

**8<sup>th</sup> Dr. Jasbir Singh Saini Endowed Chair in Sikh and Punjabi Studies Conference**  
(May 5-6, 2023)

***Sikhs of North America: Remembering Key Historical Events, Challenges and Responses***

**Abstracts of Conference Papers**

**1. ‘American Fascism’ and Sikh Precarity (Roundtable Discussion)**

**Panelists:** Dr. Guriqbal Sahota (UC Santa Cruz); Dr. Arvind-Pal S. Mandair (UMich);

**Respondent:** Dr. Anneeth Hundle (UC Irvine)

Since the events of 9/11, several of us have been thinking about the relationship between violence, nationalism, and xenophobia in the context of Sikhs in North America and in aftermath of 9/11 and the long decades of healing after 1984. In these early years our efforts were directed to turning the critical gaze back onto the concept of violence itself. All of this took a different turn after the Oak Creek massacre which was a direct result of the resurgence of white supremacy and Islamophobia fueled by the ‘Tea Party’ Republicanism. What began to come into view was a distinctly American brand of fascism which by 2016 had begun to dominate public discourse. In this paper we would like to reflect on the nature of this ‘American fascism’ and its implications for Sikhs in North America. One of the panelists (A.S. Mandair) will do so by centering his reflections on his own modes of intellectual resistance vis-a vis (i) creation of new courses and syllabi which not only engaged the nature of this fascism but developed strategies for activism; (ii) connecting this to personal reflections of a similar phenomenon being witnessed in the UK; (iii) developing a more nuanced theory of violence appropriate to the complexities of Sikh precarity in the third decade of the 21st century; and (iv) understanding the theological underpinnings of this fascism. Our other panelist (G.S. Sahota) approaches ‘American fascism’ through the lens and terminology of general semiotics. His paper will lay out the fundamental elements of a fascist “langue” which provides the essential code for quotidian speech acts that normalize a fascist politics in contemporary American society. Of particular interest will be the politics of the gun, and more specifically the assault rifle, in the recent turn toward fascism in the USA. Who is behind the gun in this politics, and what kinds of subjects fall within its crosshairs? The paper will conclude with some remarks on the predicament of minorities within the longue durée of fascist politics, with a focus on Sikh communities as targets in the US today. There will be a formal response to these papers by Anneeth Hundle (UC Irvine).

**2. “Gilded Cages”: Race, Labor, Citizenship, and the Fabrication of the ‘Hindu’ in the American West**

Dr. Amrit Deol, California State University, Fresno, CA

In 1923, the landmark Supreme Court case, *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* determined that Bhagat Singh Thind and all other “Hindus” were ineligible for citizenship because they did not meet the “common understanding” of white. This paper explores the debates surrounding the question “who is the ‘Hindu?’” in the United States in the early 1900s. The paper will depict how the racialized category of “Hindu” was fabricated and constantly curated throughout the early 20th century to protect the Anglo-American claim to whiteness. This challenges the idea that the category of “Hindu” was labeled as “non-white” following the Thind decision in 1923 and instead, highlights how the “Hindu” was always made to be “non-white.” Here, the paper showcases the leading discourses in written media, legal, and immigration policies surrounding the racial classification of South Asian men in the US, also known as “Hindu/Hindoos,” from 1906 to 1923. The question posed by these three American sources of discourse was not an ontological one set to explore the essence or being of “Hindu,” but rather a brutal effort to place the “Hindu” in a position to fail in American racial politics. This paper examines the development of the racial category of “Hindu” in labor and immigration discourse and how it became embedded within the American “common sense.”

### **3. Explaining Different Public Profiles of Sikhs in Canada and the U.S.**

Dr. Prema Kurien, Syracuse University

I look forward to having the opportunity to present my work at the conference and getting feedback since the audience at the conference will be ideal to provide comments on my research. My paper draws on a larger project (conducted between 2013 and 2020) comparing the patterns of political involvement and activism of Sikhs, and Hindus (from India, Sri Lanka, and Guyana) in Canada and the U.S. It will examine the reasons for the different profiles of Sikhs in the public spheres in Canada and the U.S. despite fairly similar patterns of migration to the two countries. Sikhs first arrived in North America at the turn of the twentieth century as part of a large migration out of the Punjab during the British colonial period. This migration was concentrated on the west coasts of Canada and the U.S., and Sikhs in both countries maintained close ties with each other. In both countries, Sikhs faced discrimination and subsequent exclusion acts which led them to mobilize for family reunification, citizenship, and voting rights. They also formed a Ghadar (Mutiny) party to advocate for Indian independence. Large-scale Sikh migration to Canada and the U.S. began in the 1970s with the liberalization of immigration laws in both countries. Despite the historical similarities between the two groups, the contemporary profiles of Sikhs in Canada and the U.S. are very different.

In the contemporary period, Sikhs are recognized as a political force in Canada. Canadian Sikhs have made great strides in participating in the political system and in obtaining public recognition for Sikhs. The leader of a major political party, a former premier of British Columbia, high-level cabinet ministers and several in parliament are Sikhs. In contrast to Canada, in the U.S. Sikhs remain largely socially and politically invisible. Sikh groups are not included in several surveys of religion conducted in the US, making it even difficult to estimate their numbers. An opt-in question in the 2020 census was meant to allow Sikhs to self-identify. However, we do not yet have the results of the census, so we do not know if this attempt was successful in capturing the majority of Sikh Americans. Most Americans are ignorant about the religion, with the result that in the post-9/11 period many have mistaken turban-wearing Sikhs

for followers of Osama bin Laden, leading the community to become a target of hate crimes, a 2012 attack in Wisconsin being just the most visible of such incidents. U.S. Sikh mobilization for civil rights has consequently been a post-9/11 phenomenon, led by several newly formed second-generation organizations. In this paper, I will argue that the reason for this variation is largely due to differences in political opportunity structures in Canada and the US, primarily differences in: settlement policies, the religious context, the role of key historical events in shaping activism patterns (1985 versus 9/11) and the presence of national advocacy organizations versus local community service organizations in Canada and the US.

#### **4. Multicultural Exceptionalism and the Limits of Racial Inclusion: Race and Gender in the Sikh Diaspora of the Transnational Pacific Northwest**

Dr. Sasha Sabherwal

Postdoctoral Fellow, Center for the Humanities at Tufts University (2022-23)

Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology and Department of Asian Studies,  
Northeastern University

Asian American Studies scholars have long problematized multiculturalism discourse of the Canadian and American liberal states which focused on culture while ignoring the lived material interests of minority communities. This politics of multiculturalism simultaneously attempts to produce, celebrate, and erase differences. Drawing from these critiques, this paper focuses on the Sikh diaspora of the lower mainland British Columbia and western Washington, or what my interlocutors refer to as the Pacific Northwest (PNW). I use the PNW—a historically situated national and imperial borderland region that has been home to the Asian diaspora since the early twentieth century, and that today houses one of the largest Sikh diasporic communities in the world—to understand how cross-border religious communities, based on longer histories of migration, have been racialized in the region. Specifically, I trace how multicultural discourse has obfuscated state sanctioned racial violence, including the criminalization, incarceration, and surveillance of the Sikh diaspora beginning in the 1980s and 1990s continuing into the present. The paper draws from analysis of Deepa Mehta's film *Beeba Boys* as well as ethnographic fieldwork between 2019 and 2021 that analyzes the tropes of the 'Surrey Jack' and the 'Kent Boy,' two pervasive stereotypes attached to young Punjabi men in the PNW. Ultimately, I show that contemporary caricatured masculinities draw on stereotypes, developed two decades prior, which characterized South Asian, and specifically Punjabi Sikh, men in the PNW as 'dangerous,' to reveal the limits of racial inclusion.

#### **5. Sikh Dharma International and Gora Sikh-Punjabi Sikh Relations: Fifty Years On**

## **Panel/Roundtable Proposal**

On April 10, 1973, the Sikh Dharma Brotherhood was officially incorporated in the State of California as a non-profit religious organization (whose name subsequently evolved into Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere and then into Sikh Dharma International). The organization's founder, Harbhajan Singh Puri (aka Yogi Bhajan; aka Harbhajan Singh Khalsa) had previously registered the Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization (3HO) as a non-profit educational organization focused on teaching Kundalini Yoga. In 1971, Puri had already taken some of his 3HO followers to Amritsar, where they had received amrit and where he claimed to have been given the title "Siri Singh Sahib" (which he asserted made him the "Chief Administrative and Religious Authority for the Sikh Dharma in the Western Hemisphere"). In the subsequent half century, Sikh Dharma members (commonly "gora Sikhs," since most of the membership has been of European ancestry or "American Sikhs", since the organization arose in the U.S.) have had sometimes cooperative and sometimes contentious relationships with Sikhs of Punjabi ancestry in North America and elsewhere. This panel/roundtable seeks to reflect upon where Sikh Dharma came from and what place the organization, and its members and former members, has had in the wider North American Sikh community both during the life of the organization's founder and the years since his death in 2004.

### **Reflections on Sikh Dharma at Fifty**

Verne A. Dusenbery, Hamline University

In this overview presentation, I reflect upon (1) some ways in which the Sikh Dharma – both the organization itself and its followers – has had an impact on other Sikhs and Sikhi in North America (e.g., through fights for Sikh legal rights and public recognition; through involvement in Sikh politics; through internet sites SikhNet and SikhiWiki; through Sant Singh Khalsa's English "translation" of the Guru Granth Sahib), and (2) some ways in which Sikh studies scholars and others have written about 3HO/Sikh Dharma (e.g., as an example of Khalsa Sikh appeal to non-Punjabis; as a Sikh sect; as a Sikh jathebandi; as a non-Sikh cult; as a new religious movement).

### **Sikh Dharma/3HO: Activism, Outreach, and a Global Sikh Panth**

Sangeeta Luthra, Independent Scholar

My paper will examine the intersections between the Sikh Dharma community and the broader Sikh community with regard to social and political activism. Through activism and outreach, particularly during periods of social strife, as in the aftermath of Operation Blue Star in 1984 and in the post 9/11 period, Sikh Dharma communities have become more engaged with the broader Sikh community in the US. Sikh Dharma individuals have challenged discrimination against turbaned people and worked with other Sikh communities before and after 9/11. In 1980, discrimination against women within the Sikh Panth was challenged by a kirtan jatha (devotional troupe) of Sikh Dharma including women at the Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple). A commitment to equality, compassion, and fairness is shared by Sikh Dharma and Punjabi Sikh communities. At the turn of the 21st century the creation of online resources like Sikhnet.com, founded by Gurmastak Singh Khalsa, has been an important innovation and resource for Sikhs around the world. Since then, many other Sikh online forums and civil rights organizations have emerged, and which collectively address various aspects of Sikh life including religious, social,

economic, and political. While there is growing recognition of the contributions of Sikh Dharma communities to the larger panth (community), there are still some distinctive features that are not shared by the wider Punjab Sikh community, in particular the larger than life and at times controversial figure of Yogi Bhajan/Siri Singh Sahib. Whether these distinctive features outweigh what is shared by Sikhs of all communities, will also be explored in this paper.

### **Remembering 3HO as a New Religious Movement**

Philip Deslippe, UC-Santa Barbara

In a 2008 article for Religion Compass, Doris Jakobsh asked why 3HO/ Sikh Dharma was seemingly "forgotten" from the scholarly attention given to New Religious Movements and the corresponding popular attention given to religious cults. She noted that "it remains unclear whether 3HO/Sikh Dharma warrants being viewed as a new religion, an imported religion, or, simply fitting into the sectarian divisions within Sikhism." My paper will reappraise 3HO in light of recent events and more longstanding research to see how the structure, beliefs, and marginal position of 3HO makes it fit within the scholarly category of NRM, and the presence of fraud, crime, abuse, and autocratic control easily allow it to fit into the popular understanding of "cults," especially in comparison to groups such as ISKCON and Tony Alamo Ministries. I argue that ultimately these categories – new religion, imported religion, sect, new religious movement, cult – are all partial, yet valid, approaches to 3HO as a complicated, multi-faceted, and everchanging organization.

### **Exploring 3HO-Sikh identities: Communal Relations and Abuses of Power**

Nirinjan Kaur Khalsa-Baker, Loyal Marymount University

After fifty-years of development, 3HO/Sikh Dharma has become a diverse international community of practitioners ranging from Sikhs, Kundalini Yoga students and teachers, followers of Yogi Bhajan (aka "Bhajanists"), and those born into the community as second generation. The diverse positionalities and practices raise critical questions around the relationship between Punjabi, Sikh and Yoga affinities and boundaries. These questions have become of particular importance since 2020, as the global 3HO/Sikh Dharma community began reckoning with the abuses of power by Yogi Bhajan and community leaders, as well as issues of white centering/privilege, racism, homophobia, and sexism. These realities have created hermeneutic chaos as people question whether the teacher can be separated from the teachings, and the ways in which their understanding of Sikhi has been filtered through these lenses. Currently the second generation are undergoing a process of reparations for the abuse, harm, and neglect they experienced at community run camps and Indian boarding schools ages 7-18 (1980s-2020) and are questioning their relationship to the community, its leaderships, and their own hybridized identities. This talk will address critical concerns and opportunities around 3HO-Sikh identity and Punjabi-Sikh relations.

### **Legitimacy in 3HO/Sikh Dharma**

Simranjit Khalsa, University of Memphis

Religious communities in a moment of crisis represent an opportunity to study legitimacy and efforts to maintain it. With the death of Yogi Bhajan in 2004, the 3HO/Sikh Dharma community

faced upheaval, as do many organizations when a charismatic leader dies or leaves. However, the organization was able to thrive until recently. In 2020, the 3HO/Sikh Dharma community faced a public scandal beginning with the publication of the memoirs of a former member accusing the Yogi Bhanan of sexual abuse. This accusation sparked an outcry from community members and a flurry of internal conversations that raised additional concerns. I conduct a content analysis of email communications of multiple organizational branches of 3HO/Sikh Dharma to the community as a whole to examine efforts to present a legitimate identity to multiple groups. We can think of controversy in religious organization as destabilizing legitimacy. Using this lens helps make sense of changes in community portrayals of religious belief and practice in the midst of controversy.

## **6. The Past Is Yet to Come: Race, Citizenship, and a Century of Sikh Diasporic Outlaws in the United States**

Dr. Tavleen Kaur

Assistant Professor, Department of Asian American Studies  
California State University, Fullerton

Much like Sikhs in the United States today, Bhagat Singh Thind was a diasporic subject seeking social, cultural, and political recognition in a settler-colonial state. Public memory of Thind's life is typically hyperfocused on three key moments: his brief but acclaimed time as a recruit in the United States military (1918), the *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* Supreme Court case in which his appeal to keep his U.S. citizenship certificate was denied (1923), and when he was finally granted citizenship via the Nye-Lea Act (1935). These moments, especially ones that appear as negotiations with the state—military service and excellent deportment in exchange for citizenship—remain as significant in the lives of Sikhs in the country today as they were for Thind a century ago. This paper brings the present into focus via the past: by using primary sources, including his own words, this paper provides critical perspectives on Thind's legal battles with the United States and contextualizes them in relation to contemporary Sikh advocacy. In particular, this paper adds three arguments to the existing genealogy of work on Bhagat Singh Thind. The first argument illustrates that Thind was well-aware of his placement in and outside of the color line of the United States; building from this point, the second argument this paper explores is how, in his appeal regarding being of "Aryan descent," Thind strategically presented existing ethnological "science" as a means to challenge the court about its own hypocrisies and haphazardly-set legal precedents. Finally, the third argument illustrates how, in the present day, Thind being coopted as an exemplary "Sikh American" model is somewhat incongruent with his own evolving beliefs and choices. In addition to contributing new perspectives to the fields of Ethnic Studies and Sikh Studies, this paper also engages with Sikh communities themselves: it analyzes the far-reaching implications of campaigns for social recognition that contemporary Sikhs in and outside of the United States engage in, often times from a vantage point similar to Thind's.

## **7. Preserving, Documenting, and Narrating Sikh North American History**

### **Panelists:**

Dr. Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra  
Dr. Michael Hawley  
Tejpaul Singh Baniwal

Dr. Sandhra's presentation will look at the art of storytelling based on the power of her lived experiences as a Sikh woman and sharing Sikh stories of migration and settlement from a place of erasure, and then power, anti-colonialism, and anti-racism. This presentation will use the Sikh Heritage Museum, a National Historic Site Gur Sikh Temple, the oldest still standing gurdwara in the western hemisphere, in Abbotsford, BC, as a living site of Sikh story telling. She will share her own journey of transformation of the way her narratives have changed over the past decade, based on stories and archives that have emerged reminding us that histories of racism, including that of the KKK continue to be relegated to the margins in the name of white nostalgia. Sikh story telling then, through truth and radicalism, is a reclaiming of histories that are nuanced, and can move communities forward rather than relegating them to a consistent state of regression.

Dr. Hawley's discussion introduces and problematizes the Alberta Sikh History Project. The ASHProject is a digital, publicly accessible, and bilingual 'archive' of the otherwise erased and undocumented narratives of Sikh experiences in Alberta. As a digital platform, the ASHProject is globally accessible. But as an archive of local voice and gaze, its primary audiences are Sikhs and sangats across the province, as well as for scholars, the general public, and Sikhophiles of all degrees. The archive contains a wide range of documents, recorded Sikh narratives, and interpretations of Sikh experience in the province. In addition, this presentation raises a series of concerns – methodological, theoretical, and teleological - about the limits and possibilities of such a project.

Tejpaul Singh Baniwal will discuss the launch and subsequent work of the Sikh American History Project (SAHP). Sikhs have been a part of the social fabric of the United States for more than a century. Yet, the Sikh American narrative altogether continues to be under-researched and under-represented. To date, there has yet to be a comprehensive project that focuses solely on the history of Sikhs in the United States. With the lack of focus and research about Sikh Americans, it results in limited knowledge about the community and the exclusion/under-representation of Sikh Americans in the broader Asian American and American history. It was for this reason that SAHP was launched, which focuses on unearthing, preserving, and promoting the history of Sikhs in the United States.

## **8. Who Owns the Past? Sikhs in North America**

Nirvikar Singh  
University of California, Santa Cruz

This paper will consider the question posed in the title, by examining a range of North America-based projects that seek to preserve heritage, memories, and histories pertaining to the Sikh

community. These projects include: Sikh heritage projects related to the community's earlier history in South Asia (the formation of the community, periods of struggle and sovereignty), early and later immigrant experiences in North America (work, violence, citizenship, community building), specific events relating to recent or contemporary India (Partition, 1984 and its aftermath, the farmer protests) and the US (9/11, Oak Creek), and informational representations in the media. The framework will include a discussion of institutions (museums, universities, rights organizations, dedicated non-profits) and forms (photographs, videos, art, objects, audio recordings, music, written word), the increasing role of digital technology, and questions of language, knowledge, expertise, and motivations. This last issue is central to the question posed in the paper, with respect to the community's memories, experiences and traditions, and the power of members of the community to frame them and concretize them in various representations and venues without intrusion, exclusion, or external appropriation.

## **9. Sikhs and Right-Wing Politics in America**

Puninder Singh  
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

I have been working on a paper on Sikh figures in the public sphere such as Nikki Haley, Harmeet Dhillon, the group Sikhs for Trump, and so on, and their embrace of right-wing politics in the U.S.

## **10. A. Twenty years of change: The legacy of 9/11 and Oak Creek on Sikh American organizing**

During this discussion, Sikh American organizers of SALDEF will reflect on the evolution of their work and community needs have evolved in the twenty years defined by two major events, 9/11 and Oak Creek. They will reflect on the development of a Sikh American infrastructure that meets the unique and specific needs of diverse segments of the community from an advocacy, services, and spiritual perspective.

## **B. Sikh American Youth: The Perspective of a New Generation**

The recent Sikh American story has been defined in the context of 9/11. However, a new generation is coming of age who weren't born then but lived through Oak Creek and Indianapolis. Their lives and experiences have been defined by tragedies shared across social media, connections built through national leadership programs, and new forms of community organizing on immigrant rights and economic issues. Through this discussion, these youth will share how these incidents and others are defining a new approach to community building, advocacy, and Sikh experience.



