

Re-Reading Sikh History in New Zealand 1900-1940

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The research presented in this article brings forth new archival information on the Sikh community in New Zealand between 1900 and 1945. The article draws upon information from multiple primary sources including records of colonial institutions and newspapers. The details about the everyday life of Sikhs in New Zealand are analysed. This includes their activities, occupations and employment as well as their interactions with colonial institutions such as the military, government institutions and the judicial system. In addition the article presents information on public dealings of Sikhs in several areas such as entertainment, sports, religion and culture. This research reveals how Sikhs were integrated into the New Zealand society and presents a new opportunity to scholars in terms of primary source information. Consequently the histories previously thought complete can now be reanalysed in light of new evidence. Finally this article provides fresh and detailed perspectives on the Sikhs by enriching, questioning and revealing new streams of history thought lost to time.

The Sikh community's history between 1900 and 1940 has been viewed through the lens of oral history. This has been, in part, due to the continuing reliance on McLeod's extensive research on the earliest settlers and their descendants recorded in his book *Punjabis in New Zealand*.¹ The lack of research into the early history of community has also been compounded by the lack of accessibility to primary sources especially with print culture sources. Print culture which encompasses records such as newspapers and government records have remained scattered and difficult to analyse during the pre-digitization era. Much like McLeod, in a pre-digitization age, the returns for many hours of research would have been unsatisfactory.² This has inevitably left scholars such as Leckie and Bandopadyay reliant on McLeod's ground-breaking work in current scholarship.

With the growing availability of new digital databases in the past decade scholars have the opportunity to revisit the early history of the Sikh community in New Zealand. Various databases such as *Papers Past*³ and *Archives New Zealand*⁴ have enabled scholars to view the life of Sikhs in the public sphere throughout the country. This includes previously unknown information in regards to religious practices, entertainment, sporting pursuits, employment and political activism providing insight into the level of integration in society and how that was achieved. The new information also forces scholars to rethink how Sikhs were viewed both in the New Zealand context and globally. Arguments of seclusion, lack of religious identity, non-integration with the wider community, lack of engagement with colonial

institutions, and the level of political activism must be questioned in light of this new evidence. Ultimately the new evidence allows scholars to review, verify, correct and expand upon oral histories recorded by McLeod providing an enriched history of Sikhs in New Zealand.

Punjabis in New Zealand remains the landmark work for early Sikh history in New Zealand. As noted in my previous paper *Reassessing Sikh History in New Zealand 1881-1914*⁵ McLeod's view of Sikh history was hampered by the limitations of his oral history survey. Due to lack of returns from other sources and choosing to rely on oral histories McLeod's work became bound to four critical issues. The first was the limitations of memory of his interviewees. A period of approximately sixty years had lapsed when McLeod undertook his interviews meaning many aspects of common life, especially in the private domain were not discussed by interviewees. Second, was "undercoverage" which refers to the bias present when sampling a population for a survey. The problem generally occurs when a range of the population is not adequately represented in the survey. For McLeod, his informants came from a small sample in the Waikato and King Country which locked him into these two regions. The third issue in McLeod's methodology was the questioning style and response recording. McLeod relied on recalling answers to questions from memory after the interview had taken place. This was further exacerbated by the fixed set of questions which McLeod chose to work with. The twelve questions he chose to use neglected important aspects of popular practise and the private life of the community.⁶ The fourth and final critical issue was the wariness towards the interviewer. McLeod as an outsider would have likely left some questions as to his motivations and what the information could possibly be used for. With the racial tensions of the past created by discrimination e.g. Immigration Restriction Act 1921, this left significant suspicion towards white New Zealanders and inevitably by implication towards McLeod. It was clear some information was omitted from various narratives provided to McLeod, including relationships, traumatic experiences and religious beliefs. This inevitably left McLeod with a partial view of early Sikh history in New Zealand.

The aim of this article is to provide broad insight on the early Sikh community in New Zealand during the 1900 to 1945 period. By analysing print culture materials this article will attempt to detail Sikh involvement in multiple areas of New Zealand society while providing an enriched view of Sikh life in the public sphere. This new evidence counters McLeod's arguments of seclusion, lack of religious identity, his strictly rural centric interpretation of Sikh employment and the community's lack of political interest in New Zealand. The ultimate aim is to provide a new and enriched view of Sikh history during the early twentieth century in light of this new evidence.

Entertainment

The Sikh community throughout the 1900 to 1945 period lived amongst and continually connected with the wider community. These connections were

often maintained through entertainment (in the form of shows and sporting pursuits) which drew thousands from towns and cities across the country. Entertainment put Sikhs on a national stage as commentary, advertisements and challenges were printed throughout the colonial press. Sikhs wholeheartedly engaged with their non-Sikh counterparts for the entertainment of the public.⁷

Public shows were one such avenue of entertainment. One of the earliest recorded shows was noted in 1902 when “The Sikh Troupe” arrived from India.⁸ The troupe was a group of men sponsored by a local Sikh by the name of R. Singh, a business man in Hawera. The troupe were noted for performances such as “long pole spinning”, “stick combat” and “varied feats of arms”, possibly a form of Sikh martial art called *Gatka*. They were exposed to local society throughout the country as they travelled to towns and cities entertaining many crowds along the way. They were noted by the local press as “eastern sensations” and members of a “famous Sikh tribe”.⁹

Sporting pursuits were also an important part of entertainment and cross-cultural connection for the Sikhs. Wrestling, weightlifting, rugby, athletics, shooting and cricket showed the wide breadth of engagement with the community. During 1904 a Sikh along with three “Indian brothers” entered a weight lifting competition in the hope of winning a medal.¹⁰ They were described as local men who were also involved in wrestling. Another Sikh by the name of Sunda Singh was a member of the Physical Training School where he was known as a “champion Indian Athlete”.¹¹ Both males and females were involved in sporting pursuits such as athletics. For example, during Easter of 1938, M.D. Singh was involved in athletics in Otorohanga¹², south of Hamilton where a significant rural Sikh community resided. In Auckland two school girls, B. Singh and N. Singh, were involved in the Ellerslie Amateur Athletic Club.¹³ Sikhs were also involved in sporting pursuits in and around Papatoetoe¹⁴ and Papakura¹⁵ in South Auckland. Another Sikh who was listed by his last name “Singh” was described as playing in a cricket match between Hawera Technical High School and New Plymouth Technical College during 1922. He was noted as achieving the highest score in the game playing on the New Plymouth team.¹⁶

Wrestling was also a core form of entertainment the Sikhs were involved in. As noted earlier, Sikhs were involved in local matches by 1904. During the late 1920s and 1930s Sikh involvement increased substantially as the sport grew in popularity. The wrestlers came to New Zealand and fought locals in highly competitive matches throughout the country. Individuals such as Jagat Singh were famed for their “Indian deathlocks” and prowess in New Zealand, Australia and America. Thousands would attend fights and many were broadcast over radios¹⁷ across the nation. Local papers provided post-match commentary¹⁸, advertising¹⁹ and posted challenges between various wrestlers.²⁰ As shown in figure 1.0, multiple Sikh wrestlers came to New Zealand in search of fame including Harbans Singh²¹, Jagat Singh²², Naranjan Singh²³, Prince Bhupinder Singh²⁴, and Brann Singh²⁵, some of whom had wrestled internationally. A few wrestlers were of Punjabi Muslim descent,

such as Tiger Duala and Faizal Mohomet²⁶ who joined their Sikh counterparts in the country. The localization of wrestling meant that these men fought in towns such as Napier, Gore, and Whanganui and in major cities such as Wellington and Auckland. The impression of these men in local press was positive, entertaining and major venues hosted them while crowds showed up to see them.

Figure 1.0- Sikh wrestlers in New Zealand Jagat Singh²⁷ (left), Karem Singh²⁸ (centre), Harbans Singh²⁹ (right).



Hockey also played a pivotal role in the relationship between Sikhs and the wider community. This was especially true as the teams which arrived in New Zealand were generally from the British Indian Army. The first such team to arrive in New Zealand was during 1926 and was represented by Sikh soldiers throughout its ranks. The team was to play seventeen games in New Zealand against various local teams and the national side. The hockey team was composed mainly of Sikhs, but also included Gurkha, Pathan, Madrasi and European soldiers from the Indian Army. The team's interactions focused on local communities across New Zealand, where they were met with applause and support. These involved playing matches, living amongst the people, being entertained and meeting with local communities as they travelled.

The purpose of the team's visit to New Zealand was a "mutual broadening of each other's views of the Empire".³⁰ This was particularly poignant in the racially charged climate in which they were playing. Unlike the local Indians, the soldiers were treated with the utmost respect by their hosts. Local dignitaries, such as mayors and ministers offered cordial welcomes in areas such as Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch. These dignitaries were often joined by British officers of the Indian Army based in New Zealand, who were fluent in Hindi and Punjabi and spoke to the soldiers in their native languages. This was not necessary as the soldiers themselves were fluent in English, making communication no real issue. The soldiers were placed with locals in various communities, including European and Maori exposing them to the indigenous Maori culture. In Auckland³¹ and Wellington, the soldiers were stationed in the military barracks. In Ohinemutu (near Rotorua) the Indian team was placed in the local Maori Pa (village) and given a distinctly Maori welcome.³² As shown in figure 1.1, local Indians were also well aware of the Indian hockey team and met them in various centers.

Figure 1.1 - A Sikh hockey team member meeting a local Indian fruit seller in Auckland, 1926.³³



Employment

Employment diversity during the early twentieth century was viewed as limited and restricted within rural labour markets. According to McLeod “those who arrived from 1912 onwards were principally involved in rural development”.³⁴ This allowed for “long hours in conditions of considerable privation”.³⁵ He believed one of the primary reasons for occupation choice was “visibility.” McLeod believed the low-visibility of rural development was the major reason for Sikhs to work in occupations within this sector. This meant the Sikhs would be “noticed by few New Zealanders” and “unlikely to regard them as competitors” for jobs, resources or social status.³⁶ The view was further compounded by the tensions of the 1920s which placed these men within a racially difficult and at times hostile context. The implementation of racially exclusionary policy and amplified tensions caused by organisations such as the White New Zealand League added to the perception of seclusion especially within employment.

Newly discovered information shows employment within the Sikh community was highly diverse and shifted according to the varying economic dynamics occurring locally and globally. The diversity placed Sikhs in various facets of society working in professions such as farm labourers, doctors and entertainers. The diversity in employment caused Sikhs to interact with multiple areas of society in cities, small towns and rural regions. Some occupations required mobility between different regions such as hawking and fruit selling which connected rural and urban regions across the North Island.

In urban areas Sikhs were involved in highly interactive occupations which placed them in the middle of European dominated communities. One such individual was Lullah Singh located at 114 Manners St, Wellington. Lullah Singh was a “masseur, hydropathist and herbalist” who could solve problems of “swollen feet” and “nervous complaints.”³⁷ In Auckland another Sikh with a very different occupation was also active on Grey St, Auckland. J Singh was an “Oriental and European masseur” and offered services such as “magnetic massage.” He was also available to attend people in their homes to provide these services.³⁸ In Wellington Lal Singh was working as a port worker. He was described as wearing the “green turban of the Prophet”.³⁹ There seems to be some confusion about the religion of the man who may have been mistaken for a Muslim. In the Hawera/Wanganui region Sikhs were noted working in small towns running businesses. These included Phuman Singh (Gill) and R. Singh who both owned business in the region for a number of years. R. Singh who was likely Ruanag Singh arrived from Australia in 1893. He was initially a hawker based in the Taranaki region before accumulating enough wealth and going into a fixed dwelling business (much like Phuman Singh) and dealt in confectionary as well as fruit and vegetable business.⁴⁰ R. Singh had established himself in Hawera and like other Sikhs, expanded his business. Phuman Singh was well recorded by McLeod as a business man who was initially noted as the first Sikh in New Zealand. Phuman was a hawker who later became a successful businessman marrying a local English nurse and

settling in the country. Another Sikh was Baldev Singh Share who was a doctor working on the prestigious Queen Street in Auckland. He travelled from India to settle in New Zealand with his family. Legal troubles met Baldev during his time in New Zealand and he returned to India after suffering imprisonment losing a court battle. Hakim Singh Jhooty also dealt in fabrics and was noted as a draper with extensive connections to the local Maori community.⁴¹ These examples were progressively changing and expanding as Sikhs embedded further into the society. According to voter registration rolls Sikhs were listed as drivers, cooks, sugar boilers, merchants, electricians, confectioners, civil servants, furriers, share-milkers, market gardeners, drainers, fruiterers and contractors.⁴² Some went onto acquire farms as wealth increased and communities became multi-generational. This created a continually growing support infrastructure for Sikhs seeking opportunities in New Zealand and many chose to settle in the rural North Island.

Political Activism

The level of integration and interest into local society was reflected in the political activity of the Sikh community. McLeod stated that if Punjabis “took an interest in politics their attention was directed to the politics of Punjab rather than to those of New Zealand.”⁴³ Politics was seen as peripheral to the concerns of the temporary residents even if Sikhs had been in New Zealand for a long period.⁴⁴ This view was held by McLeod due to the assumption that Sikhs intended to return to Punjab and therefore were not worried about the wider concerns of the country. By analysing the political engagement of the Sikh community an enlarged picture of participation is apparent.

Political activism showed how Sikhs defined themselves within the New Zealand context including how they viewed themselves as citizens of New Zealand and subjects of the British Empire. Far from non-engagement with local politics Sikhs were proactive in multiple ways when fighting for their rights in local society. Sikhs were organising, lobbying politicians, engaging colonial presses and publically challenging local pro-white groups throughout New Zealand.

During the early twentieth century discrimination rapidly increased as economic hardship beset the nations globally. Race and citizenship became a hot topic as an increasing numbers of Asians continued to migrate throughout the world. The increasing hostility both within India and around the world caused Sikhs to react. Indians in South Africa under the leadership of Gandhi protested for equal rights while Sikhs protested for their rights in the ports of Vancouver with Gurdit Singh at the helm. Sikhs organised along political lines especially in the diaspora. In the United States and Canada, Sikhs along the West Coast organized and established the Ghadar Party in the hopes of ending British rule in India. In Australia Sikhs protested against the restrictions imposed on them by the central government with the implementation of restrictive anti-Asian immigration legislation. In Punjab Sikhs were also

venting frustrations against the colonial power which eventuated in a massacre and progressive weakening of British power throughout India.

In New Zealand Sikhs faced the same problems and issues as many of their counterparts overseas. Due to the relatively small population within New Zealand the country's reaction towards Sikhs was relatively mute until the 1920s when legislation effectively closed mass migration into New Zealand. The first rumbles of racial tension came during 1910 as pro-white organisations were formed in areas such as Pukekohe, South of Auckland, where Sikhs and other Indians were concentrated. They were working alongside their European counterparts within local communities at the same time providing strong competition in the fruit and vegetable market. This caused a reaction from local white farmers who were not happy with the economic challenge posed by Sikhs and Asians. Consequently a decision was made to organise according to race.

During 1914, an individual who called himself "White New Zealand" complained about Indian fruit hawkers in Wellington.⁴⁵ His complaint lay in the economics of Indians setting up businesses "who [paid] no rent for their business premises" and they also "sold their goods at prices that respectable shops [could not] compete with." The writer advocated the "removal of [the] undesirable immigrants from the country" and he believed politicians would "sure to receive thanks of all classes of white community." These exaggerated fears had little basis in reality as, by 1912, Wellington city had licensed six Indians to sell in the streets. By 1913, this had increased to twenty.⁴⁶ The external appearance of Sikhs also drew particular criticism from pro-white groups. According to an article in the *Auckland Star* it was "no unusual experience to see in Auckland...be-turbaned Indians who are allowed to land in New Zealand".⁴⁷ Special mention was also made of rural Sikhs located around Taumarunui who were described as living "at a very low standard" and would "lower the moral and standard of living for working classes." The effect on the Sikhs was already apparent during this period as many were deported, being unable to meet immigration requirements, as shown in Figure 1.2. The exaggerated fears and heightening tensions pushed both the Sikhs and wider Indian community to react.

During the growing racial instabilities of the mid 1910s, Indians began actively creating organizations. In 1916, an Indian association was first mentioned in the *Hawera & Normanby Star*.⁴⁸ A letter from New Zealand troops in Iraq stated that they had received "hard boiled lollies" and a "tin of milk each" from an Indian association.⁴⁹ It is quite possible that this could have been from Indians or Sikhs living in Wanganui or Hawera during the period. By 1920, multiple Indian focused organizations were recorded with members in thirty centers from "Whangarei to Invercargill."⁵⁰ The two organizations were called the "British and India Association" and "The Home Rule for India League." In 1920, these organizations were merged and became known as the New Zealand and Indian League. The organization was made up of Europeans and advocated for the home rule of India. It also decried the removal of press freedoms and censorships, which were enacted and advocated

for the rights of indentured labourers in Fiji. The organization had strong links to Annie Besant, an Irish activist woman, who advocated for the home rule of India and was imprisoned for doing so.

The New Zealand and Indian league joined the racial fray by addressing attacks against Indians in the local press. The honorary secretary of the organization, Mr John Griffiths wrote to the *Dominion Post* defending Indians.⁵¹ He stated that “Indians [were] mainly of Aryan stock” and that it would be wise to “differentiate between Chinese, Japanese and Indians.” He went on to state that Indians were citizens of the Empire and they had contributed in “blood and treasure” for the defense of the Empire during World War 1. The organization was dominated by Europeans in support of Indians and reflected the cross cultural support for Indians during the hostile period.

By 1920, the Indian community was already organized in different localities including Auckland and Wellington. As mentioned earlier, Indian Associations were donating gifts to the New Zealand military in 1915 but their activities before this date remain unclear.⁵² Indians were organized in Auckland by 1918⁵³, where a significant community of Sikhs was present. The organization in Auckland was led by Chhotubhai Jivanji who was a well-educated shipping clerk.⁵⁴ After suffering discrimination from co-workers he quit and found work as a clerk at a local jeweller. In 1919, Chhotubhai engaged the colonial presses arguing for the rights of Indians in New Zealand. He stated in a letter to the Prime Minister, “in my opinion this country belongs to all Britishers, who reside in it, and have equal right no matter whether black, white or red, as was shown in the Great War”.⁵⁵ In the same month, a “Singh Sud” (an alias) wrote another letter to the *Auckland Star* emphasizing India’s contribution to the war effort in Europe.⁵⁶ Another article recorded an interview with Dr. Baldev Singh Share was noted one week after his arrival in Auckland, in 1920.⁵⁷ He defended the Indians arriving into New Zealand as “decent and law-abiding class” and they had the intention of becoming “reputable citizens.” Both Sikhs and Gujratis were working together to counter prejudices against Indians. The relationship would spread across the wider Indian community unifying both communities for a common purpose.

Figure 1.2: The deportation of Sikhs in Auckland during 1914 after the implementation of the 1910 Immigration Act.⁵⁸



By 1922, the Auckland organization was officially named the New Zealand Indian Association and was headed by J.K. Natali. Dr. Baldev Singh Share also had a close relationship with the organization. The New Zealand Indian Association led high ranking delegations to both local officials and visiting dignitaries. The first example came with the visit of V.S.S Shastri, who led a top level diplomatic delegation from India through multiple regions in the British Empire.⁵⁹ Sastri was a member of the Privy Council and was a well-respected diplomat in the Indian Government. His delegation was met by the head of the Department of Internal Affairs in New Zealand along with Dr. Baldev Singh Share and J.K. Natali, the president of the Auckland based association. Again, after the unification of the associations, Auckland continued to lead delegations such as to the Minister of Internal Affairs in 1926, to air their grievances about discrimination.⁶⁰ The association openly challenged the White New Zealand League in the press⁶¹ and placed the League on a defensive footing.⁶² This also occurred at a local level where the Association met politicians in Wellington such as Dunbar Sloane (a reform candidate for Wellington Central). He expressed support for Indians in the city stating “these Indians are British subjects, and electors of Wellington Central,

and thousands of their countrymen served the Empire during the Great War".⁶³ This was particularly important as Sloane was going against the prevailing attitudes of the period. The Auckland association was the dominant and most influential organization during the 1920s and remained so after unification in 1926.

In Wellington, on 133 Tory St, a group of Indians established "The Indian Association".⁶⁴ The address had an Indian presence from about 1915 and was the base for a fruit selling business. The organization was dominated by the Gujarati community and was likely organized because of the growing hostility towards them, as noted in the local *Evening Post*.⁶⁵ In 1920, the organization was influential enough to advertise in the local newspaper calling for Indians in Wellington, to observe self-declared holidays.⁶⁶ In Wellington another Indian individual named "Miru" (likely linked to the Indian Association) detailed his views of a White New Zealand Policy. He believed that if New Zealand blocked Indians then India could adopt an "Indian's India" policy.⁶⁷

The rural Sikhs had their own Indian Association in Taumarunui, where much of the population was concentrated. It remains unclear how early the Sikh association was formed but by the 1919, the Sikhs had established a centralized support base in Te Awamutu. The place was called the "Hindu Farm" by local Europeans, likely because of the high numbers of Indians located there. The farm was acquired by the pooled resources of four farmers (Indar, Harnam, Sumundu and Nandu Singh) and was noticed by the local Returned Servicemen's Association (RSA).⁶⁸ The farm was acquired for a "£1000" deposit (no small amount for the period) and was located "5 miles out of Te Awamutu," near the township of Kihikihi.⁶⁹ This was much to the disdain of the local RSA, who reacted angrily to its establishment.

The farm functioned much like a gurdwara (Sikh temple) providing a base for temporary residence, to hold meetings, meet other Punjabis and sing Punjabi songs. This was in line with other Sikh diaspora communities such as the United Kingdom, Canada, Fiji, the United States of America, China and Hong Kong. The "Hindu Farm" was short lived after the implementation of the Immigration Restriction Act in 1921. The steep drop in new arrivals resulted in decreased numbers seeking assistance at the farm which resulted in its eventual sale in 1922-1923.⁷⁰ The closure should be seen in the context of the wide geographical spread of the community and relatively small population within New Zealand. The "Hindu farm" showed that the Sikhs recognized a need for an organized support structure within the community and attempted to form this based on the common gurdwara system.

Along with the farm, Sikhs were challenging negative perceptions in the colonial press. Individuals such as Singh Sud, Baldev Singh Share and Indar Singh Randhawa⁷¹ argued for their citizenship in New Zealand and the Empire. Singh Sud (likely an alias) responded to article in the Auckland Star which attacked "a handful of Indians settling in [New Zealand]".⁷² Singh argued that "thousands of [his] countrymen went to France to fight for the British Empire long before America entered the war." He went on to refer to white New Zealanders as "pakehas" likely referring to their own foreign

origins. He attacked the “capitalistic slave drivers, who [were] mostly white men.” Baldev Singh (as noted earlier) took a more conciliatory stance when he was interviewed by the *Evening Post*.⁷³ He supported European education and placed Indians in the “Aryan family.” Share went on by delineating Indians from other “Asiatics” such as “Mongolian, Chinese and Japanese” who he believed “[infused] an entirely alien strain of blood into the countries in which they [settled].” Indar Singh Randhawa responded to an article from White New Zealand League. He stated that the League had “done some service to the Indian community.” He quoted Queen Victoria’s stance on equality and requested the League “that in their light they may weigh their argument.” He went on to antagonize the League asking “has the League any respect for the above-mentioned words?” referring to the quote of Queen Victoria. He argued that “true citizens of New Zealand [had] not forgotten.” He evidenced the reaction of the citizens and “civic reception paid to our hockey representative” referring to the Indian Hockey team touring New Zealand during 1926. These men were leaders within the community and provided a voice for rurally based Sikhs, far from the political centers in Auckland and Wellington. Baldev Singh was particularly proactive (as mentioned earlier) and was closely linked to the Gujarati dominated Auckland association. The Sikh community was organized by the 1920s and continued to evolve as the racial threat grew.

Political activity continued through to the 1940s as Sikhs came together to discuss communal issues and dealt with the greater context in which they were living. The Indian Association was highly active throughout New Zealand’s major centres. Under the banner of the Indian Association Sikhs continued to challenge pro-white policies and organisations. During the World War II, the minutes from a meeting of the Indian Association state that Sikhs and their Indian counterparts “whole heartedly supported the New Zealand Government defence policy and offered it full cooperation in whatever capacity its service were required”⁷⁴At the same time Sikhs continued to advocate for their rights stating “the fact should not be overlooked that local Indians, being British subjects and also citizens of New Zealand, deserved British justice.”⁷⁵ These concerns about justice and rights reverberated throughout the early history of the community and were reiterated again in 1945 as Sikhs emphasized the need for “a fair chance” of settling in New Zealand after World War II.⁷⁶

Sikh political activism and integration in society was reinforced by the fact that many of these men were registered in voting electoral rolls from 1901, a sample shown in Figure 1.3. As citizens of New Zealand Sikhs had the right to vote for politicians and the government seemingly had no issue in giving Sikhs this right. No references were made to removing the right to vote from Sikhs and as noted earlier Sikhs were involved in attempts to lobby local politicians for their cause. The right to vote, the growing numbers on electoral rolls and the political activism of the community reflected integration, citizenship and the permanent nature of the migration. McLeod emphatically stated the intention was to return home to Punjab and there was no intention to settle permanently in New Zealand. The vast majority of Sikhs who travelled to New

Zealand chose to permanently settle in the country. It is apparent that the idea of the Sikh sojourner must be placed into question in light of the new evidence.

Figure 1.3 - Sample of New Zealand Electoral Rolls 1928.⁷⁷

Bhagwan Singh	153 Willis St	Wellington
Bikar Singh	Torehape via Kaihere	Hauraki
Bugga Singh	Te Puke	Tauranga
Channon Singh	Kaihere	Hauraki
Chhajja Singh	Paterangi	Raglan
Cynthia Satwanti Singh		
Share	470 Dominion Road	Eden
Dalip Singh	Taumarunui	Waimarino
Dhanpat Singh	Piriaka	Waimarino
Dhuleep Singh	16 Andrew Young Street	Palmerston
Dhuman Singh	Torehape	Hauraki
Dulel Singh	Te Puke	Tauranga
Elizabeth Singh	18 Andrew young Street	Palmerston
Esive Singh	16 Andrew Young Street	Palmerston
Fanju Ngaroto Singh	Ohaupo	Raglan
Florence Emily Singh	Bay View	Hawkes Bay
Gaja Singh	Tahuna, Morrinsville	Waikato
Gaja Singh	Torehape Mill, Torehape	Hauraki
Ganda Singh	Makirikiri, Wanganui	Rangitikei
Gunda Singh	Torehape Mill, Torehape	Hauraki
Gur Bakhsh Singh	Awaiti	Thames
Gurbakhsh Singh	Pirongia	Raglan
Gur Bakhsh Singh	Awaiti West Road, Netherton	Waikato
Gurbachan Singh	Kaihere	Hauraki
Gurdas Singh	C/O Mr Hayward, Mananui	Waimarino
Gurdas Singh Johal	Kaihere	Hauraki
Gurdit Singh	Bay View	Hawkes Bay
Hakim Singh Jhooty	Tokomaru	Bay of Plenty
Hazara Singh	Tahuna	Waikato
Hajara Singh	Torehape	Hauraki
Harman Singh	Kihikihi	Waitomo

Sikhs & the Justice System

The engagement of the Sikh community in New Zealand with the justice system is completely absent from McLeod's historical writings. The oral histories recorded by McLeod made no acknowledgement of criminal activities and engagement with the courts with the exception of Dr. Baldev Singh Share who McLeod suggests was possibly framed.⁷⁸ The lack of information in regards to criminal activities emphasizes the limitations of oral histories – the distance of memory from criminal occurrences, the lack of greater community knowledge or the possible sanitization of the history by interviewees who were unwilling to expose negative activities of the community. This lack of information again contributed to ideas of seclusion and lack of integration with the greater New Zealand society.

New research within newspapers and government records sheds light on the engagement of Sikh community with justice system in multiple ways. This included as criminals, as defendants as well as fighting for their rights. The utilization of the justice system showed integration, trust and participation with state institutions and how Sikhs viewed their judicial rights in New Zealand. The courts were in regular use before the 1900s as Sikhs were noted in local courts from 1888.

During the 1900s Sikhs were engaging with the local judiciary frequently. A Sikh, Weer Singh appeared in newspapers multiple times for offences relating to liquor. He was arrested for “keeping liquor for sale”⁷⁹ in Paeroa, near Wellington. He was arrested multiple times for being drunk.⁸⁰ His repeated arrests landed him in the local gaol for a month. The frequency of Weer Singh's contact with the law allows for the mapping of his movements across the North Island. Weer was continually referred to in newspapers from 1894 until he died in 1918. Brushes with the law continued across the country as Sikhs were arrested for disorderly behaviour. On the West Coast of the North Island in the quaint town of Wairoa, Gurdet Singh ended up in court after he was arrested for being drunk at the “Waikare hotel”.⁸¹ The geographical spread of judicial engagement also reached Auckland as Sikhs were in court as disputes with locals were played out in the media.⁸² Sikhs were convicted for crimes including theft⁸³, fraud⁸⁴, drunkenness⁸⁵, perjury⁸⁶ as well as sexual crimes⁸⁷. An example of this was the case of Acchar Singh and Banta Singh who stole money from another (likely Punjabi) woman called Ram Chamkour.⁸⁸ This resulted in Banta Singh receiving a fine while the case for Acchar was dismissed because he was too drunk. Another case was of Bachint Singh who was found guilty of perjury within the courtroom. It must be emphasized that criminal activities within the community were only fractional and did not reflect the community as a whole. There are few records, showing the infrequency of crime throughout the 1930s. At the same time Sikhs continued to use the courts to deal with grievances. This was true for Nand Singh who was sent to prison after committing crimes against Bachint Singh's wife.⁸⁹ Another example is of Esive Singh who went to court to defend himself against labour claims, a case he eventually lost.⁹⁰ The activity in the

courts required utilization of state institutions and a broad understanding of how they worked. Sikhs were not unfairly treated trusted the courts enough to use them for their own ends.

The majority of criminal references present us with a community engaged with the justice system in New Zealand. One of the main reasons for this was the growing anti-Asian sentiment and the slow influx of Sikhs with their distinctive identity attracted public attention towards the community. Newspapers reflected this attention through racist sentiments which they often exaggerated through editorial articles. This saw newspapers focusing on the negative aspects of the Asian communities in New Zealand, such as criminal activities. This was not something unique to New Zealand but reflected attitudes throughout much of the Empire at the time. This was compounded by the sensational nature of reporting where criminal activities within New Zealand in general were extensively recorded especially during the earliest periods of Sikh migration. The reason for criminal behaviour can also be seen in the new cultural context. These men shifted into a new society where the rules and restrictions of rural Punjab no longer applied. These were young men who often lacked parental and familial restrictions as well as guidance in New Zealand. This new found freedom could often lead them into brushes with the law. Many of the men who were arrested were young adult males who found a new exciting life far different from the one they had come from.

Again, even though these details of the Sikh community were covered extensively by colonial presses, they were by no means the norm of the community and do not reflect the community in its totality. The new migrants were adjusting and settling into a new society and this could often create friction as they adjusted to it. These unique and overlapping set of conditions drew much attention to the community often for negative reasons.⁹¹

Military Connections

The military connections between New Zealand and the Sikhs came on multiple fronts. The external connection was detailed in *Reassessing Sikh History in New Zealand 1881-1914*. However McLeod and later scholars were unable to discover how extensive these connections were and hence they are completely absent from current scholarship. As shown in figure 1.4 the British Indian Army's arrival in New Zealand came during 1901 and they were paraded extensively across the country. These included forces from 15th Ludhiana Regiment. These men were in full regalia and treated as honoured dignitaries, taking photos with locals, marching through city centres with thousands cheering for them.

Figure 1.4: Indian Contingent in New Zealand 1901.⁹²



Within New Zealand the Sikh contribution to the war effort was relatively small. Comparably New Zealand's population was also small. Sikhs who were voting, living and working in New Zealand became embroiled in World War 1. The Sikh contribution to the effort was partly due to the mandatory service (also known as the draft) while others, coming from military backgrounds in India, chose to sign up voluntarily. The New Zealand government implemented the draft to help sure up troops for deployment in Europe and Africa to fight German aggression throughout the Empire. The Sikh involvement in the military was not unusual in the global context especially because Sikhs were already deployed worldwide as part of the British military machine. Sikhs were known for their military prowess and skills and a valuable asset in the British arsenal. Sikhs were already deployed from India in multiple fronts and fought alongside their New Zealand counterparts in France and Gallipoli. At same time some of the Sikhs on these battlefields also became settlers in New Zealand.

The draft ballot system used during World War I recorded numerous Sikhs in the reserves for the New Zealand Expeditionary Force, as shown in Figure 1.5. They were located around the country both in rural and urban areas. For example, Gurdet Singh a storekeeper in Napier was called up for the reserves in 1916. In Taumaranui, during the same year Sohan Singh was also called up to join the New Zealand Expeditionary Force reserves. These would be followed with numerous other Sikhs including Sham Singh, Suba Singh,

Sunder Singh, Agiti Singh, Arjan Singh, Maghar Singh and so on. These men were located throughout New Zealand in both the North and South Island.

Only one Sikh served in direct combat overseas. This individual's name was Jagt Singh, a 27 year old labourer from Te Awamutu (South of Auckland) voluntarily enlisted for army in 1915.⁹³ He arrived in New Zealand from the village of Shankar, Punjab only four months prior to his deployment. His deployment began with the Wellington Mounted Rifles where he was sent to the battle fields of Dardanelles (Gallipoli) and Egypt. At the battle of Gallipoli he was wounded and evacuated to Egypt and was later attached to the Auckland Mounted Rifles. His service for New Zealand spanned almost five years, with over four of those years spent overseas. Due to his injuries he was unable to serve any longer and was discharged on December 5th 1919. Three years later Jagt received the Victory Medal for his service to New Zealand and Britain. Jagt Singh's enlistment may not have been unique in the global context as Sikhs attempted to engage in both the United States and Australia during the same period.

These Sikh men were citizens of New Zealand and their inclusion into the draft ballots meant government policy allowed for their enlistment regardless of where they came from. The Sikhs were subjects of the Queen and citizens of the Empire and this was reflected in the World War I draft. Sikhs actively served in the military by not only fighting under the flag of British India but also from New Zealand due to their loyalty to the crown. Sikhs were intrinsically a part of New Zealand society by the time of World War I and their records in the military reinforce this.

Figure 1.5: List of Sikhs Involved in the New Zealand Army World War I.

Name	Location	Occupation	Year	Army Status
Acbar Singh	Auckland	Labourer	1918	Drafted
Agiti Singh	Taumarunui	Labourer	1917	Reserves
Arjan Singh	Taumarunui	Labourer	1917	Reserves
Banta Singh	Kaiteke	Labourer	1918	Drafted
Bhagat Singh	Makirikiri	Labourer	1918	Drafted
Buttah Singh	Auckland	Shopkeeper	1917	Drafted
Chinchal Singh	Taumarunui	Labourer	1917	Drafted
Ganda Singh	Makirikiri	Labourer	1917	Drafted
Gina Singh	Te Kuiti	Labourer	1916	Appealed Draft
Gurdet Singh	Hawkes Bay	Shopkeeper	1916	Reserves
Harnam Singh	King Country	Labourer	1918	Drafted

Indar Singh	Taumarunui	Labourer	1918	Drafted
Jagt Singh	Manukau	Labourer	1914	Active Duty
Jagat Singh	Te Awamutu	Labourer	1916	Reserves
Jasa Singh	Taringamutu	Scrub-cutter	1918	Drafted
Jiwan Singh	King Country	Labourer	1918	Drafted
Kahan Singh	Ongarue	Scrub-cutter	1917	Drafted
Karnal Singh	Auckland	Cook	1917	Drafted
Maghar Singh	Taumarunui	Scrub-cutter	1917	Reserves
Mihan Singh	Matatoki	Farmer	1917	Reserves
Mohar Singh	Waikato	Labourer	1917	Drafted
Munsha Singh	Taumarunui	Bush feller	1918	Drafted
Ranjit Singh	New Plymouth	Confectioner	1918	Drafted
Ratan Singh	Taumarunui	Labourer	1917	Reserves
Sham Singh	Wairapa	Labourer	1916	Active Duty
Sohan Singh	Taumarunui	Labourer	1916	Reserves
Suba Singh	Whangarei	Labourer	1916	Reserves
Sunder Singh	North Otago	Labourer	1916	Reserves
Thaman Singh	Makirikiri	Labourer	1918	Drafted
Weer Singh	Wellington	Labourer	1916	Active Duty

Identity, Religious and Cultural Recreation

The identity of the Sikhs in New Zealand has been defined by scholars in terms of nationality, language, regional localities, and caste delineations with religion held at the periphery. McLeod emphasized the Punjabi identity of the Sikhs while authors such as Leckie, Bandopadyay and Ballantyne emphasized the Indian identity of the community. For McLeod these overriding identities were in part to cover all those who were from Punjab, which included Muslims and Hindus. The finer Caste/Zaat/Got delineations were likely due to the high bar set for “religiousness” by McLeod and the interviewees who possibly deemphasized the extent of their faith. McLeod also placed great emphasis on the *rahit* and *kes* (hair) as identifiers of an individual’s Sikh faith attributes which was in turn influenced by Sir Malcolm Darling’s scholarship on the

Sikh community.⁹⁴ The name of an individual also influenced how McLeod viewed the religious identity of individuals as some chose to change their surname to Chand from Singh, something he attributed to fluid religious identity. Ultimately, McLeod stated emphatically “enquiry concerning their precise identity was essentially pointless because it presupposed the possibility that rural Punjabis can be clearly identified in terms of religious affiliation”.⁹⁵ In the same breath he acknowledged that most of the Punjabi immigrants regarded themselves as Sikhs.⁹⁶ Much of the information McLeod received was from interviewees during the 1970s and were generally second party perspectives on other individuals who they saw as “Hindu/Sikh” as opposed to gaining information from the individuals themselves. It is also wholly possible that the 1980s militancy had an influence on McLeod’s perspective on the Sikh faith and his application of it on early Sikh settlers. This was by no means McLeod’s fault as many early settlers had passed away from the Pre-World War II period making exact religious affiliation difficult. It was also likely that many of the activities undertaken by Sikhs were not seen as distinctly Sikh but something which was seen as a normal part of life, this included learning Punjabi, undertaking prayers, or following practices for funerals and marriages. Due to the highly dynamic nature of faith it was difficult to define a Sikh. The importance of faith within the community was clear during the early period of Sikh migration into New Zealand. Multiple references to ceremonies such as prayers, funerals and marriages provide insight as to how the Sikh attempted to continue and recreate religious and cultural practices from Punjab within the country.

The Got/Zaat (clan name or last name) of these men appears to have been a very personal affair. Public records of individuals held by multiple areas of government, newspapers, voting rolls, military enlistment rolls (shown above), and communication papers show only a few Sikhs referred to their clan name. Almost all Sikhs referred to their last name as Singh while women were referred to as Kaur. Internally within the community most Sikhs were well aware of their background being Jat, Saini, Chamar etc but it appears application only held true within the context of marriage. For example within newspapers one of the most prominent early Sikhs referred to himself only as Phuman Singh, his Jat clan name of Gill was never used on any public records, including marriage, death, newspaper advertisements, immigration papers or on his signature. A handful of Sikhs did choose to use their last name on voting rolls such as Indar Singh Randhawa and Hakim Singh Jhooty, though in other contexts such as newspapers these were missing. The vast majority of records depict a community who chose to utilize the Sikh last name of Singh, though exceptions existed for varying reasons. The categorization of the community within caste categories was an external application by scholars and was not something apparent within the early community. The overriding use of the and last name of Singh reflected the Sikh faith of these men had a larger role to play in their identity.

In a setting where the community was in the minority and was made up of a small population, it was at times difficult to reproduce culture and religion in

a new context. This by no means stopped the community from doing so against many difficulties. Beginning in 1919 the community had established a center in Te Awamutu which was named the “Hindu farm” by locals, as mentioned earlier in this paper. Its purpose was to provide support for the community following a similar function to the gurdwara. Due to costs and lack of financial support the farm was eventually closed and sold. This was not uncommon for the period as Sikh gurdwaras were established globally and an attempt was made to setup an independent building in New Zealand.

Two Guru Granths were present in the country during the 1930s. The first arrived with Phuman Singh Gill in 1892 and the second was acquired by Phuman Singh Rurki for the wedding of his daughter in the 1930s. The Guru Granth Sahib served a central religious purpose throughout the 1890s and early 1900s. It was usually contained in a room at the house of whoever acquired the Scripture. Madge Singh, Phuman Singh Gill’s daughter, mentioned that “quite a few seemed to pass through Wanganui before and after my parents were married. One gave my mother a bolt of pure silk of which her wedding gown was made. They were mostly hawkers I should think and it before 1900 or just after. They would visit my father on Sundays and have a religious service there”.⁹⁷ This was confirmed by the significant presence of Sikhs in the region. In the 1930s the same applied as the marriage of Kartari took place in Waikato, South of Auckland. Here the text was specially acquired and used as a part of the marriage ceremony where it had central place. To the current day the scripture remains in the hands of the original family. Prayers were also undertaken using *gutkas* or small prayer books with extracts of the Guru Granth within them. Sikhs generally sat and listened to someone leading the prayer, this was confirmed through McLeod’s own oral history survey. According to McLeod some Sikhs recited *Japji Sahib*, *Shabad Hazare* and *Rahiras*.⁹⁸ Observances for food were also maintained as some Sikhs chose only to eat *jatka* meat the method by which an animal was killed by a single blow, a distinctly Sikh custom.⁹⁹

Along with the scriptures Sikhs were following protocols when it came to deaths in the community. Multiple people had passed during the growth of the community, some by accident, murder and some by suicide. This meant Sikhs had to make do without proper cremation facilities. In a descriptive article noted in the Wellington based *Evening Post*¹⁰⁰ the method of cremation followed general practices in Punjab. The first known record of a Sikh cremation occurred in New Zealand during 1929. Balwant Singh, a fifteen year old boy working at a camp near Ohura committed suicide using a shotgun.¹⁰¹ In a news report almost three years later it was recalled that the boy was given a cremation in accordance with Sikh rites.¹⁰² The second known cremation occurred in the same district. According to the article, “Udham Kaur” wife of Harnam Singh had passed away in Taumaranui (Central North Island) and a pyre was to be built for her. “The pyre of “chitta” was “half built and the body was bought from the hearse and deposited on the logs”. The article goes on to describe how the body was “wrapped in fine linens and cover over all with a beautiful red cover of flowered silk.” Flowers were also placed on the body

along with a wreath, perfume, cardamom seeds and spices. The body was finally covered with 10lb of mixed nuts and 4lbs of sultanas. The article goes on to say the pyre was usually set alight by a granthi (caretaker/priest) but due to the absence of one, the husband set the pyre alight. Importantly the article describes a “prayer” taking place lead by Kaitar Singh, a friend of the husband. The prayer was translated as meaning “everybody had to come to the same place-dust to dust and ashes to ashes. He asked God to forgive the sins of the deceased and take her to the place the Indians called “Surgh” (heaven). This was likely a very rough translation by the reporter. This was not the only instance as another funeral took place in Wanganui in 1936 after the death of Kehar Singh (who was killed during a landslide).¹⁰³ Again, a pyre was built which was “seven feet high and a body on a bier of green willow was placed on it.” “Rice, almonds and raisins” were also placed on the body which included a “box of butter.” In this case a chaplain read the service but it remains unclear if this was in reference to a Sikh granthi or a Christian chaplain. The ashes were then distributed into the ocean similar to the current day custom of the Ganges or Kiratpur.

The reproduction of religion and culture in New Zealand also expanded into marriages. Much like other pressures for the community, marriage also proved problematic especially as anti-Asian legislation made it difficult to find partners for both sons and daughters. Many marriages during the pre-1950 period were arranged though exceptions remained including interracial marriages with the Maori and European communities. The community turned to transnational networks in the hunt for partners (relying on close friends and relatives in Punjab to find prospects). For those who were to be married to men and women in New Zealand they were generally required to make the move to the distant land. For women this was generally different from the norm in Punjab as tradition and culture dictated women were to move to the husband’s village. This was changed as parents of daughters did not feel comfortable sending children to Punjab, instead men and women moved to New Zealand and contributed to the success of the family there. Marriages in New Zealand were often undertaken on similar lines to Punjab. Extravagance, color and fanfare were the order of the day which meant at times lavish settings and invitations to both Sikh and non-Sikh alike. The restrictions placed on marriages were generally financial i.e. the size of the wedding was generally defined by the amount of wealth a family had. For Kartari (shown in Figure 1.6 and 1.7), the daughter of Phuman Singh (Rurki) this meant an extravagant highly publicized wedding through the streets of Waikato. A marching band, decorated cars and a procession marched down the street much to the delight of the locals and the press which covered the event. According to the *Auckland Star*, the wedding followed “customary marriage rites of their religion” which included “the bridegroom and his party [were greeted] at the gate of his prospective bride’s home by her father and “the Granthies”.¹⁰⁴ This occurred after the sun had set as was and continues to be the norm in Punjab. The ceremony eventually took place in front of the Guru Granth which (as noted earlier) was brought in especially for this purpose. As shown in Figure 1.8, the

public procession in downtown Te Aroha consisted of “20 cars” and the Municipal Band who played appropriate selections.

Figure 1.6: A heavily veiled Kartari Kaur with her father Phuman Singh during wedding day ceremonies.



Figure 1.7 A photo of Kartari Kaur during marriage ceremonies, 1932.



Figure 1.8 - The wedding procession in Te Aroha for the marriage of Miss Kartari Kaur, 1932.¹⁰⁵



Marriages of New Zealand Sikhs were also occurring overseas and were covered by the local press in New Zealand. In 1935, Dass Singh a “former pupil of Te Aroha High School” while temporarily residing in India for a “period of four years” was to get married.¹⁰⁶ He described his marriage in length including the Mandi ceremony, the band and procession through the village and at sunset the journey to this bride’s residence, similar to Kartari Kaur’s wedding. He also described that during the marriage ceremony the protocol of the bridegroom sitting in front of the Guru Granth Sahib while waiting for bride to come was followed and then they walked around the Holy Scripture four times as verses were read in line with the Anand Karaj marriage ceremony. Details were also provided on events after the marriage ceremony which included entertainment and celebrations. Dass’s father owned a farm in Waihou on the then named Chudleigh Estate.

These instances show reproduction and importance of distinctly Sikh religious and cultural ceremonies as an important part of the community’s identity both in India and thousands of miles away from their homeland. The Sikhs, restricted in multiple ways, maintained their identity and practices in a context which deemed them foreign and at times created hostility towards the community. Death, marriage, maintenance of Sikh names and usage of multiple Sikh scriptures while being in a European dominated context showed a community which remained distinct yet attempted to continually join and integrate into the society. Seclusion, isolation and fear were far from the minds of the Sikhs as they became “citizens” of New Zealand and remained “subjects” of the Empire.

Conclusion

This paper has recreated a brief and broad snapshot of a distinctly Sikh community in New Zealand from 1900 to 1945. The new evidence presented in the paper reflects immense detail on the early Sikh community. It was a community integrated into local society through work, entertainment, military service, political activism, engagements with the justice system and expressions of culture as well as religion. The evidence runs counter to the arguments of seclusion, exclusion, and questions the de-emphasis of religion in the identity of the community. For scholars, it is a new avenue, a new opportunity to rethink the history of Sikhs in the diaspora globally. As the digitization age takes full affect we as scholars must challenge ourselves to reassess Sikh history and rethink our previous theories and assumptions to shed the shackles of the past.

Notes

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- ¹⁰⁴ “Sikh Wedding,” *Auckland Star*, November 29, 1932, 8.
- ¹⁰⁵ “Indian Wedding Provides Entertainment At Te Aroha.—the Rites Of The Sikh Religion In A Wedding Ceremony On Saturday Aroused Much Interest.

On The Left The Te Aroha Municipal Band Is Heading The Wedding Procession, And The Bride, Miss Kartari Singh, Makes Quite A Formal Study On The Right. (see Letterpress Below.)” *Auckland Star*, November 29, 1932, 8.

¹⁰⁶ “Sikh Wedding,” *Auckland Star*, May 18, 1935, 11.