible to hardships on many fronts. Not only do they face misunderstandings by mainstream America, they have also had difficulty maintaining traditions in the American-born generations and preserving a connection to the Amritsar and the Punjab state. No immigrant group has come to the US unscathed or without facing adversity. The

Sikhs are no different, yet their group-wide communal perseverance has enabled them to find not only refuge, but also accomplishment and prosperity. Some adversities shared between the Sikhs and other ethnic groups include prejudice from Americans, struggles in finding the balance between acculturation and retaining homeland ideals, language barriers, and legislation impeding or forbidding immigration. Though significant progress has been made, Sikhs have and continue to encounter a multitude of problems that are both specific to their community and are shared by other ethnic communities. In this paper I will discuss how Sikhs have been in the United States for over 100 years, and despite facing challenges in immigration, discrimination, and assimilation, have persevered to form a community of unmistakable strength, enabling them to find success in a myriad of platforms in contemporary society.

To many, the US is recognized as both a “Land of Opportunity” and a “melting pot” of ethnic groups and cultures. Both monikers have been illustrated in Sikh history. The first Indians to immigrate to the US were predominantly Sikhs, who left the state of Punjab at the turn of the 19th century due to the state being fraught with turmoil at the hands of British mercantilism. Mostly farmers, these Sikhs found new homes in the US on the east and west coasts, finding work in places such as the lumber mills in Washington and the arable land of California. This first wave of immigration lasted from 1899-1914. By 1912, the first Sikh temple was opened in Stockton, California. The Gurdwara epitomizes more than just a place of worship; it is the most fertile soil conducive to building community for Sikhs in the US. In addition, the Gurdwara “has historically served as a refuge for the homeless and the destitute... Visitors, irrespective of their religion, are offered shelter, comfort, and food” (SikhNet.com). This sense of warmth and welcome has fortified both the Sikh community and non-Sikhs alike. The swift rate at which the first temple was constructed is symbolic of the focus Sikhs have on community.

When considering the obstacles in place to a “smooth” immigration, the pace at which Sikhs mobilized and united in the US is astounding. During the first wave of immigration, Sikhs were being portrayed not only unfavorably by the American media, but incorrectly, as Hindus. Despite their hardships, the establishment of Sikh communities in the US led directly to more Sikhs immigrating, this time seeking opportunity in the form of higher education, not just arable land. In 1924, at the behest of pressure by the American people, President Coolidge signed the Johnson-Reed Act into place with the purpose of “preserving the ideal of American homogeneity” (Office of the Historian). This federal law restricted the annual number of immigrants allowed into the US to only two percent, slashing the chances of many Sikhs yearning to immigrate. Due to additional restrictions on landowning, some Sikhs returned to the Punjab. This stagnant period of Sikh immigration lasted until the mid-1940s when the second wave of immigration was launched with the 1946 Luce-Celler Act. Signed into law by President Truman, it “opened citizenship rights to US Sikhs and arranged for a quota of immigration for their relatives from India” (Mann “Making” 296). The Luce-Celler Act was a landmark event for the Sikh population already living in the US and for future generations to come. The act allowed immigrating Sikhs to become naturalized as American citizens. Though only 100 Indian Americans were allowed to immigrate per year, once citizenship was obtained individuals could

petition to bring more of their family, enabling more Sikhs to come to the US. Those that came during this second wave of immigration generally flocked to areas that had a Sikh presence already. As noted by Gurinder Singh Mann, “even when they had the opportunity to work in the states in which they went to school, many moved to the West Coast to be nearer to other Sikhs” (“Making” 295). The Sikh focus on community is again visible: new arrivals to the US begin searching for other Sikhs in their vicinity, assemble together, and join an established community. It is clearly important to Sikhs to be with and around other Sikhs. As Sikh immigration continued, Sikh communities continued to develop as illustrated by the formation of the second Sikh temple in California in El Centro in 1948. The second wave of Sikh immigration to the US strengthened existing communities and created new ones.

The third wave of immigration brought the most diverse array of Sikh individuals to the US. From 1921-1965, the National Origins Formula enforced restrictions in immigration with a quota that kept many Sikhs from Southern and Eastern Europe to Punjab away. This nonsensical system was dissolved after the Hart-Celler Act was signed into law by President Johnson in 1965, therein instituting a preference system for immigration policy in the US, based on family relationships with citizens and the skills of immigrants. Sikhs from both rural and urban backgrounds, some with advanced degrees and some “unskilled” laborers, were now entering the US. These individuals typically joined established Sikh communities or congregated with other Sikhs to form their own communities. What is most striking about the third wave of Sikh immigration to the US is not just the diversity present, but the togetherness that people maintained and strengthened by uniting in Sikh communities. As stated by Professor Philip Pecorino of the City University of New York, “in Sikhism everyone has equal rights irrespective of caste, creed, color, race, sex or religion” (Pecorino). This equality heightened the effectiveness and camaraderie of both men and women in the American Sikh community.

The most recent Sikh immigration to the US can be understood in two distinct groups. The first group is composed of East Africans that fled political persecution. Political tumult in Uganda and Kenya drove many families to leave and find asylum elsewhere. Many of these individuals came to western countries such as the US, armed with a plethora of business acumen and experience that enabled them to find success in urban areas. The second group has immigrated as a result of violent atrocities committed by the Indian government in attempts to find jurisdiction in Punjab. This calamity culminated in an event called Operation Blue Star, which forever reshaped how Sikhs viewed the Indian government. This military operation consisted of an effort to assassinate a Sikh religious leader, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who was taking residence at the Harmandir Sahib Complex in Amritsar. Indira Gandhi, the Indian Prime Minister at the time, ordered the assassination.

Operation Blue Star had massive repercussions: an estimated 500-5,000 civilians were killed in the attack, and four months after the operation Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards in what was viewed as an act of retaliation. Subsequently, Hindu mobs sought vengeance and killed 3,000 Sikhs. As Professor Mann asserts, these incidents in 1984 “eroded any identification US Sikhs may have had with the Indian nation. Unlike other immigrant Hindu

groups, Sikhs plainly do not see India as a second home” (“Making” 299). This firm sentiment enabled Sikhs to not only immigrate to the US, but to do so with a “no going back, cannot fail,” type mentality. Meanwhile, the American Sikh perception that India is not a second home is only reinforced by the present state of Punjab, where Sikh leaders have accomplished very little in solving the problems of today’s Punjabi Sikhs. This has contributed greatly to the absence of the “myth of return” in prior generations of Sikh immigrants in the US. As noted by Dr. Shinder S Thandi, Sikhs feel a “deep sense of alienation that continues very much today” (Thandi). These sentiments and perceptions are derived not only from Operation Blue Star, but also from the partition of India after earning independence, and the failed movement for the Sikh country of Khalistan.

In addition to these two aforementioned immigrant Sikh groups, a small but visible group of Americans have converted to Sikhism and stayed in the US. Called Euro-American Sikhs, “they took up the Sikh path under the spiritual guidance of Harbhajan Singh Yogi, a Punjabi Sikh who had arrived in the United States in 1968” (Mann, “Making” 295). These American Sikhs reinforce not just the Sikh focus on community, but the strength of that community in welcoming non-Punjabi individuals. The most recent major Sikh immigration to the US was the post-1990 Sikh immigrants that were part of the “Brain Drain,” a movement whereby American companies were offering the brightest workers in India the best opportunity to work. Financially charged by the technology boom, this brought many Sikhs to places like Silicon Valley where they have mostly fared very well. Sikhs have consistently shown that they possess the Protestant work ethic – to work hard, save money, and educate one’s children. This work ethic was present in the “Brain Drain” movement. The movement also had a direct hand in the increase in Indian students studying in the US, seeking similar opportunity.

Sikhism’s adaptability is an integral component of the Sikh ability to form substantial communities in many places. “They interpreted their migration generously – as ‘taking the Sikh beliefs’ to the farthest corners of the divinely created world and as a major opportunity in Sikh history” (Mann “Making” 295). This optimism has been actualized into successes due to a Sikh willingness to modernize. Modernization has elevated the transportability of Sikhism through its means of adaption. This is illustrated by newer generations of Sikhs as they adopt their cultural and traditional tendencies to find a kind of middle ground with their American surroundings. After the tragedy of 9/11, a prominent Sikh scholar in the US “argued that a ‘mini sword’ hanging on a chain is an appropriate substitute for the traditional *kirpan*” (Mann 296). Older generations of American Sikhs have disagreed with measures like this being taken from within the community; however, it is consistent with the adjustments Sikhs have made throughout their history. Another example of these adjustments includes the Gurdwara in Ventura, which formerly was a Korean Church. The procurement and subsequent repurposing of buildings like this is an important aspect in the growth of American Sikh communities. “An examination of the history of the Gurdwara in the United States sheds important light on the nature of the Sikh community’s attempt to integrate into American society while simultaneously maintaining a religious identity” (Mann “Making” 296). Through a willingness to modernize, this integration

into American society has been a great Sikh success. From the outside a Gurdwara may look like a normal building, it may have even been a church or commercial building at one point, but on the inside Sikhs continue to make it their own.

Despite the connections and knowledge one can digest from scholarly articles and even empirically, we cannot have a generalized statement for an entire body of people. Sikhism is the fifth largest religion in the world, with over twenty-five million people. Though twenty million of those remain in Punjab, there are over 500,000 Sikh Americans according to the Sikh Coalition, and that number is only continuing to grow. From these staggering numbers, one can safely conclude that there is diversity within the Sikh community, particularly in the US. Some Sikhs may be less in touch with the traditional values of their religion, which can be illustrated by some choosing to cut their hair or not wear a turban. Others may maintain a strict orthodox following of the traditional Sikh values. Regardless of differences, though, American Sikhs seem to be happy and thriving in the US. They are distinctly proud to be American, over other places like Australia, Canada, and Britain.

The US *is* their homeland now, while the Punjab is their Sacred Land. This distinction marks Sikhs as different from other Diasporic communities. But even though the Punjab is considered the Sikh Sacred Land, the Sikh “myth of return,” as already mentioned, is essentially non-existent. As contended by Professor Mann, “Sikhs enjoy basking in the glory of being part of the world’s only superpower” (“Making” 299). While the connection for most American Sikhs to the Punjab may be lost, the connection to the Amritsar is preserved through the religion, as it is a sacred center for Sikhism. The sense of the US being the homeland of the Sikhs can be understood with the following contemporary examples. Organizations such as the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF) and the Sikh Mediawatch and Resource Task Force (SMART) were both founded in 1996. These organizations inform mainstream Americans about Sikhism, protect Sikhs from various forms of discrimination, and continue to actively illustrate the perseverance and progress of the Sikh community. Other organizations such as the Sikh Student Associations (SSA) have sprouted at over fifty colleges and universities in the US. Contemporary American Sikh progress is undeniable.

Though such progress has and continues to take place, American Sikhs have faced other notable strife. According to the Huffington Post, there have been over twenty documented hate crimes against Sikhs since 9/11 alone. A 2012 shooting at a Sikh temple near Milwaukee, Wisconsin was especially disconcerting. A white supremacist walked into a Sikh temple during *langar* and opened fire, killing six Sikhs, in an event that made international news. For Sikhs to have come so far and made so much progress in their 100-plus years of being American, this tragedy was particularly challenging to confront. Cases like this, and a majority, if not all, hate crimes against Sikhs are a result of misplaced hate and anger. Data gathered in the 2013 research study *Turban Myths* states, “99 percent of people wearing turbans in the US are Sikhs from India” (SALDEF). In the aftermath of 9/11, the turban (and beard) appearance immediately became associated with terrorist activity. To combat this, Sikhs have been sensitive to the need for the American public to understand Sikh beliefs and their community’s history.

In efforts to find a safe and comfortable place for their community in American society, Sikhs are starting Sikh Day Parades, interfaith activities, inviting political figures to visit the Gurdwara, and teaching Sikhism in American universities such as UCSB. Sikh community leaders push for this “visibility” to help the community receive more exposure and recognition of who they truly are. They show an openness and practice of equality that invites individuals from any background to see for themselves what Sikhism really is. Another dimension of this is that Sikhism is not a proselytizing religion. There exists no pressure on others during their visit to a Sikh community or Gurdwara.

What does it mean to look American? The United States of America, as the preeminent “melting pot,” provides its own answer: there is none. However, this is not the case for everyone. Many Americans and non-Americans alike have a skewed perception of what an American is “supposed” to look like. They may envisage simply a Caucasian male or female, when in truth, an American may be of any color, caste, creed, religion, or culture. In addition to the prose in *Turban Myths*, I focused on the detail in the pictures of the Sikh Americans in its pages. To the uneducated eye, these people may only look American from the neck down and something foreign from the neck up. This is due to a beard and turban, but can be due to a plethora of things in other cases. Americans tend to perceive the beard and turban as a threat, due to the aftermath of 9/11 and various media portrayals such as the films *Lone Survivor* and *Zero Dark Thirty* failing to differentiate clearly between radical terrorist threats and harmless individuals that may appear aesthetically similar. Moreover, the conflation between religions like Islam and Sikhism is simply incorrect. In actuality, the two religions differ in countless ways such as origin, traditional principles, deity, scripture, worship, and appearance. Association between the two based on the turban and beard appearance is inexcusable everywhere, let alone in the “melting pot” capital of the world. Before writing this paper, I was an individual that did not understand. Far more than any scholarly article or study can share, my interactions with Sikhs (especially when I visited the Gurdwara in Ventura) have authenticated and confirmed the warmth, strength, and support present in the American Sikh community. It is my contention that without these systems in place, the perseverance that Sikhs have employed to rise against the challenges presented to them would not have been as successful.

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