

## Introduction

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The central argument of this book is quite simple: we need to move beyond existing tropes, especially religion, that have defined Sikh subjectivities. An integrated approach to nationalism, identity and diaspora offers a more comprehensive understanding of Sikh aspirations for self-determination since the late nineteenth century. The Sikh case provides striking new insights into minority religious nationalism in the colonial and postcolonial contexts and questions the centrality of the homeland in the discourses of long-distance nationalism in a globalised world, thus making possible de-territorialised nationalism.

The word *Sikh* has its origins in Sanskrit (*sisya*) meaning disciple or student. The Sikhs, as their gurus intended, stand out from the crowd with their unshorn hair and turbans (males) and covered heads (females). This distinctiveness is also only too evident in popular caricatures of the community as a martial race, agriculturalists, entrepreneurs, risk-takers, victims of discrimination and terrorists deeply committed to their faith and the politics of their homeland – the Punjab, ‘the land of the five rivers’.

Globally, there are about 26 million Sikhs, of whom about 23 million are found in India, where they are less than 2 per cent of the total population.<sup>1</sup> The vast majority (78 per cent) live in the Punjab, where they make up 58 per cent of the state’s inhabitants. Concentrated pockets of Sikhs also exist in the northern states of Haryana, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, and in Delhi and most large cities in India. Outside of South Asia, 2–3 million Sikhs live in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, the Persian Gulf, South-East Asia and Australasia.<sup>2</sup> This diaspora dates from the end of

<sup>1</sup> These figures are based on the projections of growth from the 2011 census, which noted a figure of 20.4 million in India and 16 million in the Punjab. For further details, see Census India (2011).

<sup>2</sup> There are small numbers in Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. For the global distribution of the Sikh population, see Chapter 8.

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the nineteenth century, but grew rapidly after 1945, with further outflows from the Punjab after 1984.

The Sikh question erupted dramatically onto the international stage in the early 1980s. A regional autonomy movement led by a moderate Sikh political party, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), climaxed in the storming of the Golden Temple (the Sikhs' holiest shrine) by the Indian Army in June 1984 (Nayar and Singh 1985; Tully and Jacob 1985; Jeffrey 1986). This was followed by the assassination of the prime minister of India, Mrs Indira Gandhi, and riots in Delhi in which 3,000 Sikhs died. These momentous events produced a decade of insurgency in the Punjab by militant Sikhs, during which 30,000 people were killed. Internationally, the Sikh diaspora organisations waged a highly vociferous campaign against human rights abuses in the Punjab and for a separate state of Khalistan (literally, 'land of the pure' or 'land of the Khalsa').<sup>3</sup>

Almost four decades after these events there is no comprehensive analytical appraisal of Sikh nationalism.<sup>4</sup> Surprisingly, given the political interest in the community's fortunes, systematic research has focused on a few key areas only. In the West, there has naturally been much concern about diasporic and host land issues, such as integration and public policies against discrimination.<sup>5</sup> Some of these works have made a major contribution to diaspora and transnational studies (Tatla 1999; Axel 2001; Dusenbery 2008). The growth of Sikh studies as a distinct area of research has introduced new methodological approaches that have problematised the conventional understanding of Sikh politics (*Sikh Formations* 2005–; Mandair 2009), and researchers within political science have provided more empirically grounded analyses of violence and ethnic conflict management in the Punjab (G. Singh 2000; Chima 2010; Lutz 2017). Yet distinctly missing from this literature has been the use of frameworks of ethnicity and nationalism to explain the multiple dimensions of the Sikh case that integrate the politics of a religious minority in India and an ethno-religious diaspora.<sup>6</sup>

The main difficulty which confronts researchers in addressing the subject from this perspective is how to define the Sikhs sociologically. This problem was first highlighted by Juergensmeyer and Barrier in the 1970s, who suggested that the Sikhs exhibited the contradictory characteristics of

<sup>3</sup> The Khalsa is the majority Sikh identity generally seen as synonymous with the Sikh community; see Chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>4</sup> Deol (2000) and Shani (2008a) are two exceptions. However, they are dated and do not embrace the approach outlined here.

<sup>5</sup> For a review of this literature, and on Sikhs studies generally, see contributions to two leading journals in the field: *Sikh Formations* (2005–) and *Journal of Punjab Studies* (2005–15).

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 2 for an explanation of the term *ethno-religious*.

‘a social group with a long history and a present-day community of faith’, such that ‘one is born into the Sikh community; but one may also voluntarily leave [or join] it’ (1979, 2). Whereas the former definition conforms to the conventional view of an ethnic group or a nation, the latter is more appropriate to a sect or a religious group (Dusenbery 2008, 120). One way of overcoming this conundrum is to employ the narratives Sikhs themselves use to define their subjectivities.

Sikh national aspirations and Sikh politics can be better appreciated as the interaction and outcome of three competing narratives of the community’s identity that frequently overlap. Firstly, the main narrative which still defines the community is religion, as a world religion like Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. When Sikhism is viewed as a faith, the claims to a territorial homeland are necessarily greatly diminished, notably in the imaginings of non-Punjabi Sikhs and the diaspora. Secondly, the narrative of a nation continues to be an important signifier rooted in the attachment to the Punjab, the historical myths and memories of the Sikh empire in the nineteenth century, and the territorialisation of Sikh identity with the creation of a Punjabi-speaking state in the Indian Union (1966). Thirdly, Sikhs are often defined as a minority by state registers of religion, ethnicity, language and culture. Consciousness of being a vulnerable minority has been deeply ingrained in Sikh history. As a distinct cultural minority, the Sikhs in South Asia and the diaspora have often made common cause with other cultural minorities in pursuit of minority rights.

Methodologically, an attractive approach to explain the historical and modern political consequences of these three narratives is offered by critical theory, which now predominates in the interdisciplinary field of Sikh studies.<sup>7</sup> An eclectic theoretical outlook that draws on post-structural, postmodern and postcolonial theory, critical theory aims to deconstruct the Sikh subject in the metropolitan heartland and the homeland as essentially the *object* of theorisation. Thus, the narratives of a ‘nation’ among Sikhs are reinterpreted as contemporary manifestations of colonialism that perpetuate racial domination in the West while simultaneously trapping Sikhs in ethnocidal struggles for nation-statehood against the ‘real’ interests in South Asia (Mandair 2009, 2015). Deeply embedded in these narratives, critical theorists assert, are values of patriarchy, masculinity and colonial cultural essentialism (Jakobsh 2003). Nationalism as an ideology is held to be innately Eurocentric, a concept alien to societies such as those in South Asia (Mandair 2009, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> To be sure, *critical theory* is an overarching term which covers the diverse intellectual influences within cultural studies as applied to Sikh studies. See Ahluwalia, Mandair and Singh (2005) and Chapter 1.

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Critical theory has contributed to a better understanding of gender, colonialism as an ideology and Sikh religious text (Malhotra 2002; Mandair 2009). But as a fully developed theoretical approach, it suffers from two serious weaknesses. As Chrisman has pointed out, critical theory sees ‘nationalism as a primarily cultural and epistemological, rather than social-political, formation’ (2004, 183); perhaps more importantly, it also fails to fully account for Sikhs’ subjective experience and its impact on the community’s modern political history.

Accordingly, we recognise the heuristic merits of critical theory in Sikh studies and draw on it where relevant. However, our aim is to understand the existence within the global Sikh community of the drive to establish a distinctive Sikh identity and its political expression through the pursuit of autonomy and statehood within the well-established literature on the study of ethnicity and nationalism. This literature has evolved since the 1960s to explain the rise of nationalism in developed and developing countries alike, and though the experience of the latter has differed significantly from that of the former, generic similarities can be discerned in both contexts. The Sikh case, as an example of the ‘nationalism of small peoples’ (Smith 1999, 203), illustrates that nationalism as an ideology and as a mass phenomenon appealed beyond the movements led by the Indian National Congress Party (hereafter the Congress (Party)) or the Muslim League. In other words, we seek to draw attention to the popular characteristics of nationalism as an emotive force capable of mobilising subaltern groups as well as modernising elites in the developing world.

Our idea of a nation and the ideology of nationalism borrows from the work of Anthony D. Smith. For Smith, a nation is a ‘named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and memories, a single economy, and common rights for all members’ (1991, 14). Smith defines nationalism ‘as an ideological movement for the maintenance and attainment of autonomy, unity and identity of a human population[;] some of its members conceive it to constitute an actual or potential “nation”’ (2001, 9). Both the idea of nation and nationalism as an ideology of self-determination, Smith suggests, can be more fully explained by what he calls an ethno-symbolic approach, which aims to uncover the cultural roots of nationalism that account for the persistence and irrationality of the ethnonationalist bond by ‘comprehending the “inner world” of ethnicity and nationalism’ (61). Following Smith, we draw on the ethno-symbolic approach to probe the cultural heritage of Sikh nationalism that continues to provide the mainspring of its resilience.

But for a comprehensive understanding of Sikh nationalism today it is also necessary to include three other closely related dimensions. Firstly,

the narrative of a minority has very much been shaped by the world around the Sikhs, especially in the Punjab. Like for the Baluchis, Kashmiris, Nagas, Tamils (in Sri Lanka) and Kurds in the Middle East, the rise of majority nationalisms around these communities as the principal ‘other’ has fostered a reactive, minority demand for autonomy and self-determination. In the case of the Sikhs, as a small minority with a strong religious ethic to neither ‘dominate nor be dominated’, this narrative has deep historical roots. Modern manifestations of this minority consciousness, even as the ‘dominant minority’ during the Sikh empire,<sup>8</sup> have included the veneration of the Punjab’s social and religious pluralism, and under colonialism, support for political power-sharing and multiculturalism.<sup>9</sup> Within the diaspora, the Sikhs have pioneered campaigns to ensure greater protection of minority cultural rights.

Secondly, the role of the diaspora in the development of Sikh nationalism is integral to our approach. Somewhat unusually, the Sikh diaspora emerged simultaneously with the rise of modern Sikh nationalism. Almost a century later, the diaspora and the homeland remain mutually dependent – a dependence reinforced by common religious institutions and transnational networks of business, family and religious philanthropy. In the 1980s and 1990s the diaspora played a central role in giving ideological and practical shape to the campaign for a separate state (Tatla 1999; Axel 2001). Today it is the site of a minority politics of difference, of novel ways of imagining the Sikh nation.

Thirdly, the rise of religious nationalism since the end of the Cold War offers a new point of departure for a critique of Indian nationalism and the secular state as the guarantor of minority religious rights. Since independence the Sikh question in Indian politics has posed a sharp counterpoint to the Congress Party’s civic conception of nationalism (Nayar 1966). But the relative ease with which the latter has been now supplanted by the Hindu nationalism of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) requires us to rethink the origins of religious nationalism in India before 1947 and to reassess the policies to manage religious diversity (van der Veer 1994; Kim 2019). One consequence of these policies has been to strengthen the close nexus between religion and nationalism among these communities by frustrating the development of a viable civil society, an outcome that has seriously limited the political autonomy of religious minority elites (Kim 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Historically the Sikhs, like Ulster Unionists and Indians and Chinese in Africa and East Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, are sometimes referred to as ‘dominant minorities’ who exercised political or economic control because of colonisation or their economic power. Under the British Raj the metaphors of ‘Ulster’ for the Punjab and ‘Protestant’ for Sikhs were regularly used in colonial thinking; see Chapters 2 and 4.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of *power-sharing* and *multiculturalism* as a concept, see Chapters 2 and 8.

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To summarise: this work uses an integrated approach to understand the historical origins of Sikh nationalism. It draws on theories of ethnicity and nationalism, in particular Smith's ethno-symbolic framework, to examine the cultural roots of Sikh nationalism and how it was transformed in the late nineteenth century. It locates the narrative of Sikhs as a minority in the broader debates about nation-building before and after 1947 and the politics of power-sharing and multiculturalism in South Asia and the diaspora. The role of the diaspora is central to our assessment of the post-1984 campaign for a separate homeland and its reinvention as the site of new imaginaries of Sikhs as a nation. Equally important for us are the radical implications of the rise of religious nationalism in India that necessitate a rethinking of the nature of India's secular state and the civic nationalism of the Congress Party. Overall, this approach, we maintain, offers a more coherent and comprehensive explanation of Sikh nationalism.

Chapter 1 discusses at length the dominant narratives of Sikh identity – religion, nation and minority status – and how the literature of ethnicity and nationalism has framed them since the 1960s. It reviews in detail the scholarship on the subject and its application to the Sikhs, and outlines the key elements of our approach.

Chapter 2 traces the emergence of a Sikh identity from the birth of the tradition in the fifteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. It highlights the highly contested historiography of Sikhism and the Sikhs and the major transformations that enabled the religious tradition to become a political force in the Punjab, culminating in the Sikh empire and the latter's annexation by the British in 1849. The impact of colonial modernity on Sikhism and Sikhs in creating a consciousness of being a 'world religion' and a 'nation' is also assessed.

Chapter 3 discusses in some detail the rise of modern Sikh nationalism from the end of the nineteenth century to before the outbreak of the Second World War. It evaluates the importance of the internal and external influences that contributed to the rise of a reformed Sikh identity, the new religious and political institutions and the social and political divisions within Sikh society that date from this period. Popular manifestations of the new nationalist consciousness are explored in the development of a distinct press, literature and material culture. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the dilemmas of the Sikhs as a political minority in the Punjab faced with colonial democratisation against the spectre of Muslim and Hindu majoritarianism.

Chapter 4 provides an in-depth account of the Sikh community's response to the transfer of power in India that began with the Lahore Resolution of the Muslim League in March 1940, with its call for the creation of Pakistan that resulted in the division of British India in

August 1947. It reviews how the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan, which laid claim to the whole of the Punjab, and the Congress Party's demand for a downsized India with a quick transfer of power turned the Sikh world order upside down. The failure to accommodate Sikh demands in the 3 June Plan (1947), which resulted in one of the most violent tragedies of the twentieth century, is critically evaluated.

Chapter 5 outlines the ethnic conflict strategies the Indian state used to manage the Sikh question after 1947. It examines the impact of Partition that concentrated the Sikh population in East Punjab in the India Union and the campaign for a Punjabi-speaking state that the Congress Party thwarted until 1966. The incomplete linguistic reorganisation thereafter laid the basis of the autonomy movement in the early 1980s.

In Chapter 6 we offer a systematic overview of Operation Blue Star, the Indian Army's entry into the Golden Temple, its consequences, and the Centre's political strategies to manage the 'Punjab problem' up to the 1990s. We discuss in some detail how the failure of these strategies led to the marginalisation of moderate Sikh political leadership, which emboldened the militants, with the support of organisations in the diaspora, to launch a decade of insurgency in the battle for a separate state of Khalistan. We conclude by evaluating the competing explanations for the failure of this insurgency.

Chapter 7 reviews the aftermath of the separatist insurgency and the return to conventional politics by mainstream Sikh formations. It critically examines how Sikh political elites attempted to manage political aspirations for autonomy against the Centre's refusal to concede the substantive demands that led to the tragic events of 1984. These responses are situated within the contemporary challenges to Sikh identity posed by globalisation and the rise of Hindu nationalism, which threatens to reabsorb Sikhism into Hinduism.

Chapter 8 provides an overview of the Sikh diaspora from its origins to the present day. It evaluates the diaspora's role as the site of radical politics from the early twentieth century, the change in this role with the settlement of a large number of Sikhs in Western countries and, after 1984, the involvement of diaspora organisations in the campaign for Khalistan. We assess the post-9/11 implications of the gradual displacement of the politics of homeland by the politics of recognition that is creating new opportunities for reimagining the global Sikh community.

Finally, the conclusion reflects on the current global condition of Sikh nationalism and the lessons the Sikh case offers for the comparative study of ethnicity, nations and nationalism.



## 1 Understanding Sikh Nationalism

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The Sikhs represent something of a puzzle: they are a distinct cultural and religious community with a vibrant diaspora and a territorial homeland, but do not easily conform to the frames of ethnicity and nationalism. This paradox is even more striking when we consider that within 550 years they have developed from a small religious group to a paradigmatic transnational community. The political events that have convulsed the community over the past four decades stand in sharp contrast to the lack of rigorous analysis of Sikh nationalism as a political phenomenon. At the heart of this paradox, some argue, are essential tensions between the methodological approaches of ethnicity and nationalism and the character of the Sikh community itself that require the use of pre-modern, vernacular Indic concepts (Ballard 1996; Dusenbery 2008; Shani 2008a; Mandair 2009).<sup>1</sup> These tensions, however, also offer an opportunity to reflect more critically on the approaches to the study of ethnicity and nationalism and apply them to an example that does not readily conform to conventional cases.

This chapter reviews how students of the subject have framed the understanding of Sikh nationalism since the 1960s. Before undertaking this task, it outlines the dominant narratives of Sikh identity which provide the starting point for a more detailed review of the literature. The chapter concludes with an outline of the key elements of our approach to the subject.

### **Dominant Narratives of Sikh Identity Today**

On 23 March 1983, the House of Lords, the highest appellate court in the United Kingdom at the time, heard an appeal of the *Mandla v. Dowell Lee*

<sup>1</sup> Dusenbery (2008, 127–30) suggests that the Indic concepts of *panth* and *qaum* used by Sikhs and referred to since the eighteenth century are more appropriate today than the concepts of either religion or nation. *Panth* refers to a path or way followed by a charismatic spiritual leader with substantial devotees. *Qaum* is an Arabic term for ‘people who stand together’, and from the nineteenth century it was translated as ‘nationality’ or ‘race’. Beyond the panth is the idea of *dharam*, a moral religious order. Sikhs use these terms interchangeably, but panth has become a synonym for the Sikh community. An earlier argument for this approach was made by Ballard (1996).



case. The appeal concerned the right of a turban-wearing Sikh pupil not to be discriminated against under the provision of the Race Relations Act (1976). As the act applied only to racial and ethnic groups, the question arose as to whether Sikhs were a religious, national or ethnic group (G. Singh and Tatla 2006, 131–3). The appeal brought into sharp focus the three main narratives of contemporary Sikh identity. Like all narratives, these construct the Sikhs as a subject of academic study and impact how Sikhs see themselves and the world around them.

The dominant narrative within academia has been to view the Sikhs as a religious community, followers of a universal religion such as Christianity, Hinduism and Islam. Here Sikhism resembles a ‘world religion’, a faith tradition that has overcome its roots in north-west India and that focuses ‘on the transcendent appeal and relevance of the Guru’s teachings’ (Dusenbery 2008, 125). Sikhism’s open embrace of converts has led, for example, to a thriving community of *gora* (white) Sikhs in North America, who like many in the diaspora and South Asia share little of the cultural heritage of Sikhs from the Punjab. The emergence of Sikhism as a ‘world religion’ has been underpinned not only by the popularity of the faith, but also by the doctrine and practices of the tradition centred on the Guru Granth Sahib (Sikh scripture), the establishment of religious institutions and the growth of a large religious bureaucracy to support them. While the recognition of Sikhism as a universal faith was undoubtedly influenced by the activities of Sikh religious reformers at the end of the nineteenth century, the register of religion remains the primary mode of identification and self-identification for the community in South Asia and overseas.<sup>2</sup>

The second narrative identifies the Sikhs as a modern nation with clear geographical boundaries, though one *without* independent statehood. The Sikh community, seen from this perspective, has a historical and ethnic dimension which shares collective myths and memories dating from the creation of the order of the Khalsa and Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s empire. Because the overwhelming majority of Sikhs are Punjabis, share a common language (Punjabi) and a homeland (the Punjab), and have their own ‘political system’, this degree of religious and subnational autonomy is deemed sufficient to accord to nationhood (Chaddah 1982). This narrative has waxed and waned since the late nineteenth century but gained prominence after 1984 in the diaspora among organisations campaigning for an independent state. For Sikhs in South Asia and also the diaspora, this self-identification coexists

<sup>2</sup> The year-long events to globally mark the 550th anniversary of Guru Nanak from 12 November 2019 is a case in point.

unproblematically with the view of the community as also essentially religious.<sup>3</sup>

The third main narrative which has received less attention, but is no less important, both in the diaspora and in South Asia, is the idea of Sikh as a minority defined by the dominant state registers (Kymlicka 1995; Barry 2001; G. Singh and Tatla 2006). In popular perception, especially within the diaspora, it is not uncommon for Sikhs to describe themselves as a minority and for officials to define them as such in state policies on religion, ethnicity language or culture. Hence in India the Sikhs are officially recognised as a religious minority, and much of the post-1947 politics of the community have been framed within the discourse of minority religious rights.<sup>4</sup> In fact, from the first decade of the twentieth century, the community itself embraced the narrative of a minority which needed special protection from the colonial state. Since 1947, this self-perception has only strengthened as the diaspora has grown and as Western democracies have embraced multiculturalism as a way of managing religious and ethnic diversity (Rex and G.Singh 2004).

It is a truism that these contemporary narratives intersect and interact in complex ways. Sikhs themselves have added to the confusion by making selective use of these narratives to advance their political demands, as the turban cases in the United States, Canada, England and France have demonstrated. In the Punjab the campaign for a Punjabi-speaking province was pursued on linguistic rather than religious grounds. Each narrative has serious limitations as the primary signifier of community identity. Religion, for example, despite its claim to universalism, overlooks the fact that the vast majority of the tradition's followers are still regionally based. Nationalism, on the other hand, homogenises and territorialises the community, excluding groups that do not share common cultural and geographic markers. Finally, Sikhs as a minority, whether in India or part of the diaspora, highlights further internal fissures, whether these are defined by caste, gender, sexualities or other markers of social identity.

Yet these analytical difficulties are not peculiar to the Sikhs.<sup>5</sup> Competing narratives of self-identity do not *ipso facto* rule out a serious

<sup>3</sup> On 9 November 2019, India and Pakistan opened the Kartarpur Corridor, which links a *gurdwara* (a Sikh temple) in Pakistan's territory with India. Both states viewed the opening as the fulfilment of a long-standing *religious* demand. For Sikhs, on the other hand, the opening had both *national* and *religious* significance, a fact illustrated by the speeches Sikh representatives gave on the occasion. For the background to the corridor, see G. Singh (2019a) and Chapter 7.

<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Article 25(2) of the constitution of India defines Sikhs as Hindus. For the significance of the definition of Sikhs as a religious minority and Article 25 (2), see Chapters 5 and 7.

<sup>5</sup> For how they apply to the Jews, see Smith (1999, chap. 8) and Myers (2015).