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Sikh Studies in the Western Academy: Exploring its Prospects and Challenges

ABSTRACTS

1. **“From the Margins to the Mainstream? Critical Reflections on Half a Century of Sikh Studies”**

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Abstract

As an active participant in Sikh Studies over the past 45 years the author feels this may be the appropriate time to take stock and offer personal reflections on the historical and current state of Sikh Studies in the Sikh diaspora. These reflections cover the period from the late 1960s - noted for increased academic interest in Guru Nanak given the founder's 500th centenary and the first major diaspora Conference on Sikh Studies at Berkeley in 1969 - to the current period. There are five specific aspects explored in these reflections. Firstly, have Sikh Studies entered the mainstream curriculums in the Social Sciences and Humanities, and if so, where, when and at what level? What has been the impact? If not, why not? Secondly, who have been the leading scholars in Sikh Studies during this period and how has their contribution been received by both scholars and communities? Thirdly, what role have diaspora communities played in raising expectations and profile of Sikh Studies? This will involve examining three models in three localities: North American, British and Asian (Singapore and Malaysia). Fourthly, what have been the degrees of interactions and dialogues between diaspora based Sikh Studies scholars and Sikh Scholars based in Punjab or India in general? How are the new generation of Sikh Scholars raised in the diaspora engaging with Punjab based scholars? Does this engagement even matter? Finally, what are the potential trajectories of Sikh Studies? Will

they also include textual analysis? Who will train scholar to undertake this especially as Sikh Studies undergoes a generational change? Or will Sikh Studies submerge into Diaspora Studies or another mainstream area of academic study with Sikhs as a special case study? Hopefully, these five critical areas of exploration will provide important insights into struggles, diversities, controversies and challenges that have faced Sikh Studies and provide an assessment on the degree of progress over the past half a century. The paper will conclude by identifying some critical lessons of the past when thinking about future directions in Sikh Studies.

2. **“Sikh Studies in the United Kingdom: academic and community perspectives”**

Dr. Opinderjit Kaur Takhar
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University of Wolverhampton, UK

Abstract

In the last decade, academic Sikh Studies in the United Kingdom has becoming increasingly visible with a significant rise in PhD research and academic publications on the Sikhs and Sikhi. The United Kingdom’s first and only Centre for Sikh and Panjabi Studies was established at the University of Wolverhampton in March 2018. A funded Chair in Sikh Studies at the University of Birmingham was also announced in November 2019 to mark the 550th Gurburab of Guru Nanak. A major three-day International Sikh Studies Conference was held at the University of Wolverhampton in September 2019 which brought together Sikh scholars from around the globe, the previous one on this scale had taken place at Coventry University in 1999. The community engagement aspect was also an important outcome of this conference, which was not without its challenges and unfounded suspicions. The rapid rise in the number of Sikh Free Schools in the UK, which receive central Government funding, also presents an interesting dimension when discussing academic and community-based approaches to new research in Sikh Studies. In this paper therefore, I will be discussing my approach to Sikh Studies in the United Kingdom from both an academic as well as community engagement angle. The repercussions of unfounded myths which lead to the trolling of Sikh scholars engaging in Sikh Studies will be analysed by referring to theories around the insider/outsider as well as the emic/etic perspectives. This paper will explore my experiences in engaging with the non-academic British Sikh community in order for my research to make a real impact on the community around which it is centred and how this becomes impactful research and outreach in the British Higher Educational environment. Another important point to be raised in this discussion is the gendered approach to Sikh scholars embedded in Sikh Studies and the various challenges, and indeed opportunities, this has given rise to. The future for Sikh Studies in the United Kingdom therefore promises to be exciting, but not one that will be without its challenges.

3. **“History, Memory, Community, and the Politics of Conversion”**

Dr. Anshu Malhotra
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Abstract

History-writing has always been a politically charged enterprise. It has historically served at one end the patrons of chroniclers, the mighty and the powerful; and on the other, it has been vulnerable to demotic pressures. As the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has noted, the inception of academic history in India, the “cloister” in his writing, was also the moment that popular pressures were brought to bear on what was documented, investigated and written, a tensive relationship that has continued to shape both politics and history-writing. (Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Calling of History: Sir Jadunath Sarkar and his Empire of Truth*, 2015). Sumit Guha, more recently, has drawn our attention to the manner in which social memory is constructed, and how collective memory is forged (or lost) through social institutions (or their atrophy). He also points to the “boundary disciplines,” whether oral traditions, psychology or genetics among others, that impinge upon the domain of history, whether generating new understandings or giving alternative perspectives (Sumit Guha, *History and Collective Memory in South Asia 1200-2000*, 2020). I too have discussed in my work the multiple purveyors of pasts, historians being just one, and perhaps not the most influential, among them (Anshu Malhotra, *Piro and the Gulabdasis: Gender, Sect and Society in Punjab*, 2017). The writing of “Sikh” pasts, given the tussle between adhering to the norms of disciplinary history-writing and sustaining acceptability in the academy (Raziuddin Aquil and Partha Chatterjee eds, *History in the Vernacular*, 2008), and the stakes of a sensitive and vocal public invested in its production, particularly in the Diaspora, is generative of conflict as of concession.

In this presentation, I will look at the politics of “conversion,” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in colonial Punjab, primarily through Bhai Vir Singh’s novel *Sundarī* (and possibly his other novels). I will delineate the contentious interplay between history, fiction, and the making of and tapping into collective memory therein. I will do this to show how a Sikh community was sought to be consolidated through the othering of Muslims and Hindus, but with a different and complex distinction maintained between them, and the specificity of the relationship of either to the Sikhs. In the process I will discuss how some “conversions” were seen as legitimate and others illegitimate, drawing attention to the layered, complicated and patriarchal politics vis-à-vis the Hindu/Sikh/Khalsa Sundari. I will also briefly propose that the territorial and demographic re-structuring of Punjab since 1947 impelled an epistemic change, fashioning new imperatives of self-knowledge and self-perception, particularly among Jat-Sikhs, that seek hegemonic control over knowledge production and dissemination. Further, I will show that the bogey of love-*jihad*, the new avatar of communal polarization and patriarchal control in India today, had long and painful antecedents. The contention here is that the contretemps between disciplinary history and demotic politics, assuredly, is here to stay.

4. “The evolution of the Panth: Sikh history from Sikh sources”

Jaskiran Kaur Bhogal
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Abstract

Paramount to understanding how Sikh ideology and the idea of spirituality and politics (miri piri) have evolved, a necessarily broad overview of the origin of Sikhi, key events from history once the faith was established and how the behaviour and positionality of Sikhs has developed over time is required. In this paper, I utilise primarily 'indigenous' texts as a means of understanding Sikh history through the lens of Sikhs themselves (Singh P 2014:20). This history is important because "history is not simply the past; history is process. To understand history is to understand movement - forward over time (i.e., diachronically) or in time (i.e., synchronically)." (Singh P & Dhanda 2014:19) Sikhi and the relationship that exists between a Sikh and Guru is unique and is prevalent throughout Sikh history. Uberoi (1996:99) describes Sikhi and Sikh history as "a sacred and joint construction of the guru and the Sikh, and it is not a pragmatic or a contingent one; it has a history of freedom and not of determinism." The notion of 'panth' typifies this and not only describes a 'collective', it also describes a transition of responsibility to the Khalsa commonwealth giving birth to a new form of democracy: 'the Sikh way'. (Singh B 2009:15)

5. **"Alcohol abuse, gender and the Panjabi Sikh community"**

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Abstract

Alcohol abuse in the British Panjabi Sikh community is a heavily under-researched topic and little is understood about the influence of the Sikh religion and Panjabi culture. The phenomenon is further obscured by most research focusing on the relationship between men and alcohol. Women's experiences with alcohol on the other hand have received far less attention and women are often portrayed as support givers to a male partner/spouse or family member who experiences abuse.

To fully understand the underlying factors driving alcohol abuse in this context, we must distinguish between Panjabi culture and Sikh religion (and the multiple dimensions within) as two distinct but overlapping aspects. In particular this paper examines to what extent these aspects construct expected drinking habits amongst the contemporary Panjabi Sikh community. Moreover, exploring whether expected drinking habits vary between men and women and if so, why this is the case is critical; this can construct different barriers for accessing recovery services according to gender.

6. **"The partition of India and the Sikhs: Some unspoken assumptions"**

Dr. Gurharpal Singh
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Abstract

Seventy-three years after the event the causes and consequence of the partition of India are still very poorly understood. Subaltern studies, postcolonial theory and feminist studies have

provided new ways to make sense of the human experience of the partition, but we are no closer to a more meaningful appreciation of what led up to 1947 and its aftermath. This paper focuses the Sikh political leadership which offered a radically different vision of postcolonial Punjab and India. It focusses on the Sikh case and the unspoken assumptions about the transfer of power to the two dominions of India and Pakistan led by the Congress and the Muslim League that ultimately contributed to the violence in which over 1 million people were killed. These unspoken assumptions, it will be argued, need to be better understood if we are to grasp the long-term consequence of nation and state-building failure of the Congress and Muslim League in the Punjab in 1947 and the emergence of two highly centralised states in South Asia.

7. **Asymmetries of Power in “Knowledge” Production: The Case of Sikh Studies**

Dr. Nirvikar Singh
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Abstract

In a well-known statement, Michel Foucault observed that “The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power.” This paper examines how asymmetries of power have shaped the process of “knowledge” production in Sikh Studies in Western academia. Among the established sources of power that are particularly relevant are defined academic fields such as South Asian studies, religious studies, history and anthropology. However, broader approaches that come under headings such as cultural studies, critical theory or, more generically, “postmodernism”, are also very significant, and they intersect with and influence the aforementioned fields. Another important source of power comes from various ideologies related to Hindu identity, such as Hindutva, which are also seeking a firmer place in Western academia. To discuss the effects of power in these contexts, the paper uses examples from several topics that have been salient in Sikh Studies: the origins of Sikhism, the later evolution of the tradition, diversity in belief and practice, the impact of colonialism on Sikh belief, and the Sikh diaspora. It explains the manner in which some of the problems in how these subjects are treated relates to the underlying asymmetries of power and of apparent “knowledge.” The paper also touches on the issue of concerns about “anti-intellectualism,” in the broader context of asymmetries of power. It concludes with some suggestions for a productive way forward for the field of Sikh Studies.

8. **“Expressing and Justifying Sikh Identity in Canadian Arts, or the Near-Impossibility of Critique”**

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Abstract

Through an exploration of two visual artworks by Canadian Sikhs and the discursive flashpoints built around them, this paper examines how Sikh identity politics are mobilized

against critique, which is framed by youth communities as a colonial encroachment on an already embattled identity formation. These works include the mural “*Taike-sye’yə*” (cousin-friend) by Alicia Point and Keerat Kaur in Vancouver (2019) – which depicts Musqueam paddlers supplying the Komagata Maru, and *Medicine for a Nightmare (they called, we responded)*, a solo exhibition by Nep Sidhu (2019) that memorializes the martyrs of the Khalistan movement through metalwork and tapestry.

Both works were met with academic and art community criticism. Of the mural, media scholar Ali Kazimi stated that there was no way Musqueam paddlers could have broken the British blockade around the Komagata Maru (2019). Art critics expressed dismay about Sidhu’s defiant valorization of the Khalistan movement amid Canada’s continued policing of pro-Khalistani activists (2019). Though subsequent discussion around the mural was muted, Sidhu attacked the rights of his critics to speak about 1984.

This paper reads these two vignettes through Zarina Muhammad’s commentary on the insularity of South Asian diasporic art (2018) and Michael Nijhawan’s discussion on how Sikh time and identity are frozen around 1984 (2016; 2019). I argue that the mainstream Sikh diaspora, as illustrated through these artistic case studies, rejects critique by citing historical and imagined marginalization, and by equating critique with attack, defamation, and an encroachment on the right to tell their own histories.

9-13. **“Panel Proposal for UCR Webinar on the Future of Sikh Studies”**

Panelists:

Dr. Anneeth K. Hundle (University of California, Irvine)

Dr. Harjeet Grewal (University of Calgary)

Puninder Singh, Doctoral Candidate (University of Michigan)

Dr. Guriqbal Sahota (University of California, Santa Cruz)

Dr. Arvind-Pal S. Mandair (University of Michigan)

Reassessing the Role of Critical Thought in Sikh Studies

This panel discussion looks at the role and function of ‘critique’ and ‘critical thinking’ in Sikh studies. The main objective of these conversations will be to examine the stakes involved in disorienting the operations of critique and critical thought from its Western heritage with a view to uncovering a space that allows expression of intellectual, political and spiritual freedom within Sikh studies. Despite continual assertions of this freedom by scholars and the Sikh community, why does it remain difficult to assert this positionality and the diverse perspectives that embrace it? Panelists will be asked to consider whether the very idea of a “critical Sikh studies” is simultaneously a question about the political meaning of the concept of critique. What challenge does this pose to the “discriminating operations of Western criticism”? Does critique necessarily espouse the old Enlightenment ethos or is it possible to extract from Sikh sources and contexts an alternative and more expansive form of critical thinking that highlights the operations of intellectual and governmental policing that continue to hamper real progress of this growing field. Panelists will discuss these or similar questions in relation to their research areas and disciplines.

14. **“Keynote Speech at the Inaugural Function on Friday Morning”**

Dr. Michael Scott Alexander
Maimonides Endowed Chair in Jewish Studies
Department of Religious Studies
University of California, Riverside

15. **“Keynote Speech at the Evening Session on Friday”**

Dr. Louis E. Fenech
Professor of South Asian and Sikh History
University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, IA

16. **“Emergent Field of Digital *Sikhi* and Social Change: The Future of Sikh Sovereignty in Turbulent Times”**

Zabeen Khamisa, Doctoral Candidate
Religious Diversity in North America
University of Waterloo, Canada

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has made more evident the need to address the problems wrought by the complex systems we currently live in, in order to have a more sustainable, equitable, and optimistic future. Not surprisingly, many young progressive Sikh creatives, innovators, activists, politicians, community organizers, and professionals have found ways to use their platforms to strive to create change during this time, taking the challenges of the pandemic head on. Simultaneously, this time of uncertainty has sparked the creative energies of many young Sikhs who are beginning to seriously consider and imagine what a just future could be like, the responsibility Sikhs have to contribute to the possibility of this future, and what it would mean to be a Sikh seven generations from now. Some are actively drawing inspiration from their Sikh values and notions of Sikh sovereignty as they align with their understandings of decolonization, optimism, and the aesthetics of sci-fi found in the social movements of Afrofuturism and IndigiFutures, creating innovative expressions of a desired Sikh future, while forming new modes of technology, and even pondering the possibilities of sovereign Sikh Artificial Intelligence. As life becomes more virtual, so too has Sikh life. Within Sikh Studies despite a largely historical orientation, we have seen a turn to the contemporary lived realities of young Sikhs and Sikhs online, particularly as younger scholars bring with them new perspectives and innovative research methods. In light of this context, I pose the following question to my colleagues in the field: *Does Sikh Studies have what it takes to capture new and dynamic Sikh imaginations of the future?* Drawing from my research on Sikh millennial entrepreneurial activists on Instagram, I provide a review of the emergent field of Digital *Sikhi* and take the position that scholars of Sikh Studies will be required to develop deep literacy of digital media and technology and the respective research methods of the digital humanities, should they wish to have access to future lived experience of Sikh generations.

17. **“Working Title: Sikhing Sovereignties Amidst State Violence”**

Dr. Nirinjan Khalsa
Loyola Marymount University

Abstract

On Friday November 10, 2017 I hosted a one-day seminar at Loyola Marymount University to commemorate the 350th birth anniversary of Guru Gobind Singh. This event was part of multiple world-wide events funded by the Indian Ministry of Culture throughout that year, including large-scale celebrations in Patna, Bihar which I had participated in during the New Year. Sikhs from around the world gathered for these celebrations, heartened by the fact that the Indian Government spent hundreds of crores that year to honor the life of Guru Gobind Singh who fought for religious freedom.

The donors of my Sikh and Jain Professorship encouraged me to host this event working with the Indian Consulate and the local Sikh sangat of Southern California as it would be an opportunity for positive collaboration and bridge-building between Sikh scholars, sangat, and the Indian government - who have historically displayed distrust and antagonism. They also saw it as an opportunity to garner further support for the interfaith Sikh-Jain position. However, it became clear that many in the Sikh community were not supportive of such collaborations.

At the event, the Indian Consul General Ambassador Venkatesan Ashok was invited to give the inaugural address, at which point a Sikh man from Northern California, Bhajan Singh, rose in protest “You are a coward, you have killed so many people in New Delhi. We are suffering. You are coming here representing the government. You say Guru Gobind Singh is the defender of truth. You right here are representing untruth.” Bhajan Singh’s brother had been tortured in 1984 and he spoke against the atrocities the Indian government has continued to inflict against the Sikh community (even now witnessed with the *kisaan morcha*.)

This experience awakened me to the diverse and often divergent political approaches and agendas of Sikhs, scholars, donors, universities and governments in the US, India, and throughout the diaspora. Sikhs continue to expand into diverse geographic, linguistic, ethnic, racial, and national identities. The question of who represents Sikhi becomes a contested landscape, particularly when Sikhs are a precarious and vulnerable minority that continues to experience hate crimes, state surveillance, and violence. What is at stake and what is the cost of representing the multiple identities of Sikhi within growing ethno-nationalist dialogues? How do scholars respond to the crisis of ethnonationalism while also protecting the safety and security of their own communities, profession, and families? What does it mean for scholars to work both within and against institutions of power (donors, communities, universities, governments, religious institutions i.e., Akal Takht)? Can we build bridges from the inside while at the same time supporting protests from the outside? What is my role as a white female Sikh scholar in the Sikh struggle for sovereignty, who experiences Punjab as a spiritual-religious homeland but does not have ethnic, racial nor ancestral connections to Punjabi identity and state violence, yet experiences the vicarious trauma of religious persecution over spatio-temporalities? In what ways does my positionality make it (im)possible to speak between differences in the Sikh experience? To respond to such questions, I will look to the

scholarship of other persecuted religious minorities, to notions of diasporicity, as well as to Gurbani and the Sikh teachings which articulate a pluriversal vision of political and spiritual sovereignties.

18. **“Sikh Musicology in the Western Academy: the challenge of intersectional research and decolonized education”**

Dr. Francesca Cassio
Hofstra University, Long Island, NY

Abstract

Sikh Musicology is a new field of study established only a decade ago in Western academia, with the institution at Hofstra University (NY) of the Sardarni Harbans Kaur Chair and the first undergraduate and graduate courses. This discipline was introduced in the United States after that the Gurmat Sangīt Chair and Department were established in the early 2000’s at the Punjabi University of Patiala (India), to foster Sikh ‘music’ as a separate genre from Hindustani sangīt. Sikh Musicology in Western academia took a distinct route in terms of scholarship, research methods, and teaching objectives, not only to meet the educational goals of a multicultural society, but also to bring the study of Gurmat (or Gurbānī) sangīt on international academic platforms. Developed as an interdisciplinary area that bridges Sikh studies with ethnomusicology, Sikh Musicology in Western academia is in fact opening new avenues for intersectional research that touches upon Sikh music literature and sonic practices across ages and contexts, including the diaspora. Early research interest revolved around the polarized debate that animated community and academic circles concerning, on the one hand, the revival of rāga-based hymns (Cassio 2015; Khalsa 2014; B. Singh 2011), and the commodification of the kīrtan experience through *neo-traditional* forms inspired by the 20th century music market, on the other (Van der Linden 2013; Purewal and Lallie 2013; Feld 2012). This historical depth and continuity, along with the perpetual change and instability, are *twin phenomena* that keep kīrtan a lived, fluid reality (Manuel 2015; P. Singh 2019). Recognizing that the intangible heritage of the Sikhs is in danger of disappearing, the efforts of the Sardarni Harbans Kaur Chair at Hofstra University have particularly focused on the preservation, study, and teaching of those pre-modern repertoires attributed to the Sikh Gurus’ era that have been transmitted to this day in oral and written forms. Courses are designed to engage young generations of the Punjabi-Sikh diaspora with their heritage, as well as to generate interest about Sikh culture and Gurbānī music literature among students hailing from other backgrounds. In synergy with the religion classes held by the Sardarni Kuljit Kaur Bindra Chair in Sikh Studies, Sikh Musicology courses are included in the Music Literature and History program, contributing to decolonizing the curriculum in the Western university system. This project aligns with the reflections advanced by postcolonial scholars since the late 1990’s, that have endeavored to establish a *plurality of musicologies* ‘as a means to dismantle the singularity of hegemony’ (Bohlman 2008), and to delink from eurocentred music scholarship (Stobart 2008; Van der Meer 2005; Bartz and Cooley 1997). Today, Sikh Musicology is pioneering postcolonial and decolonial discourses that challenge the dominant narrative of South Asian musics and reveal the necessity to radically rethink the study of underrepresented cultures. At the same time, through the study of rāga and śabad, Sikh Musicology contributes to Sikh scholarship reaffirming the need to reconstitute the link that

connects music, literature, history and philosophy in a unified field, and kīrtan as a collective experience that engages the community with these aspects.

19. **“Growing Pains in the field of Sikh Studies in the Western Academy”**

Dr. Pashaura Singh
University of California, Riverside

Abstract

The field of Sikh Studies has arrived in the western academy along with a rich experience of growing pains during the last three decades. The vocal opposition of ultra-conservative fringe groups in the Sikh diaspora have managed to gain a dominant voice in community media effectively trolling, harassing, and marginalizing progressive scholarly voices. There is an urgent need to understand the origins of these fringe groups in the context of the Punjab crisis. The Indian government covertly supported these groups to sabotage the establishment of Sikh Studies chairs in western universities by linking these genuine community efforts with the separatist movement of Khalistan. Undoubtedly, the censure of scholarly research was intimately linked with the complex political situation of the Punjab. As a result of Operation Blue Star of 1984 and the rise of militancy in the Punjab, the role of Akali leadership was marginalized within the Sikh community to a large extent. But in the early 1990s the Congress-led government in the Punjab crushed the movement of an independent state of Khalistan. The suppression of militancy created a vacuum in Sikh politics that provided an opportunity for the Akalis, particularly the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), to stage a political revival. The scholarly controversy provided a handy tool for the SGPC leadership to assert its authority. Thus, they used the very powerful rhetoric of “Granth in Danger” (in contrast to the famous slogan of “Panth in Danger”) to regain their lost credibility. Both the external and internal forces within the Panth have used the scholarly controversy to mobilize public opinion. In the context of insecurities about their place in India and the uncertain future of their youth growing up in the diaspora, attacking non-conformist scholars fills a convenient ideological space, demonstrating the solidarity of Punjab-based scholars and diaspora professionals with contemporary projects of nation building and religious revival (Dusenbery 1995).

20. ***“Sikh Studies and Anthropology: Interdisciplinary and Disciplinary Encounters and Critical Field Formations”***

Dr. Anneeth Kaur Hundle
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Dhan Kaur Sahota Presidential Chair of Sikh Studies
University of California, Irvine

Abstract

In this paper presentation, I offer a preliminary schematic of the mutual relationship between the history of the discipline of anthropology and the history of Sikh Studies as an interdisciplinary field formation. What current and critical innovations in the discipline of anthropology lend themselves to a Sikh Studies “interdiscipline” (Ferguson 2012) that can

contend with the challenges of 21st century formations of empire, the state and capital, race and religion, and the academy? Likewise, how might Sikh Studies help to influence the field of anthropology as it continues to grapple with its normative constructions of difference, or the so-called “savage slot” (Trouillot 2003)? Finally, what does the signature method/methodology of anthropologists, ethnography, offer the field of Sikh Studies in terms of understanding the lived experience of Sikhs and *Sikhi*? I offer examples from building Sikh Studies at UC Irvine Anthropology, a premier and highly ranked anthropology department in the US academy.