

The Boundaries between “Home” and “Diaspora”: American Sikhs and the Construction of Place

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My goal in this article is to examine the kinds of political, religious, and social issues faced by Punjab, India, that are of prime significance to Sikhs in the American diaspora as a way to shed light on this group’s construct of “homeland.” This analysis uses the case of American Sikhs who emigrated from the Indian Punjab to achieve that goal. In order to do so, I reflect on the extant literature on American Sikh participation in the areas of politics, religion and development in Punjab. By so doing, I address the debate on the meaning of “homeland” and “diaspora” and the linkages between the two as well as contribute to the scholarship on the experiences of Sikhs immigrants in America. The article concludes by making suggestions for further exploration of this topic by researchers in this area of study.

Introduction

A delegation consisting of five representatives from various Sikh organizations in North America, located in Stockton, California approved by the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society, was sent to participate in the *Sarbat Khalsa*, a plenary meeting for members of the Sikh community. The meeting was held in Amritsar, Punjab on November 10, 2015. Racinder Singh Uppal, the President of Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society and coordinator of the summit, named five individuals to lead the diaspora delegation to Punjab.¹ Notably, the plenary meeting in Amritsar was not called to discuss matters concerning the experience of Sikhs in the diaspora. It was called to consider issues of decision-making and leadership within the Sikh religious order in Punjab. In particular, the meeting was triggered by dissatisfaction with the Sikh high priests’, who are located in Punjab, decision to pardon Guru Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, the chief of *Dera Sacha Sauda*. The self-proclaimed guru was pardoned despite having committed the blasphemous act of imitating Guru Gobind Singh (Navjeevan, 2015). Despite the geographical distance, the diaspora Sikh community, as evidenced in the formation of the North American delegation, thought necessary to participate in the discussion to address matters concerning Sikh religious controversies taking place in Punjab. The question is why? Why do Sikhs who have settled in another country continue to feel the need to remain involved in matters of governance in their country of origin? And, what does Sikh interest in Punjab say about the group’s attachment and thus construct of a homeland or a place to which they belong?

In this paper, I rely on the major themes emergent in the discourse on citizenship, homeland and diaspora and build on it with the case of American Sikhs and show the challenges of neatly dividing “homeland” and “diaspora” for this group. I do so by analyzing the broad themes of American Sikhs understandings of “homeland” and “diaspora” in the extant literature. In particular, I focus on the literature that illuminates the various ways in which the group remains connected to Punjab, a place from where the immigrants arrived as well as a place with which all Sikhs have a deep ancestral and spiritual bond, as a way to ascertain American Sikhs’ concepts of “homeland.” The questions that I ask to achieve that goal are: a) what does the continued participation in affairs of Punjab say about the Sikh American construct of ‘homeland?’ and b) to what extent is this attachment to Punjab related to the Sikhs location as non-whites and non-Christians in American society.

The paper is organized in the following way: firstly, I present the key themes in the discourse on citizenship, homeland and diaspora; secondly, I offer a brief overview of Sikh immigration to which is linked the questions of “homeland” and “diaspora” for this group; thirdly, I use the case of American Sikhs, charting the time of their arrival to the United States in the early twentieth century through today, in order to address the debate raised in the discourse on citizenship, homeland and diaspora as a way to analyze how American Sikhs construct home and diaspora.

“Homeland” and “Diaspora”

The scholarly discourse on “homeland” and “diaspora” offers a multi-dimensional analysis of the relationship between the two concepts. An important challenge to this discourse has been from scholars who have questioned the clear demarcation between them. As populations move back and forth from one place to another, they can identify with multiple homelands. Home can span national boundaries because ties span national boundaries as well. Furthermore, people’s sense of belonging can be such that different aspects of one’s identity are split across many nations. Drawing from Yasemin Soysal’s (2000) perspective on citizenship more specifically, one can posit that groups can legally belong to one nation and continue to be emotionally engaged with another. Therefore, decoupling of emotional and physical identifications where the former speaks to the groups’ cultural identity and the latter to the socio-political rights, offers insights into multiple loyalties expressed by groups that traverse the space between nations. Binaries are, thus, unhelpful because group identification with homeland and ‘hostland’ cannot be neatly separated into two categories (Aiyar, 2011).

Certainly, the literature on transnational migration has demonstrated this very well. The pioneering work of Basch, Schiller and Blanc (1994) point to the overlapping spaces of “home” and “abroad” and the associated complex identities of people who move back and forth between multiple societies. The actions of Dominican immigrants in Peggy Levitt’s (2001) research published in the book *Transnational Villagers* also complicate the notion of a singular

“homeland.” Her work shows that although immigrants continue to exist within the boundaries of nation states, their identities have many aspects because they belong to more than one society – their place of emigration and the place to which they have immigrated. A reversal in the group’s concept of homeland and diaspora additionally blurs a distinction between the two. What was once considered the homeland can become the diaspora and the diaspora can become the homeland (Mendelson-Maoz, 2013). Disenchantment with the unsavory social reality of the ‘homeland’ can push a group to re-define it. Beta Israel Jews from Ethiopia are a case in point. In Ethiopia, the group imagined Israel as their homeland. However, the racism faced in Israel because of their African heritage gradually shifted the second generation born in Israel to imagine a broader identification with Africa as the ‘homeland’ (Mendelson-Maoz, 2013). The case of Jews returning to Germany post Holocaust is more proof of the complexity that underlies the construction of “homeland” and “diaspora” and the relationship between the two (Almog, 2015). Socio-political shifts in the homeland might lead members in the diaspora to re-configure their identities as well. The Chilean diaspora in Sweden, for example, was forced to reconstruct its identity from refugee to immigrants as the Pinochet government came to an end in Chile in 1990 (Olsson, 2009). They were in exile when they fled Chile after Pinochet took power in 1973, but that was no longer so when that same government came to an end. In this instance, the Chilean concept of diaspora and homeland did not change. However, the Chileans in Sweden had to reconstruct who they were in the diaspora in relation to their “homeland,” a place from which they no longer needed to flee. The relationship between the diaspora and homeland and the identities of those who constitute both spaces are, therefore, dynamic. That is, it is challenging to neatly separate “homeland” from “diaspora” and vice-versa in light of the ways in which people live and experience the two, including experiences of marginalization in the societies that they inhabit which in turn can affect where the groups imagine belonging.

From Punjab to the World: Evolution of the Sikh diaspora

Seeds of the Sikh diaspora were sown with the encounter of Punjab with British colonialism, and especially the annexation of Punjab to British colonial territory in the Indian subcontinent in the middle of the nineteenth century. Recruitment of Sikhs in the British colonial army and the development of canal colonies² within Punjab catalyzed emigration from there. Sikhs were also hired to serve on the police force in the British imperial territories in East Asia and the Far East. Additionally, although to a far lesser extent, export of indentured labor to the British colonies contributed to the movement of Sikhs out of Punjab (Kaur, 2011; Dusenbery and Tatla, 2009; Singh and Tatla, 2006).³ Economic push factors sometimes overlapped with these various reasons for exit from India and contributed to the development of the Sikh diaspora during that time.

Over the years, the Sikh diaspora has increased, for reasons that both overlap and are distinct from the group’s international mobility earlier in the twentieth century, particularly from Punjab to America. Economic struggles continue to

be a factor that explains emigration in the contemporary era. Historically, the group's route to America has not always been a straightforward one. Since the early period, Sikhs had immigrated to the United States having lived in other parts of the world. In the period post-1980s, we see similar patterns of 'twice migrants,' a term conceived by Parminder Bhachu to refer to East African Sikhs. Even more recent work by Mitra (2012) supports this recurring pattern of multiple routes with the example of rural Sikh immigrants and their journey to New York City where they work as taxi drivers. Many of the respondents in Mitra's study had first reached destinations in Europe and a few had even traveled to parts of the Middle East before settling down in America. Sikhs comprised the flow of professional immigrants as well. They, like other groups from India, had arrived to fill a shortage in professional workers since the 1960s. Last, but not the least, a distinctive reason for emigration of Sikhs is the aggressive policies towards Sikhs, especially Sikh youth, as a way to curtail 'terrorism' by the Indian state in the 1980s and through early 1990s (Tatla, 2009).

The formation of the Sikh diaspora is, therefore, a product of people from diverse socioeconomic and spatial backgrounds who have made the decision to immigrate to the United States, and elsewhere, confronted with socio-political as well as economic adversities. It is in this context that the meaning of homeland for Sikhs must be situated. Where is "homeland" for American Sikhs and why? I answer this question in the sections that follow. In the first section, I provide a discussion of the three significant ways in which the extant research shows American Sikhs stay connected to Punjab – through engagement with politics, religion and development projects. Next, I offer a discussion of the ways in which those types of involvements with Punjab speak to the question of a "homeland" for American Sikhs.

American Sikhs and the Construction of "home" via Involvements with Punjab:

Politics

American Sikh immigrants have been involved in political matters of the Punjab and India since their initial arrival at the turn of the nineteenth century. The *Ghadr Party*, formed in the United States in 1913, was a prominent organization that strove to create avenues via which Sikh immigrants participated, and thus remained involved, in issues related to governance in British India. Although not exclusively so, a majority of the Party members were Sikhs. Further, the centrality of gurdwaras for organizing among *Ghadarites* (Sohi, 2014) makes it impossible to separate *Ghadr* from Sikhism (Gill, 2014).⁴ The Sikh immigrants were primarily peasants from the rural parts of Punjab. The immigrants had left one home in Punjab to make another one in the United States⁵. But, racism impeded their goal to carve out a home for themselves in America.⁶ As such, dismantling racism was imperative. Subsequently, the *Ghadr Party*, previously known as the Pacific Coast Hindi Association, was, therefore, formed to fulfill

this goal of resistance. Its members also realized that their approach to resistance would have to be a transnational one that would challenge British colonial rule in India – a type of control where race played a crucial role in legitimizing practices of power.

Movements like that of the *Ghadr Party* rode on the momentum to challenge social injustice that already existed among the immigrants, who were predominantly Sikh. They tapped into groups of Sikh immigrants who regularly met at gurdwaras to discuss avenues of resistance against such types of racial discrimination in North America (Gill, 2014). The *Ghadr Party* formed relationships with those groups and expanded their struggle to include anti-imperialist aims to oust the British from India as well.⁷ During this period, the Sikh immigrants did not mobilize for an anticolonial and antiracist movement around a Sikh identity. They were all Indians equally oppressed by imperial power seeking freedom for their “motherland” (Tatla, 2009).

The immigrant Sikh involvement in political matters of British India also assumed interesting forms. Sikh farm workers in California, for instance, established the Guru Govind Singh Sahib Educational Scholarships from students from India for both genders, who wanted to study at the University of California at Berkeley, as a way to strengthen their political mobilization (Gill, 2014; South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) website). It was Jawala Singh, an immigrant to California from Amritsar, who initiated those scholarships (Tatla, 2009). Although the scholarship offered students support for their educational and living expenses, the main objective was to get support for political organizing (Gill, 2014, SAADA). In the minds of the farmworkers, the Indian students would be useful in mobilizing due to their higher levels of education and linguistic skills (Gill, 2014). Staying involved in the political affairs of British India was hence necessary in order to eradicate racism in America. Evidently, despite having made the journey from India to America, the ties to India were not severed. Instead, what evolved was an understanding of the global forces of their subordination in America that motivated them to remain involved in the political arrangements of British colonial rule in India, and seemingly, by way of that, end their racial subordination in America too.

The strategies assumed to overthrow the British colonial government in India failed as did their efforts to keep open the channels of immigration to America that were effectively stopped until the end of Second World War. Moreover, those who participated in anti-British organizing faced severe punishment after their return to India, including execution for some of the *Ghadarites* (Ogden, 2012). Immigration from India, including that of Sikhs, along with other groups from Asia gathered momentum post passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. Contrary to the period of Sikh immigration in the early twentieth century, this phase was marked by a shift in the location of Sikhs in both nations – India and America. In particular, American immigration policies had liberalized and the British rule in India had been overthrown. In America, Sikhs no longer faced overt racial barriers and could immigrate, including with their families. In the context of India, Sikhs no longer had to submit to the will of the British colonial rulers. But, as the following discussion will make clear,

the Sikh fight for dignity, emancipation and self-governance did not come to an end. It is just that the nature of the struggle had undergone transformation at this point in time.

Struggling for freedom from the Indian state, or the fight for *Khalistan*, which means the land of the pure, was an important reason for Sikh immigrants' political engagement with India. In India, the call for a separate Sikh state, just like the call for Pakistan for the Muslim population, was heard prior to the nation's independence.⁸ Apprehension at being part of a Hindu majority India after British departure was an incentive for that emergent voice. Dr. V.S. Bhatti was the first to formally articulate a call for *Khalistan* in 1940 (Shani, 2008). According to Robin Cohen (1997), Sikh immigrants in America, along with those in Canada and Great Britain, supported the cause for a separate Sikh homeland as early as the 1950s and the 1960s.⁹ Later, former finance minister of Punjab as well as President of *Khalistan Council* (Shani, 2008), Jagjit Singh Chohan, attempted to mobilize support in favor of a separate Sikh 'homeland' by taking out an advertisement in the *New York Times* in 1971 expressing his discontent with the Indian government. He specifically expressed the fear of continued domination by the Hindu majority rule of India (Shani, 2008). That the Indian government did not honor the Anandpur Sahib Resolution which was passed in 1973, in addition to reneging on promises of self-determination made to Sikhs who remained within India at the time of independence (Shani, 2008), is likely to have kept alive, in the diaspora as well, the feelings of domination by a Hindu majority nation.

However, immigrant Sikhs' support for a separate Sikh state gathered momentum after the Indian government's invasion of *Harmandir Sahib* in 1984. The attack was another assault on the dignity of Sikhs and a reminder of the group's subordinate position in India. In America, Sikhs organized in order to obtain independence from India. Toward that end, new organizations emerged, old organizations were revived and still other organizations re-formulated its goals in order to fulfill the imagination of a Sikh nation-state (Tatla, 1999). Oddly, the "enemy" in the early twentieth century, i.e. the United States, was now perceived as an ally in their struggle. Thus, immigrants lobbied the American and the Canadian governments as well as the United Nations in order to effect restructuring of the Indian nation and create a "home" for Sikhs (Tatla, 1999). Like the efforts to free India from the British as well as the challenge to end racist immigration policies of America by the early waves of Sikh immigrants failed, the contemporary movements to create a "homeland" for Sikhs out of India's territory did not succeed either. Yet, immigrant *Khalistani* voices have not died. Some quarters of Sikh immigrants in the United States continue to express their desire for a "homeland." As recently as the annual Sikh Day Parade in New York City in April 2016, slogans were raised for the creation of *Khalistan* (Reddit). There are also efforts by American Sikh groups who want the Indian government to hold a referendum for the creation of *Khalistan* (Singh, I.P., 2016).¹⁰

In this context, it is necessary to note that American Sikhs have sought redress from Congress for violation of human rights of Sikhs committed by the

Indian government in its efforts to curb the fight for *Khalistan* (Tatla, 1999). There were several political figures, like Republican Congressman from Illinois Dan Burton, who offered their support to the Sikh cause. Burton, for instance, “sponsored many resolutions in Congress and castigated India for its “profound lack of respect for Sikh life and culture” (Tatla, 1999, 166). Tatla also writes that Rajiv Gandhi, when he visited the United States in June of 1985, was met with protest from various Sikh groups. Reagan, who was the sitting President, while having promised Gandhi support for India’s territorial integrity, did not issue any official response on the issue of Sikh “extremism.” At the time, India’s geopolitical alliance with the Soviet Union, including India’s policy of nonalignment, was a sore point in Indo-US relations (Tatla, 1999) – something that proved beneficial to the Sikh lobby. The immigrants’ “western power,” thus, proved useful in lobbying the American government as one of the legal avenues to protect Sikhs from human rights abuses of the Indian government, and to seek rights of Sikhs for self-determination as well.

Despite these efforts, however, it would be erroneous to characterize all North American Sikh initiatives to question the Hindu hegemony in India and/or wish to attain self-governance of Sikhs as necessarily proponents of *Khalistan*. If I may go beyond the extant research, *Free Akal Takht* movement is one of the most recent initiatives among immigrant Sikhs in America, and Canada in fact, to attain sovereignty for Sikhs that does not involve carving out a separate nation from India. The mission of the initiative, led by first- and second-generation immigrant Sikhs to free *Akal Takht* from the governing power of *Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee*, or SGPC. Given that the SGPC, albeit a voice for Sikhs, exists within the political boundaries of the “outside government,” it cannot truly serve the Sikh people. Distrustful of the SGPC, which the group views as an arm of the Indian government, they want to obtain governing powers over the *Akal Takht* – a ‘throne’ that holds central authority for Sikhs. At a webinar offered by the *Free Akal Takht* organization through Sikh Research Institute on February 6, 2016, Santbir Singh who is designated as a Public Service Worker on the organization’s website, equated the efforts of the organization with building a nation for Sikhs. In this way, he presented the *Akal Takht* as an institution accessible exclusively to Sikhs much different from *Harmandir Sahib*, which is open to non-Sikhs as well. Interestingly, Santbir Singh compared this plan for the *Akal Takht* to the American Pentagon, a space where one cannot walk in without having made a commitment to the Guru. Although it was clearly stated that this goal of political control is not to mobilize support for *Khalistan*, the comparison with the Pentagon made it evident that the control being sought of this religious symbol is of immense political significance for Sikhs, and I would argue, it represents a nation.

Previously, a similar argument in favor of influence by diaspora Sikhs on the *Akal Takht* was made by California-based Dr. Tarlochan Singh Nahal. In the article entitled “Selection of the Jathedar Sri Akal Takhat Sahib and the Role of Sikh Diaspora,” Nahal maintained that diaspora Sikhs should unite as one group and rally for their say in the selection of the Jathedar for Sri Akal Takht Sahib. Similarly, the aforementioned delegation of North American Sikhs that attended

the *Sarbat Khalsa* in November of 2015 in Amritsar also sought inclusion of overseas Sikhs in the decision-making that affects Sikhs all around the world. They were part of the group that supported the resolutions drafted at the plenary meeting, which they attended, including the demand for Vatican-status of Golden Temple (Pubby, 2015).

In addition, even those who continue to focus on 1984 do not necessarily do so in order to fight for a separate Sikh state. Shruati Devgan (2013), in her work entitled "From the 'crevices in dominant memories': virtual commemoration and the 1984 anti-Sikh violence," discusses the ways in which diaspora Sikhs use the Internet to remember the violence around 1984 without fighting for *Khalistan*. Although Devgan includes American, Canadian and British Sikhs in her analysis, she makes the larger point that virtual commemoration through creation of websites dedicated to 1984 "provides them with a sense of belonging both in India as well as transnationally" (p. 228). By so saying, Devgan suggests that the immigrants carve out an identity for themselves as Sikhs in their places of settlement as well as assert a place for themselves in India as Sikhs through narratives counter to the silence around 1984 as well as the voices of separatism.

Furthermore, American Sikhs remain linked with Punjab, and India, by way of involvement in Punjabi electoral politics. Here again I would like to go beyond the data sources for this paper to show that recent newspaper reports from India illustrate this political linkage between the Punjabi (the reports do not separate Sikhs out from the category of Punjabi) immigrants in the United States (and in other parts of the world) and politics in Punjab (Dattagupta, 2016; IANS, 2016; Vasdev and Chhina, 2015). They discuss this nexus in the context of the upcoming state assembly elections in 2017. Political figures, the journalists note, have begun taking trips to America, for instance, in order to court the support of Punjabi immigrants. Captain Amarinder Singh is one such figure who, as well as his wife who was in the ministry of External Affairs in the government of Manmohan Singh, campaigned in the United States in April of 2016 (Dattagupta, 2016; IANS, 2016). The financial support from immigrant Punjabis is important for wooing those who live in India (IANS, 2016). For this reason, some believe that non-resident Punjabis exert influence over election results (Dattagupta, 2016). More importantly, the decision for Punjabi politicians to pursue votes among the immigrant community plays a role in preserving ties between the immigrants and Punjab. Presumably, such political strategies invoke the imaginary of "home" among immigrants and simulate a sense of participation among them.

And, of course, last but not the least, it is necessary to recognize the racism that Sikhs continue to experience in contemporary America. The research on this topic is abundant. Muninder Ahluwalia (2013) is one who has shown the pervasiveness of racism against Sikhs in American society. She offers examples of racial profiling of her nine-year old nephew at airports and the shooting at the gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin to support her claim. Sikhs in America are often profiled as "terrorists" (Ahluwalia, 2013; Arora 2013; Falcone, 2006). The turban, as Arora (2013) and Ahluwalia (2013) maintain, represents an otherness in Sikhs that is connected to the violence inflicted on them. Even before

September 11, 2001, Sikh Americans were subject to racial prejudice and discrimination. Immigrant Sikh men being confronted with remarks such as “go back to your country” while driving taxis on the streets of New York City are other examples (Mitra, 2012). In fact, the respondents in this study assert that the events of September 11, 2001 have perhaps increased the racial violence faced by Sikhs, but it is certainly not the starting point of it.

Together, the various aspects of the Sikh experience from the early period through today that focuses on the group’s location in the American racial hierarchy, British- and independent India, are key in understanding the American Sikh pursuit of a “homeland.” I address this in the discussion section of the paper. For now, let us look at the ways in which the American Sikh ties with Sikhism shape their involvement with Punjab and/or India.

Religion

Previous research shows that matters concerning religion are indeed the most important area of monetary contribution made by Sikhs residing outside of India (Dusenbery and Tatla, 2009). It has been so since the time of the early immigration of Sikhs (Tatla, 2009). Hence, it is unsurprising that SGPC, as the protector of the Sikh religion, has been one of the biggest recipients of money from American Sikhs, as well as all other Sikhs living outside of India (Tatla, 2009). Having said this, the literature reviewed also suggests that this kind of involvement in matters of religion in Punjab is not always intertwined with political goals of American Sikhs. In other words, Sikh immigrants are not necessarily choosing to participate in Sikhism, or events or decisions connected to it, in order to always create a separate Sikh state or strengthen the political power of Sikhs as a group in Punjab, and India by way of that.

In particular, the literature reveals that building gurdwaras and/or reviving the ones that were decaying have been an important mission of American Sikhs, a goal without at least any explicit political objectives. One of the many examples that Maan and Maan (2009) offer in their work on Sikh diaspora philanthropy is that of a gurdwara located in Takhar patti in the village of Shankar in the Doaba region. This was Gurdwara Berrian Wala that was renovated in 1965 by American Sikh, Kartar Singh Takhar. He contributed the majority of the total of two and a half million dollars invested in modernizing this place of worship. A gurdwara constructed at Majaari near Belachur by an American immigrant named Mehar Singh Thekedar is another example of the same. In addition to building places of worship, American Sikhs are interested in contributing toward other types of religious needs. The well-known Tut Brothers who have made great strides as immigrants, have provided support in cleaning up the *sarovar* in *Harmandir Sahib* (Tatla, 2009). They helped install a water purifying system that cost 1.5 million dollars. Immigrants furthermore can take part in arranging religious events, like an *akhand path*, which is the continuous reading of the Guru Granth Sahib, when they visit their villages (Tatla, 2009). The family of American immigrant Rashpal Singh Purewal does indeed contribute to such kinds of religious events. They have also made

significant donations to the construction of *Hazur Sahib*, a gurdwara located in the southern part of India (Maan and Maan, 2009). It is noteworthy though that the money is invested in Sufi shrines and dharamsalas as well (Tatla, 2009), perhaps indicative of a complex religious identity among American Sikhs.¹¹

However, contribution toward religion in Punjab can be marked by caste as well. That is, the caste identities of Sikhs who immigrated along with the people play a role in the distribution of remittances for religious purposes in Punjab (Maan and Maan, 2009, Tatla 2009). Gurdwaras identified as Ravidass and Lobana in New York, for instance, is one indicator that caste identities of Sikh immigrants have been preserved in America. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that immigrant followers of Ravidass would contribute regularly to *Dera Sachkhand Ballan*, which is a central religious place for Dalits in northern India located in the Doaba region (Ram, 2009). Recently, North American followers of the *Dera*, along with those from Europe, donated 15 kilograms of gold to the *Dera* to build a palanquin for Guru Ravidass (Ram, 2009). Similar overseas funds have been provided for Balmik mandirs by its followers. Maan and Maan (2009) mention the name of America based Kartar Singh Takhar who has donated 50,000 dollars to Bhagwan Balmik Mandir in the village of Shankar. Such financial contributions are a sign of the group's growing economic strength, Maan and Maan assert. The researchers further suggest that it allows the group to create a separate space and shelter themselves from caste prejudice. It is also likely that donations like these, which are a display of wealth, allow them to negotiate their lower caste status and gain prestige in their villages. Overseas donors of other sectarian groups like the Radhasoamis and Namdharis – and not just American Sikhs -- are also known to make contributions to their specific places of worship (Tatla, 2009). In this way, caste based immigrant donations tie the immigrants to Punjab and reinforce their caste identities¹² and raises questions regarding Sikh immigrants and identification with a "home."

To remain connected in this manner with Sikhism in Punjab and actually helping the growth of the religion by constructing new places of worship as well through sponsorship of various religious events is possibly related to the Sikhs' location in American society as a minority group. More specifically, as people whose religion is visibly distinct from the dominant norm of Christianity in American society, it is challenging to feel included as Sikhs in America. Not only are Sikhs "othered" on account of their non-whiteness, Sikhs face racial prejudice and discrimination on account of their visible religious difference from the dominant norm as well. The aforementioned well-known recent attack on the gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin in 2012 is just one example of the marginalized position of Sikhs in the society. Furthermore, as the non-dominant religion, Sikhism is not reflected in the larger cultural imagination, including aesthetics and celebrations of Sikh religious holidays. Nurturing Sikhism in Punjab is perhaps then a way for the immigrants to create a space where they can at least imagine experiencing inclusion and thus, preserve their identity as Sikhs. Is this "reactive transnationalism,"¹³ which is the idea that experience of exclusion in the place of settlement only serves to strengthen participation in transnational activities by immigrants. A more recent exploration of this concept

by Snel, Hart and Van Bochove (2016) reveal that indeed Dutch immigrants' who experienced more discrimination were more likely to engage in transnational activities, including in matters of religion. As for the Sikh immigrants who are the topic of discussion in this paper, the literature reviewed does not permit me to assert with certainty that involvement in religious affairs of Punjab is necessarily "reactive transnationalism." There is at least research that shows that Sikh immigrants have used to resources obtained overseas to enhance their *izzat*, or honor, in the context of their village community in Punjab.¹⁴ It may not necessarily be a result of being excluded in their places of settlement. But is that not a possibility? Is that what the American Sikhs discussed in the scholarship and explored for this paper attempt to do? I return to this point and expand on it in the discussion section of the paper.

Development

Sikhs have shown great interest in the betterment of Punjab since their arrival to the North American continent in the early twentieth century. The areas that have received the greatest attention from them, following interest exhibited for religious initiatives, are education, healthcare, and infrastructural improvements. Of these three areas of development, education has historically ranked first (Tatla, 2009). The efforts to promote education in the villages in Punjab to which the immigrants are connected range from setting up schools to establishment of trusts that support local libraries or scholarships to the students to donation to even taking the responsibility to mobilize funds from immigrants and sending it over to Punjab (Dusenbery and Tatla, 2009). Some of the initiatives led by American Sikhs even have global ties, like the Dhaliwal Academy in the village of Rakhra that is affiliated with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (Tatla, 2009). With regard to the health sector, American Sikhs have financed construction of hospitals in their natal villages and/or established medical trusts for the wellbeing of the villagers. America based immigrant, Hoshiar Singh, for example, donated money to the Ayurvedic Medical College and Hospital that is run by Shahid Kartar Sarabha Charitable Trust in the village of Sarabha (Tatla, 2009). Pursuit of general infrastructural improvements is yet another area in which American Sikhs have demonstrated interest. Dr. Raghbir Singh Basi, an academic at Alaska Pacific University, developed a plan to promote basic ground level changes in the supply of water, hygiene, sanitation, and computer education (Singh and Singh, 2007). Dr. Basi, along with Dr. Gurdev Singh Gill from Canada, also provided funds to build parks, treat the sewerage system, installed streetlights powered by solar energy, covered pavements in the village of Kharaudi in the district of Hoshiarpur (Tatla, 2009). Still others, like American immigrant, Dr. Amarjit Singh Marwah, have supported construction of low cost housing as well (Tatla, 2009).

Interestingly, American Sikhs, as well as Sikhs who have immigrated elsewhere were not always as involved with the health sector as they are today. Based on a survey conducted in 2002, Satnam Chana (2009) asserts that investment in health in Punjab has not always been a priority for Sikh

immigrants, along with other social development projects. Yet, when the survey was administered again in 2007, the information obtained showed a significant increase in investment in general social development projects. Perhaps the increase is attributable to the incentives offered by the Indian government as the country opened up to foreign competition. Availability of dual citizenship, financial stimuli, setting up of political offices to address the needs of overseas Sikhs (and Indians) are some of the ways in which the Indian government motivated its emigrants to undertake progress in Punjab (and India overall) (Tatla, 2009). Such strategies to solicit funding from overseas Sikhs have been adopted as the state retreated from its responsibility for “progress,” including financing the education system, in the era of economic liberalization (Agarwala, 2011; Dusenbery and Tatla, 2009; Walton-Roberts, 2005, 2001) and it is likely to nurture the idea of Punjab, and India, as “home.”

Furthermore, not all development projects sponsored by immigrant Sikhs are accepted by the villagers. A case in point is the educational projects funded by North American Sikhs, and immigrant Sikhs from other parts of the world. Such initiatives have generated some amount of tension in the village communities in Punjab. The tension is a product of an air of superiority that is associated with making knowledge of English a prerequisite by structuring curriculum in that language as well as establishing school affiliations with Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), as opposed to Punjab School Education Board (PSEB) which is viewed as inferior (Tatla, 2009).¹⁵ The high cost of such education, because they tend to be private, makes it more difficult for poorer families to send their children to those institutions (Tatla, 2009; Walton-Roberts, 2005) and these villagers are likely to feel excluded from “better” resources. At the same time, it is the case that in an environment where the government has taken several steps back from actively promoting development, contribution from the immigrants can be beneficial (Dhesi, 2009; Singh and Singh, 2007). Nonetheless, the tensions within villages that comprise of both nonimmigrants and immigrants are worthy of attention because they reveal much about the emergent social formation in those villages.

Discussion

Within the parameters of the scholarship analyzed for this paper by focusing on the diasporic practices in three areas of engagement with Punjab, I show that American Sikhs construct of “homeland” is multidimensional. The most explicit imagination of Punjab as the “homeland” is witnessed through the struggles of those American Sikhs who have supported the struggle for a separate Sikh state in the form of *Khalistan*. Historically, this fight for a separate Sikh state predates India’s independence, and found support in the American diaspora as early as the 1940s. Disappointment with the treatment of Sikhs by the Indian government in the post 1984 period is when the movement gathered much support among American Sikhs. This “homeland” that the American Sikhs, along with Sikhs elsewhere, supported was intertwined with political aspirations, a home where Sikh voices would not be suppressed as they were in

Hindu-dominated India (Shani, 2008). Much later, one sees a similar movement for “home” in the form of the *Free Akal Takht* organization. The objective here is to get control over *Akal Takht*, detach it from the authority of SGPC, and have a say in the decision-making that impacts Sikhs everywhere. Although this movement differs from the *Khalistanis* in the specificities of carving out a Sikh nationhood and “homeland,” there is nonetheless an imagination of a “homeland” in Punjab via influence over *Akal Takht*, the highest seat of religious authority for Sikhs.

The narrative of *Khalistan* or that of power over *Akal Takht*, however, does not capture the complexity that informs the imagination of a “homeland” among American Sikhs. There are those immigrants, as the scholarship presented in this paper shows, who are involved with construction of gurdwaras or sponsorship of Sikh religious events in Punjab without necessarily fighting for Sikh self-determination. At the very least, such involvements are suggestive of a spiritual relationship with Punjab. Punjab is the birthplace of Sikhism, although *Nankana Sahib* where Guru Nanak was born is in erstwhile west Punjab or today’s Pakistan. Nonetheless, the Golden Temple, *Akal Takht* and the broader Indian national association of Sikhism with the state of Punjab makes the two – Punjab and Sikhism – inseparable. For this group, there is also likely an ancestral connection to Punjab simply because many of the Sikh religious affairs that the American Sikhs advance are usually in their natal villages. It is further possible that Sikh concepts of *dan*, or charity, *seva*, or selfless service, provide additional motivation for engagement in Sikh religious matters in particular. Perhaps, giving back to one’s ancestral village is a way to give back to one’s “own” community, or a place that one identifies as “home.” Intertwined with Sikh religious values of charity and selfless service that incentivizes the immigrants to contribute to Punjab is the concept of *izzat*, or honor, as suggested by Verne Dusenbery (2009) in his essay entitled “‘Through Wisdom, Dispense Charity’: Religious and Cultural Underpinnings of Diaspora Sikh Philanthropy in Punjab.” Steve Taylor (2014), with his research focused in the United Kingdom, put forward a similar connection between *izzat*, diaspora and Punjab. He argues that the construction of homes in Punjab is demonstration of wealth and thus, assertion of *izzat* by the nonresident Indians. For American Sikhs, who are the subjects of discussion of this paper, then is the importance of asserting a higher social status in Punjab through religious contribution an indication of their connection to Punjab as “home,” a place where they are “seen” and thus experience a sense of belonging? I would argue that the Sikhs evaluate themselves using the village community as a reference group and/or offer charity to their natal villages is indicative of their imagination of Punjab as home. These are perhaps the same reasons for contribution by American Sikhs toward development projects in Punjab.

Interestingly, American Sikhs also desire *izzat*, and hence show attachment, within the immigrant transnational community as well. Demonstration of success through material contributions, be it for religion and/or development, points in that direction. It is symbolic of community formation, i.e. a space where the immigrants “see” each other and have a sense of belonging. Steve

Taylor (2014) certainly maintains that to be the case with his work on Punjabi British immigrants. According to Taylor, the houses built by the British Punjabi NRIs in their villages “are signifiers of belonging to, and inclusion within, not only Punjab as a region and India as a nation but also the non-resident Indian community in Punjab/India and the global Punjabi diaspora/transnational community” (p. 284). That means, it is important to consider the extent to which the contributions made toward gurdwaras, or religious events as well as money invested for village improvement projects by the American Sikh immigrants are possibly ways for them to display success and gain higher social position in relation to others in the Sikh transnational community too. Then, that transnational space is also “home” for the immigrants. Contrary to the imagination of a “homeland” bounded by territory in the form of Punjab, the boundaries of the transnational space as “home” (without land) is a flexible one; fluid because it shifts to fit the flexible boundaries of the transnational space.

This brings us to the second part of the question posed for this paper: to what extent is this identification of “homeland/home” with Punjab and/or the transnational arena linked with the Sikh location intertwined with their location as racial minorities in American society? Using the case of the American Sikhs as one example, Giorgio Shani (2008), in his book *Sikh Nationalism and Identity in a Global Age*, contends that marginalization in the immigrants’ place of settlement as racial minorities is connected to the group’s quest for a “homeland” or a separate nation.¹⁶ Pursuit of a Sikh nation that can be a “homeland” for Sikhs will protect the interests of the group, and that, in turn, will make it possible for those like the American Sikhs to wield power in their place of settlement. Thus the belonging is sought in the place of settlement but with the tools made available by an exclusively Sikh nation. The struggle for *Khalistan* in the diaspora and the *Akal Takht* movement can be viewed from this lens. Certainly, as the literature shows, the *Ghadr* movement of the early twentieth century in which American Sikhs, along with fellow Indian immigrants, fought to free India from colonial rule was definitely connected to the racism experienced by Sikhs, and other South Asians, who had immigrated to the United States. Of course, the *Ghadarites* fought as Indians to free India, a “homeland,” from British imperialism. But, of greater direct relevance to the issue at hand, their struggle was linked with their experience of racism in America. And even when the goal is not for a separate “homeland” or for liberation from the Indian government, participation in Punjabi electoral politics is indicative of a bond that the group continues to share with Punjab – a bond that might be linked with their non-whiteness in American society.

I would also extend that argument to capture yet another layer of community formation that contributes to the marginal location of Sikhs in the American social context. That is, the association of “Indian” identity with Hindu by Indian Americans (Kurién, 2001) from which Sikhs, and Indians of other non-Hindu religions, are excluded. It is an identity that is promoted by “Indian” immigrants and surfaces as prominent in opposition to the Christian foundations of American culture. Even among Indian Americans, Sikh immigrants are possibly viewed as “others.” Future research should explore this dimension of the

American Sikh experience within the Indian immigrant community and its ties with the group's concept of "homeland." Therefore, as people without a nation to which they experience complete belonging, Sikh immigrants imagine and pursue the quest for a "home" that will protect them.

By so saying, however, I am not suggesting that American Sikh quest for a "homeland" is exclusively connected to the group's alienation in American society and/or a reaction to American Hindu nationalism. Sikhs share a deep ancestral and spiritual bond with Punjab and there exists a "broader loyalty towards India" (Tatla, 1999, 210). What I am suggesting here is that "home" for immigrant Sikhs is possibly a quest to carve out a space where the group feels its interests are met. They need an "independent "homeland" in order to feel at home in a world of nation states (Shani, 118). It is in this context that Punjab, as the birthplace and keeper of the religion as well as the place of their emigration is where the immigrants dream of complete inclusion.

Yet, it would be inaccurate to clearly demarcate "diaspora" and "homeland" between the United States and Punjab and/or India. Historically, the term is rooted in the experience of Jewish lives far from the "Promised Land" (Bauman, 2000). Contemporary scholarship treats the term much more broadly.¹⁷ A review of the definition of the concept by major journals in the field shows this very robustness in the literature today.¹⁸ Understood in this way, can one clearly divide America and Punjab into diaspora and homeland respectively? The Sikh immigrants with their patterns of involvement, including philanthropy, do imagine complete acceptance in Punjab. But, some of the values that guide their engagement with Punjab in the ways discussed here are suggestive of a Sikh identity that is influenced by America as well which, in turn, makes it challenging to identify America as purely a diasporic space (that is away from the "homeland" in Punjab). Verne Dusenbery (2009) in addressing this dimension of identity formation puts forward the argument that "diaspora Sikhs are influenced not only by Punjabi cultural understandings and social practices but also by those of the respective countries to which they have emigrated" (p. 91) and then speaking specifically about migration to Western nations, Dusenbery continues "Given their international migration patterns, the majority of Sikh emigrants have experienced some form of Western modernity" (p.91). An aspect of that modernity is the absorption of values that support charity, religious or secular, which is supported by the state through tax deductible donations (Dusenbery, 2009) – types of engagement with Punjab that is evident among American Sikhs as shown in this paper. There is moreover another aspect of western modernity identified by Dusenbery, i.e. a "sense of progress and of bringing 'development' to those 'less developed'" (p. 92). The preference for a "globalized education" (Tatla, 2009) that emphasizes instruction in the medium of English, technical education, private ownership of institutions and projects for improvement in their natal villages are examples of ways in which the American Sikhs attempt to bring progress. One thus sees that the group's 'Sikhness,' 'Punjabiness' and 'Indianness' gradually meld with their emerging American conception of self. What it also indicates is that the Sikh identity stretches beyond a mere instrumental relationship with America as suggested by

Soysal's understanding of immigrant citizenship mentioned earlier in the paper, i.e. merely to ensure political rights or citizenship. The attachment is a cultural one as well where American Sikhs are shaped by the values of the place where they have settled. Here, one might want to note that the Sikh immigrants arrive from a nation previously governed by the British that is likely to have already shaped their identity in favor of a western notion of advancement (Srivastava, 1998; Sudhir, 1993; Banerjee, 1989). Disentangling these multiple dimensions of the American Sikh identity and its impact on their concept of the "homeland" is something future research needs to examine more closely. Where is "homeland" and where is "diaspora" then? These identities, as the paper shows, are fluid. The Sikh immigrants create home in the "diaspora" as they create home in Punjab as well. Their sense of selves are impacted by their ancestral, spiritual and natal ties with Punjab, as well as shaped by their experience of western modernity. Additionally, their postcolonial identity, which immigrates with them to the west, shows that they are likely to be receptive to western modernity to begin with. Hence, a binary of "homeland" and "diaspora" is difficult given these various components of the American Sikh identity.

In my estimation, based on the literature analyzed in this paper, additional work is needed in four other areas of the American Sikh experience: a) scholarship should further examine with empirical research the ways in which caste hierarchies within the American Sikh community, that migrate along with the immigrants, are re-configured and influence the community's construct of home. The presence of caste identified gurdwaras, like the ones in the New York and New Jersey areas (Guru Ravidass¹⁹ and Lobana Foundation) show that the Sikh community is not a monolith. How do those intra-group differences shape American Sikh identity and their sense of belonging? Meena Dhanda's (2015) work on race and caste in the United Kingdom can be one such work that offers guidance in that goal; b) the American Sikhs community is also differentiated on the basis of social class and rural versus urban backgrounds; how do socioeconomic and spatial differences, along with caste, shape the boundaries of the Sikh community in America and shape the people's view of "home?" c) more light needs to be thrown on gender by those invested in theorizing about the immigrant Sikh construct of "homeland." The *Khalsa* identity of Sikhs, which embodies the male and/or masculinized body as representative of Sikhism (Chanda and Ford 2010), receives much support in the diaspora. Researchers²⁰ like Navtej Purewal (2009) have alluded to tensions concerning gender within the British-Sikh community. Purewal argues that men's *seva*, contrary to that of women, is much more likely to receive public recognition. Does that not create friction within the community? How does the immigrant focus on the *Khalsa* identity shape gender relations among Sikhs outside of India? Does that not impact Sikh identity, participation in India and Sikh understandings of belonging? Scholarship should expand more in this direction in order to assess the many formations of immigrant Sikh identity and its influence on Sikhs concepts of "diaspora" and "homeland;" and d) more empirical, and specifically, qualitative work, is needed on American Sikhs to show how all of the internal

variations among Sikh immigrants shape their experience of race in America and thus, inform the group's construct of home.

Conclusion

It is important to recognize that the analysis presented in this paper is limited by the literature included. Within that parameter, however, it appears that the patterns of commitment of American Sikhs, namely in the areas of politics, religion and development, with Punjab, India show their continued attachment with the birthplace and/or the place of their emigration. A closer examination, however, shows that the immigrants identify with their country of immigration as well. The literature that I have analyzed shows that the attachment with America is not just on the grounds of political rights and privileges, or citizenship, but also because the Sikhs are likely to have internalized its cultural values which is suggestive of a shift in identity to being "from" America as well. Perhaps "homes" are many for immigrant Sikhs? To me, it seems that more scholarship is needed specifically on the Sikh immigrants' understandings of "homeland" and "diaspora" with sustained focus on postcoloniality as well as the ways in which intra-group divisions and racism experienced influence constructions of "homeland" and "diaspora."

Notes

¹ <http://www.sarbatkhalsainfo.com/blog/north-american-sikhs-select-five-representatives-for-sarbat-khalsa/>

² Canal colonies were established by the British colonial rulers in the unpopulated parts of western Punjab as a way to encourage settlement and farming in those regions; land grants were also available for those who wanted to move to the colonies; participation in the army and caste status were at least two sources of preference established to avail of this opportunity (See Tatla, 1999) and Verma, 2002).

³ According to Gurharpal Singh and Darshan Singh Tatla (2006), for instance, Sikhs were sent to Fiji and the West Indies as indentured laborers, but the overall number for indentured servitude is low among this group. But recruitment of Sikhs was barred because they frequently rebelled against the poor conditions of work (Singh and Tatla, 2006).

⁴ A small proportion of Hindu-Bengalis dominated the remaining number of *Ghadarites*.

⁵ Canada was the initial destination of this early group of immigrants. After Canada established blocks to immigration, Sikhs began immigrating to the United States in the first decade of the twentieth century.

⁶ For instance, Punjabis could not marry white women because of the anti-miscegenation laws; they were referred to as "ragheads," faced physical attacks from other races, their children were segregated into nonwhite schools. See for

example Karen Leonard (1992) for racism faced by the early Sikh immigrants to the United States.

⁷ *Ghadarites* also joined forces with the *Komagata Maru*, a ship that set sail in 1914 for Canada from Hong Kong in order to test Canada's restrictive immigration policies. Gurdit Singh Sarhali, a native of Amritsar in Punjab, was the person who chartered the *Komagata Maru*. Sarhali was a religious man who installed a gurdwara on the ship as a way to calm the energy of its passengers (Johnston, 2013). *Ghadr* literature and representatives, two of whom were Sikhs, did make their way into the ship as a way to advance the global anticolonial struggle.

⁸ See Tatla (1999) for instance for a discussion of Sikh concerns at the time of India's independence.

⁹ Neither Cohen, nor any of the resources included in this article would suggest that those voices were highly prominent though they do point to their presence at this stage.

¹⁰ See www.referendum2020.org

¹¹ See Harjot Oberoi (1994) for a discussion on the complexity underlying Sikh religious identity. Oberoi, although not discussing the case of immigrant Sikhs, is a useful, if controversial, resource to reflect on the layers that comprise the Sikh identity.

¹² My informal observations would further suggest that gurdwaras in the New York/New Jersey region where the governing board is Jat are not marked as such. In fact, the one gurdwara in New Jersey that I attend regularly for the purpose of my research where the attendees are of professional background is also not identified as such. Interestingly, my observations based on conversations with attendees at the gurdwaras also indicate that while the gurdwaras have caste identities, marked or unmarked, entry into the gurdwara and participation in at least the service and the *langar* are not based on the caste of the immigrants.

¹³ "Reactive ethnicity" was coined by Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut in their work in on second generation immigrant youth in America in order to talk about the ways in which prejudice and discrimination motivates ethnic group cohesion and political mobilization. See Portes and Rumbaut (2001).

¹⁴ See for example Taylor (2014) and Verma (2002).

¹⁵ The Central Board of Secondary Education is a Board of public and private education in India under the central government. The state government of Punjab administers the Punjab School Education Board.

¹⁶ Sikhs, racialized as Asian Americans, are a marginalized racial group in America. They are indeed the "model minority," therefore. Even for those Sikhs who maybe upwardly mobile and/or occupy higher positions in the American socioeconomic order are still considered to be racial "others" (a history that goes back to Bhagat Singh Thind case in 1923) and thus, face racial prejudice and/or discrimination. The religion is an additional element in the group's racialization which visibly marks them as "different" from the Christian and white normative social order of the United States. There are organizations like the Sikh Coalition,

for instance, that have been formed to increase awareness of Sikhs among the dominant mainstream American society and offer Sikhs the protection from racist attacks. In post 9/11 America, the racist attacks towards Sikhs have become much more evident. See Mitra (2012, 2008).

¹⁷ See for example Chariandy, 2006; Singh, 2013 for a discussion on the debate surrounding the concept of the diaspora, its evolution from being applied to Jews to a more expanded definition of the concept, with much resistance, in contemporary times.

¹⁸ See the journals *Diaspora*, *Diaspora Studies* and *South Asian Diaspora*.

¹⁹ For my current project on Sikh immigrants in the United States, I have conducted interviews with those who attend the Ravidass gurdwara in Queens, New York. Preliminary information does show that the attendees have a self-concept of being Sikh.

²⁰ See for example Mand (2006), Mandair (2005), Kaur Singh, N.G. (1995).

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