Organized by Gurinder Singh Mann, Kundan Kaur Kapany Chair in Sikh Studies and Director of the Center for Sikh Studies and Punjab Studies, the UC Santa Barbara hosted a major conference on 16th and 17th May 2014. It was the 8th international conference held since the Sikh Studies program started 15 years ago. This event was conceived to celebrate Mark Juergensmeyer’s contribution to the field of Sikh Studies, to showcase the achievements of the Sikh Studies program over 15 years, and to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Journal of Punjab Studies.

Henry Yang, the Chancellor of the university inaugurated the event and welcomed over 35 scholars who had travelled from Australasia, East Asia, India, Europe and North America, to participate in it. Mann, in his opening comments, reminded Juergensmeyer that during the first conference he organized at Berkeley in 1976, he had expressed his deep concern that Sikhism was in danger of becoming a forgotten tradition in the academy. Thanking him for this clarion call, Mann’s response was that Sikhism may no longer a forgotten tradition – given the impressive increase in the volume of literature on the Sikhs – but the huge scholarly output over the past decades does not necessarily mean that all is well with the field. According to Mann, the quality of much of the work in circulation remains shaky and he urged the younger scholars in the audience to take up this challenge of bringing the requisite theoretical and empirical rigor in their research. Narinder Singh Kapany, the primary donor of the position at UCSB, congratulated Mann and described the achievements of the UCSB program as “absolutely spectacular.”

This was followed by Juergensmeyer’s address on ‘Sikhism as a Global Religion,’ in which he explained how over the past decades, Sikhism had come out of its invisibility to be recognized as a major religion and also how Sikhs have become globally connected both with their homeland but also transnationally. In his view, the future Sikh community will adapt as it responds to the changes around it.

The first panel, chaired by John S. Hawley (Columbia), focused on Studying Early Sikh Literature. It included presentations by Rahuldeep Singh Gill (Californian Lutheran University) on interpreting Vars of Gurdas Bihalla, by Joginder Singh Ahluwalia on the little understood or studied Early Sikh Schismatic Literature and finally by Mann (UC Santa Barbara) on Issues in Studying Early Textual Sources. Mann argued that the current understanding of how Sikh documents came to be created needs radical revisions and supported the position that writing started at the very inception of the community and brought forth its implications for understanding Sikh literature.

The second panel, chaired by Bruce LaBrack (University of the Pacific) was on the theme of Pioneer Sikhs and Institution Building, which heard three papers on activities of early 20th century Sikh communities: Hugh Johnston (Simon Fraser University, Canada) presented on the early Vancouver Sikh community and outlined the context for establishing the first Sikh gurdwara in Vancouver in 1907; Jane Singh (UC Berkeley) delivered a paper on the economic and religious activities of the Sikh community settled around Stockton and events leading to the establishing of the first gurdwara in Stockton in 1911. Shinder S. Thandi (Coventry University, UK) presented a paper entitled ‘Rajas, Sants, Scholars and Peddlers: Institution Building among Pioneer Sikhs in early 20th century London’ which assessed the connections between introduction of higher education policies by the British in Punjab and their impact on Sikh politics, characteristics of early Sikh migrants to Britain and the major personalities associated with the establishment of the first Sikh gurdwara in Britain in Shepherds Bush in London in 1911. Jasjeet Singh (Leeds University, UK) critically examined different models of gurdwara management and the varied forms of engagement of British Sikh youth with these gurdwaras. Based on ethnographic research, he also discussed challenges around inter-generational transmission, growing role of jathbandis and rising influence of home-grown prachariks. As far as I know, this was the first scholarly discussion on institution building among Sikhs located in three separate countries.
The final panel on the first day was on Sikh Enterprise Abroad, chaired by James Lochtefeld (Carthage College, USA). The first speaker was Harpreet Singh, a doctoral student at the University of Otago, New Zealand. Based on archival research he presented an interesting profile of the nascent Sikh community in New Zealand and their varied activities and argued that far from being a ‘marginalized’ minority, they appeared to be well-integrated into New Zealand society and economy. The second paper was presented by Parminder K. Bhachu (Clark University) who talked about her ongoing research and provided short narratives on the professional and entrepreneurial activities of four individuals who made a major impact in their chosen profession but drew their creativity and inspiration from Sikh work ethic and value system. Philip Deslippe, a doctoral student at UC Santa Barbara, presented a fascinating account of the entrepreneurial pursuits of five yoga teachers of Sikh heritage, including the infamous Bhagat Singh Thind, who made an important contribution to the history of yoga movement in America. The final presentation was delivered by Van Dusenbery (Hamline University) who provided a profile of the social entrepreneur Budh Singh Dhahan, his remarkable achievements in establishing a charitable hospital and nursing college in rural Punjab and the challenges he faced in later life. If the previous panel made a major contribution to our understanding of the early overseas gurdwara movement, this panel was excellent in highlighting the amazing zeal among Sikhs for adventure, self-preservation, enterprise and creativity in foreign lands.

The second day started with a panel exploring different means of transmission of Sikh heritage and was chaired by Inderjit Kaur of UC Santa Cruz. John Warneke, a doctoral student at UC Santa Barbara presented a paper on different forms of educational transmission among the Sikhs during the guru period. Gibb Schreffler, a recent graduate of UC Santa Barbara and now a faculty member at Pomona College, presented a provocative paper on Sikh musical traditions and wanted a more fundamental question - ‘what constituted Sikh music?’ - answered before we could start categorization of Sikh musical traditions. The third paper was presented by Kulbir Singh Thind of the Bay Area who talked about his pioneering project on digitizing the Guru Granth Sahib, development of the Gurbani CD and the gurugranth.org website, its powerful search features and enormous potential as an educational tool.
The last two presentations were by Bhajan Singh (Sikh Education Foundation, Singapore) and Harjinder Kaur (University of Western Australia). Bhajan Singh provided a narrative on the remarkable achievements of the Khalsa School in Bangkok in serving Sikh children since 1984 and Harjinder Kaur talked about their successful campaign in Singapore - through setting up the Board for the Teaching and Testing of South Asian Languages - resulting in an important educational breakthrough in which this organization had now been entrusted in developing a common framework, syllabus and curriculum development for five non-Tamil Indian languages: Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Urdu and of course Punjabi. Surely for Punjabi (in Gurumukhi script) to be treated officially on par with these other South Asian languages which have speakers many times than those speaking Punjabi, must be a first anywhere and needs to be viewed as a tremendous achievement.

Anna Bigelow, the first graduate student to complete her doctoral dissertation on the Punjab at UC Santa Barbara and now a professor at North Carolina University, chaired the penultimate panel aptly entitled Research in the Making. The conference heard from five presenters who shared their thoughts on developing new themes in Sikh and Punjab Studies, which I am sure will transform into cutting-edge research for presentation at future conferences. The first paper was by Natasha Behl (Arizona State University) who spoke on discourses on female feticide in Punjab and how cultural explanations in particular, including those provided by Sikh scholars, actually end up legitimizing this barbaric practice. Lou Fenech (University of Northern Iowa) presented on 'Objects and Gifts in Maharajah Ranjit Singh’s Darbar' with a focus on the significance of gifting of the Kaukab-i Iqbal-i Punjab to Lord Auckland, and this provoked a lively discussion afterwards. The next presentation was by Will Glover (University of Michigan) who spoke about his research project on patterns of urban development in Punjab, with a particular focus on reasons for the rise and decline of towns, providing a counter narrative to the conventional linear pattern of development – village to town to city. Doris Jakobsh (University of Waterloo, Canada) discussed her new project on examining Sikh female religio-cultural materiality and visuality as contra-distinct to the religio-cultural materiality and visuality of the male Khalsa body through the lens of regulatory and prescriptive texts. The next speaker, Michael Hawley (Mount Royal University, Canada) shared information about a project he had recently embarked on, in which he would provide a comprehensive, contemporary profile of the Calgary Sikh community. Hawley was angling for a new perspective in studying diaspora communities rather than using the traditional and rather over-worked migration-settlement-community institution building framework. The final presentation in this long but thought-provoking panel included a presentation by Kristina Myrvold (Linnaeus University, Sweden) on her new research project on 'Religion in the Trenches', exploring the circulation of 'miniatures scriptures' among Sikh soldiers in mainland Europe during the First World War. She intends to explore the production and distribution of such miniature texts and assess their role in providing spiritual nourishment to Sikh soldiers fighting for the British.
The final academic panel provided an opportunity to showcase the state of Sikh Studies at three University of California campuses. Chaired by noted Punjab historian Farina Mir (University of Michigan) the conference heard from the Sikh Studies Chair holders within the University of California system. Pashaura Singh (UC, Riverside) presented a moving account of personal challenges he faced during the early phase in establishing the Sikh Studies program at UC Riverside. He talked about accomplishments of the program there and pointed to recent publications including co-editing (with Lou Fenech) the prestigious *The Oxford Handbook on Sikh Studies*, published in 2014. Nirvikar Singh (UC, Santa Cruz) outlined how much had already been achieved since the relatively young Sikh Studies program started at UC Santa Cruz in 2010. He also gave information on forthcoming conferences. Gurinder Singh Mann in his remarks referred the audience to the comprehensive report in their conference pack on 15 years of Sikh and Punjab Studies at UC Santa Barbara. He identified several achievements: popularity of courses on the Sikh Tradition and Punjabi Language and Literature, development of teaching materials, running the Summer School in Punjab Studies for 13 years, hosting the *Journal of Punjab Studies* and a program of visiting scholars. In the final presentation of this panel Eleanor Nesbitt (University of Warwick, UK) and Shinder S. Thandi (Coventry University, UK) explained the context, history and academic achievements of the *Journal of Punjab Studies*, as it celebrates its 20th anniversary this year.

The conference concluded with a discussion chaired by Parminder Kaur Jassal of ACT Foundation on the role of Sikh Studies programs and their potential impact on Sikh community action. They all welcomed and appreciated the range of presentations made during the conference, which they argued made for a fantastic learning experience. They also lauded the achievements of different Sikh Studies programs, urged them to be more involved in community activity and stated that research only had real meaning if it could be translated into actionable evidence. The conference included evening dinners at the homes of Juergensmeyer and Mann, and the great atmosphere of warmth, pleasantness and camaraderie shared by all made this conference both a social as well as an academic event of the highest caliber.
In concluding this report, I want to flag up two important details. Firstly, the fact that during this academic year alone over 280 students took a course on *The Sikh Tradition* and another 154 students took a course on *Global Diasporas* which has a large segment on the Sikh Diaspora, it immediately becomes clear that UC Santa Barbara offers the world’s largest program in Sikh Studies at this level. Secondly, considering the names of paper presenters or those who Chaired the panels, many of these are present or past doctoral students associated with the UC Santa Barbara program. Given this critical mass of scholars trained here and the thrust of their research conclusions suggest that a distinct school of Sikh Studies may be in the making. They have been trained to focus on classical texts as their source material, be critical in their reading and interpretation but at the same time not ignore the sensitivities of a relatively young living tradition. This type of scholarship will go a long way in clarifying scholarly understanding of the Sikh tradition and further raising the academic respectability of Sikh Studies. The Sikh community leaders present in the conference seemed to be fully cognizant of this important aspect of the program and open to supporting it in whatever way they can.

Finally, the fact that the conference participants included over 35 speakers from all over the globe and was attended by a large audience over the two days, demonstrated a high level of academic and Sikh community support for the Sikh Studies program at UC Santa Barbara and confirmed the large reservoir of goodwill Mann has generated over the past 15 years.

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