

## **Civic Engagement and *Seva*: An Ethnographic Case Study of a Sikh Gurdwara in Yuba City, California**

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Scholars working in the field of migration studies have explored religious places of worship as sites where immigrants can express, maintain, and re-negotiate their identities and transmit them to the next generations. Recent studies have increasingly also highlighted the role that religious institutions can play in providing its members with skills that promote civic engagement. Eager to contribute novel insights to this latter body of research, I focus in this article on a Sikh *gurdwara* in Yuba City, California and examine the practices that Sikh immigrants and their descendants carry out in relation to this particular place of worship. The two central research questions that guide the analysis of this ethnographic study are 1) what forms of civic engagement can be documented 2) what factors foster civic engagement amongst Sikhs in California? By using this particular case study and focusing on those research questions, this article helps to draw a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between civic engagement and the Sikhs concept of *seva*, selfless service. Further, it highlights the agency through which Sikhs in the diaspora contribute to the shaping of the communities of which they are part.

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### **Introduction**

It is a sunny weekday morning in Yuba City, a rural town located in Northern California. I am riding my bike to one of the town's purpose-built Sikh temples where I am supposed to meet Karanjit<sup>1</sup> for an interview. Halfway I pass a sign that points the way towards the Sikh temple and functions as one of the many visual indicators for the presence of Sikhs in town. Moments later I am seated on a couch, beginning the interview with Karanjit that eventually lasts about three hours, during which Karanjit takes me on a journey through time and across places, and allows me to share moments of sorrow and joy that are part of his life. He also explains his involvement with the *gurdwara* on Tierra Buena Road where he has carried out various acts of *seva*, which is a form of voluntary and selfless work that a Sikh is supposed to carry out. Amongst others, he has introduced several groups of non-Sikhs from Yuba City's larger society to the temple and its functions. Usually he begins the tour of the *gurdwara* by telling the visitors that 'hey, we are not here to convert anybody, you know, we just want to welcome you with open arms, and this is our hospitality, this is how it works', thus emphasizing Sikhism's anti-proselytizing attitude. During the interview, Karanjit refers to further examples

that depict how Sikhs living in Yuba City are actively involved in the *gurdwara*.

Numerous scholars working in the field of migration studies have brought to the fore the ways in which religious places of worship may in addition to meeting people's spiritual needs also serve as important sites where immigrants can express and maintain their identities and transmit their religious and cultural traditions to their descendants (see e.g. Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Hirvi 2010; Jacobsen 2012). Research conducted on Sikh temples in the diaspora has also shown how *gurdwaras* may provide sites of conflicts (Ilkjaer 2011; Gallo 2012; Jacobsen et al. 2012). In addition, recent studies have increasingly pointed out the significant role that worship communities often play in fostering forms of civic engagement amongst people with a migration background (see e.g. Foley and Hoge 2007; Stepick, Rey and Mahler 2009; Baumann 2010; Brettell and Reed-Danahay 2012). In this article I examine a Sikh temple through the lens of civic engagement in order to reach a deeper understanding of the roles that a *gurdwara* may play in the lives of Sikh immigrants and their descendants. The central questions that intertwine and guide the ethnographic analysis presented in this article are the following: 1) What forms of civic engagement can be documented at the Sikh temple on Tierra Buena Road in Yuba City, California 2) what factors foster civic engagement amongst Sikhs? In order to address these questions, I analyze practices that Sikhs in Yuba City perform at the *gurdwara* or in relation to it. By doing so I hope to shed light on the strategies through which Sikh immigrants and their descendants shape the communities in which they are embedded.

By definition, civic engagement includes people's formal political participation but goes well beyond it to incorporate also the various kinds of voluntary activities that people carry out in formal as well as informal associations. Following anthropologists Caroline Brettell and Deborah Reed-Danahay (2012: 2) I understand civic engagement in this article 'as the process by which individuals enter into and act within civic space to address issues of public concern'. The underlying assumption is that through their civic engagement people not only display an interest to contribute to the larger public good, but also help to weave the social fabric of the civil societies to which they feel to belong. In the context of this study, civic engagement is measured by looking at the concrete practices performed by Sikhs in relation to the *gurdwara*. In particular, I am eager to explore the relationship between civic engagement and *seva* (selfless service) as promoted in the Sikh religion.

The empirical data on which this article is based has been gathered by means of ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted for my trans-Atlantic ethnographic study in which I looked at the ways in which Sikhs living in Yuba City, California, and Helsinki, the capital of Finland, negotiate their identities (Hirvi 2013). In Yuba City, I carried out fieldwork during a three months period in fall 2008, and again in fall 2009 when I attended the annual Sikh parade weekend for a second time. All in all I conducted 35 interviews with self-identified Sikhs in Yuba City out of which fourteen were female and

twenty-one male Sikhs belonging to different age groups. The people I interviewed were either immigrants or descendants of immigrants from the Punjab in Northern India. In addition to the interviews, I collected data by the help of participant observation that I carried out amongst others at Yuba City's first *gurdwara* on Tierra Buena Road, which is also in the spotlight of this article.<sup>2</sup>

Sikhism is a monotheistic religion, believing that there is only one God. As Karanjit puts it: 'We believe in one God, and he is the almighty creator, and he is everything'. The founder of the religion is Guru Nanak (1469 – 1539), who was followed by nine *Gurus* (teachers), before the last living Guru Gobind Singh handed over the authority to *Guru Granth Sahib*, which is Sikhs' holy book. The followers of Sikhism are called Sikhs and they meet for congregational worship in a Sikh temple called *gurdwara*. Sikhism is not a proselytizing religion; however converts are allowed to join the fold. One of the most visual symbols associated with Sikhism is the turban, which also plays a significant role in the process through which Sikhs negotiate their identities vis-à-vis co-religionists as well as Non-Sikhs (Walton-Roberts 1998; Hirvi 2013: 82ff.).

Sikhs started arriving in the United States in the early twentieth century and many of those who settled down in California found work in lumber mills, railroads and agriculture (La Brack and Leonard 1984: 528). Over the decades and in response to the changing legal situations there have been several waves of Sikh immigration to California (see Hirvi 2013: 46ff.). Within the last hundred years the number of Sikhs living in California, including Yuba City, has significantly grown from its initial number. According to Sikhs' own estimates expressed in conversations with me, they make up today about ten percent of Yuba City's total population, which means that there are about 10,000 Sikhs currently living in Yuba City and its direct surroundings. In addition to farming, Sikhs are working nowadays in a wide range of other occupations. Some of them maintain ethnic shops, while others work as truck drivers. Many Sikhs also work as doctors, nurses, physical therapists, IT specialists, lawyers, and teachers. The latter group consists mainly of those Sikh who immigrated to the United States as students or with a university degree in their hands, or who have been growing up in Yuba City. It can be argued that due to their long history of migration, Sikhs in Yuba City provide a particularly interesting case study to learn more about the experience of migration more broadly.

This article begins by discussing how the efforts needed to build and maintain the daily routine of Yuba City's first Sikh temple can be seen to disclose a form of inward-looking civic engagement that is to a large extent encouraged by the Sikh ethic of *seva*. I will then focus on analyzing a number of events that had been organized by active Sikhs in relation to the *gurdwara* with the intention to create a bridge to the wider society. As it will become clear, this form of outreach -civic engagement was encouraged to a great extent by a desire to take action against the hostile atmosphere that dominated in the United State in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11,

2001. While it could be argued that these particular forms of civic engagements are at its core motivated by an interest to improve in particular the wellbeing of the Sikh community, the third section discusses a form of civic engagement that is outward looking and clearly reaches beyond the immediate interests of the religious group. As I will become clear throughout the article, it is absolutely crucial to take into consideration the concept of *seva* in order to understand the civic engagement of Sikhs.

### **Inward-looking civic engagement**

A first important milestone in the process of establishing Sikh places of worship on American soil was the opening of a *gurdwara* in Stockton, California in 1912. Until 1947, the Stockton *gurdwara* functioned in the state of California as the only religious institution, where Sikhs from the larger area surrounding Stockton, including Yuba City, would gather for religious worship (Leonard 1992: 95). Kundan, who arrived in Yuba City as a toddler in the late 1960s, remembers in the following interview excerpt how he and his families visited the *gurdwara* in Stockton during weekends:

We used to go to temple all the time, I mean, back then, there was nothing to do, we would all as a family, two families, would drive to Stockton, because Stockton was the only Sikh temple there, and we would leave on a Saturday and spent the night at the temple, and Sunday we would go there, and Sunday [afternoon] we would drive back, and it was always four or five o'clock in the evening before we got home.

Also Baldev, who came to the US as a college student and has been living there since the mid-1950s, recalls how he used to visit the religious institution in Stockton for special occasions three to four times a year before the first *gurdwara* in Yuba City was established. Such special occasions were for example the 'birthday of Guru Nanak, the founder of the religion', as Baldev illuminates, or 'the birthday of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru'. In its initial foundation period, the Stockton *gurdwara* also constituted the meeting place for Sikhs who were involved in the *Ghadar* movement, an organization that was eager to establish India's independence through a violent revolt against British rule (Walton-Roberts 2005: 140).

The first purpose-built *gurdwara* in Yuba City eventually opened its doors in 1969. It is located at the city's western outskirts on Tierra Buena Road and is surrounded by farmland, orchards and a few residential buildings. Further down the road one can find a church. In the opposite direction, towards the right of the *gurdwara*, one can also find a mosque, the rebuilding of which after arson in 1994 by unknown culprits was supported by donations from the local Sikh community, as my informants told me. Also the project of building Yuba City's first *gurdwara* was based on the generous offerings made by individual Sikhs and on the collaborative efforts of a number of Sikh families who actively supported the whole enterprise. One family donated land while

others helped to raise the needed financial means to build the actual building. In parts the project was financed by private funding but also supported through a loan taken from the local bank (La Brack 1988: 304). Looking back, it can be pointed out that the ability of lay people to organize and push through such a large-scale project is highly impressive, and for sure, being involved in this enterprise had a positive effect on developing the organization skills of the people who participated in the realization of this project. Most likely it also improved their ability to deal with the public authorities in their new home country.

If one visits the *gurdwara* on Tierra Buena Road today, one finds a complex of buildings that are bounded by a fence with a line of palm trees towering in front. The *gurdwara* elegantly imposes itself on the surrounding landscape and can be seen as a visual means by which Sikhs announce their presence in town. Inside, the temple gets filled on weekends and for special occasions, such as for *akhand path*<sup>3</sup>, by flocks of worshippers who in concert bring sounds and colors to the building which during the week often lies rather silent in California's sunshine or occasional bed of fog. The congregational worship starts on Sundays around ten in the morning, and groups consisting of family members drop in one after the other. After having taken off their shoes and having washed their hands and feet, people enter the prayer hall with their heads being covered and walk towards the *Guru Granth Sahib*, their holy book, where they make a donation and do *mattha tek*, which 'means kneeling or prostrating oneself and touching the floor with one's brow (mattha) in humble reverence to the Guru Granth Sahib' (Nesbitt 2000: 80).

Then the worshippers proceed to receive their serving of *karah prashad* (blessed food) that a volunteer puts into their cupped hands. During the ceremony, people are seated cross-legged on the floor while a few have taken seat on one of the stools positioned along the wall. When they feel ready, people go to the adjunct hall to eat *langar*, the free food that is served from the common kitchen. As it is common practice in the Sikh diaspora,<sup>4</sup> one or a couple of families are usually sponsoring the *langar* on weekends and at special occasions. The families who sponsor the food normally also help in preparing and distributing it as a way of doing *seva*.

Doing *seva* is an essential value in Sikh belief that Karanjit, for instance, connects to the idea of 'giving back to the community'.<sup>5</sup> It means to carry out voluntary, self-less acts in the service of the community. Although *seva* is not an exclusively Sikh phenomenon, it plays a pivotal role in the ethical framework that guides the behavior of Sikhs (Murphy 2004: 340-341). As Sikh scholar Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh (2011: 86) puts it:

*Seva* means a deed of love and selfless service for fellow human beings. *Seva* is presented as the highest ideal in Sikh ethics. By *seva* one cultivates humility. By *seva* one overcomes the obsession with egoistic self and extends beyond individuality.

Within Sikhism, doing *seva* is seen as a practice to reach a state of tranquility and is further regarded to have a positive impact on the spiritual journey of a

Sikh. In practice, *seva* may encompass a wide range of activities. As it becomes clear in this section, Sikhs may carry out *seva* to meet the needs of fellow Sikhs or to support the wellbeing of the Sikh community at large. The mundane practices of preparing and serving *langar*, vacuum cleaning a prayer hall or cleaning a *gurdwara*'s bathroom can be all seen as such forms of *seva*. Likewise, the Sikhs I talked to see the voluntary act of organizing the financing and actual process of building a Sikh temple as a selfless service that serves the larger interests of the Sikh community. The type of *Seva*, which is especially targeted to meet the needs of Sikhs might also adopt a transnational character when Sikhs in the diaspora engage in philanthropic activities to help fellow Sikhs in India (Murphy 2004; Dusenbery and Tatla 2009), or when *kathavacaks*<sup>6</sup> from the Punjab are travelling through different places in the Sikh diaspora and consider this as doing service to the Sikh community (Myrvold 2012: 195ff.).

However, the doctrinal teaching of *seva* not only asks Sikhs to work towards the betterment of fellow Sikhs. As Sikh scholar Kristina Myrvold (2007: 336) highlights, *seva* also equips Sikhs with the moral obligation to strive for the wellbeing of the wider society. Hence, *seva* can not only be seen to encourage the form of inward-looking civic engagement that has been described in the previous section, but it also motivates Sikhs to do voluntary work which addresses the concerns that may encompass those of the Sikh community but go well beyond it. This will be illustrated in more detail in the following section.

### **Outreach**

One event that triggered off an amplified need amongst many immigrant communities in the United States to become more actively and visibly involved in the civic sphere of their adopted homeland were the terrorist attacks that happened more than ten years ago. On September 11, 2001, the world watched with shock and dismay how two airplanes crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York. A third plane that had been also hijacked by terrorists crashed into the Pentagon, the United States Department of Defence, a bit later. Al-Qaeda and the group's leader Osama bin Laden were soon seen responsible for these attacks. As one of the consequences of these tragic events, male Sikhs wearing a turban were mistakenly identified as followers of Osama bin Laden due to the similarities in their outward appearance, and in the years that followed many male Sikhs became victims of hate crimes (Sidhu and Gohil 2008).

As I have highlighted in another publication (Hirvi 2013), Sikhs in Yuba City felt that on the local level the reactions of fellow 'mainstream' Americans were highly positive towards them. Colleagues but also strangers in public would approach them and express their support, as many of the Sikhs whom I interviewed were eager to emphasize (Ibid.: 88ff.). As a consequence, Sikhs in Yuba City felt confident in raising the claim to be included into the definition of the mainstream American 'us' who is under threat from the terrorists

'other' (Ibid.: 90). As I argue, the particular long and numerically relatively strong presence of Sikhs in Yuba City is a factor that as an important influence on the ways in which Sikhs in Yuba City are able to position themselves within the wider society, and are positioned by others in this particular context.

But despite the rather positive response that Sikhs said to have experienced on the local level in Yuba City, they were well aware of the atmosphere of distrust and hatred that prevailed in other parts of the United States in the years following September 11. Hence, many of the Sikhs in Yuba City began like their co-religionists elsewhere in the United State (see Murphy 2003) to engage in a number of civic acts that concretely aimed at creating a state of mutual understanding, trust and tolerance in their adopted home country. While Sikhs in Yuba City had been already in the 1980s active to promote activities that would increase an understanding of the Indian culture by the local community (la Brack 1988: 299ff), they saw after 9/11 a more acute need to "educate fellow Americans" about the Sikh religion, by establishing an active outreach to the larger American society. Like fellow Sikhs in other parts of the country (see Murphy 2004: 258ff.; Foley and Hoge 2007: 137ff.), they were particularly keen to stress through their practices their loyalty to the United States.

To reach this goal, the *gurdwara* on Tierra Buena Road in Yuba City invited, for example, groups of non-Sikhs to visit the temple to introduce them to its functions. The underlying idea of such visits is to make the *gurdwara* and Sikh religion less strange and more familiar to non-Sikhs by showing them at the time the practices that are carried out at a Sikh temple. Over the years the temple has welcomed several groups of high school and college students. In addition to offering *gurdwara* tours that are given by individual Sikhs in an act of *seva*, a number of active Sikhs also arrange on a voluntary basis numerous other events at the *gurdwara* that reflect concrete efforts through which they seek to create bridges to the larger American society.

At the annual Sikh parade weekend, for instance, a group of Sikhs organized in 2008 and 2009 on the Saturday preceding the actual Sikh parade an 'Open House'. The idea of the Open House was to create an outreach to the non-Sikh population and to introduce them to Sikhism. During the Open House that I observed in 2009 there were lectures and speeches as well as documentaries conveying information concerning Sikhs in America. In the beginning, some young Sikhs performed *kirtan* while singing parts of the text in English. Towards the end, Sikh as well as non-Sikh local dignitaries, who had been invited to participate in the 'Open House', were honoured in front of the audience for their 'service to the Sikh community' as it said on the plaque that they were given. As such, it could be argued that the Open House functions as a means through which Sikhs establish their civic presence and make their voice heard in the wider community. (see also Hirvi 2013: 134ff.).

The organization of events like these is made possible by *seva*, the voluntary acts carried out by a countless number of Sikhs in Yuba City as a service for community. While it could be argued that one of the main motivators for displaying this particular kind of civic engagement is a desire to

improve the wellbeing of the Sikh community in their adopted homeland, it is clear that the various outreach activities described here also aim at improving the more general concern of establishing a harmonious society built on mutual understanding, tolerance and respect.

### ***Reaching beyond***

As it has become clear by now, the concept of *seva* is tightly linked to the civic engagement of Sikhs. But the idea of *seva* as practiced today is not only limited to the idea of doing selfless service for the good of fellow Sikhs and the Sikh community but also incorporates the idea to do voluntary service for the wellbeing of all human beings, independent of their religious, ethnic or social backgrounds. To treat all people as equals is one of Sikhism's core teachings, and functions as a premise that motivates Sikhs in California to engage in civic actions that clearly reach beyond the immediate concern of their co-religionists.

For example, during one of my very first visits to the Sikh temple on Tierra Buena Road in the beginning of October 2008, I noticed a 'Health camp' that had been set up on the *gurdwara*'s parking lot. It consisted of various booths that volunteers had built up. A Sikh woman helping out there told me that the purpose of the medical camp was to provide a free medical check up to all those who had no health insurance, Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike, as she was eager to emphasize. Again, the whole event was made possible through Sikhs who were willing to do *seva* and willing to apply without compensation their professional skills as doctors and nurses for the good of other, less fortunate people. Besides acting in accordance with their religious teachings this group of voluntary people also acted that day to address an issue of public concern in the United States, namely to help those who are not able to afford a health insurance.

Another event that was organized on the grounds of the Sikhs temple on Tierra Buena Road and that can be seen to disclose the civic engagement of Sikhs was the 'Food drive' (Figure 1), which was organized in 2009 during the annual *Nagar Kirtan* (religious procession) in Yuba City. The slogan of the food drive was 'With a can we can', which obviously referred to Barack Obama's 2008 successful election campaign slogan 'Yes, we can'. Bins had been set up in front of the temple to collect vegetarian canned food. As it said on the posters, the purpose of this initiative was to collect food for a local food bank to feed the needy people. As I was told, the food drive was organized as a response to the impact that the global financial crisis had on the lives of many Americans, Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike.



**Figure 1. Yuba City ( 2009)**

Food Drive organized in relation to the annual Sikh parade.  
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The idea to donate and to share what one has with others is in line with the Sikh religious teachings, which advise Sikhs to give *dasvandh*, a tithe of one's salary or profit, to social and communal charity work. To give *dasvandh* is considered as a moral obligation that Sikhs should try to observe in their daily life (Myrvold 2007). Like *seva*, the act of giving *dasvandh* is seen to have a positive impact on the spiritual journey of a Sikh. In this vein, it can be argued that both *seva* as well as *dasvandh* encourage Sikhs to enter civic space and to act within it in order to address issues that are of concern to the wider society in which they live and to which they belong.

#### **Civic engagement translating into formal political participation**

In a study conducted amongst Indian and Vietnamese immigrants in the United State anthropologists Caroline Brettel and Deborah Reed-Danahay (2012: 200) point out in their conclusion that religious assemblies can function as important "training grounds" where immigrants can develop their civic skills (see also Foley and Hoge 2007: 152ff). This is especially the case in the Sikh diaspora, where usually lay people manage and run a *gurdwara*. Being active at a Sikh *gurdwara* in the diaspora can thus be seen to offer immigrants an arena where they can practice their civic skills, as this article has shown. Besides offering Sikhs the possibility to train their organizational skills being involved in the *gurdwara* may also offer a chance to develop public speaking skills. Further, it may help to improve their ability to lead meetings as well as bargain and compromise when acting in a larger group of people. Possessing such skills makes it easier for immigrants to take on an active role not only in civil societies but also in the formal political landscape of their adopted homeland.

In Yuba City, there are two Sikh men who entered the local political landscape in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century by running in the elections for Yuba City's councilmen. The timing of Sikhs' first appearance in Yuba City's political landscape was no coincidence. Sikhs were dealing at that time with the events happening in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11. Being embedded in such a particular historical context played a decisive role in triggering amongst Sikhs in Yuba City a desire to participate in interfaith dialogue and to make their voice better heard in the local political arena, as one of the elected politicians explained.

The two men who were the first Sikhs to enter Yuba City's political arena were Kash Gill and Tej Maan. Both of them had immigrated to California from Punjab as children together with their parents around the mid-1970s. They were each elected as one of Yuba City's five council members in 2006. Looking at Tej's and Kash's educational backgrounds, it becomes clear that both are university graduates. This comes perhaps as no surprise as it has been argued that education is a great predictor of civic engagement (Putnam 2000: 186). Tej Maan's decision to get involved in politics was motivated by fellow Sikhs who encouraged him to do so. As he explains, he had always been active in the community, 'both mainstream community and the Punjabi community', and he also had been an active visitor of the Sikh temple. Apparently due to his involvement in both, the 'mainstream' as well as Yuba City's Punjabi Sikh community, other Sikhs considered him as a suitable candidate.

So people saw me, 'Look at this guy, he is involved in the mainstream community, very well accepted, and he is also accepted by the Sikh community, a likable guy, and doesn't belong to one fraction of the temple', so people started asking me [...] 'Tej, you seem like a perfect candidate'. [...] And I thought, ok, if everybody says so, showing interest in me, believes in me, I guess I can try that.

The first time Tej ran as a candidate, he did not make it, but his second attempt in 2006 was successful. That year, both Tej Maan and Kash Gill were running in the elections, each having their own group of supporters within the local Sikh community.<sup>7</sup> Both of them were eventually elected as councilmen, and three years later in November 2009 Kash Gill made history when he became Yuba City's first Punjabi Sikh mayor, more than hundred years after the advent of the first Sikhs in California. It can be argued that for Yuba City's Sikh community both elections were significant moments that symbolically reflected Sikhs' standing in the local community and their degree of civic incorporation.<sup>8</sup>

Taking a closer look at the manner in which Tej Maan became involved in politics, it is interesting to note that fellow Sikhs, of whom many are also very active at the Tierra Buena *gurdwara*, were responsible for encouraging him to enter the political arena of his hometown. This suggests that also in the case of people with a migration background being recruited often plays a crucial role in motivating someone to start a career in civic activism (cf. Vogel 2008: 109).

Further, Tej's account highlights that he belonged to the group of people who are so called '*network nodes* – people with many contacts to other people' (Vogel 2008: 114), and that others considered him for this reason as a suitable candidate.

As it becomes clear, fellow Sikhs encouraged Tej Maan to enter politics. Further, both politicians received during their election campaign significant backing from Sikhs who are prominent in the local Sikh community and who are actively involved in the *gurdwara*. On a whole this seems to suggest that civic engagement developed at a religious place of worship can translate into the formal political participation of immigrants and immigrant groups in their new homeland. A similar case in Finland, where one of the *gurdwara* founders and leaders Ranbir Sodhi became recently active in Finnish politics (see Hirvi 2013: 116), seems to support the argument that civic skills developed through an active involvement at a *gurdwara* can have a promotional effect on the successful political participation of immigrants.

### **Some conclusive thoughts**

In this article, I have highlighted the various forms of Sikhs' civic engagement performed at, or in relation to a *gurdwara* in the diaspora. As argued, there are three different types of civic engagement: 1) I used the concept of 'inward civic engagement' to refer to those voluntary practices that aimed in particular at improving the wellbeing of the Sikh community. 2) 'Outreach or outward civic engagement' was applied to describe the form of service that Sikhs carried out for the good of the Sikh community *and* the larger community. 3) Finally, I discussed several examples that bore the characteristics of what I called the type of 'reaching beyond civic engagement' that aims to improve the wellbeing of the wider society. It is of course impossible to draw a clear-cut distinction between those concepts, and there is an overlap especially between the second and third type of civic engagement as defined in the context of this study. Yet, for the purpose of the analysis, and for future research it might be useful to think of the different dimensions attached to civic action.

In addition, this article made clear that in order to gain a profound understanding of the factors that motivate the civic engagement of Sikhs, one needs to take a closer look at the religious concept of *seva* that encourages Sikhs to do selfless and voluntary service for the wellbeing of all. Future research would do well to explore in an ethnographic manner the meanings that contemporary Sikhs in the diaspora, and especially young Sikhs who have been growing up outside of India, ascribe to *seva*. The desire to do *seva* can also motivate a Sikh to become active in the political arena in order to do good and give back to the community. Further, I highlighted how civic skills developed at a *gurdwara* in the diaspora might correlate with Sikhs' successful political participation in their adopted homelands.

On a more general level, this article has brought to the fore the agency of Sikhs. Through their civic engagement Sikhs significantly contribute to the shaping of the communities they are part of. Highlighting the contribution that

immigrants and their descendants make to the societies in which they have settled is important in order to counteract the image that is often drawn in the Media that portray immigrants as well as immigration as a problem. The cases discussed and mentioned in this study might give the impression that this sort of agency in the civic space can be noted especially in the case of male Sikhs. However, civic engagement is also prominent amongst female Sikhs, and future studies would do well to highlight this in a more explicit manner. Also the question of what role 'generation' plays in the analysis of civic engagement needs to be addressed in more detail in the studies to come.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this study I use pseudonyms for my informants in order to protect their anonymity, unless referring to persons in their public roles as politicians or as official representatives of a religious institution.

<sup>2</sup> At this point, I would like to take the opportunity to thank the Sikhs in Yuba City who participated in this research for their generosity and support throughout the entire research process.

<sup>3</sup> *Akhand path* is the uninterrupted reading of the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

<sup>4</sup> Like in the *gurdwaras* in Norway (Jacobsen 2012: 112) also in the *gurdwara* in Finland, Sikh families often prepare or sponsor the preparation of the *langar* to commemorate the birthday of a family member.

<sup>5</sup> As Brettell and Reed-Danahay (2012: 199) point out in their study on Indian immigrants, "giving back to the community" is an important idiom in the American talk of civic engagement. Also the Indian Immigrants whom they interviewed, and who were mostly Hindus, were able to "talk the talk" of civic engagement and to adapt their actions accordingly (Ibid.).

<sup>6</sup> A *kathavacak* is a professional exegete.

<sup>7</sup> As Tej says in the interview, 'there was a little friction' in the local Sikh community, adding, 'not that Kash and I have a friction, but our supporters. We were sort of there, forcing the race, so they were spending all their energy that their horses come first.'

<sup>8</sup> A year later, however, Kash had to resign from his post after having lost his council seat in the 2010 elections which were overshadowed by an attack advertisement that was targeted against him. Meanwhile Tej, who had only 49 votes more than Kash, was successfully re-elected as a councilman (Gebb 2010).

### Interviews

Baldev (M), December 8, 2008, Yuba City.

Karanjit (M), November 19, 2008, Yuba City.

Kundan (M), December 2, 2008, Yuba City.

Tej Maan (M), November 7, 2008, Yuba City.

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