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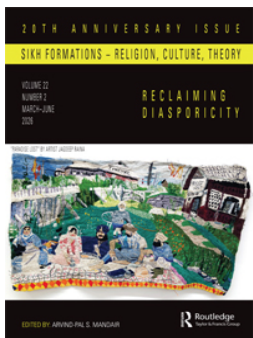
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Sikh immigration, theology, and pan-ethnic solidarity: A comparative analysis of Sikh theology practiced in three different nation-states

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Sikh theological principles, specifically *Miri-Piri* (the unity of spiritual and temporal authority) and *Sarbat da Bhala* (welfare of all humanity), function as operational frameworks for political action and pan-ethnic solidarity across the global Sikh diaspora. Drawing on oral history data from a Sikh-American activist and comparative case studies spanning India, the United States, and Indonesia, the analysis demonstrates that Sikh diasporic solidarity is not merely a sociological response to shared trauma but an active theological practice. The findings suggest that political theology may constitute an under-examined dimension of diaspora formation that existing frameworks do not fully capture.

KEYWORDS

Sikh diaspora; pan-ethnic solidarity; *Miri-Piri*; *Sarbat da Bhala*; oral history; postcolonial theology

1. Introduction

The Sikh diaspora, a worldwide community refined by successive waves of migration, political upheaval, and a persistent demand for justice, offers a case study in the effects of maintaining cultural identity and the practice of pan-ethnic solidarity. Numbering approximately 25–30 million worldwide, with significant populations in India, Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and Southeast Asia, Sikhs have established vibrant communities that maintain deep connections to their homeland in Punjab, while still actively engaging with the social and political spheres of their adopted nations. This study seeks to understand this phenomenon not through a distant, archival lens but through the lived experience of a notable figure within the diaspora itself. This study is grounded in an analysis of an original oral history interview with Dr. Ranbir Singh Sandhu, a pivotal scholar-activist who spent fifteen years compiling and translating the speeches of Sant Jarnail Singh Khalsa Bhindranwale. Dr. Sandhu's testimony provides a unique 'witness-scholar' perspective that bridges the gap between lived experience and academic analysis. By placing his narrative in conversation with the broader Sikh diasporic experience, this paper aims to construct a more robust and nuanced

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understanding of how theology can support community building through exploration of moral philosophy, political action, and identity formation.

The existing scholarly literature on the Sikh diaspora has productively analyzed the community through several complementary frameworks. Brian Axel's *The Nation's Tortured Body* (2001) argues that the diaspora constructs the idea of the homeland through shared experiences of violence and the circulation of images of the tortured body (Axel 2001). Verne Dusenbery's *Sikhs at Large* (2008) provides an expansive examination of how Sikh identity is negotiated across borders, emphasizing the interplay of cultural maintenance and political boundary-making (Dusenbery 2008). Jaideep Singh's research on the post-9/11 racialization of Sikh Americans has highlighted the construction of a 'new American apartheid' in which religious minorities are subjected to systemic discrimination (J. Singh 2013). Tanweer Fazal's comparative work on Muslim and Sikh identities within the Indian nation-state framework illuminates how minority rights are negotiated and often denied (Fazal 2014), while Pritam Singh's analysis of the political economy of violence in the Sikh struggle reveals the cyclical relationship between state repression and community mobilization (Singh 2007). Collectively, this body of work demonstrates that Sikh diasporic identity is shaped by the interplay of external persecution, racialized exclusion, and internal community-building. What this literature shares, however, is a tendency to treat Sikh political mobilization as a response to external conditions—violence, racism, state neglect, rather than as an expression of an internal theological mandate. This is precisely the 'false dichotomy' that Mandair (2009) identifies: Western academic frameworks consistently separate the spiritual from the political, treating Sikh theology as one variable and Sikh political action as another (Mandair 2009). The separation is visible in Axel's framing of diaspora as constituted primarily through the circulation of images of tortured bodies, a sociological mechanism that does not require theology to explain it, in Dusenbery's emphasis on cultural rather than theological boundary-maintenance, and even in J. Singh's otherwise powerful analysis, which foregrounds the sociological category of 'racialized religious minority' without examining the theological resources that shape the community's response to that racialization. The question of how minority communities maintain solidarity in the face of state violence has also been explored through the lens of comparative genocide and human rights studies. The events of November 1984 in India, which Bainswal (2020) terms a 'genocide' rather than 'riots' to accurately describe their targeted, organized, and state-sponsored nature (Bainswal 2020), invite comparison with other instances of state-sponsored mass violence. The systematic use of voter rolls to identify Sikh households, the distribution of kerosene and iron rods to mobs, and the complicity of the police all point to a level of planning that transcends spontaneous communal violence. Understanding these events through the framework of state violence is essential for grasping the depth of the trauma that continues to shape the Sikh diaspora's collective consciousness, but even here, the existing literature tends to analyze the community's response in terms of trauma and resilience rather than theological imperative.

This paper intervenes in that gap. It builds on this rich body of scholarship by arguing that for Sikhs, pan-ethnic solidarity is not merely a sociological phenomenon produced by shared trauma but a proactive theological expression, deeply rooted in the doctrines of *Miri-Piri* and *Sarbat da Bhala*, which provides a consistent framework for navigating diverse forms of oppression across diverse global contexts. By grounding this argument

in original oral history data from the Sandhu interview, this study demonstrates how theological principles are not merely preserved in the abstract but are actively operationalized, resulting in individual and communal resilience, and building bridges with other marginalized communities. In doing so, it extends Mandair's theoretical critique into empirical territory, showing not only that the false dichotomy exists in academic discourse but that the Sikh case itself provides evidence of its inadequacy. It seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature that takes seriously the role of theology, not merely as a cultural artifact but as a living, dynamic force, in shaping diasporic political engagement.

1.1. Theoretical framework: diaspora, postcoloniality, and Sikh theology

To analyze the Sikh experience, this paper adopts a dual theoretical framework that integrates diaspora studies with a postcolonial critique of how Sikhi is understood within Western academic discourse. The first pillar draws on Robin Cohen's influential model from *Global Diasporas* (2008), which identifies nine shared features of diasporas. These include: dispersal from an original homeland, either traumatic or voluntary; the expansion from a homeland in search of work or trade; a collective memory and myth about the homeland; an idealization of the ancestral home and a commitment to its maintenance and prosperity; a return movement that gains collective approbation; a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time; a sometimes-troubled relationship with host societies; a sense of empathy and responsibility with shared ethnicities in other countries; and the possibility of a distinctive, creative, and fulfilling life in host countries (Cohen 2008). The recent Sikh journey, from the 1947 Partition of Punjab to the politically motivated violence of the 1980s and subsequent global migration, maps onto many of these criteria, providing a strong case for its categorization as a classic diaspora. However, this paper seeks to go further than just applying Cohen's framework to the Sikh case. It asks whether the Sikh experience, with its deeply embedded political theology, reveals a dimension that Cohen's model, developed primarily from the Jewish and Armenian experiences, does not fully account for – the role of an integrated spiritual-physical mandate as a primary driver of diasporic solidarity.

More recent interventions in diaspora studies have moved beyond Cohen's typological approach. Stierstorfer and Wilson (2018), in *The Routledge Diaspora Studies Reader*, argue that the field now understands diaspora as an ongoing process of identity construction rather than a fixed category, shifting attention from what diasporas are to what diasporas do. Vertovec's (2023) concept of super-diversity further complicates the picture by highlighting how contemporary migrant communities are internally differentiated along multiple simultaneous axes, legal status, generation, gender, class, and transnational connections that resist reduction to a single ethnic or religious label. The Sikh case engages productively with both developments; it demonstrates how a shared political theology actively produces diasporic solidarity (diaspora as process) while providing coherence across the very differences – generation, class, national context – that super-diversity identifies as fragmenting. Additionally, Dolea's (2024) work on diaspora diplomacy argues that enabling and disruptive emotions mediate diaspora assemblages, a framework that illuminates how theological concepts like *Miri-Piri* and *Sarbat da Bhala*

function as emotional infrastructure, channeling collective grief and outrage into organized solidarity rather than fragmentation.

The second pillar of this framework engages with a postcolonial critique of how Sikhi is understood, drawing centrally on the work of Arvind-Pal Mandair. In *Religion and the Specter of the West* (2009), Mandair argues that the very category of ‘religion’ was imposed on Sikh tradition during the colonial period, a process that served to depoliticize its teachings by creating a false dichotomy between the spiritual and the physical (Mandair 2009). This is particularly relevant to the core Sikh theological concepts of Miri-Piri and Sarbat da Bhala. Miri-Piri, the doctrine of the balance between physical (Miri) and spiritual (Piri) authority, was institutionalized by the sixth Guru, Guru Har-gobind, who famously wore two swords to symbolize this principle after the martyrdom of his father, Guru Arjan Dev. This concept mandates that Sikhs engage in worldly affairs and fight injustice as a spiritual duty. It is not a separation of church and state, but a fusion of the two, the spiritual life is incomplete without engagement in the physical world, and physical power is meaningless without spiritual grounding. Sarbat da Bhala (welfare for all), the concluding phrase of the daily Sikh prayer, the Ardas, implores for the well-being of all humanity, not just Sikhs. Mandair’s work suggests that viewing these concepts through a purely ‘religious’ lens, as separated from the political, is itself a colonial misreading that has been internalized by much of Western Sikh Studies. This paper, therefore, analyzes Miri-Piri and Sarbat da Bhala not as abstract religious ideals, but as an integrated political theology that provides a blueprint for action in the material world. This approach allows us to see the Sikh community’s responses to oppression, from the Dharam Yudh Morcha in India to the Sikh Coalition in the US to interfaith langar in Indonesia, not as unique political reactions, but as consistent expressions of a unified theological worldview.

2. Methodology: oral history and thematic analysis

This study is grounded in a qualitative analysis of a semi-structured oral history interview conducted by the author with Dr. Ranbir Singh Sandhu (Sidhu 2018). Dr. Sandhu, a retired academic now in his 90s and residing in California, is the author of *Struggle for Justice: Speeches and Conversations of Sant Jarnail Singh Khalsa Bhindranwale* (1999), a seminal work that involved a fifteen-year effort to collect, translate, and publish cassette tape recordings of Bhindranwale’s speeches (Sandhu 1999). His position as both a participant in Sikh struggles since the early twentieth century, and his life as a chronicler of one of its most contentious periods makes his testimony a uniquely valuable primary source. The interview was conducted at his home, and the conversation covered his personal history, his motivations for the translation project, his experiences within the American academic system, and his reflections on the trajectory of the Sikh community over the past seven decades.

The interview was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines established by the Oral History Association (‘Oral History Best Practices’ n.d.). Informed consent was obtained from Dr. Sandhu prior to the interview. He was fully informed of the purpose of the research and the potential uses of his testimony, and he consented to being identified by name in the resulting publication. While oral history projects are often exempt from formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) review when they do not aim to produce

generalizable knowledge, the ethical obligation to protect the participant's rights, dignity, and privacy was rigorously upheld throughout the process.

The analytical approach employed is thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative research method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns/themes within data. It is a flexible and accessible method that is not tied to a specific theoretical framework, making it particularly suitable for interdisciplinary research that draws on both religious studies and political science. This method was chosen for its systematic approach to qualitative data analysis, allowing for a rigorous and transparent examination of the participant's narrative. These six phases were applied: first, the author familiarized himself with the data through repeated reading of the interview transcript and the accompanying essay; second, initial codes were generated from the data, identifying discrete units of meaning; third, these codes were collated into broader potential themes; fourth, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they were internally coherent and externally distinct; fifth, the final themes were defined and named; and sixth, the analysis was produced. Initial coding produced twenty-three discrete codes, including 'sacred-political unity,' 'violence as catalyst,' 'counter-narrative preservation,' 'grassroots institution-building,' and 'transnational solidarity practice'—which were subsequently refined into the three thematic categories that organize the analysis: theological recovery as political act, sacred infrastructure as solidarity architecture, and diasporic mobilization as theological practice. This rigorous process yielded four key themes that emerged from Dr. Sandhu's testimony: the preservation of historical memory against state erasure, the challenges to academic integrity when dealing with politically sensitive topics in Sikh Studies, the nature of diaspora community life before the institutionalization of formal gurdwaras, and the arc of hope and subsequent disillusionment with the postcolonial Indian state. These themes, drawn directly from the primary data, form the analytical framework for the paper. The case studies of Sikh communities in Indonesia, India, and the United States are then used not as standalone objects of analysis, but as contextual evidence to elaborate upon and enrich the themes raised by Dr. Sandhu.

It is important to acknowledge the methodological limitations inherent in a study based on a single oral history. Dr. Sandhu's perspective, while invaluable, is shaped by his particular generational, educational, and geographic position within the diaspora. He is a male, highly educated, first-generation immigrant who arrived in the United States before the watershed events of 1984, and his experience cannot be taken as representative of the entire Sikh diaspora. To mitigate this limitation, the interview data is triangulated with secondary sources, including peer-reviewed scholarship, journalistic accounts, and organizational reports, to ensure that the themes identified are not idiosyncratic but resonate with the broader community experience.

3. The Sandhu interview: memory, integrity, and diaspora life

Dr. Sandhu's oral history provides a powerful and deeply personal lens through which to understand the intellectual and emotional landscape of the Sikh diaspora in the late twentieth century. His experiences reveal a sustained engagement with the challenges of preserving history, maintaining academic integrity, and building community in a new land, all while grappling with the trauma of events unfolding in the homeland.

3.1. Preserving historical memory

Dr. Sandhu's fifteen-year project to translate Bhindranwale's speeches was, at its core, an act of historical preservation in the face of active state erasure. He recounts the immense difficulty of the task, noting that after Operation Bluestar in 1984, 'everything relating to the Sant was destroyed out of fear of persecution, portraits, recordings, videos, almost everything' (Sidhu 2018). The Indian government's campaign to suppress Bhindranwale's legacy extended beyond physical destruction, to a war of narratives, in which he was propagandized as a terrorist. Dr. Sandhu's work was a direct counter-narrative, an effort to let the primary sources, Bhindranwale's speeches, speak for themselves, so that scholars and the public could form their own judgments based on primary sources, rather than state propaganda. This act of collecting, translating, and publishing is a form of intellectual *seva* (selfless service), a core Sikh value, ensuring that a key part of modern Sikh history was not lost to state-sponsored silencing. The significance of this work is underscored by the fact that Dr. Sandhu himself faced barriers entering India as a result of his research, a personal cost that speaks to the political stakes of historical memory in the Sikh context. His experience mirrors the broader pattern documented by Devgan (2020), whose analysis of the Ensaaf organization's work to 'make the disappeared appear' through archival documentation demonstrates how the preservation of evidence and testimony is itself a form of resistance against state impunity (Devgan 2020). Dr. Sandhu's translation project, like Ensaaf's archive, transforms private memory into public record, creating a resource that future scholars and communities can draw upon to challenge official narratives. In this sense, his work is not only academic, it is an act of resistance against what Bhogal (2011) calls the state's attempt to monopolize the narrative of violence (Bhogal 2011). By making the primary sources available in English, Dr. Sandhu ensured that the global Sikh diaspora, and the broader scholarly community, could access and evaluate Bhindranwale's words directly, rather than relying on the distorted representations circulated by the Indian state and uncritical media.

3.2. Diaspora life before 1984

Dr. Sandhu's recollection of Sikh life in Dublin, Ohio, before the 1980s offers a rare and valuable glimpse into the early formation of diaspora communities in the American heartland, a period that is often overshadowed by the dramatic events of 1984 and 9/11. Before the construction of a formal gurdwara, the community performed a form of mobile worship that was both intimate and deeply communal: 'every Sunday a different volunteer would set up a clean area in their home for everyone to come and sing hymns together, read gurbani together, eat langar together' (Sidhu 2018). This 'traveling gurdwara' model demonstrates a grassroots, self-reliant community spirit, grounded in shared practice rather than institutional structures. It reveals the core elements of Sikh communal life: collective worship, the reading of scripture, and the sharing of langar. These were maintained even in the absence of a dedicated physical space. This adaptability is a hallmark of diasporic communities and fits Cohen's observation about the creative and enriching life that diasporas can build in new settings (Cohen 2008). What is particularly noteworthy is how this informal structure preserved

the egalitarian ethos of the gurdwara. By rotating the hosting responsibility among families, the community ensured that no single household became a permanent center of authority, mirroring the democratic principles embedded in Sikh institutional life. This model also highlights the role of langar, the communal meal shared by all, regardless of caste, class, or creed, as a binding social practice. Even in a small Ohio community, the insistence on sharing food together was not merely a cultural habit but a theological statement about equality and mutual care. It also provides a baseline against which to measure the dramatic changes that the community would undergo in the following decades, as the events of 1984 and 9/11 would transform the nature of Sikh community life in America from quiet, private worship to public advocacy and political engagement.

3.3. Hope and disillusionment

Perhaps the most striking theme in the interview is the arc of hope and subsequent betrayal felt by many Sikhs of Dr. Sandhu's generation regarding the Indian state. He speaks with contagious passion of the optimism during South-Asian independence, believing in a pluralistic vision where 'all of us working together, Hindus, Jains, Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs all together' would build a new, just nation under the Cambridge-educated Jawaharlal Nehru. This hope, however, was progressively, but blatantly, eroded. Dr. Sandhu recalls hearing 'Nehru insult our facial hair and appearance' (Sidhu 2018), a personal slight that symbolized a broader pattern of cultural dismissal. This personal recollection encapsulates the broader political journey from postcolonial hope to the painful recognition of being a marginalized minority within the very nation-state they had helped to build. The Sikh contribution to the Indian independence movement was substantial, from the Ghadar Party's revolutionary activities in the early twentieth century to the disproportionate representation of Sikhs among those executed, imprisoned, and exiled by the British, and the expectation of a just and pluralistic post-colonial state was deeply held. The trajectory from hope to disillusionment that Dr. Sandhu describes is not merely a personal narrative; it is a microcosm of the Sikh community's collective experience with the Indian state, a trajectory that would culminate in the catastrophic events of 1984. As Pritam Singh (2007) argues, this cycle of hope, marginalization, resistance, and repression is a recurring pattern in the political economy of the Sikh struggle, driven by the structural tensions between a centralizing Indian state and a community that insists on its distinct identity and autonomy (Singh 2007). Understanding this arc is necessary for contextualizing the case studies that follow, as it reveals the deep emotional and historical roots of the community's grievances.

4. Contextualizing the themes: case studies in the diaspora

The themes from Dr. Sandhu's interview—historical memory, political pressure, community formation, and state relations—are not unique to his experience. They resonate across the global Sikh diaspora, as illustrated by the experiences of communities in India, the United States, and Indonesia. Each case study demonstrates how the theological principles of *Miri-Piri* and *Sarbat da Bhala* are operationalized in response to distinct forms of oppression.

4.1. India: state persecution and the struggle for recognition

Dr. Sandhu's disillusionment with the Indian state is rooted in a history of systemic marginalization that began long before 1984. The 1947 Partition was a foundational trauma for the Sikh community, severing it from a vast number of its historical shrines. Scholars like Iqbal Qaiser have documented nearly 200 historical Sikh shrines that remained in Pakistan, including Gurdwara Janam Asthan, the birthplace of Guru Nanak, representing a profound cultural and religious loss (Qaiser 1998). This physical separation from sacred sites created a deep and enduring sense of displacement that is central to the Sikh diasporic consciousness, mapping directly onto Cohen's criterion of a collective memory and idealization of the ancestral homeland (Cohen 2008).

This was followed by what many Sikhs perceive as constitutional misidentification. In 1949, Explanation II to Article 25 of the Indian Constitution stipulated that for the limited purpose of social welfare and reform, the term 'Hindus' shall be construed to include Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists ('Article 25(2)' n.d.). While this is not a complete legal subsumption of Sikh identity, it has been a persistent source of grievance, seen by many as an attempt by the Hindu-majority state to erase a distinct Sikh religious and cultural identity. The Punjabi Suba Movement of the 1950s and 60s, a protracted struggle to preserve the Punjabi language and create a Punjabi-speaking state, further deepened the sense of marginalization. The movement resulted in the trifurcation of Punjab in 1966, and the Indian government's decision to designate Chandigarh as a shared capital with Haryana, effectively denying Punjab its own capital city (Sidhu 2018). These cumulative grievances, the loss of sacred sites, constitutional erasure, linguistic marginalization, and territorial dispossession, created the conditions for the political mobilization that would follow.

This context of systemic marginalization is crucial for understanding the rise of Sant Jarnail Singh Khalsa Bhindranwale. The scholarly debate surrounding his movement is complex and deeply divided. While the Indian state and mainstream media consistently portrayed the movement as secessionist, seeking the creation of a separate state of Khalistan, many scholars argue that this framing oversimplifies a complex response to the Indian state's centralizing tendencies. Singh and Purewal (2013), for instance, argue that the resurgence of Bhindranwale's image in contemporary Punjab is not a renewed call for separatism but a form of political protest and a means of remembering the traumatic events of 1984. Bhindranwale's core message, as preserved in the speeches Dr. Sandhu translated, was one of spiritual renewal and self-respect: 'Nashey shaddo, Amrit chakko, Gursikh banno' (Let go of your addictions, fulfill yourself with the nectar of God, become good students) (Sidhu 2018). His political demands, articulated through the Dharam Yudh Morcha and rooted in the Anandpur Sahib Resolution, were primarily for regional autonomy, control over river waters, and an end to discrimination – not secession (Sandhu 1999). This nuance is critical, as it reframes the movement not as a separatist insurgency, as it has been propagandized, but as a manifestation of the Miri-Piri principle: a demand for temporal justice rooted in spiritual authority.

The state's response – Operation Bluestar in June 1984, the subsequent anti-Sikh pogroms of November 1984, and the decade of disappearances that followed – was a brutal culmination of this long-simmering conflict. The violence was not spontaneous;

it was organized and openly incited by political and media figures. According to the eye-witness testimony of Jagdish Kaur, a victim of the pogroms, actor Amitabh Bachchan appeared on the state-run Doordarshan television network and declared, ‘Khoon ka badla khoon se layenge’ (We will take blood for blood) (Rana 2011). While this has been denied by Bachchan, it is widely cited within the Sikh community as evidence of the complicity of India’s cultural elite in the violence. More concretely and verifiably, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi appeared to justify the carnage by stating, ‘when a mighty tree falls, it is only natural that the earth around it does shake a little’ (Mitta and Phoolka 2007). The pogroms left an estimated 1,300 widows and 4,000 orphans in Delhi alone (Sidhu 2018).

The ‘Decade of Disappearances’ that followed was arguably even more devastating. Enabled by draconian laws like the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA), which effectively reversed the burden of proof by presuming guilt until innocence was proven, the Indian security forces carried out a campaign of extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and mass cremations (Bainiwal 2020). The heroic work of activist Jaswant Singh Khalra, who painstakingly documented the secret cremation of over 25,000 Sikhs, 6,017 of which were in Amritsar district alone, exposed the scale of this state terror. Khalra was himself abducted from his home when he was washing his car in 1995 and subsequently tortured and murdered by the Punjab police, a fate that underscores the lethal risks of challenging the state’s narrative (Devgan 2020). The scale of the violence is staggering: the pogroms of November 1984 alone left an estimated 1,300 widows and 4,000 orphans in Delhi, while the subsequent decade of counterinsurgency operations in Punjab resulted in tens of thousands of extrajudicial killings, many of which remain unacknowledged by the Indian state to this day (Sidhu 2018; Bainiwal 2020). This history of state violence, as analyzed by Bhogal (2011), represents a case where the state’s monopoly on violence is deployed to suppress a minority’s call for justice, prompting a theological and political response from the community that is both a demand for recognition and an act of collective survival (Bhogal 2011).

4.2. United States: from exclusion to advocacy

The Sikh experience in the United States, while different from the state terror in India, echoes the themes of misidentification, the struggle for justice, and the practice of Miri-Piri in a unique context. The early twentieth-century history of exclusion established a pattern of racial hostility that would persist for over a century. The Bellingham Riots of 1907, in which a white mob attacked South Asian lumber workers in Washington state, and the subsequent passage of the Barred Zone Act of 1917, which severely restricted immigration from Asia, signaled that Sikh immigrants were not welcome in the American body politic (Cahn 2008). This history of exclusion, rooted in racial and religious prejudice, created a ‘troubled relationship with the host society’ that is consistent with Cohen’s diaspora framework (Cohen 2008).

However, it is the post-9/11 era that most starkly illustrates the dangers of misidentification and the community’s theological response. The murder of Balbir Singh Sodhi on 15 September 2001, is a tragic and emblematic case. Sodhi was a man whose life embodied the principles of Sarbat da Bhala and seva. Having arrived in the United States from India, he worked his way through a series of jobs—at a 7-Eleven, a clothing store, a taxi

company—before saving enough to purchase a gas station in Mesa, Arizona (Sidhu 2018). He was known throughout his community for his extraordinary generosity. He regularly donated five hundred dollars to his local gurdwara, gave free gas to those who could not afford it, handed out candy to neighborhood children, and sent clothes to elderly people in his village back in India (Sidhu 2018). He was shot five times in the back by Frank Roque, a man who was inspired by news stories on and after 9/11 to spontaneously kill Muslims. He saw Sodhi's turban and beard as signs of terrorism, while Sodhi was planting flowers outside his gas station to honor the victims of the 9/11 attacks (Sidhu 2018). Sodhi had scheduled to hold a press conference the very next day to educate his local community about Sikhi and to express his solidarity with the nation's grief (Sidhu 2018). His murder was not an isolated incident but the most visible manifestation of a wave of hate crimes against Sikh Americans, a phenomenon that Jaideep Singh has characterized as a 'new American apartheid' (J. Singh 2013).

This event, and the broader climate of hostility, catalyzed a proactive response rooted in the Sikh principle of *Miri-Piri*. The formation of the Sikh Coalition on the very night of 11 September 2001, marked a decisive shift toward organized civil rights advocacy ('About Us' n.d.). This mirrors the pattern seen in India, where state oppression led to the political mobilization of the *Dharam Yudh Morcha*. In the US, the Sikh Coalition has become a formidable force for civil rights, successfully lobbying the FBI to create a separate tracking category for anti-Sikh hate crimes, campaigning for the right of Sikhs to serve in the US Army with their articles of faith (turban, unshorn hair, and beard), and advocating for anti-bullying protections for Sikh children in public schools ('About Us' n.d.). This proactive engagement demonstrates the operationalization of *Miri-Piri*. The insistence that spiritual identity and temporal rights are inseparable, and that the community has a theological duty to fight for justice not only for itself but for all who are marginalized. The Sikh Coalition's work also illustrates the evolution of the community's relationship with the American state. From the unintended private worship of the 'traveling gurdwara' in Ohio to the post-9/11 era, the community's response evolved into one of active, organized, and legally sophisticated advocacy. This shift represents a progression of the community's engagement with the host society, moving from the margins to the center of American civil rights discourse. This also demonstrates the universal potential of *Miri-Piri*. The Sikh Coalition's advocacy has benefited not only Sikhs but also other religious minorities who face similar forms of discrimination, embodying the *Sarbat da Bhala* principle of working for the welfare of all.

4.3. Indonesia: a comparative case of negotiation and service

The Sikh community in Indonesia provides a comparative counterpoint to the experiences of state violence in India and racial hostility in the United States. While they have not faced the same degree of overt persecution, they experience a more subtle but no less significant form of systemic oppression, bureaucratic erasure, and the denial of official recognition.

The arrival of Sikhs in Indonesia can be traced back to the nineteenth century, as part of the broader dynamics of colonialism and global migration. Originating from the Punjab region under British rule, many Sikhs were drawn to Southeast Asia by economic opportunities created by the Dutch colonial government. Their reputation for discipline

and determination made them valuable in sectors such as security and trade (Handayani 2025). Over the generations, the community established itself primarily in Jakarta and other major cities, building gurdwaras and maintaining its cultural and religious traditions. Despite this long history and their contributions to Indonesian society, Sikhi is not one of the six religions officially recognized by the Indonesian state (Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism). This lack of recognition has profound practical consequences. Sikhs are classified as Hindus on their identity cards and other official documents, a form of bureaucratic misidentification that parallels the constitutional subsumption under Article 25 in India (Putri, Truna, and Alamsyah 2023).

This challenge is compounded by the legal complexities surrounding Sikh articles of faith. The kirpan (ceremonial dagger), one of the five articles of faith that Khalsa- or baptized Sikhs are required to carry, exists in a legal gray area in Indonesia, where strict weapons laws can create friction with religious practice (Sidhu 2018). Similarly, the younger generation of Sikh Indonesians faces the challenge of maintaining a distinct identity within a multicultural but officially categorized society. Research by Putri, Truna, and Alamsyah (2023) on the diasporic identity of Sikh youth in Jakarta found that young Sikhs navigate a complex process of identity negotiation, balancing their Sikh heritage with the pressures of assimilation into the dominant Indonesian culture (Putri, Truna, and Alamsyah 2023).

In response to these challenges, the Sikh community in Indonesia has adopted a strategy that foregrounds the principle of Sarbat da Bhala through extensive public service and inter-religious engagement. The community operates *langar* (community kitchens) that are open to all, regardless of faith, and actively participates in the social life of the broader community. A particularly striking example is the practice of providing *takjil* (meals for breaking the fast) during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, demonstrating solidarity with the Muslim majority (Handayani 2025). This is a deployment of a core theological principle that epiphenomenally builds social capital, asserts a positive and distinct identity, and fosters inter-communal harmony in a context where official recognition is denied. This approach, which Handayani (2025) describes as contributing to ‘a more inclusive and harmonious Indonesian society’ (Handayani 2025), represents a form of soft power that contrasts with the more confrontational, rights-based advocacy seen in the US and India. The Indonesian case also raises important questions about the long-term sustainability of a strategy based primarily on service and goodwill. While the practice of *langar* and *takjil* has earned the community significant social capital, it has not resolved the fundamental issue of official recognition. The younger generation, as documented by Putri, Truna, and Alamsyah (2023), is increasingly caught between the desire to maintain a distinct Sikh identity and the pragmatic pressures of assimilation into a society that does not formally acknowledge their faith (Putri, Truna, and Alamsyah 2023). This tension between theological identity and bureaucratic reality is a defining feature of the Indonesian Sikh experience, and it suggests that the community may eventually need to supplement its Sarbat da Bhala strategy with more assertive forms of advocacy, similar to Martin Luther King Jr.’s form of advocacy in the US. Yet the current approach is driven by the same underlying theological impulse that animates Sikh responses in other contexts: the belief that the welfare of all is a spiritual duty, and that service to the broader community is the truest form of worship.

5. Comparative discussion

Synthesizing the insights from Dr. Sandhu's interview with the three case studies reveals a consistent, theology-driven model of diaspora engagement. The specific challenges vary dramatically – state terror and extrajudicial killings in India, racial profiling and hate crimes in the US, bureaucratic erasure and non-recognition in Indonesia – but the response is consistently informed by the core tenets of Sikhi.

Feature	Indonesia	India	United States
Form of Misidentification	Bureaucratic (classified as Hindu)	Constitutional (subsumed under Hindu law)	Racial Profiling (mistaken for Muslim)
Nature of State Relationship	Systemic Neglect and Non-recognition	Active Persecution and State Violence	Othering and Post-9/11 Securitization
Primary Theological Response	<i>Sarbat da Bhala</i> (Inter-religious Service)	<i>Miri-Piri</i> (Political Resistance)	<i>Miri-Piri</i> (Civil Rights Advocacy)
Key Institutional Expression	Community langar, Ramadan <i>takjil</i>	<i>Dharam Yudh Morcha</i> , Shiromani Akali Dal	Sikh Coalition, civil rights litigation
Relationship to Cohen's Framework	Creative, enriching life in host country	Traumatic dispersal, collective memory	Troubled relationship with host society

This comparison, grounded in Dr. Sandhu's lived experience and contextualized by broader historical and political events, demonstrates that Sikh solidarity is not a monolithic concept. It is a dynamic application of consistent theological tenets to diverse political and social landscapes. What was expected but is still striking is how the same theological principles produce different strategic outcomes depending on the political context. In India, where the state was the direct perpetrator of violence, *Miri-Piri* manifested as political resistance and the demand for self-determination. In the United States, where the threat came from societal racism and government indifference, *Miri-Piri* was channeled into civil rights litigation and institutional advocacy. In Indonesia, where the challenge is bureaucratic erasure rather than active persecution, *Sarbat da Bhala* became the primary vehicle for asserting identity through service and inter-communal solidarity. This adaptability suggests that the theological framework is not a rigid doctrine but a flexible set of principles that can be calibrated to the specific nature of the threat faced by the community. The principle of *Miri-Piri* fuels both the political resistance of the *Dharam Yudh Morcha* in India and the civil rights advocacy of the Sikh Coalition in the United States. The principle of *Sarbat da Bhala* inspires both the inter-religious charity in Jakarta and the Sikh engagement with the Black Lives Matter movement in the US, as documented by Bainiwal (2023), who analyzed how Sikh Americans navigated the tension between their 'model minority privilege' and their theological commitment to solidarity with Black communities (Bainiwal 2023).

This analysis also reveals a dimension of the Sikh diaspora experience that Cohen's framework, while impactful, does not fully capture. Cohen's nine features describe the structural and emotional characteristics of a diaspora – dispersal, memory, idealization, return, group consciousness, and so on, but they do not account for the role of an integrated political theology as a primary driver of solidarity and action. The Sikh case suggests that for communities with a strong tradition of political theology, the theological tenets themselves become a defining feature of the diasporic experience, shaping not only how the community responds to external threats but also how it understands its own

purpose and identity in the world. Describing it as a ‘strong ethnic group consciousness’ in Cohen’s terms is an oversimplification; it is a theologically grounded imperative to act in the world, a mandate that transcends the boundaries of ethnicity and extends to all of humanity through the principle of *Sarbat da Bhala*.

This proactive, justice-oriented framework finds a powerful parallel in the philosophy of Martin Luther King Jr. In his 1967 speech at the 10th Annual SCLC Convention in Atlanta, ‘Where Do We Go From Here?’, King shared a vision of power that resonates deeply with the Sikh concept of Miri-Piri: ‘Power at its best, is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best, is power correcting everything that stands against love’ (King 1967). This formulation – power as the fusion of love and justice – mirrors the Sikh insistence that spiritual authority (Piri) and physical influence (Miri) are not separate domains but are most effective when synthesized. Just as King argued that ‘power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic’ (King 1967), the Sikh tradition agrees that personal spiritual devotion without engaging with the world is incomplete, and political power without spiritual grounding is meaningless. This cross-cultural resonance is not merely rhetorical; it has been actively practiced by Sikh Americans in their engagement with the Black Lives Matter movement. As Bainiwal (2023) documented, Sikh Americans have drawn on the principle of *Sarbat da Bhala* to exemplify their solidarity with Black communities, navigating the tension between their ‘model minority privilege’ and their theological commitment to justice (Bainiwal 2023). This suggests that the Sikh model of solidarity, far from being a parochial phenomenon, speaks to a universal aspiration for a form of power that is both just and compassionate, and that it provides a practical framework for building coalitions across racial and religious lines.

This resonance is not coincidental; it reflects a deeper structural parallel between Sikh political theology and the broader tradition of liberation theology. Gutiérrez (1973) argued that authentic theology must begin from the perspective of the oppressed and that the separation of the spiritual from the political is itself an ideological act that serves existing power structures (Gutiérrez 1973, 36–39). Cone (1969) extended this argument to the Black American context, insisting that a theology which does not address the material conditions of racial oppression is no theology at all (Cone 1969, 1–17). The Sikh doctrine of Miri-Piri anticipates this insight by several centuries. Guru Hargobind’s donning of two swords in 1606 – following Emperor Jahangir’s execution of Guru Arjan for the perceived transgression of allowing spiritual authority to accumulate temporal influence (Grewal 1990, 58–62) – formalized the refusal to accept any imposed separation between the sacred and the political. As Mandair (2009) argues, this was not merely a pragmatic militarization but a philosophical intervention: the assertion that sovereignty and spirituality are co-constitutive, not competing domains that the state may selectively permit or suppress (Mandair 2009). What liberation theology articulated as a twentieth-century intervention – that the sacred demands political engagement – Sikh theology had already institutionalized as doctrine. King’s ‘Where Do We Go From Here?’ speech is thus not an isolated parallel but one expression of a broader theological tradition that shares with Sikhi the fundamental conviction that power without love is tyranny and love without power is sentimentality. The cross-cultural resonance documented by Bainiwal (2023) in Sikh-BLM solidarity is, in

this light, not merely strategic coalition-building but a recognition of shared theological grammar (Bainiwal 2023).

Moreover, this analysis challenges the tendency, critiqued by Mandair (2009), to view Sikh responses to oppression through a purely secular, political lens. The formation of the Sikh Coalition, for instance, is not only a political act; it is a theological one, an expression of the *Miri-Piri* mandate to fight injustice in the physical world. Similarly, the provision of *langar* during *Ramadan* in Indonesia is not only an act of companionship; it is a lived expression of *Sarbat da Bhala*, the prayer for the welfare of all. By recognizing the theological dimension of these actions, we gain a more accurate understanding of the Sikh diaspora's engagement with the world.

6. Conclusion

This analysis, grounded in an original oral history with a key witness and scholar, demonstrates that Sikh pan-ethnic solidarity is a direct and consistent application of core theological tenets in response to the challenges of diasporic life. Dr. Ranbir Singh Sandhu's interview, when placed in the context of Sikh experiences in Indonesia, India, and the United States, reveals a resilient and replicable framework for navigating systemic neglect, state violence, and racial discrimination. The doctrines of *Sarbat da Bhala* and *Miri-Piri*, understood not as separate religious and political spheres but as a synthesized political theology in the manner argued by Mandair (2009), are practiced as avenues for political mobilization, civil rights advocacy, community building, and inter-religious engagement.

This study contributes to the field of Sikh Studies by using original oral history data to explicitly link theological concepts to socio-political outcomes across multiple national contexts. It moves the conversation beyond a simple narrative of oppression and response to a more nuanced understanding of how a community's internal philosophical and theological explorations shape its engagement with the world. The Sandhu interview, in particular, provides a valuable primary source that illuminates the intellectual and emotional dimensions of the diaspora experience, from the painstaking work of historical preservation to the personal pain of political disillusionment.

The implications of this analysis extend beyond the Sikh case. The model of theology-based solidarity documented here offers a framework for understanding how other faith-based diasporas, from the Jewish experience that Cohen originally studied to the Tibetan Buddhist diaspora to the Palestinian Muslim and South-American Catholic communities, mobilize their theological resources in response to displacement and oppression. The Sikh case is unique in the explicitness of its theological mandate (*Miri-Piri* as a formal doctrine of integrated spiritual-temporal authority), but the underlying dynamic, the use of theological principles as a framework for political action and community solidarity, may be a more widespread phenomenon than current diaspora studies acknowledges, though this claim, grounded here in the Sikh case alone, requires further comparative research to substantiate.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged, and they point toward productive avenues for future inquiry. The primary data is based on a single oral history interview, and while Dr. Sandhu's testimony is rich and insightful, it represents one perspective within a diverse community. His experience as a male, highly educated, first-

generation immigrant shapes the themes that emerged from the analysis, and different interviewees—women, second-generation diaspora members, working-class Sikhs—might foreground different aspects of the diasporic experience. The comparative case studies, while drawn from multiple national contexts, rely on a combination of primary and secondary sources and could be deepened with additional fieldwork. Future research could build on this work by conducting more extensive oral histories with other figures from the twentieth century, by undertaking oral history fieldwork within the Sikh community in Indonesia, a significantly under-researched context, and by exploring how the theological frameworks of *Miri-Piri* and *Sarbat da Bhala* are being adapted by a new generation of Sikh activists. Ultimately, the journey of the Sikh diaspora, as illuminated by the life and work of figures like Dr. Sandhu, offers a powerful testament to how faith can be mobilized as a tool for social justice, historical preservation, and the unwavering pursuit of a world where the welfare of all is paramount. At a time when religious identity is too often instrumentalized as a source of division and conflict, the Sikh model of theology-driven solidarity offers a counter-narrative: a vision of faith as a bridge between communities, a mandate for justice, and a foundation for the kind of inclusive, compassionate engagement with the world that is captured in the closing words of the *Ardas*—*Nanak nam chardi kala, tere bhane Sarbat da Bhala*—‘In the name of Nanak, raise your spirits high, and may your will bring welfare to all.’

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Data availability statement

The primary data for this study consists of an oral history interview. The transcript is not publicly available to protect the privacy of the individual, but relevant excerpts are available from the author upon reasonable request.

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