(Dis)continuous Identities:

Modalities of Liberalism and the Sikh Diaspora Online

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ..... **iv**

Extended Abstract ..... **v**

Acknowledgements ..... **x**

Chapter 1: Introduction **1**
- **I. Context and Research Question** **1**
- **II. Further Background** **6**
  - A. Pluralising the Sikh Diaspora 6
  - B. Liberal Sikh Discourse 12
  - C. Digital Diasporic Sikh Discourse 15
- **III. Theoretical Context** **16**
  - A. The Liberal Social Sphere in the Abstract and in Practice 17
  - B. The Liberal Self 20
  - C. Spirituality in the Liberal Imaginary 21
  - D. Critique of Liberalism 22
- **IV. Methodology** **26**
  - A. Selection of websites 26
  - B. Analysis 29
  - C. Temporal Parameters 31
- **V. Restatement of the Argument** **33**
- **VI. Chapter Summary** **34**

Chapter 2: Literature Review **36**
- **I. Introduction** **36**
- **II. Sikh Studies: Identity, Plurality, and Normativity** **37**
  - A. Evolution of the field 37
  - B. Sikh Identity, Plurality, and Normativity 38
- **III. Conceptualizing the Sikh Diaspora** **43**
  - A. Diaspora studies 43
  - B. The Sikh Diaspora 46
  - C. Broadening and Complexifying the Sikh Diasporic Experience 50
- **IV. Sikhism and the Critique of Liberal Secularism** **54**
  - A. Problematizing the Liberal-Secular Binary 54
  - B. Sikhism and the Liberal Secular Imaginary 57
- **V. Sikhism and the Internet** **59**
  - A. Digital Religion 59
  - B. Sikhism Online 60
- **VI. Conclusion** **62**

Chapter 3: Framing Sikh Identities **64**
- **I. Introduction** **64**
- **II. Sikhism as a world religion** **65**
- **III. Sikhs as an ethnoreligious community** **69**
- **IV. Sikh Mobility and transnationalism** **78**

V. Conclusion 84

Chapter 4: Overview of Websites 85
I. Introduction 85
II. Activist Websites 86
A. Jakara.org and Thelangarhall.com 87
III. Lifestyle Websites 90
A. Kaurlife.org 92
B. Kaurista.com 94
C. 'Style with Kaur' Instagram Account 95
IV. Advocacy Organisation Websites 96
A. SikhCoalition.org 97
B. Saldef.org 98
C. UnitedSikhs.org 99
V. General Interest Websites 100
A. Sikhnet.com 101
B. SikhChic.com 102
C. Sikhri.org 104
VI. Conclusion 106

Chapter 5: Discursive Modality - Translation 107
I. Introduction 107
II. Persuasive Definitions of Sikhism 109
A. Invisible Logic and Ideological (In)Coherence through Composite Images 109
B. Expanding the Visual Grammar of the Sikh Race 116
C. Persuasive Definitions through Informational Resources 121
III. Applying Sikh Principles 123
A. Political Advocacy 123
B. Reshaping the Terms of Solidarity 128
C. Individual Spirituality 131
IV. Conclusion 133

Chapter 6: Discursive Modality - Critique 135
I. Introduction 135
II. Critique for Critique's Sake 137
A. Nonconformity 137
B. De-centering authority 140
C. Individual ethics 142
III. Sikhism's disposition towards the world 145
IV. Sikhism's internal disposition 155
V. Conclusion 162

Chapter 7: Virtuous Citizenship 164
I. Introduction 164
II. Liberal Subjectivity and Agency 166
A. Visual constructions of liberal citizenship 173
B. Whole and Fragmented Subjectivities 174
III. Socio-Political Normativity 182
A. Civic Participation 182

B. Consumer Citizenship 187
IV. Conclusion 192
Chapter 8: Conclusions 194
I. Findings 194
II. Limitations of the Study and Directions for Further Research 197
Bibliography 199
List of Figures 212

Abstract

This project examines eleven different Sikhism-related websites that are operated largely by and for diasporic Sikhs, and which collectively constitute a digital discourse that both produces and reflects a distinctly diasporic Sikh identity. The central research questions guiding this dissertation are: How is liberal diasporic Sikh discourse redefining Sikh identity? How is this discourse produced and perpetuated as such? How does the digital nature of this discourse have an effect? What does this discourse tell us about the nature of diasporic Sikhism? I argue that liberal Sikh discourse redefines Sikhism as universal and cosmopolitan by showing it to resonate with the values of liberal modernity, and by situating it within the particular vision of universality encompassed in liberal modernity. It attempts to ground Sikh identity in a new way, one that is not based upon historical, ethnic or linguistic claims, but upon the abstract, liberal principles that underlie much of Western modernity. In so doing, it clears the way for creating a new sense of belonging in the West. This discourse wields liberalism as an analytical tool to engage, improve and fulfil Sikhism; however, it fails to realise the extent to which it is also embedded within the epistemological domain of liberalism, and how that epistemology actually shapes its concerns. I employ multi-modal discourse analysis to examine the particular discursive modalities that these websites employ, which are as follows: (1) translation, (2) critique, and (3) representing Sikhs as virtuous citizens. Ultimately, this dissertation shows that diasporic Sikh identity is not continuous with Punjabi Sikh identity, but is actually emerging as a distinctive way of being a Sikh.

Extended Abstract

This dissertation examines the development of a distinctively ‘liberal’ diasporic Sikh identity through the discursive analysis of eleven different diasporic Sikh websites. This project sits at the intersection of Sikh studies, diaspora studies and the study of digital religion, while also being indebted to the growing field of interdisciplinary studies that interrogate how the modern category of ‘religion’ is produced through its opposition to the ‘secular’. In recent decades, Sikhs studies has paid careful attention to the different ways that diasporic Sikhs engage their new national and local contexts, but the tacit presumption underlying these studies is that there is a substantive continuity between Sikhism in Punjab and Sikhism in the diaspora, and that diasporic Sikhs are eager to reconstitute Sikhism in the diaspora with as much fidelity to the Punjabi original as they can. However, I suggest that we can discern the development of a distinctively diasporic Sikh identity, one that is distinguished not only by its ideological orientation but also its use of liberal modalities of discourse.

I study these websites in particular because they represent the first time that diasporic Sikhs have developed an arena for discussion, debate and conceptualisation that prioritises the diasporic perspective rather than the Punjabi one. Although these websites still discuss and report on Punjab, Punjab remains tangential to their focus. Previously, diasporic media such as newspapers, radio shows or television programmes had a Punjab-centric focus, not only in terms of geography, but also in terms of how they fundamentally conceptualised Sikh identity. By contrast, these websites’ shift in focus belies an even greater shift in terms of how Sikh identity is being grounded. The particular Sikh public that is invoked by these websites views Sikhism as

something that should be defined in a way that extends beyond the Punjabi context, as being fundamentally universal.

The central research questions guiding this dissertation are: How is liberal diasporic Sikh discourse redefining Sikh identity? How are the dichotomies inherent within this discourse, such as Sikhism and Punjabi culture, the particular versus universal situatedness of Sikhism, or even the general dichotomy of religion versus culture, produced and perpetuated as such? How does the digital nature of this discourse have an effect? What does this discourse tell us about the nature of diasporic Sikhism? I argue that liberal Sikh discourse redefines Sikhism as transcultural and universal by showing it to resonate with the values of liberal modernity, and by situating it within the particular vision of universality encompassed in liberal modernity. It attempts to ground Sikh identity in a new way, one that is not based upon historical, ethnic or linguistic claims, but upon the abstract, liberal principles that underlie much of Western modernity. In so doing, it clears the way for creating a new sense of belonging in the West.

I use multi-modal discourse analysis to draw attention to how this argument is performed in ways that are not immediately apparent – or perhaps even conscious – I have organised the data based on the discursive modalities of these websites, rather than on content. The particular discursive strategies that I focus on are (1) translating Sikhism, (2) critiquing Sikhism and (3) representing Sikhs as virtuous citizens. Each of these sections corresponds to a particular chapter, and each chapter will explicate how these discursive modalities function.

This dissertation is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 2 offers a literature review of the relevant scholarly fields and conversations, focusing on Sikh Studies, Diaspora Studies, the study of digital religion, and the critique of liberal secularism. It finds a space of interaction between these various fields. Chapter 3 is a background chapter that offers a brief historical overview of

Sikh history, Sikh migration and the formation of a Sikh diaspora. Chapter 4 is a chapter devoted to introducing and discussing the eleven different websites that I analyse throughout the rest of the dissertation. It discusses each website in depth, giving an overview of its history, purpose, and audience.

The main data chapters are Chapters 5, 6 and 7, in which I present my findings organised by the rhetorical modalities operating in these websites. Chapter 5 discusses the first strategy, translation, whereby the websites highlight and foreground those aspects of Sikhism that align with liberalism, such as an emphasis on egalitarianism and universalism, and on the individual as the locus of spiritual fulfilment. This 'translation' takes place not necessarily through an explicit declaration of what are and are not the most significant features of Sikhism, but also through the performative aspects of the websites themselves, such as images, vocabulary, grammar and the conspicuously absent or elided aspects of the Sikh tradition. With this particular strategy, the web discourse views itself not as an agent of change, but rather as an agent of preservation, even while this act of preservation inherently contains a kind of transformative gesture.

Chapter 6 highlights how the websites 'critique' Sikhism, both explicitly and performatively. In the liberal tradition, critique itself is presumed to be intrinsically valuable, an end in itself. This is part of a conceptual apparatus that equates modernity with reason, secularism and critical thinking, and views religion as being diametrically opposed to all of these. To critique something, particularly religion, is considered the only way to seriously engage with it. The web discourses I examine internalise this valorisation of critique, and turn their critical lens upon Sikhism itself.

Chapter 7 examines how these websites depict Sikhs as virtuous citizens, and how they present an analytic model of citizenship that adequately expresses the multiple dimensions of

citizenship, including the social, political, economic and affective dimensions. Minority or immigrant communities residing in liberal societies must constantly prove that they, too, comport themselves in a way that is amenable to these values. Thus, citizenship is something that must be earned in other, non-legalistic ways, through the self-conscious performance of these liberal values. Many of these websites actively participate in positioning Sikhs as virtuous citizens.

Chapter 8, the final chapter, offers conclusions. The principle conclusion is that we must fundamentally rethink the relationship between Punjabi Sikhism and diasporic Sikhism. Rather than viewing diasporic Sikh identity is flowing from or supplementing Punjabi Sikh identity, we must conceptualize it on its own terms as a wholly distinctive way of being Sikh. The differences are not simply cosmetic, but go much deeper. The diaspora is emerging as a central, generative source for the rearticulation of Sikh identity.

This research also shows that it is not only academics who are problematising how religion has been conceptualised, but practitioners as well. As I examined, the discussions taking place on the websites consciously and astutely challenge the presumed contiguity of Sikh identify and Punjabi identity, recognising that in many ways this formulation is historically contingent rather than self-evident. However, even while performing this critique, these discussions inscribed another problematic set of assumptions, which is that religion is modular. It inherits the presumption that religion is a stable and universally applicable category, and de-emphasizes those aspects of Sikhism that fall short, exceed, or otherwise contradict the category's imperatives. Thus, liberal diasporic Sikh discourse challenges one set of assumptions about Sikhism while simultaneously reproducing another.

This dissertation has demonstrated that the need to continually problematise those aspects of religious identity that seem relatively inconspicuous or unremarkable, because despite their

ostensible un-remarkability, they actively shape the way that we understand religious identity. By foregrounding diasporic Sikh tendencies to reinterpret Sikhism through the lens of liberal universalism, we are able to arrive at an understanding of how distinctive and radically different this discourse is. Equally, by foregrounding a relatively marginal site of religious production that is the Web, we can see how meaning is generated in new and surprising ways. We must continue to foreground the unsightly and seemingly mundane aspects of religious identity in order to understand how that identity is being continually rearticulated.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I. Context and Research Question

This project examines a number of Sikhism-related websites that are operated largely by and for diasporic Sikhs, and which collectively constitute a digital discourse that both produces and reflects a distinctly diasporic Sikh consciousness and identity. This particular discourse, which I term 'liberal' diasporic Sikh discourse, is not the only one to have emerged among diasporic Sikhs, or even among diasporic Sikhs online. However, it is unique because it marks a radically different way of relating to and situating Sikh identity, one that both scholars and Sikhs have yet to fully appreciate for its distinctiveness.

This project sits at the intersection of Sikh studies, diaspora studies and the study of digital religion, while also being indebted to the growing field of interdisciplinary studies that interrogate how the modern category of 'religion' is produced through its opposition to the 'secular'. In recent decades, Sikhs studies has paid careful attention to the different ways that diasporic Sikhs engage their new national and local contexts, but the tacit presumption underlying these studies is that there is a substantive continuity between Sikhism in Punjab and Sikhism in the diaspora, and that diasporic Sikhs are eager to reconstitute Sikhism in the diaspora with as much fidelity to the Punjabi original as they can. Diaspora studies has begun to problematise the assumption that diasporas are monolithic entities with a singularly nostalgic relationship with their respective homelands, but has yet to fully examine the implications of intra-diasporic differences. This under-theorisation results in a failure to recognise that a

particular segment of the Sikh diaspora is increasingly defining Sikhism in a radically new way, by (1) contrasting it against 'Punjabiness', and (2) affiliating it with the liberal world-view. This dissertation foregrounds this transformation and conceptualises its larger meaning.

Since the particular Sikh discourse that I study is situated online and has hitherto been largely unstudied, there is a methodological challenge in defining the subject. There is no obvious boundary or set of parameters that would allow us to label these websites as constituting a definitive category. Yet their overarching similarities unify them in two important ways. Both of these distinctions help to delineate a certain class of diasporic Sikh website.

First, these websites represent the first time that diasporic Sikhs have developed an arena for discussion, debate and conceptualisation that prioritises the diasporic perspective rather than the Punjabi one. Although these websites still discuss and report on Punjab, Punjab remains tangential to their focus. Previously, diasporic media such as newspapers, radio shows or television programmes had a Punjab-centric focus, not only in terms of geography, but also in terms of how they fundamentally conceptualised Sikh identity. By contrast, these websites' shift in focus belies an even greater shift in terms of how Sikh identity is being grounded.

Secondly, these websites collectively help to produce and consolidate a particular kind of Sikh public. This public is receptive to using digital technology for disseminating religious knowledge and community-building. More importantly, it views Sikhism as something that should be defined in a way that extends beyond the Punjabi context, as something that is transcultural and universal. I am not arguing for a version of technological determinism here; it is certainly true that Sikhs with this disposition pre-existed the emergences of these websites, and it is also true that many diasporic Sikhs engage with 'offline' spaces that are developing a similar

discourse. However, I suggest that this particular public is consolidated most potently through the digital discourse, and that the medium and the message are intimately related.

Another way to contextualise the significance of liberal diasporic Sikh discourse online is with reference to the traditional narrative about diasporic Sikhs, which has been prevalent among both scholars and Sikhs themselves. Most Sikhs belong to a Punjabi background and speak Punjabi; thus, there has always been the presumption of a natural contiguity between Sikhism and Punjabi ethnicity, language and culture. There was no real impetus to distinguish between these different elements of Punjabi Sikh identity, and most Sikhs (although there have always been exceptions) were content to view their Punjabi and Sikh identities as comfortably and inextricably linked. Until recently, this narrative has posited that diasporic Sikhs could comfortably inhabit Western societies only by finding ways to bridge an essential and irreducible gap between Punjab-based Sikhism and diasporic life in the West. While Sikhs could certainly negotiate this gap, it could never be *entirely* overcome. Nor did diasporic Sikhs necessarily want to overcome it, since they were so rooted in their Punjabi identity. Thus, this 'traditional' diasporic narrative is self-consciously Punjabi-oriented.

By contrast, the liberal diasporic Sikh discourse that is crystallised through these websites eschews being so closely wedded to Punjabi identity. Rather than romanticising or longing to maintain the connection to Punjab, this discourse views Punjabi culture as having added unnecessary and even damaging cultural accretions to Sikhism. It argues that Sikhism should be defined in more abstract and transcultural terms, as something that can and does thrive in all cultural contexts and that theoretically encompasses all ethnicities. This means finding cultural resonances between Sikhism and Western liberal culture. This discourse does not present this

approach as a modernisation of Sikhism, but as the authentic fulfilment of Sikhism's promise and potential.

For these liberal diasporic websites, the crucial dichotomy at work is not just between Sikhism and diasporic life, but also between the category of religion and culture. This discourse is helping to consolidate the notion that Sikhism is a 'religion' in the modern sense of the term, as something that is abstract, universal, apolitical and acultural. By contrast, culture is treated as something that is 1) particular to a location or group, and 2) secular, in that it is viewed as distinct from religion. The traditional diasporic discourse views Sikhism as coeval with the particular culture of Punjab, whereas liberal diasporic discourse ostensibly argues that Sikhism and Punjabi (or any) culture are essentially distinct.

Both the traditional and liberal iterations of diasporic Sikh discourse are operating with modern, circumscribed and essentialist definitions of religion and culture, albeit in different ways. This dissertation limits itself to studying the liberal diasporic Sikh discourse in particular, with the caveats that both of these discourses inform each another and that their histories are intertwined. The central research questions guiding this dissertation are: How is liberal diasporic Sikh discourse redefining Sikh identity? How are the dichotomies inherent within this discourse, such as Sikhism and Punjabi culture, the particular versus universal situatedness of Sikhism, or even the general dichotomy of religion versus culture, produced and perpetuated as such? How does the digital nature of this discourse have an effect? What does this discourse tell us about the nature of diasporic Sikhism?

I argue that liberal Sikh discourse redefines Sikhism as transcultural and universal by showing it to resonate with the values of liberal modernity, and by situating it within the particular vision of universality encompassed in liberal modernity. It attempts to ground Sikh

identity in a new way, one that is not based upon historical, ethnic or linguistic claims, but upon the abstract, liberal principles that underlie much of Western modernity. In so doing, it clears the way for creating a new sense of belonging in the West.

I argue that dichotomies that animate this discourse, enumerated above, are themselves the product of a liberal mode of thinking that defines religion through its opposition to the 'secular', a category that often includes the legal, the political, the economic, and in the case of diasporic Sikhs, the cultural as well. Liberal diasporic Sikh discourse believes itself to be wielding liberalism as an analytical tool to engage, improve and fulfil Sikhism; however, it fails to realise the extent to which it is also embedded within the epistemological domain of liberalism, and how that epistemology actually shapes its concerns. Thus, this research draws attention not only to the ways in which these websites make explicit use of liberal ideas, but also to how their very ways of thinking, seeing and communicating are being engendered by liberalism. This also includes dichotomous ways of defining the relationship between Sikhism and Punjabi culture, but also between religion and culture more broadly.

Because I want to draw attention to how this argument is performed in ways that are not immediately apparent – or perhaps even conscious – I have organised the data based on the discursive modalities of these websites, rather than on content. These modalities are part of the received epistemological wisdom of the liberal imaginary, and their imperceptibility is part of what makes them so powerful. It is through these discursive methods that these websites redefine Sikhism as authentically liberal, which also entails defining it as both universal and amenable to secularism. The particular discursive strategies that I focus on are (1) translating Sikhism, (2) critiquing Sikhism and (3) representing Sikhs as virtuous citizens. Each of these sections

corresponds to a particular chapter, and each chapter will explicate how these discursive modalities function.

The fact that this discourse takes place online is not inconsequential to the argument, but actually reinforces its effectiveness. As I mentioned earlier, and as I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, prior to the development of these websites, there were not many wide-reaching public spheres among diasporic Sikhs that were devoted explicitly to discussing the diaspora and to embracing and fully inhabiting (rather than simply tolerating) diasporic life. The Internet has provided a relatively unfettered and uncensored space for this alternative discourse and public. The digital space has 'created a space for the imagination of a global Sikh identity' (Shani 2002, 11). Additionally, because the Internet is de-territorialised and abstract by nature, the digital context mimics the discourse's ostensible 'refusal' to commit to locatedness. The discourse posits that the ability of Sikhs to assimilate with and become deeply rooted in liberal societies is predicated upon articulating Sikhism as a universal, abstract and extra-locational entity, and the Internet reinforces this logic. Thus, in its capacity both as a medium and as a self-possessed logic, the Internet has enabled this discourse to come to fruition.

II. Further Background

A. Pluralising the Sikh Diaspora

The historical context of Sikhism's evolution, particularly its relationship with Punjab, plays an important role in how diasporic Sikhs of all stripes imagine themselves today. At various times throughout their history, Sikhs have conceptualised and referred to Punjab as their homeland.

Sikhism emerged in Punjab in the late 14th and early 15th centuries, and the evolution of Sikhism is closely tied with the political and historical context of Punjab in the intervening centuries. Most Sikhs reside in Punjab, although even during the Guru period (1469–1708), there were Sikh congregations and converts residing in other South Asian regions. With Partition in 1947, Punjab was divided into an eastern portion, going to India, and a western portion, going to Pakistan, with Sikhs choosing to reside in Indian Punjab.

Since the term first became popular in the late 1980s, Sikhs who have migrated beyond Punjab are referred to as 'diasporic', with Punjab taking on the role of the romanticised and much longed-for homeland.[1] To call a particular group 'diasporic' is to foreground the notion that the group is displaced and not where they naturally belong. It conjures a scene in which the community negotiates – somewhat anxiously – between the 'home' and 'host' nations in an effort to acculturate to new surroundings while preserving as much of their traditions as they can manage. As with other diasporas, the connection or claim to an original homeland 'may be strong or weak, or boldly or meekly articulated in a given circumstance or historical period', but 'a member's adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background' (Cohen 1997, pp. ix). What matters in the diasporic situation is the affective dimension of the connection, regardless of the veracity of the historical claims.

Most of the Sikh diaspora has historically been concentrated in Britain, Canada and the United States (Hawley 2013). In the schema of the most desirable countries to which to emigrate,

[1] This assertion is somewhat complicated in the case of Sikhs who reside in or have migrated to other regions of India, since they nominally remain within the boundaries of their nation state even though they may be in a foreign land. However, the experience of these Sikhs is diasporic in the usual sense of the word (Banerjee 2003; 2013).

these three nations have long been considered the gold standard among Sikhs (Tatla 1999; Shani 2002), although Britain has been slowly replaced by Australia in recent years. In terms of demographics, these three countries happen to be home to the largest populations of Sikhs outside of Punjab. Online discussions among diasporic Sikhs frequently refer to the 'Sikh diaspora' collectively and without differentiating by nation, although the term is largely associated with Sikhs residing in the countries mentioned above. Thus, while there is a Sikh diaspora in many nations across the world, the term functions as shorthand for Sikhs living specifically in these Anglo-heritage, English-speaking, majority white, advanced industrial nations that have a strong tradition of possessing and espousing liberal values. This is the context in which both the tradition and liberal versions of diasporic Sikh discourse are embedded.

Sikhism-related activity online began appearing in the 1990s, and this activity originated in the North American diaspora. Jasjit Singh (2014) has provided a very useful history of Sikhism on the Internet. The first Sikhism-related website was Sikhs.org, which appeared online in 1994. Sikhnet.com and Khalistan.net both came online in 1996. Crucially, these first websites were in English, and much of their content was aimed at Sikhs living abroad. These initial websites largely sought to be informational. Sikhism-focused newsgroups were also popular at this time, providing a burgeoning space for discussion. During the early 2000s, Sikh websites became more service-oriented and began providing 'translations of religious texts, downloads of devotional music (*kirtan),* and discourse (*katha),* and discussion forums' (ibid, 84). In the early-to-mid-2000s, in line with the general trend for greater interactivity on the web, Sikh content online became more interactive. 'Sikhi-wiki' came online, as did social media and YouTube, both of which enabled Sikhs to create and disseminate their own content. This also meant the creation of more Sikh blogs, which, by virtue of their very format, are more conversational and

require less maintenance. The most popular and sophisticated Sikhism-related content has been developed by and for the diaspora, but until relatively recently this content was traditional and Punjab-centric in terms of how it defined Sikh identity and Sikh interests.

This dissertation focuses upon the particular segment of the Sikh diaspora that embraces liberal secular ideals, but rather than being defined on its own terms, liberal Sikh discourse in the diaspora must be understood as emerging in a relational sense vis-à-vis other forms of diasporic Sikh identity. As Reza Gholami has noted, 'intra-diasporic relations are always perceived, even if partially, to be part of the self; they always constitute a dimension of "our" self-experience, "our" national identity, and so on' (2014, 62). In some ways, this mode of diasporic being is a conscious attempt at differentiation from the more traditionalist segment of the diaspora. Although it should not be termed as being simply 'reactionary', the relational aspect of it helps to delineate its significance.

Sikh diasporic activity in general, and Sikh diasporic activity on the internet in particular, cannot be understood without reference to the Sikh separatist movement in Punjab known as the Khalistani movement. The Khalistani movement was a secessionist Sikh movement that was active throughout Indian Punjab from the late 1970s into the mid-1990s. The movement accelerated after the Indian Army attacks on the Golden Temple in Amritsar in 1984. Many, although certainly not all, diasporic Sikhs supported this movement and continued to support Khalistani sentiments. It also helped to propagate the idea that diasporic Sikhs were members of a nation who had been forced from their native homeland of Punjab and were living in a state of exile. As I will suggest in Chapter 3, some have argued that Sikh diaspora was 'born' with the events of 1984 and the subsequent rise of Khalistan discourse, and the events of 1984 continue to occupy an important place in Sikh 'diasporic citizenship' (Nijhawan and Arora 2013, 300).

While Khalistani supporters in the diaspora made use of a variety of different media to spread their message, they found the Internet to be particularly suitable for spreading their message. The significance of the Internet for diasporic Sikhs has been conceptualised in terms of its ability to afford them an opportunity to further disseminate their dissident discourse. Some of the earliest Sikhism-related websites were in fact Khalistani websites, such as Khalistan.org (1997) and Khalistan.net (1997). Brian Axel, whose work examines the role of Khalistani discourse on the formation of diasporic Sikh subjects, suggests that 'Internet technology has facilitated the creation and circulation of a homeland that does not correspond to an empirical place or origin' (2005, 145) and that 'the confluence of martyrdom, terror, computer-mediated communications has contributed to the emergence of a Sikh diasporic cultural politics' (2008, 145).

Thus, Sikh diasporic and digital identity has been inextricably linked with the political fortunes of Punjab, both past and present. This is illustrated especially through the disproportionate number of scholarly works that focus on diasporic discourse surrounding the events of 1984 and the Khalistani movement, both in a general sense (Dusenbery 1997; Mitra 2015; Nijhawan and Arora 2013; Nijhawan 2014; Shani 2005; Singh and Shani 2015; Tatla 2012, 2015) and in terms of the Internet (Axel 2001, 2002, 2005, 2008; Devgan 2013; Barrier 2006; Sokol 2007; Verma 2011). The disproportionate scholarly emphasis on how these events continue to reverberate among diasporic Sikhs actually helps to create the impression that diasporic Sikhs are fundamentally oriented towards Punjab, and that this is where their true fidelity lies. It naturalises the interpretation that diasporic Sikhs steadfastly maintain what would be called 'pre-modern' forms of loyalty to their point of origin. Many others who have not

focused on 1984 or Khalistani discourse nevertheless incorporate many similar presumptions about diasporic Sikh identity, which I will elaborate on in Chapters 2 and 3.

This study rests partially upon the need to 'pluralise' the way that scholars conceptualise the Sikh diaspora, paying attention to intra-diasporic differences on how to situate Sikh identity. As I will discuss in the following chapter, intra-diasporic differences exist along the lines of generation and age, caste and class, ideological orientation, and religious attachment. Diasporic subjects also have different ways of belonging to the community, with some subjects seeing themselves as members of a religious community and others as seeing themselves as members of a social or political community. More specifically, those that see themselves primarily as members of a religious community have differing ways of defining that very religious community.

Each of these different orientations occupies a distinctive corner of the Sikh public sphere, including on the Internet. There is a great deal of Sikh discourse online that goes beyond Khalistani discourse or the nostalgia for Punjab. As I will discuss in more detail in the following sections, I focus on one particular segment of Sikh discourse online, which is liberal diasporic Sikh discourse. This discourse re-articulates Sikhism as authentically liberal and suggests that Sikhism can be as equally at home in western liberal societies as it can in Punjab. However, there are many other discourses proliferating throughout the Sikh public sphere, each of which produce their own definitions of Sikh identity. In addition to the already-mentioned Khalistani discourse, there is also Sikh Marxist discourse or Sikh Missionary discourse, both of which also make extensive use the Internet to spread their message.

B. Liberal Sikh Discourse

By 'liberal Sikh discourse' I do not mean that liberalism is being imposed as an applied discourse, nor do I mean to imply that Sikhism is being 'liberalised', 'updated' or 'modernised'. The former statement simplifies the complex ways that discourses is disseminated and identities are produced, and the latter misses the way that this discourse weaves the liberal imaginary into its understanding of Sikhism. Rather, liberal diasporic Sikh discourse reinterprets the substance of Sikhism by refracting it through the liberal imaginary, using the epistemological tools of liberalism. This is observed in the way that it emphasises tolerance, cosmopolitanism, and human and civil rights, and elevates the individual as the site of spiritual and ethical conduct, but also in the way that it incorporates liberal modalities of experiencing and organising religion.

Why would diasporic Sikh discourse embrace liberal values? There are several reasons. First, this reframing aligns Sikhism with universal rather than particular truth. Secondly, it takes away some of the authority, real or perceived, of Punjabi Sikhs over diasporic Sikhs. For, if Punjab is viewed as the privileged centre of Sikhism, then a Sikh's (linguistic, cultural, genealogical) proximity to Punjab naturally endows him or her with greater authenticity as a Sikh: reframing Sikhism as a universal rather than diasporic religion has the effect of 'levelling' this field, and with it, any perceived inequalities between Punjabi and diasporic Sikhs. Thirdly, this reframing makes it possible for Sikhs to imagine themselves as naturally belonging everywhere, in all diasporic contexts: if Sikhism is universal then it can be realised in any context.

It would be easy to presume that liberal Sikh discourse online is a radically new form of Sikh cultural politics and marks the first time that Sikhs have embraced Western or modern forms of thought. However, this overlooks the long historical relationship between Sikhism and

Western modernity. It is not the interaction itself that is radically different, but the particular texture, contour and effects of this interaction that is producing new effects. It is worth briefly rehearsing here the history of Sikhism's engagement with Western modernity, and how scholars have conceptualised this history.

Arvind Mandair's groundbreaking work has examined how Sikhs' encounter with the 'West' was mediated through British colonialism and the work of both British and German Indologists. For Mandair, the precise nature of the what was being transferred or 'diffused' from the colonisers to Sikhs in Punjab was not solely a set of ideas, but also a way of being in the world, an entire 'subjective technology' (Mandair 2012, 54). He describes the dynamics of this encounter through the analytic of the ontotheological schema that developed within Hegelian philosophy as a 'means for rendering the encounter with non-Western cultures politically harmless by installing them on a standardised graph of history/religion/reason' (Mandair 2010, 15). This schema provides a principle of 'generalized translation' for bringing different religions and cultures into a 'system of equivalence' (ibid, 16); through it, Sikhs became interpolated into its comparative imaginary and translated from 'Sikhi' into 'Sikhism', a 'monotheistic-historical' religion 'centered on the authority of a clearly recognisable scripture and embodied by the Tat (authentic) Khalsa ideal' (Oberoi 1994). The ontotheological schema came to underpin the modern Sikh imaginary and the way that Sikhs express their identity to this day, including the fundamental belief that Punjabi culture was essentially secular, and therefore fundamentally distinct from Sikhism. We see echoes of this even in the present day, particularly in "world religions" discourse (Masuzawa 2005).

Mandair does not recognise the substantive distinction between diasporic Sikh and Punjabi Sikh identity. His aim is to critique the perception of a duality between these terms. For

him, both terms are correlated with the erroneous distinctions between the 'insider versus outsider', 'West versus Rest' or 'ethnic versus native' (2009, 443). While there are obvious empirical and demographic differences between Punjabi and diasporic Sikhs, for him they are not conceptually meaningful when discussing the creation of modern Sikh identity.

In a theoretical vein, this project continues some of the themes present in Mandair's work. I fundamentally agree with Mandair that, in many ways, both diasporic and Punjabi Sikhs are interpolated by the same comparative imaginary and possess the same modern understanding of the proper place of religion and culture. This is the same imaginary that has helped to conceptualise Sikhism as a 'world religion'. However, my project is different from Mandair's in terms of scope and methodology. He examines the ideational life of Sikh identity and focuses on the work of intellectual elites, whereas I examine how this identity is constructed in popular Sikh discourse. While his project is philosophical in nature, this project is sociological.

This project is also distinctive because it will show how Sikhism is produced as a world religion in circumstantial ways. Mandair recounts how the notion of Sikhism as a 'world religion' travelled from British and German Indologists to Sikh elites and scholars, and eventually to Sikh studies scholars in the West. The idea that Sikhism is a world religion did not fully take hold until it was taken up by scholars in Western universities. The digital discourse I examine goes a step further, and illustrates how the idea of Sikhism as a world religion actually works in practice, in the lived reality of Sikhs who reside in liberal, secular societies.

While there are multiple narratives of Sikh identity, this dissertation focuses on one in particular, which is liberal diasporic Sikh discourse. Liberal discourse has a discernible and profound effect on a large swath of the Sikh population, and it is one of most important ideological trends in contemporary Sikhism. However, it is highly naturalized, to the point of

appearing like conventional wisdom. For this reason, it has not yet been fully apprehended and named. Despite its pervasiveness, we know very little about how liberal discourse actually operates in the lived reality of diasporic Sikhs. Studying these websites will give us insight into one of the most significant trends in Sikh society today by foregrounding that very trend and rendering it visible.

This dissertation studies how diasporic Sikhs actually implement and reflect back the liberal interpretation of Sikhism. Although websites might seem like a relatively abstract topic of study, this dissertation is not a study of abstract ideas. Rather, it studies a form of everyday, 'popular' Sikh discourse through an ethnographic lens. It examines the actual debates, discussions, and concerns of diasporic Sikhs, most of which stem from their lived experience. It bears witness to diasporic Sikhs struggling with the quotidian realities of their lives. While some of the discussions I examine do have a philosophical bent, the abstract discussions always act as a way for Sikhs to figure out how to negotiate practical, everyday issues.

C. Digital Diasporic Sikh Discourse

The internet has become an ideal medium for this discourse to flourish. The diasporic websites describe themselves as providing important services, such as offering a neutral space for Sikhs to hold discussions, gain religious knowledge, and stay connected with other Sikhs around the world. Their content includes editorials, articles on recent events both within the Sikh community, but also national or global events that may be affecting Sikhs. They offer discussion forums, videos, animated Sikh stories for children, and downloads of Sikh prayers or Sikh music.

Although their target audience is (diasporic) Sikhs, they also aim to reach non-Sikhs wishing to learn about Sikhism.

This dissertation organises the websites based primarily on their common discursive mode, however, most Sikhs would know these websites based on their subject matter. Thus, for preliminary introductions I group these websites based on their subject matter and focus. There are youth activist blogs, such as KaurLife.org, Kaurista.com, Jakara.org and TheLangarHall.com. There are lifestyle websites and social media accounts, such as the 'StylewithKaur' Instagram account. There are also the websites of advocacy organisations, such as SikhCoalition.org, Saldef.org, UnitedSikhs.org and Khalsaaid.org. Finally, there is what I refer to as general interest websites, such as Sikhnet.com, Sikhri.org, and Sikhchic.com. All of these websites or social media accounts are owned and operated in the diaspora, all of them are in English, and all of them cater to diasporic Sikhs.

Part of the appeal of these websites is that they have the texture and feel of a familiar place. This is why so many ethnographers treat the Internet in general, and websites in particular, as a collection of ethnographic 'sites'. Such sites possess their own internal culture and logic. With traditional field sites, the boundaries of the site are made apparent before the fieldwork begins. However, with digital phenomena, there are no physical boundaries, and the contours of the site emerge only after an extended period of 'fieldwork'.

III. Theoretical Context

What is the precise understanding of liberalism that is operationalised through diasporic Sikh discourse? In the following section, I will elaborate upon liberal notions of the social sphere,

individualism and spirituality so that later on I can discuss how these concepts circulate within and through Sikh diasporic discourse. It is, of course, a truism to suggest that 'liberalism' is not a static and clearly identifiable philosophy, but a diverse, sometimes incoherent, and sometimes inconsistent set of ideas. It includes 'some mix of individual liberty, rational projects for political reform, a belief in emancipation and a certain idea of human civilisation' (Chabal 2017, 1). Despite this amorphousness, liberalism still continues to act as a powerful and surprisingly cogent force in the world. It remains a 'value-space' that provides us with a 'common political and moral language (whose ambiguities and aporias allow it to evolve) in which to identify problems and with which to dispute' (Mandair and Dressler 2010, 18). Therefore, however broad liberalism may be, it nonetheless exercises material effects, and it is both possible and important to attempt to determine what these effects are in specific contexts.

In this context, it is useful to think of liberal principles as constituting a 'social imaginary', where social imaginaries are those values, symbols and norms that define a society, and which can be both visible and invisible, or operating at a level that is not easily perceived. Like all social imaginaries, the substance of the liberal social imaginary persists across time, for while the 'external manifestations' of liberalism undergo many changes, the essential nature of its social imaginary does not. Certainly, the 'invisible meta-structures' of liberalism have remained 'conceptually stable' over many centuries (Neill 2008, 576). The following sections outline these meta-structures, particularly as they relate to the present context.

A. The Liberal Social Sphere

Liberalism is most widely known for enunciating a theory of individual rights, but it also proffers a theory of how the social sphere should be organised. The state is the most significant form of political community in liberal thought – it is the primary entity through which liberal ideals and rights are realised. These oft-cited rights include the right to freedom of belief, freedom of expression, equality before the law, the right to own private property and the right to elected representation, all of which are more or less taken for granted in most modern liberal states. While there are certainly many other localised forms of community and governance that thrive beyond or within the state, the state nevertheless plays a crucial role in shaping the structure and functioning of society, particularly the role of religion (or lack thereof) in public life.

The modern liberal state is secular, a designation that not only entails a fundamental separation between the state and religion, but also redefines religion by containing it within the private sphere. If it is to exist, religion must be a self-contained system of belief and worship, replete with sacred texts, rituals and institutions, which is theoretically isolated from the political and legal functioning of the state. This definition naturally 'deemphasizes difference, history, and sociopolitical context in favor of abstract essences and homogeneity' (McCutcheon 1997, 3). It is crucial to note that liberalism does not seek to eradicate religion from the social sphere entirely, but rather, to create a context in which 'specific kinds of religion are […] valorized and denounced, empowered and made provisional' (Goldstone 2011, 105). It is those religions that are able to conform to liberal notions of what a religion should be like – apolitical, peaceful, socially inclusive, charitable, compassionate and self-abnegating – that are recognised as legitimate.

Secularism as a principle is deemed to be especially advantageous for religious minorities because, while they may be unequal by virtue of their numerically small population, they

nevertheless attain equality by virtue of their citizenship. Citizenship is offered on the proviso that individuals subordinate their particularistic or pre-modern forms of belonging to religion, culture, tribe or clan to their loyalty to the state (Mahmood 2015). While communities within the state may have intensely held notions of religious truth, the state does not intervene in these 'local sites of truth', and these respective truth claims are not allowed to influence the workings of the state and the public sphere. The privatisation of religious belief is thus one of the central requirements of citizenship in the liberal state. This is especially true for diasporic religious groups who hail from places where the public versus private boundary is much more porous. For them, the ability to sufficiently separate and confine aspects of their religio-cultural identity, including their attire, language and forms of worship to their private lives is the ultimate measure of their willingness to embrace liberal citizenship.

During the late 20th century, the scale and intensity of immigration to modern liberal states invigorated attempts to reconcile liberal democratic ideals with the reality of a rapidly diversifying society. This meant circumstantially examining how 'liberty', 'tolerance' and 'diversity' could be allied, and whether or not diversity could be viewed as intrinsic good. Will Kymlicka has offered the most influential theory, arguing that diversity does indeed have an intrinsic value vis-à-vis liberalism. He suggests that because one's cultural (or ethnic, religious, or linguistic) identity is an indispensable aspect of one's individual identity, it must be duly recognised and protected by the state. Additionally, in order to be able to exercise true autonomy, one must be free to choose from a range of different, equally recognised and accepted cultural 'options' if one is to be truly autonomous. Accordingly, diversity has largely come to be viewed as an unalloyed good, as something that naturally complements rather than threatens liberal values.

Although ‘tolerance’ and ‘egalitarianism’ have always been regarded as more classical liberal virtues, they are anything but static, and have continued to morph over time and historical context. As Wendy Brown has argued, ‘tolerance is salient precisely in situations where there are ‘beliefs or practices that may be morally, socially, or ideologically offensive but are not in direct conflict with the law’ (Brown 2006, 12). The idea of tolerance is theoretically a useful way of mediating cultural (and other) differences in a society. However, it conversely ends up highlighting a gap in power, for those being tolerated are invariably cast as inferior and less powerful in relation to those who are doing the tolerating. Moreover, the concept of tolerance requires the privatisation not only of religion, but all such sites of difference, resulting in a kind of ‘conflation of culture with ethnicity or race and the conflation of belief or consciousness with phenotype’ (ibid, 14). While liberalism theoretically promises to extend liberty, equality, and tolerance to all, it simultaneously posits the notion of an idealized citizenry that is devoid of any obvious markers of difference. The more one can confine one’s religious or cultural difference to the private sphere, the closer one moves to the persona of the ideal liberal citizen. Thus, as much as equality and tolerance are values to be possessed, they are also imperatives that must be met.

B. The Liberal Self

Another dimension of liberal discourse that intermingles with diasporic Sikh discourse is the liberal conceptualisation of selfhood. It is a well-rehearsed argument that the Enlightenment not only conceptualized a new way of perceiving the individual, but actually foregrounded the individual as an an important site of analysis and speculation. In abstract terms, the individual became both the primary raison d’être of liberalism and its primary subject matter. The individual was no longer viewed as just a part of the larger social fabric, or as ‘governed by

norms reflecting […] the claims of the family, its memories, rituals and roles' (Siedentop 2014, 7), but actually began to be thought of as the most important unit of society. The liberal self is defined through his capacity for critical reason. Thus, to be virtuous is to be rational, and to be able to direct that rationality at oneself in order to arrive at self-awareness and self-mastery.

Charles Taylor (1989) has recounted how liberalism absorbed many humanistic and romantic influences during the 18th century, leading to a further conceptualisation of the liberal as possessing certain affective capacities. The individual came to be viewed not only as universal and ahistorical. While empirical differences among individuals were not necessarily elided, they were relegated to a position of lesser importance. This "transcendental" view of the self has been pervasive in modern discourses, affecting how many contemporary groups conceptualize both spirituality and collective political action.

C. Spirituality in the Liberal Imaginary

While many modern spiritual movements are closely related to or are descended from historical religions or from mystical traditions, they have been filtered through the lens of liberal modernity and draw upon several elements of liberal discourse. In popular usage, it has become commonplace to describe oneself as 'spiritual but not religious', a description that presumes that religion concerns itself with dogma, hierarchy and institutions, and is (at least to some extent) disciplinary in nature. By contrast, spirituality is seen in this binary model as being personal, experiential and free from rules or restrictions. It is often described as a mode of religiosity that is actually beyond the normative boundaries of religion. However, as many scholars have argued, this understanding of spirituality has been shaped by the demands of modern Western societies,

and ‘has been heavily informed by the discourse of liberalism, even to the point of celebrating this politico-intellectual tradition’ (Mitchell 2011, 126).

Modern spirituality is defined as fundamentally apolitical, and is therefore much more compatible with a secular society where matters of politics and social policy are perceived as being distinct from matters of faith. This iteration of spirituality also draws heavily upon liberal conceptions of the individual. It places the individual at the centre of his or her own spiritual development, giving them the ability to commune with the divine independently rather than through an authority figure or institution.

While concepts of the social sphere, the individual and spirituality seem like divergent strands of liberalism, they are connected by common imaginary, and are all pertinent in different ways to how diasporic Sikhs imagine their religious identity. These concepts are not dispersed or applied in a linear way; at times, they take circuitous routes and are diffused haphazardly. This brief summary will be useful for understanding the larger bedrock of liberal diasporic Sikh discourse.

D. Critique of Liberalism

My purpose in this dissertation is not to defend liberalism as a political project or assert its historical or conceptual integrity. Rather, I illustrate that despite the numerous and trenchant critiques of it, liberalism still continues to have a discernable effect on people. Liberal values are influential and widespread, even if they are not always explicitly named as being ‘liberal’. In this section, I offer a brief overview of these critiques and discuss how these critiques destabilize liberalism’s very integrity as a concept, making it more difficult to use the term in an analytically useful way. However, I propose that despite these critiques, it is still possible to use this concept

if we acknowledge that there is an ambivalence at the heart of it. Liberalism can be identified through the effects that it produces, even if its meaning cannot be defined, or its project defended. I distinguish broadly between two types of critiques aimed at liberalism. The first is a critique of the way that liberalism has been applied throughout history in real-world contexts, and the second is a critique of liberal epistemology.

One major problem that arises when discussing liberalism is dealing with the historical discontinuities of 'liberalism' and defining which particular liberalism we are dealing with. Are we dealing with 18th century French liberalism, 19th century British liberalism, 20th century American liberalism, Indian liberalism or the liberalism of post-colonial societies? We could make any number of further distinctions in the nature and type of liberalism. However, despite these variations, the contemporary version of liberalism that diasporic Sikhs engage with does possess many of the characteristics of classic liberalism as well as some important additions, which I outline in the following section. In that section, I will describe which liberal characteristics are most relevant for understanding diasporic Sikh discourse, and will emphasize that the very ambiguity of liberal discourse is precisely what makes it so powerful and effective.

In terms of its political effects, liberalism has a deeply problematic history. (1) It has been used as rationale for imperial expansion throughout history. Mehta (2001) has argued that liberal ideals about reason and historical progress were actually marshaled in support of colonization and civilizational discourse. Liberalism, an ideology that is ostensibly devoted to securing greater dignity for all individuals, actually legitimized violent colonial enterprise. (2) Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century, Western nations relied upon liberal discourse to advance a neoimperial agenda around the world. They used the promise of greater liberty, equality, peace and progress in order to justify proxy wars and covert interventions

during the Cold War and the contemporary 'War on Terror' in its various iterations. (3) On a closely related note, liberalism has facilitated the spread, growth and imposition of neoliberal economic policies, both throughout advanced industrial nations as well as on post-colonial countries in the developing world. For these nations in particular, neoliberal economic policies have been disastrous. (4) Liberal democracies have not been immune to endemic racism, sexism, or xenophobia. Many liberal democracies have difficulties in accommodating pluralism and multiculturalism. This illustrates that adopting liberal values and structures does not necessarily guarantee equality or liberty for all. All of these critiques illustrate that the liberal project has had deeply problematic effects.

Liberalism also functions as an epistemology, or ways of knowing and understanding things. Chiefly, liberalism has shaped our understanding of (1) history, (2) personal identity, and more recently (3) secularity and religion. In the realm of history, liberalism legitimizes the belief that 'history has reason, purpose, and direction is fundamental to modernity' (Brown 2001, 5-6)'. It consolidates the premise that history is teleological and that all societies inevitably progress from 'backwardness' to increasing technological, economic, political and social sophistication. Liberal historiography assumes this schema is true for all societies and uses it to assess how developed each society is. It introduces a conceptual framework for measuring and graphing nations and religions on a comparative historical schema, in which certain religions will always be at the forefront of history and others will always be deemed backwards and rudimentary. It naturalizes and ossifies a hierarchy on a global scale, which is then used to justify paternalistic attitudes and policies.

In the realm of personal identity, liberalism presumes that individuals are sovereign and autonomous subjects. Wendy Brown argues that 'individuals are cast as sovereign insofar as they

devise their own aims and direct and are accountable for their own actions' (ibid, 10). This structure of subjectivity is timeless and universally valid. Subjects are fully formed and stable, and they all desire agency, liberty, and equality. The problem with this view is that it does not consider how subjectivity can also be constituted through other things, such as social relations, language, or through governmentality and power. As a result, this narrow conception of liberal subjectivity is used to assess the lives of people living in the historical past or in non-liberal societies, as fundamentally lacking in liberty, agency, or meaning.

More recently, critics have pointed out that secularity is as much an epistemic principle as it is a political one. It demands that we think of the religious and the secular as wholly distinct and mutually exclusive realms of experience. It does not necessarily demand that we think of religion as marginal or dispensable for a modern society, but that we redefine the category of religion itself so that it occupies a narrowly circumscribed space. The most appropriate form of religion in a liberal society is one that is experiential, spiritual, charitable, and personal rather than political. As an epistemology, liberal secularism doesn't eject religion, but redefines it. The 'secular' serves as the neutral container from which reason emerges. The eritique of liberal epistemology highlights the fact that the roots of liberal values go much deeper than governmental principles or procedures, and the effects of liberalism are far reaching.

The political and epistemological critiques directed at liberalism strip it of its political integrity and conceptual stability. However, liberalism still continues to exert influence and act as a potent force in the world. It continues to structure the way that people experience 'modern personhood' and 'statehood' even if the 'constitutive premises undergirding' these notions have been critiqued, revised and even dispensed with. This counter-intuitive nature of liberalism must be understood through alternative way of thinking. Thus, we may think of liberalism as a 'social

imaginary', as an 'inheritance' (Abeyseykara), or as an 'aporia' (Dressler and Mandair), terms that encapsulate how liberalism still possesses potency despite being so thoroughly destablized. Thus, in drawing on liberalism throughout this dissertation, I remain aware of its inconsistencies and limitations but argue that it is still analytically useful.

IV. Methodology

A. Selection of websites

This dissertation argues that liberal diasporic Sikh discourse is redefining Sikh identity, and that this discourse is actualised through a number of websites that effectively reground Sikh identity within the liberal imaginary. However, it is by no means a self-evident fact that liberal diasporic Sikh discourse 'exists' as a self-avowedly distinct discourse. Thus, the premise of the argument is also a kind of argument, and one of the key contributions of this dissertation is precisely the recognition of this new category of Sikh discourse. In order to make the theorisation of this particular category of Sikh discourse theoretically robust and sufficiently nuanced, I set forth a number of guidelines in Chapter 4 about which websites I was analysing and why. Broadly speaking, I employed subjective sampling in order to determine which websites I would be examining, focusing on those websites that were created by and for diasporic Sikhs, and that embraced and espoused a liberal interpretation of Sikhism. Beyond that, I followed four specific guidelines when selecting websites.

The first criterion had to do with the type of digital phenomenon I analysed. I chose to focus on websites, rather than on discussion forums or social media accounts. This is because websites are relatively self-contained texts that possess their own logic, even when they are composed by

multiple authors or site administrators. They tend to offer a self-aware, cogent perspective, and have a larger degree of control over self-branding and self-representation. Social media accounts and discussion forums have to function within the prescribed boundaries of their respective hosts, a fact that ends up shaping their purpose, content and purview. The one exception I made to this guideline was in including the Instagram account 'Style with Kaur', which is technically a social media account. I choose to include it because the young woman who operates this account has given interviews about the images and what they represent to other Sikh websites, some of which I also examine. The meta-discourse that exists surrounding this particular Instagram account offers extra contextualisation and commentary, and elevates it to something that can be discussed and dissected in much the same way as a website.

The second criterion had to do with the type of content on the websites. The websites could not be solely static and informational, but also had to have a dynamic and interactive element. This distinction between the 'informational' versus 'interactive' websites runs parallel with a distinction often made in Internet Studies between 'Web 1.0' and 'Web 2.0', terms that are used to differentiate between two different 'phases' of the Web. The former phase, which existed from roughly 1989 to 2003, is associated with relatively static content, with web users passive recipients of data. The static websites were more uni-directional in that they were providing a service but were not particularly critical or discussion-based. The second phase, usually dated as beginning in 2004, is associated with more interactivity, user-generated content and social media. The interactive websites have a more fully realised purpose and are more likely to create content that supports it. The interactive aspect of these websites is also better at identifying and catering to the audience's needs and views. With interactive websites, there is a much more complex relationship between text and audience.

Many of the early Sikhism-related websites were simple, encyclopaedic websites that conveyed information but did not offer a definite interpretation, much editorialising or ways of providing comments. In contrast, the most popular Sikh websites today are much more dynamic and interactional. This distinction is worth making because many of the former type of Sikh websites still continue to exist online, but I have excluded them from the analysis.

A third selection criterion has to do with the purview of the selected websites. I chose to focus on those websites that view themselves as representing and addressing the Sikh community as a whole, rather than those promote or advance the cause of a particular Sikh sect or faction. There are several diaspora-based websites that promote particular Sikh sect, group or institution, such as the Akhand Kirtani Jatha (an orthodox group that has its own particular practices) or the Damdami Taksal (a Sikh educational institution with many associates and followers in the diaspora). These sects each possess unique interpretations of Sikhism and make contentious claims as to what constitutes authentic Sikh practice. Since this dissertation outlines how liberal diasporic Sikh discourse on the Internet redefines Sikhism as a whole, I chose to exclude the websites focused on promoting particular Sikh sects.

I have included some websites that might outwardly appear to fall under this category, but there are some important distinguishing features in these cases that preclude the sites from being described as sectarian. One of the websites I examine, Sikhnet, is associated with the followers of 3HO (the Happy Healthy Holy Organization), a modern Sikh sect consisting mostly of white American converts. However, the Sikhnet website does not claim to represent or endorse 3HO in any way, and self-consciously caters to the global Sikh community. Sectarian concerns are not an explicit or avowed part of its discourse. Additionally, several of the other websites I examine are associated with specific organisations, such as the Sikh Coalition or the Sikh Research

Institution. However, these organisations are founded on the secular model and do not engage in historical, intra-religious debates. They exist for the purposes of advocating for Sikhs en masse rather than adjudicating between specific Sikh factions. For this reason, I have included them in my analysis of liberal diasporic Sikh discourse.

The fourth criterion has to do with the intended audience of the websites. As I discussed in the Introduction, I have focused on those websites that are located in the diaspora and that are largely catered to diasporic Sikhs, rather than to Sikhs in Punjab. This means that these websites primarily reflect and target diasporic sensibilities, although theoretically anybody can visit these websites. This criterion excluded a great number of Sikhism-related websites that were either based in Punjab or focused on Punjab-related matters.

As I will illustrate, the websites that I analyse are the most popular and professional, and the weightiest, examples of liberal diasporic Sikh discourse online, although they are not necessarily an exhaustive representation of it. These websites represent a diversity of perspectives and focuses, but I will illustrate that despite the ostensible differences among them, there is an underlying discursive unity that remains broadly consistent. In order to illustrate the coherence, pliability and effectiveness of liberal diasporic discourse, it was important for the sample of websites chosen to be broadly representative, but not necessarily exhaustive.

B. Analysis

As is now well known, websites are dynamic texts that contain visual, textual, navigational and interactive elements. Broadly speaking, I conducted a discourse analysis on these websites, an approach that allows me to treat these websites as cultural and political texts that are rife with

subtextual meaning, and that interact with different networks of power. Discourse analysis offered me a way to study how meaning is produced through content and structure, as well as through the relationship between these two different aspects. This is a particularly appropriate methodology given that I am examining how liberalism functions through both of these registers: content (its avowed ideological principles) and structure (its epistemic regime).

Given the general methodology of discourse analysis, I will offer some additional notes on how I analysed the websites. Pauwels (2012) has developed a 'multimodal' framework for analysing websites as cultural texts and for decoding the information that resides in both their form and content. He suggests that analysis be carried out in several distinct phases: (1) record first impressions and initial reactions; (2) examine and categorise systematically the present and absent features on the websites, such as subpages, topics and regular features; (3) carry out an in-depth analysis of the salient features of the websites, including written, typographic and visual signifiers, layout and design, and the relationship between these multiple parts; (4) examine the implied author and the intended audiences; (5) study the structural and navigational options and restrictions; and (6) carry out a contextual analysis of the website as a cultural product. His delineation is useful, albeit overly mechanistic as many of these nominally distinct phases of analysis often happen simultaneously or non-linearly. Nevertheless, I used these guidelines when I encountered the websites and began analysing them in a considered way.

In Chapter 4, I introduce and discuss each of the websites. Although I used the rubric above to guide my observations, the account that I offer of each website in Chapter 4 will not be a systematic one that explicitly covers each of these individual points. Rather, it will offer a more concise overview highlighting the relevant aspects of each website.

C. Temporal Parameters

Temporality is an often under-appreciated but nevertheless critical aspect of doing research on the internet, especially when analysing content that covers an interval of time. There are digitised records of analogue materials, such as digitised newspapers or reports, and there are 'born-digital' materials that are unique to the web, such as the archival pages of websites themselves. From a historical perspective, born-digital materials are primary documents that can attest to cultural and political trends prevalent at the time that the content was produced. Like all historical documents, this unique digital history can help to form a rich and detailed account of history in the making. Although a detailed examination of how this project intersects with historical concerns is beyond the scope of this dissertation, I nevertheless had to engage with questions of temporality and historicity in a more limited way.

First, I had to set certain parameters for the time period that I was going to cover with this research. Throughout the course of this research, I covered content ranging from 2004 to 2017, although I only accessed this content from June 2014 until June 2017. Many of the websites and organisations predate 2004, but I decided to begin from 2004 because that was the year that Sikhism-related websites became more interactive and dynamic. As noted earlier, 2004 is often seen as the start of the 'Web 2.0' phase of the Internet's development. This shift allowed people and organisations to become more proactive and organised about disseminating their message.

For historians and scholars of the Internet, there is a methodological concern related to the Internet's reliability as a source and resource. The web suffers from a 'reputation problem', as it has historically been seen as the 'medium of pirates, pornographers, conspiracy theorists and self-publishers' (Rogers 2017, 163), and is not always seen as a way to offer reliable information. Additionally, the phenomenon of 'reference rot', when a referred link offered

breaks or is no longer valid, suggests that the 'Web's ephemerality, or perhaps its uneven maintenance, disproves its worthiness as source' (ibid, 164). Any scholar doing research on the Internet must address the question of reliability, but in the context of this dissertation the question is tangential since this project is concerned with how liberal diasporic Sikh discourse sustains and perpetuates itself, rather than with verifying the truth or falsity of the information presented.

Secondly, I had to account for how changes in the websites over time affected their identity. Like all robust websites, the websites that I examined evolved over time and were subject to several site re-designs. In the context of this particular project, I decided that although the surface elements of the various websites did change several times over the time period I studied, the essential logic and character of these websites remained constant over time. Many scholars have found a way to address the instability of digital references by using tools such as 'The Wayback Machine', a website that archives the World Wide Web and that allows people access to previous iterations of websites. The Wayback Machine and other such tools help to bring the web into the 'evidentiary arena' (Rogers 2017, 163) and help to alleviate, to some extent, the concerns about using digital content writing of cultural history. Following recently updated guidelines on web page referencing (Gibson 2016), I provide a Wayback URL that supplements the original URL whenever referencing the web pages I examine, so that readers will continue to be able to access and evaluate the text being discussed. Additionally, because the components of websites, such as particular images, website design and navigation can change frequently, I note throughout my discussion the particular date on which I accessed the website. Whenever it was possible and appropriate, I included specific written text and images taken from the website and included these either in the main body of the chapter or in the appendix.

V. Restatement of the Argument

Liberal diasporic Sikh discourse operates on the understanding that 'religion' and 'culture' are self-evident, universally defined and fundamentally opposed categories. Until now, relatively little attention has been paid to the ways that liberal secular discourse can produce a distinction between the religious and the cultural. Certainly, there has long been a liberal tendency to view religion as being but one element of culture at large, but equally, there is a strain of modern liberal discourse that believes that a true religion as one that is universalisable and modular. This is precisely what we find in this digital Sikh discourse, where the category of culture is something that Sikhism must be defined against, and which it must ultimately transcend. As important as it is to understand how this distinction is reproduced within specific liberal discourses, it is equally important to recognise that the putative opposition itself is discursively produced and is the by-product of a liberal mode of thinking which believes that the religious and the secular are fundamentally distinct. If we are to fully recognise both the distinctiveness and the historically contingent nature of diasporic Sikh discourse distinct, we must be attentive to the ways in which the categories upon which this discourse rests are produced and perpetuated. I am not situating liberal diasporic Sikh discourse as either a 'betrayal' of traditional Sikhism or as a form of 'collusion' with liberal secularism, but I call attention to it as a new and unique fusion of the Sikh imaginary with the liberal imaginary. Whether conscientious or not, this discourse represents the liberal re-interpretation of Sikhism, and actively realizes this re-interpretation through its rhetoric.

VI. Chapter Summary

This dissertation is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 2 offers a literature review of the relevant scholarly fields and conversations. Chapter 3 is a background chapter that offers a brief historical overview of Sikh history, Sikh migration and the formation of a Sikh diaspora. Chapter 4 is a chapter devoted to introducing and discussing the websites that I analyse throughout the rest of the dissertation.

The main data chapters are Chapters 5, 6 and 7, in which I present my findings organised by the rhetorical modalities operating in these websites. Chapter 5 discusses the first strategy, translation, whereby the websites highlight and foreground those aspects of Sikhism that align with liberalism, such as an emphasis on egalitarianism and universalism, and on the individual as the locus of spiritual fulfilment. This 'translation' takes place not necessarily through an explicit declaration of what are and are not the most significant features of Sikhism, but also through the performative aspects of the websites themselves, such as images, vocabulary, grammar and the conspicuously absent or elided aspects of the Sikh tradition. With this particular strategy, the web discourse views itself not as an agent of change, but rather as an agent of preservation, even while this act of preservation inherently contains a kind of transformative gesture.

Chapter 6 highlights how the websites 'critique' Sikhism, both explicitly and performatively. In the liberal tradition, critique itself is presumed to be intrinsically valuable, an end in itself. This is part of a conceptual apparatus that equates modernity with reason, secularism and critical thinking, and views religion as being diametrically opposed to all of these. To critique something, particularly religion, is considered the only way to seriously engage

with it. The web discourses I examine internalise this valorisation of critique, and turn their critical lens upon Sikhism itself.

Chapter 7 examines how these websites depict Sikhs as virtuous citizens, and how they present an analytic model of citizenship that adequately expresses the multiple dimensions of citizenship, including the social, political, economic and affective dimensions. Minority or immigrant communities residing in liberal societies must constantly prove that they, too, comport themselves in a way that is amenable to these values. Thus, citizenship is something that must be earned in other, non-legalistic ways, through the self-conscious performance of these liberal values. Many of these websites actively participate in positioning Sikhs as virtuous citizens.

Chapter 8, the final chapter, offers an analysis and conclusion. It will balance the view that liberal diasporic Sikh discourse is a historically contingent and constructed discourse with the undeniable reality that it also has material effects, particularly in the way it is shaping modern Sikh identity. Liberal diasporic Sikh discourse is affecting the way that Sikhism is defined and understood by a large cross-section of people, non-Sikhs as well as diasporic and Punjabi Sikhs. Its provenance is much larger than its limited position might suggest. It does not view the diaspora as marginal to the 'centre' of Sikhism (in Punjab), but as the site where ideas and opinions about Sikhism are generated. This dissertation is an attempt to situate liberal diasporic Sikh discourse on the Internet, to explicate its logic and rhythms, and to understand its implications and possible future directions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

I. Introduction

There are four broad fields of study that I engage with throughout this research project. Firstly, I engage with Sikh studies, and suggest that we must alter how we conceptualise the category of diasporic Sikhs. Rather than viewing them as fundamentally continuous with Punjabi Sikhs, we must acknowledge that they often have very different ways of 'being Sikh'. We must further pay attention to intra-diasporic differences, not just in terms of demographics, but also in terms of how diasporic Sikhs frame and experience their identity. Secondly, I engage with diaspora studies by examining the inherent contradictions and productive tensions within the concept of 'diaspora', and the way that popular discourses can both self-consciously appropriate or eschew these tensions. Thirdly, this project engages with the growing scholarship on liberal secularism by illustrating that there are many different secularisms and different iterations of the religion-secular binary. In the case of diaspora religions, the category of 'culture' can become synonymous with secular non-religiosity. Fourthly, I engage with the study of digital religion by addressing how these websites constitute a new kind of Sikh 'public'. The internet functions as the space through which this discourse is articulated, shaping its conventions, limitations and capacities.

Rather than offering a relatively linear and separate account of how the project engages with each particular field, the following literature review is organized by a series of conceptual questions and debates. The questions include: (1) How have scholars defined Sikh identity?; (2) How have scholars conceptualized diaspora in general, and the Sikh diaspora in particular?; (3) How does the critique of liberal secularism help inform this study of liberal diasporic Sikh

discourse?; (4) How have scholars conceptualized the relationship between religion and the Internet, and what conceptual role does the Internet play in relation to this particular Sikh discourse?

II. Sikh Studies: Identity, Plurality, and Normativity

A. Evolution of the field

I will begin by providing an overview of the historical developments in Sikh studies and the major debates within the field, particularly as they pertain to the topic of the Sikh diaspora. First, it is necessary to define what is meant by 'Sikh studies', because doing so is crucial for understanding how Sikhism has been conceptualised in recent times. There is a scholarly tradition within Sikhism itself, and there were Sikh studies scholars in Indian universities for decades prior to the emergence of Sikh studies as an academic field in Western universities in the 1960s. As Ahluwalia et al. (2005) point out, the rise of this new academic discipline in the West happened to coincide with the growth of both area studies and the secular discipline of religious studies.

Whereas Sikh studies scholars in India were focused more on the theological aspects of Sikhism, early scholarship on Sikhism in the West took a more objective and critical view, as is common within religious studies more broadly. The distinction is a critical one, for the point of departure for Western scholars is not verifying religious truth or falsity, but understanding how religious claims and religious communities function. When I refer to 'Sikh studies' throughout this dissertation, I am referring to the scholarly tradition that is modeled on the tenets of the

Western university, which includes a nominal commitment to objectivity, rationality and evidence-based argumentation. Theoretically, this is limited not just to those scholars in North American and European universities, but may also often include those from universities throughout India. Methodologically, the scholarship in Sikh studies can be divided into four broad categories: historical; ethnographic; textual (including both translations as well as exegeses of Sikh religious texts); and philosophical-critical. While the first three categories are largely self-explanatory, the fourth category refers to those works whose professed aim is to investigate the epistemological framework of Sikh studies and the modern understanding of Sikhism.

B. Sikh Identity, Plurality, and Normativity

A central preoccupation in modern Sikh studies has been defining Sikh identity. Harjot Oberoi's social constructivist approach and Arvind Mandair's deconstructive approach are the most relevant perspective on Sikh identity for the context of this research. In order to engage meaningfully with this debate as it has played out in modern Sikh studies it is important to briefly touch on W.H. McLeod's contribution. McLeod's work is the earliest and most comprehensive academic examination of Sikhism. Using historical and philological methods, McLeod assiduously researched the first two centuries of Sikh tradition, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* (1968)*, The Evolution of the Sikh Community* (1976), *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janam-Sakhis* (1980)*,* and *Who is a Sikh?* (1989). McLeod's principle task in the early works was to analyze early Sikh tradition, particularly the life of Guru Nanak, and to determine which aspects of Sikh tradition and lore could be verified in the historical record. The

publication of his work resulted in an immediate backlash from the Sikh community, who felt that McLeod's work, and the western academic field of Sikh studies in general, distorted and disrespected Sikh tradition. Although he didn't focus explicitly on the notion of Sikh identity, he was instrumental in shaping the paradigm of Sikh studies in the decades that followed, in which debates about the meaning and content of Sikh identity became intertwined with issues of historical authenticity and accuracy.

Starting in the late 1980s, the influence of post-colonial theory instigated a broad methodological shift in the study of world religions, particularly South Asian religions. Historically, the study of religion has tended to emphasize the abstract, the philosophical, and the textual elements of religious life, while overlooking the sociological elements. This 'textual bias' is built into the very definition of religion, which is defined as a codified set of beliefs. The lack of sacred texts or a clear central theology was taken as evidence of a religion's relative immaturity. Since literacy and knowledge of sacred texts was often limited to the upper classes, the textual bias also led to an 'elite' bias. This inclination has had myriad other effects as well. Richard King notes that it has contributed to 'a homogenization of other cultures and the way in which they are represented' (King 1999; 66), and that world religions 'as they are usually portrayed are idealized and largely theoretical constructs that bear some relationship to, but are by no means identical with, the actual religious expression of humankind, especially in the pre-modern era' (ibid, 67). This has led to to a systematic marginalization of popular religious forms and oral texts and traditions, as well as a general disregard for how gender, caste, and class affect religious forms. This theoretical bent of religious studies has meant that the construction of religious identity and religious boundaries has been the domain of a few privileged elites.

This is particularly true in the case of Hinduism. Since the 18th century, the Vedanta, also

known as the *Upanishads,* has been constructed as the 'essence' of Hinduism. As King notes, the *Upanishads,* and later on the *Gita*, had a philosophical bent, and together these texts were taken as representing the 'the central philosophy of the Hindus' and as evidence of the fact that 'the fundamental teachings of Christianity already existed in the ancient scriptures of the Hindu faith, albeit in a distorted and unclear fashion' (King 1999, 120). Over time, the predominant western narrative about Hinduism was that despite its apparent pantheism, it does indeed consist of a central philosophy, and that Hindu social practices are all a logical extension of this philosophy.

As a corrective measure, many scholars of religion have focused on 'alternative' or popular elements of Hinduism. Wendy Doniger's *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (2009), like much of her earlier work, recovers and reconstructs forgotten fragments of ancient Hindu social traditions. It aims to demonstrate that 'Hindus throughout their history have been enriched by the contributions of women, the lower castes, and other religion' and that 'the greatness of Hinduism…lies precisely in many of those idiosyncratic qualities' that most onlookers and mainstream Hindus view as insignificant (Doniger 2009, 56-57). Several other attempts have been made to unsettle the predominant narrative of Hinduism, including Hugh Urban's work on Tantra (2003; 2009), and Brian Pennington (2005) and Richard King's (1999) work on the colonial construction of Hindu identity.

Harjot Oberoi's landmark book, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (1994), Oberoi's work is broadly continuous with this attempt to displace the nominal center of Sikhism and Sikh identity. The book interrogates how Sikh elites, particularly the socio-religious reform movement, Singh Sabha, constructed normative Sikh identity for the modern era. His argument hinges on a distinction between pre-

colonial '*Sanatan*' (traditional) Sikhism, characterized by syncretism and permeable boundaries, and modern Sikh identity, which is fixed, insular and homogenous. Oberoi's argument focuses largely on Singh Sabha's discursive role in facilitating this transition. Although there were multiple factions of the Singh Sabha active in the late nineteenth century, the 'victorious' faction was what Oberoi terms the 'Tat Khalsa' (pure) Singh Sabha, which sought to 'purify' Sikh identity from the influence of superstition, witchcraft, Sufi saints, idol worship, and Brahmanical influences more generally. Although the Tat Khalsa Singh Sabha (hereafter it will be referred to simply as 'Singh Sabha') viewed itself as preserving and reviving Sikh tradition, Oberoi points out that they were operating through a largely modern idiom.

In Oberoi's account, the transition between the pre-colonial 'enchanted universe' and modern Sikh identity is deeply lamentable, since Singh Sabha enacted an epistemic violence on the naturally diverse and pluralistic Punjabi Sikh society of the pre-colonial era. Many sects, ceremonies, and practices that had previously been an accepted part of the Sikh *Panth* were declared to be outside the boundaries of Sikhism. For Oberoi, this represents the victory of singularity over plurality, or of homogeniety over heterogeneity. Oberoi's framework has been influential because it clearly articulated a notional binary between a singular/hegemonic/fundamentalist vision of Sikh identity versus a pluralistic/heterodox one. This binary remains visible throughout many contemporary strains of Sikh discourse, including the liberal diasporic Sikh discourse I examine.

While Oberoi's work interrogates the modern boundaries of Sikhism, Arvind Mandair's work interrogates the entire conceptual framework of Sikh studies and Sikh identity. As I discuss in the previous chapter, Mandair argues that the very signifier 'Sikh' is not simply a neutral descriptor, but necessarily refers to an entire conceptual apparatus that structures the way that

Sikhs relate to their tradition. By not recognizing the ways that the religious categories themselves are undergirded by western metaphysical thinking, Oberoi unknowingly reproduces many of its binaries. By contrast, Mandair argues that the very concept of Sikh identity is historically contingent, and that arguing over which particular identity should be privileged is a misguided debate that fails to grasp the larger issue. In his assessment of Oberoi, Mandair writes the following:

> By maintaining a grip on the concept of religion—where religion is simply assumed as an origin that maintains itself as unpolluted, safe, sacrosanct, nonviolent—the historian can separate religion from politics (identified with violence, writing, and hence a deviation from the universal religion). Once this *sui generis* ideology is internalized it becomes impossible for the Sikh subject to escape the "dreamtime" loop since "authentic" Sikh subjectivity or repetition will already have been defined in terms of quietist detachment from worldly politics. (Mandair 2009, 355)

While Oberoi's text supports the distinction between singular and pluralistic visions of Sikh identity, Mandair's argument suggests that both of these terms are part of the same continuum.

While I broadly agree with Mandair, my project intercedes in this debate by showing that it is illuminating to examine how Sikhs themselves are attempting to distill the meaning and essence of Sikh identity. My research will show that: (1) liberal diasporic Sikhs supports the values of plurality and diversity in the Sikh Panth, trying to make space for Sikhs of different persuasions, lifestyles, and backgrounds, and (2) liberal diasporic Sikhs upholds the idea that there is a pure and unpolluted Sikh identity that exists in relative abstraction. Collectively, these websites define Sikh identity in a modular and abstract way, while also promoting diversity and plurality within the Panth. For this particular Sikh discourse, maintaining an authentic identity and accommodating differences are entirely commensurate ambitions.

III. Conceptualizing the Sikh Diaspora

A. Diaspora studies

A third major scholarly field that I engage with is diaspora studies, a field that has had an even more recent genesis than Sikh studies. Until the 1960s, the term was generally understood as a 'a social formation engendered by catastrophic violence or, at the very least, by coerced expulsion from a homeland, followed by settlement in other countries and among alien host societies' (Tololyan 2007, G48). Prior to the late 1980s, it was used only in limited contexts. For much of the term's history, the archetypal example had been the Jewish diaspora, with other 'classical' examples being the Greek and Armenian diasporas. However, the term 'diaspora' has recently expanded, and the number of diasporas has greatly multiplied. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, diaspora studies emerged as an increasingly cogent and flourishing field of study, aided partly by the inauguration of a new journal, *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, in 1991. One primary reason for this expansion was a broad methodological shift that saw scholars breaking with 'methodological nationalism', and finding ways to analyse how immigrant communities did not simply sever ties with their homelands once they moved, but found new ways to continue the relationship with their ostensible homelands (Brubaker 2005). Another reason is that laying claim to diaspora status became intertwined with identity politics and with using a collective identity to make territorial claims.

Tololyan (2007) offers a number of criteria that we can use to define diasporas, and to delineate between diasporas and other migrant communities. The first is that the community in

question has collectively suffered through catastrophe, and for whom the 'work of memory, commemoration, and mourning is central, shaping much of its cultural production and political commitment' (G49). A second feature is that diasporas preserve elements of the homeland, such as 'religious, social and cultural practice' in either a pure or hybrid form (ibid, G49). A third feature of diasporas is that they have a 'rhetoric of restoration and return', whereby they maintain relations with their community located in the homeland as well as elsewhere in a number of ways, such as through financial remittances, cultural exchange, political advocacy work and personal visits (ibid). A fourth feature is that descendants beyond the first generation of the diaspora still feel connected to the homeland.

One of the major theoretical debates within the field revolves around how diasporas should be conceptualised. The traditional approach has a place-based approach, where the diasporic community's 'place of origin' is viewed as 'originary and constitutive of a diaspora, and very often it supports an essentialization of origins and a fetishization of what is supposed to be found at the origin (e.g., tradition, religion, language, race)' (Axel 2002). Among other things, the place-based approach has meant that determining the 'validity' of a diaspora's community's claims means verifying historical claims as either true or false. In this view, the diaspora community is largely homogenous and 'uninflected by disparities in gender, class, sexuality, generation' (Mishra 2015, 13). It experiences a tension between home and host country, for they are 'living without belonging in one, belonging without living in the other' (ibid 14).

In the mid-1990s however, many scholars began advocating for a less 'vertical' approach in favor of a more 'horizontal' one, viewing the diaspora as *process* of identification that engenders particular kinds subjects, rather than as an ontological fact. Another way to express this tension is by negotiating between 'arboreal' versus 'rhizomatic' metaphors (Cohen 2015),

with the former framing a diaspora as being anchored by a common ancestral and territorial point of origin, and the latter treating it as series of connections (Clifford 1994, Gilroy 1993). Sudesh Mishra writes that this approach adopts a broadly 'poststructuralist approach to movement and identity' and is 'deeply suspicious of stable signs and categories and instead maps 'the lateral motion of bodies, ideas, goods, and information across multiple territories' (2015, 15). Many scholars began calling attention to the heterogenous nature of diasporic groups, as well as non-linear detours that individuals and groups often take from their point of origin to their new locales (Axel 1996, Hall 1996; Dufoix 2008).

Most recently, scholars have argued that it is necessary to integrate both of these frameworks, because place and territory are indispensable for understanding diasporic formations, particularly diasporic religion. Paul Christopher Johnson argues that 'without any territorial connotation, Diaspora and Diasporic Religion come unhinged and are unable to serve comparative research well' (Johnson 2012, 101). This is particularly true in the case of the Sikh diaspora, which is dependent upon the imaginative faculties of its members, but also on a real historical connection to a particular place. Indeed, in the diasporic Sikh context, the point of origin is significant because of its conceptual isomorphism with Punjabi culture. Without an appreciation of the historical relationship between Sikhism and Punjab, it is not possible to understand how and why liberal diasporic Sikh discourse has developed the binary between religion and culture, even though it is trying to make an argument about the abstract nature of these categories. Place, culture and the point of origin paradoxically remain significant even when they are erased.

Religious diasporas occupy a particular subset of diasporas, and Johnson argues that a distinction must be made between 'religious diasporas' and 'diasporic religions'. 'Religious

diasporas' denotes a group whose 'most salient reference is religious identity rather than ethnic, racial, linguistic, or any other social bond', and whose migration is a direct result of their religious identity (104), whereas 'diasporic religions' are any migrant social group whose identity is not primarily based on religion, but whose 'sentiments toward a distant homeland are mediated by, and articulated through, a religious culture'. For this second group, the religious identity of these groups gains 'special salience only secondarily, in the attempt to give order and meaning to the new space and its relation to the places left behind' (ibid 104). While this distinction may be provisionally useful it quickly becomes apparent in the context of the Punjabi Sikh diaspora that both categories are applicable, and yet, both categories fall short.

Sikhs are a 'religious diaspora' because many Sikhs would certainly claim that their most salient identity is their religious one, although this is not true for all Sikhs during all eras of migration. While most Sikh migration was not a directly consequence of their religious identity, some Sikh emigres might certainly feel that they were not able to fully thrive in India due to being Sikhs. Sikhs are a diasporic religion because their sentiments towards Punjab are certainly filtered through their Sikh identity, but it is not accurate to say that Sikh identity is a secondary consequence of migration that emerges in order to make sense of the diasporic experience. Both categories might be true or false at different historical times and for different segments of the diaspora. As Hausner and Garnett (2015) rightly point out, the attempt to construct a clear-cut boundary between religious diasporas and diasporic religions seems like an unnecessary exercise, given that the relationship between migration and religious identity is unique in each specific case.

B. The Sikh Diaspora

Although Sikh studies first evolved in the 1960s, there was no focus on the diaspora until the late 1980s and early 1990s. This coincided with the general growth of diaspora studies, and with the increasing growth and visibility of Sikhs living in Western societies. It also happened to coincide with the Khalistani movement, a Sikh secessionist movement that was taking place in India from the late 1970s until the mid-1990s. This movement made Sikhs more visible in the international media, and many diasporic Sikhs supported it. All of these factors contributed to the increasing scholarly interest in the Sikhs living abroad.

The first published mention of the term 'Sikh diaspora' in an English-language academic source was in 1977 (Manchanda), and was a passing reference to Sikhs living abroad.[2] Over the next few years there are a few scattered references (Leaf 1985; Shackle 1985; Bhachu 1987; Mcleod 1987), and starting in 1988 the term appears with some regularity. At this point, it was no longer a passing reference but actually became the major focal point of several studies. In 1989, the first major edited volume about the Sikh diaspora, *The Sikh Diaspora: Migration and experience beyond Punjab* (Barrier and Dusenbery 1989), was published. Thereafter, 'Sikh diaspora' became part of the lexicon of Sikh studies, although it was by no means an uncontested term.

This first phase of scholarship on the Sikh diaspora took a traditional or place-based approach depending upon static conceptions of collective identity and place of origin. The question of anointing Sikhs as a diaspora at the time was fraught with political implications. To

[2] The term must certainly have been in use prior to 1977, but this is the first instance I could find of it in print.

call Sikhs diasporic presumes that Sikhs are a sovereign nation possessing a homeland (Shani 2002; Tatla 2012). It legitimates not only the community's historical claims, but also its demands for greater political autonomy or independence. Naturalising the notion of a Sikh diaspora underscores many of the claims of Khalistani discourse, which is partly why the term has been so contested.

One major objection with the term had to do with historical anachronism. Scholars argued that it was inaccurate to use the term to refer to all past episodes of Sikh migration, some of which went as far back as the late 18th century, since the concept of Sikh identity has not remained consistent throughout all historical periods, and many of those migrants may not have identified themselves solely or even primarily as Sikhs (Leonard 1989; McLeod 1989c). Earlier generations of Sikh migrants may have identified more often as 'Punjabis' or 'Indians' rather than solely as Sikhs. While Sikhism was an integral facet of early immigrant identity, 'Sikh identities were not the only salient identities that early migrants brought with them from Punjab' (Dusenbery 1995, 22).

A second reservation about the term relates to the status of Punjab as the Sikh homeland. Contemporary Sikh discourse at the time projected a deep, abiding and historical connection between Sikhs and Punjab; however, scholars suggested that this connection has been misrepresented (Oberoi 1987; Darshan Tatla 2001; 2012). Tatla notes there was 'no expression of Sikh attachment to Punjab during the 19th century' with the exception being 'an odd nostalgic longing for a sovereign Punjab ruled by the Khalsa by some members of the Namdhari sect in the 1880s, and a wild effort of the exiled prince Dalip Singh from Britain to return to "my sovereign Punjab"' (2012, 62). Although 'Sikhs lived surrounded by hundreds of sacred and historic Gurdwaras reminding them of their gurus and numerous martyrs', it is probably that the

'geographical area as such carried no sacred status or any connotation of "homeland" in its modern sense' (ibid, 62). The situation changed in the mid-20th century and was particularly resurgent during the Khalistani movement.

Despite these objections, reservations about the validity of the term have largely fallen away since that time, and scholars (both within Sikh studies and beyond) have come to accept 'Sikh diaspora' as a legitimate term. One reason for this is that the increasingly numerical strength of Sikhs abroad has enabled the community to do more Sikh-specific community-building, such as building Gurudwaras, setting up Sikh NGOs and developing the Sikh media. This has enabled religion to become the primary focus of their diasporic life (Tatla 1999).

A second, even more powerful reason is that the events of 1984 and Khalistani discourse successfully mobilised and reinforced Sikh identity, both in Punjab and abroad (Tatla 1999, Mandair 2009, Shani 2007, Nijhawan 2014, Axel 2002). In many ways, the Sikh diaspora was born, or at least activated, in that year (Mandair 2011). Since 1984, Sikh political consciousness, particularly the belief that Sikhs have been subject to political trauma and are not entirely safe or secure as long as Punjab remains a part of India, has only strengthened. While not all diaspora Sikhs are sympathetic to Khalistani discourse, it is fair to say that it has successfully shaped the terms of the contemporary debate about Sikh identity, and has helped to further naturalise the conceptual isomorphism between Sikhs as a people and Punjab as their ancestral homeland. Thus, even while other Sikh discourses evince apathy with Khalistani discourse, they share the belief that Sikhs are a cohesive community with a shared consciousness that is uniquely bonded with Punjab.

Studies on the Sikh diaspora have greatly proliferated, and most of them have taken a traditional, 'place-based' approach, in which 'identities and forms of identification are bound up

with the separate expectations of the imagined communities of homeland and hostland' (Mishra 2015, 14). These studies share the theoretical assumption that Sikhs occupy a that first- or second-generation Sikh immigrants living in Western nations exist in a liminal state in which they want to retain their ancestral life-world while assimilating to their new homes. To echo Mishra, they are 'living without belonging in one' and 'belonging without living in the other'. The literature includes a focus on Sikhs residing in Vancouver (Nayar 2004; Sandhu and Nayar 2008; Smythe and Toohey 2009), Toronto (Mooney 2011; Nijhawan and Arora 2013), Yuba City (Khurana 2011), Northern California (Gibson 1988), New York (Angelo 1997) and Britain (Hall 2002; Nesbitt 2009; Nagra 2011). The type of experience represented in this literature, in which diasporic Sikhs seek out ways to both assimilate with and maintain their Sikh identity in Western societies, is certainly a truthful representation of a large swath of the diasporic Sikh experience. However, I suggest that it is a partial representation, for many Sikhs are increasingly viewing their religious identities not as being at odds with liberal secular life, but as coextensive with it.

C. Broadening and Complexifying the Sikh Diasporic Experience

Following the general trend in diaspora studies, scholars in Sikh studies adopted a poststructuralist framework for studying the Sikh diaspora. In this vein, Brian Axel's work has been transformational because of the way he reconceptualizes the very nature of the Sikh diaspora. Firstly, rather than viewing Sikh subjects as stable and self-evident entities prior to migration, he suggests that Sikh subjects are created through discursive acts that make the masculinized *amritdhari* Sikh male the iconic representation of Sikh subjectivity and the Sikh homeland. Thus, diasporic subjects do not come into being just through an act of migration, but

through discursive acts as well. Secondly, he argues that it is the representations of trauma and violence visited upon the male Sikh body that are most significant in the creation of modern Sikh subjects. Understanding the roots of this trauma and of Khalistani discourse are, for him, crucial to understanding Sikh diasporic identity. Thirdly, he suggests that the Internet is not just a means for Sikhs to disseminate information, but actually contributes to the creation of diasporic Sikh subjects because of its unique ability to disseminate images of tortured and mutilated Sikhs. Thus, Axel's contribution reconceptualizes the Sikh diaspora in a significant way.

Tony Ballantyne (2006) expands the temporal framework of the Sikh diaspora and argues that we should view the Sikh diaspora not necessarily as a relatively recent phenomenon, but as a social formation that emerged through British colonialism and its 'webs of empire'. For him, the Sikh diaspora is not primarily a religious formation, but a social and cultural one that can be located in the webs of empire. He writes that 'societies that were colonized by the East India Company (or other agents of British imperialism) did not simply "encounter" the British but were drawn into the institutions, markets communication systems, and cultural networks that made up the empire.' (Ballantyne 2006, 30). Through this approach, he draws attention to the cultural exchanges that colonial (and subsequent) Sikhs have had with other communities throughout the empire, and develop a Sikh historical narrative that is more attentive to different forms of mobility and syncretic exchange.

Ballantyne and Axel's work is relevant to this present research in two regards. Both of them expand the spatial and temporal parameters placed around the concept of the Sikh diaspora, and make it possible to study the diaspora with greater nuance and complexity. This enables us to think of the Sikh diaspora as a process rather than as an immutable fact. Moreover, both scholars pay attention to the role of digital technologies in Sikh diasporic life. Axel examines

Khalistani websites, many of which prominently feature photographs of mutilated Sikh militants. For Axel, the Internet provides a way for Sikhs to give voice to a separatist discourse that would otherwise be largely marginalized. He sees a direct link between websites and the social reality of diasporic Sikhs. For Ballantyne, the Internet plays less of a centrally constitutive role. He draws on Internet sources, such as Sikh discussion forums, mailing lists and websites, in his effort to write a global history of Bhangra music and how it remakes Punjabi Sikh identity. While he recognizes the important role that the Internet has played in the dissemination of Bhangra as well the discourses surrounding it, his primary theoretical interest is not in the role of digital technologies but in cultural syncretism more broadly.

This project both builds on and departs from Axel and Ballantyne's work in important ways. Broadly speaking, I am interested in how diasporic subjects are discursively created. I differ from Ballantyne in that he views the Sikh diaspora as a primarily social and cultural formation, whereas I am interested in viewing it in religious terms. I analyze how certain segments of the Sikh diaspora are conscientiously and purposefully defining Sikh identity as primarily religious, rather than social and cultural. For them, the social and cultural need to be marginalized rather than placed at the center. I also pay greater attention than Ballantyne does to the Internet's constitutive role in producing diasporic Sikh identity. I differ from Axel in that he overdetermines the centrality of Khalistani discourse among diasporic Sikhs, and the degree to which diasporic Sikhs define themselves vis-a-vis the ostensible homeland. I draw attention to the significant intra-diasporic differences amongst Sikhs, particularly to those Sikhs who self-consciously define themselves in universal rather than regional terms. While Axel focuses almost exclusively on the 'Khalistani Internet', I focus on how diasporic Sikhs use the Internet to disseminate an entirely different kind of discourse.

Other scholars have conceptualized the Sikh diaspora in ways that are relevant to my research. Giorgio Shani (2015) explores how Sikhs are articulating a global Sikh identity, one that is defined more through bodily or spiritual practices than in relation to territory (p.57). Using an international relations framework, he argues that a traditional liberal perspective upheld the primary of the nation-state and thus territorialized Sikh identity and stimulated 'the demand for an independent Sikh homeland', but increasing 'globalization and fragmentation' are helping to articulate a deterritorialised and global Sikh diasporic identity. For him, this global value-based Sikh identity comes chronologically after the place-based Sikh identity, and globalization and the breakdown of national boundaries is a postmodern process. I agree with Shani that the distinction between territorially-based and globally-based Sikh identity is salient, however I follow Mandair in arguing that both categories as being part of the same theoretical schema.

Michael Nijhawan's *The Precarious Diasporas of Sikh and Ahmadiyya Generations: Violence, Memory, and Agency* (2016) focuses on generational differences among the Sikh diaspora, particularly the long-term effects of violence on second-generation Sikhs in Canada and Germany. Rather than taking for granted that there is a singular or modular Sikh diasporic experience, he pays attention to how historical experiences continue to reverberate and shape the experience of the Sikh diaspora. He develops the analytic of 'precariousness' as a way of acknowledging the uncertain and liminal space that Sikh diasporic subjects inhabit. Like Axel, he views violence as a crucial part of Sikh diasporic subject formation, and focuses on how their experience has been shaped by the 'experience and memories of violence' (2016, 1). More specifically, he pays attention to how the mobilization around a violent event can differ by 'class, gender, race and age' (ibid). Through a series of ethnographic and sociological case studies, he focuses on the everyday struggles of marginalized diasporic Sikhs who both affirm and retreat

from liberal secular spaces.

This research project further explores the theoretical possibilities and limitations invoked by the idea of diasporicity. For the particular liberal Sikh discourse that I examine throughout this dissertation, the term serves a dual function. One the one hand, it is indispensable because it evokes a sense of unity and cohesiveness about the community in question, instantly acting as a way of grouping together a group of people by virtue of their common ancestral history. Yet it is also delimiting, because it imposes an isomorphic logic on the relationship between the community and its homeland, language, ethnicity and culture. The term effectively ghettoises the group and makes it much more difficult for them to imagine themselves in cosmopolitan or universal terms. Thus, liberal diasporic Sikh discourse has an ambivalent relationship to the idea of diasporicity. My work explores this ambivalence and draws attention to (1) how Sikhs appropriate and transvalue the concept of diasporicity at a popular level, and (2) how intra-diasporic differences are developed and perpetuated.

IV. Sikhism and the Critique of Liberal Secularism

A. Problematizing the Liberal-Secular Binary

This project also engages with the emerging field of study that unsettles the normative presumptions about the relationship between the religious and the secular. I examine different permutations of this fundamental dichotomy and the different forms that the 'secular' can take. Specifically, I argue that in the context of diasporic religions, 'culture' often becomes a reified

category. It is invoked as something that is both universal and secular, as something that is thoroughly distinct from religion and also something that remains structurally similar across multiple contexts. Although it may not be immediately apparent, this configuration of the relationship between religion and culture is produced in large part through liberal-secular discourse, and it remains subtly present in the way that religious diasporas conceptualise their own identity.

Over the last two decades, scholars have increasingly problematised the notion of the secular and have examined, among other things, how it fundamentally redefines religion. They have begun to illustrate that the secular and religious are not immutable, permanently distinct domains of life but are historically situated systems of thought that are much more mutually constituting than previously imagined (Asad 2003; Casanova 2009; Juergensmeyer, Calhoun and VanAntwerpen 2011; Taylor 2007). Although secularism is conventionally understood as a political philosophy and governing principle, it is also an epistemic regime that is viewed as the neutral, objective 'bedrock' of rationality and critical thought, a space that both precedes and extends beyond the domain of (irrational) religiosity (Mignolo 2002; Butler et all 2009; Mas 2012). It is coeval with liberalism and the emergence of the modern liberal state; thus religion as we imagine it today has actually already been rearticulated 'in a manner that is commensurate with modern sensibilities and modes of governance' (Mahmood 2009, 65). Because of this, religion is largely conceived of as something that is a matter of personal, privatised belief, wholly dissociated from the public sphere and all it encompasses.

Although it has been imposed and embraced in many different societies around the world, secularism does not operate in the same way in every context. While it is theoretically a central principle of all modern liberal states, its textures, agendas and effects vary considerably

(Calhoun et al. 2011; Mahmood 2015). Thus, there are 'micro-cultures' of liberal secularism in particular contexts, and those micro-cultures often reveal something new about the concept's durability.

While scholars have examined how secularism is viewed as inextricably bound up with the abstract entities known as the law and the public sphere, and even with embodied experience (Asad 2003; Connolly 1999; Hirschkind 2011), they have yet to fully conceptualise how secularism is also often connected with the concept of culture, particularly within popular discourses. I suggest that for diasporic religious groups, the liberal secular imaginary casts religion as wholly distinct and abstracted from the surrounding culture, which is itself recast as secular. For diasporic groups, their 'original' identity is often a matrix that includes religious, cultural, ethnic and linguistic dimensions. Those groups who strongly identify with a particular religion may have a need to discuss those aspects of their identity which tie them to the group, but which are not dependent upon their strict adherence to religious principles. Thus, for diasporic religious groups, the meaning of 'culture' often develops as a relational context with 'religion'.

What little has been written about the relationship between secularism, religion and culture has frequently been in the context of diasporic religious groups, particularly in the Islamic context (Ewing 2015; Gholami 2015; Fadil 2017). Ewing writes that 'the term "culture" itself has also become a politically powerful symbol in discussions among Muslims about how to practice Islam as a minority in a world understood to be simultaneously Judeo-Christian and secular' (2015, 202), and I suggest that the term is mobilised in similar ways by diasporic Sikhs. For diasporic Sikhs, the vast majority of whom identity as Punjabi in some way, Punjabi identity becomes a way to approximate an association with the community without being subsumed by

the dictates of religious discipline. Although the conceptual distinction between Sikhism and Punjabi culture certainly exists at a popular level in Punjab as well, this research pays attention to the ways in which this distinction is produced and highlighted in diasporic discourse.

Another pertinent focus within diaspora studies is the question of whether and how religious diasporas meet the demands of liberal citizenship, especially when those religions possess their own distinctive understanding of how religion and politics should interact. Traditionally, immigrants who did not fully embrace their political cultures were thought to pose a threat to the integrity of the nation state because their primary fidelity would remain to either their previous nation state, or, in an even riskier proposition for the state, to an outside religious authority. Diasporas especially would pose this problem, since they are characterised by an intense identification with their homelands. Scholars of Sikh studies have examined how diasporic Sikhs not only participate in the civic processes of liberal secular societies, but also expose the precarious nature of these societies. This includes work on how American Sikhs have dealt with hate crimes (Verma 2006; Ahluwalia, M.K., 2010; Singh, Jaideep 2013), the limits of American (Mehta 2013) and Canadian multiculturalism (Dhamoon 2013) in accommodating Sikh difference, and Sikh American institutional-building (Singh, Jaideep 2008; Luthra 2017). This literature takes the meaning of politics, law and the public sphere to be self-evident and conceptually stable.

B. Sikhism and the Liberal Secular Imaginary

More recently, in the light of the post-secular turn, scholars within Sikh studies have begun paying attention to how diasporic Sikh discourses re-articulate Sikhism in a way that highlights

its natural affinity with liberal secular values. Although they do not necessarily conceptualise the diaspora as explicitly 'liberal', their basic premise is that this segment of the diaspora is very much oriented towards liberal democratic norms and values rather than nostalgia for Punjab. They argue that this discourse, disseminated primarily through the work of Sikh advocacy organisations, is redefining Sikhism so as to highlight the ethics and values it shares with liberal democracy (especially America), and that such a process is self-defeating: it not only threatens to undermine Sikh difference (Grewal 2012) but also makes Sikhs complicit with the foundational violence of 'forgetting' the historical and ongoing atrocities against marginalised groups such as blacks and Muslims (Judge and Brar 2017). Additionally, Luthra (2017) has argued that despite propagating a sense of shared humanism and egalitarianism between Sikhism and liberal democracy, Sikh advocacy groups inadvertently end up privileging the turbaned Sikh male as the primary site of Sikh identity, effectively marginalising Sikh women and failing to fulfil the promise of egalitarianism at the heart of the religion. Stoker's (2007) study of the legal debate about the right of Canadian Sikh students to be able to carry a *kirpan* (ceremonial dagger) to school points out that Sikh advocates articulated their case in a way that would appease two competing views of secularism (Canadian and Quebecois).

These studies acknowledge that diasporic Sikhs are equating Sikh tradition with liberal, secular values. My own work places a greater focus on the mechanics of this process. I do not argue that diasporic Sikhs align themselves with liberal secularism, because this would imply that they are 'modernising' or 'updating' Sikhism. Rather, I argue that they redefine Sikhism as authentically liberal and secular. This discourse views itself as 'returning' to Sikh tradition, albeit a different kind of tradition then the one produced through nostalgia for Punjab. More specifically, I suggest that in diasporic Sikh discourse, a process of 'secularisation' takes place

that must be understood with reference to the complicated discursive relationship between religion and culture in the Sikh context.

V. Sikhism and the Internet

A. Digital Religion

This project also intersections with the field of digital religion, which examines 'how religious practice, discourse, and engagement have become embedded in online and offline contexts and the interconnections between those two contexts' (Campbell and Vitullo 2016, 74). Campbell and Vitullo delineate four stages of research in this scholarship, going back to the early 1980s. During the first two stages, scholars treated religion on the internet as a contained, 'online-only' phenomenon. The first stage was 'descriptive', in which scholars charted the different aspects of a religious community online, which consisted of discussion groups, networks and rudimentary websites. At this early stage, religious practices were being translated into the cyber realm but were not necessarily associated with a traditional religion in the 'offline' world. The second stage of research focused on categorising these various cyber phenomena. In the third and fourth phases of this scholarship, the focus shifted to examining how online and offline religious discourse is intertwined. This includes a focus on how the internet helps generate a sense of community among religious groups (Berger and Ezzy 2004; Griffin 2004, Helland 2004), or how a religious group uses the internet as a message delivery system for its congregation (Baab 2008; Cantoni and Zyga 2007).

A perennial debate and primary methodological question within the field is whether or not the digital medium actually heralds substantively new religious phenomena, or whether

digital religion is simply an extension or continuation of traditional 'offline' religious phenomena. Early scholars argued that using the internet for religious-related purposes might actually help transform religion in significant ways (O'Leary 1996; Brasher 2001; Dawson and Cowan 2004). But, as Campbell (2012) suggests, perhaps these changes were not quite as revolutionary as initially thought, for we need to reconsider the 'influence of the internet on religion in light of the shift already occurring within Western religious culture' (66).

The answer to this question depends upon the specific digital phenomenon being studied, as well as how one defines terms like 'digital religion' and 'religious change'. If we conclude that the digital medium serves a solely utilitarian purpose, it would mean that we see religion as a category with fixed features that are transferrable into any medium. However, if we see the category of religion as being a bit more structurally permeable, it becomes easier to imagine that the medium actually shapes religious discourse, rather than simply conveying it. This latter position could turn into a form of technological determinism, in which the role of the medium in relation to the content is over-determined.

B. Sikhism Online

The existing scholarly literature about Sikhism online has for the most part viewed the Internet as a tool, rather than as a medium that actively shapes Sikh discourse. Notable exception are Axel, Devgan, and Jakobsh, who treat the Internet as an active part of diasporic Sikh discourse. In terms of subject matter, there are three broad categories. The first consists of work that examines how Sikhs use the Internet to discuss and commemorate the violence of 1984 and the Khalistani movement (Axel 2001, 2005, 2008; Barrier 2006; Devgan 2013; Sokol 2007; Verma

2011). The second category includes works that examine how diasporic Sikhs utilise the internet as a tool to acquire religious knowledge (Jakobsh 2006; Jasjit Singh 2012, 2014; Satnam Singh 2012). The third category is literature that examines how the Internet plays a role in identity construction among diasporic Sikhs (Jakobsh 2012, 2015). All of these studies about Sikhism and the internet focus explicitly on diasporic, rather than Punjabi, Sikhs.

Jasjit Singh's work is an interesting point of comparison with my research project. He has published extensively on the role of the Internet in shaping the religious attachments of younger generations of British Sikhs. One of his principle conclusions is that while young British Sikhs use the Internet for a range of purposes, including seeking religious knowledge and religious engagement, these online communities do not constitute 'communities' in the traditional sense since they do not have a regulatory function. He finds that while British Sikhs use the Internet to supplement existing Sikh institutions and forms of authority, the Internet is not transforming British Sikh religious discourse. This is in contrast with my own conclusion, which is that the Internet does indeed have a transformative effect on diasporic Sikh discourse because it both enables and produces a new way of framing Sikh identity.

The differing conclusions arise from differing analytical frameworks and methodologies. Singh asks how British Sikhs themselves perceive the role played by the Internet (among other things) in their religious socialisation, whereas I ask how the Internet affects diasporic Sikh discourse in ways that Sikhs themselves may not be aware of. Singh's approach is social scientific, whereas mine is textual. Whereas Singh is interested in the respondents' direct accounts of their experiences and how they were socialized into Sikhism, I study implicit and almost imperceptible themes and motifs in diasporic Sikh discourse. The overriding point is that Singh's point of departure is that diasporic Sikhs use the Internet as one tool among many

possible tools, whereas my point of departure is that the Internet actually helps to creates an entire discursive field within which diasporic Sikhs operate. Thus, even though Jasjit Singh's work and my own research project share many similarities, our respective conceptual frameworks for approaching Sikhism and the Internet are entirely different. Singh's work is highly valuable, but if we are to understand the transformations happening in the Sikh diaspora it is important to also ask a different set of questions about the emerging relationship between digital media and Sikhism.

I argue that the Internet is significant to liberal diasporic Sikh discourse because it provides a space for this discourse to flourish, and because the unique features of the digital experience shape the way that this discourse functions. Many of the discussions that I identify throughout this dissertation have been taking place among Sikhs for decades in some form or another, but the internet's unique qualities have helped to create a liberal diasporic Sikh public for perhaps the first time. The virtual connectedness of the digital medium mimics the sense of virtual connectedness that runs throughout diasporic experience. This mutually reinforcing quality helps render both digital and diasporic connection even more 'real' and affecting. The digital medium is indeed pertinent because it is the very space through which this peculiar Sikh discourse and public are articulated. It shapes the conventions, limitations and unique capacities of this discourse.

VI. Conclusion

This project is situated at the intersection of these four major fields, all of which are woven together to provide the theoretical terrain of this dissertation. It seeks to understand how the

particular positions and perspectives found within liberal diasporic Sikh discourse online have come to appear to natural and simplistic, when in fact they are highly nuanced It explores how this discourse appropriates and reproduces liberal values, how it reconstructs its own particular vision of liberalism, and how it produces meaning in general.

Chapter 3: Framing Sikh Identities

I. Introduction

This chapter describes how different, often competing trajectories of Sikh identity have evolved over time. It will offer a brief overview of the historical relationship between Sikhism and Punjab, the history of Sikh migration and the formation of the Sikh diaspora. It will also describe how Sikhs have negotiated between competing master narratives of Sikh identity, which define Sikhism as either a world religion or an ethnic religious. Both narratives are predicated upon the understanding of religion as a self-evident and universal category that is (1) modularly translatable across all contexts, and (2) epitomized by Christianity. As we will see, both identities have either been imposed or appropriated at various times throughout Sikh history.

As Masuzawa (2005) has argued, European scholars developed a taxonomy of religions in order to classify and order the relationship between the various different religions. 'World religions' are those with a long historical past and which embody 'the impartial principle of global coverage' (43). This is contrasted with 'minority traditions', which early scholars of religion more typically described as 'tribal', 'indigenous' and 'preliterate'. To this latter list I would also add the category of 'ethnic' religions. This classificatory system was disseminated largely during the colonial era, but it continues to congeal and reassert its authority in new ways. In particular, it influences how individuals experience and define their religious identity.

Mandair, who examines how this schema operates in the South Asian context, argues that all South Asians (including Sikhs) invariably respond to and reiterate this essential understanding of religion every time they claim to be members of a world religion or members of an ethnic nation,

or even when they claim to be atheists. In the late nineteenth century, Sikh scholars began re-articulating Sikhism as a monotheistic religion with a universalistic scope, and in the latter half of the twentieth century many scholars and Sikhs described Sikhism as a cosmopolitan world religion. At other times throughout the twentieth century, Sikhs invoked the 'particularistic' narrative of Sikhism and described Sikhs as an ethnoreligious community.

II. Sikhism as a world religion

It is now well established that the colonial period gave rise to conditions that encouraged both colonial and South Asian elites to describe their traditions as world religions (Dalmia 1997; King 1999; Oberoi 1994; Pennington 2005; Masuzawa 2005). During this period, not only did Sikhism and Hinduism emerge as world religions, but 'religion' itself came to be seen as the master signifier of identity, as the very ontological essence and organising principle of South Asian existence (Mandair 2009). In the case of Sikhs, this process began during the colonial era and continued well into the twentieth century. In this section, I briefly summarize the colonial milieu, the development of modern Sikh religious discourse, and the various ways in which this discourse has been disseminated among modern Sikhs.

Colonialism in South Asia was sustained not through military conflict and physical might, but by intellectual and administrative mechanisms that operated in a much subtler way (Cohn 1996). For the British, it was both logistically and ideologically necessary to understand South Asian religions, and to chart them within a general taxonomy of religion. This was carried out through both the cooperation and contestation of indigenous elites. Wilhelm Halbfass writes

that:

> They [Indians] took more distinctive initiatives to interpret their identity for the Europeans, and to defend and affirm it against them. They began to demarcate themselves against the foreign and to recognize the other in a new sense; but they also tried to comprehend and assimilate the Western ideas within the framework of their own tradition…The Indians reinterpreted key concepts of their traditional self-understanding (such as the concept of *dharma),* adjusting them to Western modes of understanding (Halbfass 1988, 438).

Colonialism pulled Indians into a dialogue that was carried out on unfamiliar terms, but which they could not refuse to enter into. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the rise of socio-religious reform movements throughout South Asia which sought, among other things, to define the parameters of their religious identities and craft historical narratives that instantiated these parameters (Dalmia 1997; Jones 1989, 1992). While some of these reform movements self-consciously aligned themselves with colonial modernity, others eschewed it. In either instance, reform movements invariably appropriated the conceptual grammar of the colonizers.

Among Sikhs, this function was carried out primarily by Singh Sabha, a socio-religious reform movement based in Lahore and Amritsar. The development of what is now known as 'Singh Sabha discourse' has become an important historical moment in the history of modern Sikhism. Founded in 1873, Singh Sabha's ambitious mission included reviving traditional Sikhism among the Sikh population, producing religious literature in Punjabi, and combating illiteracy. They focused on literary production in Punjabi, publishing religious tracts, magazines, newspapers and books that proselytised Sikhism. They also built schools and colleges modeled on the Western education system. Chief among Singh Sabha's ideological concerns was delineating Sikhism's boundaries vis-a-vis Hinduism, which led to the publication of a well-

known booklet by Kahan Singh in 1898 entitled *Hum Hindu Nahin Hain* (We Are Not Hindus*)*.

Singh Sabha sought to return to a pure and authentic vision of Sikhism. Informed as they were by the colonial milieu, they saw the need to define and standardise Sikh beliefs and practices. This extended to things such as life-cycle rituals, dress and comportment, caste relations and women's rights, Gurudwara management, religious ceremonies and language use. It also meant condemning beliefs and practices that were felt to deviate from pure Sikh orthodoxy, such as popular religion, the belief in saints, supernatural beings and witchcraft, 'idolatry, polytheism, the pervasive influence of Muslim pirs, Brahmanical presence in rituals' and 'vertical ties based on […] maximal lineages, sects and castes' (Oberoi 1994, 377). ingh Sabha discourse actually combined elements of both reformism and revivalism. It was reformist not only because it sought to clarify the boundaries between Sikhism and Hinduism, but also because it self-consciously adopted Western modalities of social organisation and institution-building; it was revivalist in that it believed in a pure, original and authentic Sikhism. For Singh Sabha, reform was a way to fulfill the promise of Sikhism, rather than to simply transform or modernise it.

Singh Sabha successfully articulated a vision of orthodox Sikh identity and helped to construct a normative understanding of what constituted a true Sikh. Mandair outlines three distinguishing aspects of this discourse: (1) it construed reform as a self-conscious distancing from 'the ambivalent signifier "Hindu"' and from any practices that could reasonably be described as Hindu in nature; (2) it rearticulated the Sikh tradition as 'Sikhism', a monotheistic religion with a corresponding theology; and (3) it placed Sikhism within the 'modern historical consciousness' (Mandair 2012, 188). The second and third features outlined by Mandair illustrate that Singh Sabha discourse attempted to place Sikhism within the conceptual matrix of

world religions. Even though Sikhism would not definitively be referred to as a world religion until much later, Singh Sabha writers are certainly viewed as being the first to initiate these efforts (Mandair 2009). Even at this early stage, a nascent dichotomy between 'religion', embodied by Khalsa orthodoxy, and 'culture', embodied by the heterogeneous flux of non-orthodox beliefs and practices, was developing amongst Sikhs.

At times, this discourse has been used to authorise a strictly rationalist approach to Sikh scripture. One of the clearest examples of this philosophy was in the figure of Babu Teja Singh, also sometimes referred to as Teja Singh Bhasaur (hereafter 'Bhasaur'), who helped to found an offshoot of the Singh Sabha called the 'Bhasaur Singh Sabha' in 1893. Bhasaur was a scholar who took a literalist approach to *Gurbani.* He argued that *Gurbani* had an exceedingly rational, consistent message, and that any inconsistencies were likely to be apocryphal and should be viewed with suspicion. This overarching belief led him to alter the texts of several Sikh prayers and to advocate that certain *banis* or compositions be banished from use altogether. He also produced a new version of the Guru Granth Sahib, from which he removed certain Sikh prayers that he felt were not authentic compositions of the Sikh Gurus and contradicted the overall message of *Gurbani*. For these reasons, he became a controversial figure among Sikhs at the time, and in 1928 was excommunicated from the Sikh *Panth*.[3] Bhasaur is a notable example of how the drive to identify a rational and consistent Sikh theology sometimes had extreme effects.

Singh Sabha discourse continues to shape contemporary Sikhism because its ideology is still disseminated through educational institutions. Singh Sabha emphasised the need to create Sikhism-oriented schools and colleges, especially vocational colleges for Sikh preachers and

[3] Literally, 'the Guru's path', but also used to refer to the Sikh community as a whole.

other religious performers. The Shiromani Gurudwara Prabhandak Committee, a Sikh organisation that is responsible for the management of Gurudwaras throughout India and that is largely synonymous with the Singh Sabha idiom, began developing vocational colleges for Sikh *raagis* (musicians), *granthis* (Gurudwara custodians) and *pracharaks* (preachers) in the early twentieth century. In addition to these vocational courses, such institutions are also known to offer general courses on Sikh scripture and history for laypersons wishing to expand their knowledge. These institutions are called 'Sikh Missionary Colleges', and the first of these was established in 1927. In addition to the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabhandak Committee, other private Sikh organisations have gone on to found similar academies throughout Punjab. Not only have these institutions created a class of Sikh specialists who adhere to Singh Sabha ideology, but they have also circulated Singh Sabha discourse among the Sikh masses in Punjab and abroad who listen to these preachers at Gurudwara services. (Myrvold 2012)

The idea of Sikhism as a universal world religion came to fruition in the 1960s and beyond. Verne Dusenbery (1999) argues that this was due to a number of factors, including the growth of the Sikh diaspora in western countries and the emergence of the New Age Sikh sect '3HO' led by Yogi Bhajan. Most importantly, Western scholarly interest in Sikhism, particularly the work of McLeod, helped to solidify the reputation of Sikhism as a world religion. After that point, Sikhism began appearing more regularly in religious studies textbooks, and Sikhs themselves became comfortable with framing Sikhism as a world religion.

III. Sikhs as an ethnoreligious community

Alongside the world religions narrative, there is an alternative narrative that frames Sikhism in particularistic terms, either as a parochial religion or as a nation. This narrative emphasizes

Sikhism's close ties with Punjab and the Punjabi language, and makes frequent references to pre-colonial Sikh history. The modern iteration of this discourse emerged during the era of anti-colonial mobilization in the lead-up to Partition. Although Sikh leadership would ultimately choose to remain a part of the newly formed India, they adopted the language of nationhood and self-determination.

In 1946, at a Cabinet Mission convened by the British government to discuss the progression of Indian independence. Sikhs were represented by the Akali Dal, a Sikh political party that had formed in 1920 at a high point in anticolonial mobilisation, and that continued to be the chief representative of Sikhs throughout much of the twentieth century. the Sikh delegation submitted a document called the 'Memorandum of the Central Akali Dal', which made the case for creating a separate Sikh homeland. I quote the document at length in order to draw attention to the language being used to frame the Sikh claims:

> Whereas the Sikhs being attached to the Punjab by intimate bonds of holy shrines, property, language, traditions, and history claim it as their homeland and holy land which the British took over as a 'trust' from the last Sikh ruler during his minority and whereas the entity of the Sikhs is being threatened on account of the persistent demand of [*sic*] Pakistan by the Muslims on the one hand and of the danger of absorption by the Hindus on the other, the executive Committee of the Shiromani Akali Dal demands the preservation and protection of the religious, cultural and economic and political rights of the Sikh nation, the creation of a Sikh state which would include a substantial majority of the Sikh population and their sacred shrines and historical gurdwaras with provision for the transfer and exchange of population and property. (Reprinted in Tatla 1999, 19)

The sentiments expressed in this document certainly existed prior to 1946, but they crystallised at this point in history. The language of this statement is grounded in a conception of the Sikhs as a sovereign nation with a unique historical claim to Punjab. Although the proposals for a Sikh state, alternatively described as Khalistan, Sikhistan or Azad Punjab, did not gain traction due to

the relatively small Sikh population, the themes invoked in this description would continue to frame how Sikhs viewed their relationship with Punjab (Singh, Kushwant 1999).

Since Partition, the relationship between Sikhs and the Indian state has frequently been strained, with a major point of contention being Sikh autonomy vis-à-vis the Indian state. A series of conflicts with the Centre have had the effect of emboldening Sikh claims to nationhood and incentivizing Sikhs to embrace the narrative of Sikhism as an ethnoreligious community. The first major hurdle in this relationship was the struggle to form a majority Punjabi-speaking state. Immediately following Partition, states across the newly formed India began campaigning for reorganisation in order to create states that were more linguistically homogenous. In Punjab, the Akali Dal began a large-scale agitation for a 'Punjabi Suba' (Punjabi province) that lasted until 1966, when the Indian government conceded to several of the Akali demands and reorganised Punjab and the surrounding territories along linguistic lines.

In articulating their movement as an explicitly linguistic rather than religious one, the Akali Dal presented it as secular and inclusive. However, linguistic identity in post-Partition (Indian) Punjab was divided along communal lines. When Punjab was reorganised in 1966, the new iteration was essentially a majority Sikh state. Thus, Punjabi came to be associated almost exclusively with Sikhs, and Sikhs began to view themselves as the vanguard of the Punjabi language. The Punjabi Subah is a crucial movement in modern Sikh history because it further naturalised the perceived contiguity between Punjab, Sikhs and Punjabi.

Although they achieved a victory with the reorganisation of Punjab, Sikh grievances and discontent with the Indian state persisted. This next phase of modern Sikh history must be understood as a phase of escalating tensions between the Akali Dal and Indian National Congress (INC), India's ruling party. While the Akali Dal represented Sikh interests, the Indira Gandhi-led

Congress Party's interest in Punjab was to promote the interests of its main support base, constituted by urban Hindus. While the INC interfered with the Akali Dal's ability to govern effectively in Punjab, the Akali Dal also remained a thorn in the former's side because of its persistent resistance to central control. This led to Akali–Congress animosity, which remained entrenched for decades to come.

In 1973, the Akali Dal summarised their grievances and demands in a published document called the 'Anandpur Resolution' (ASR). The document made an overarching demand for a stronger federalist system granting individual states greater powers, a demand that anticipated Indira Gandhi's penchant for centralising power. Another demand was that the remaining Punjabi-speaking areas not already incorporated into Punjab be included in the state, and also that the Punjabi capital of Chandigarh be changed from a centrally-administered Union Territory and be incorporated into Punjab instead. While these demands appear to be simple enough, the document itself represented an amalgamation of several competing interests among Sikhs, which ultimately made it ineffectual. Although its demands were largely secular, they were 'couched in the terminology of religious nationalism' (Mandair 2015, 128), and went so far as to claim that the 'fundamental policy of the Shiromani Akali Dal is to seek the realisation of this birthright of the Khalsa through the creating of a geographical entity and a constitutional set-up of its own' (ASR). This blurring of the religious–secular binary made the ASR a dangerously transgressive document. Although the Akali Dal president declared that the document was not calling for a separate Sikh state, many certainly viewed it as a secessionist document. The period between 1973 and 1984 was characterized by increasing political and economic instability in the Centre, and large-scale civil disobedience campaigns led by the Akali Dal.

This period also happened to coincide with the rise of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a

popular preacher and head of the Sikh religious institution Damdami Taksal, who argued for the implementation of the ASR and for greater Sikh autonomy in general. Bhindranwale vocally disseminated an anti-Indian rhetoric and urged Sikhs to join his cause, gaining broad support among rural Sikhs. The government, along with the media, highlighted Bhindranwale at the expense of other Sikh factions, including the Akali Dal. His supporters had clashes with opposing groups as well as the police and paramilitary forces. 'By neatly conflating the image of Bhindranwale as the arch "Sikh terrorist" with the "Punjab problem," "Khalistan" and the "Hindu-Sikh conflict," the Sikhs as a whole came to be perceived as the enemy within, ready at any moment to collude with the "foreign hand" of India's arch-enemy and neighbor, Pakistan' (ibid, 131). The clash between the Indian government and Bhindranwale led to the Indian Army's invasion of Darbar Saheb Amritsar and several historical Gurdwaras throughout Punjab. The invasion set off a further chain of events that entrenched the mutual enmity between Sikhs and India and the generalized suspicion of Sikhs.

Between 1984 and 1995, Sikh militants waged war against the Indian state as part of a separatist movement, known as the Khalistani movement (named after the proposed Sikh homeland of 'Khalistan', which translates as the 'land of the pure'). India responded by repressing the movement, arresting its leaders and declaring President's Rule in Punjab from 1987 to 1992. The atmosphere in Punjab was a turbulent one at the time and both the state apparatus and militants inflicted violence. The state profiled young Sikh men who wore turbans and beards en masse, essentially criminalising them (Axel 2001). The events of 1984 and the Khalistani movement have been crucial to shaping contemporary Sikh identity.

Although there were a variety of Sikh responses to the events of 1984, it is certainly true that it marked a watershed moment for modern Sikh identity as a whole and galvanized an entire

generation of Sikhs. 1984 made it necessary for all Sikhs to take up a particular position on the matter of Sikh politics, even if that position was an outright rejection of separatist sentiments or a form of political apathy. For many Sikhs, they 'forced a reevaluation of the Sikh community's place in India, a restructuring of the community's institutions and organizations, [and] rupture of its traditions' in a 'framework largely determined by a state bound by a different set of agenda [*sic*]' (Tatla 2015, pp. 316–317). The Khalistani movement lasted until the mid-1990s, since when there has been a cessation in major hostilities between Sikhs and the central government.

The Sikhs' current situation in Punjab is characterized by increasing social, cultural and political assimilation with the rest of India. Anti-Indian sentiment has largely subsided, and the Sikh elites favour peaceful coexistence. This does not mean that Khalistani discourse has completely vanished; there is a small but dedicated minority within Punjab that remains committed to it, and it has a resurgence in popularity from time to time when some event sparks the collective ire of Sikhs. The movement continues to receive great deal of support in the Sikh diaspora. The idea that Sikhs are an ethnoreligious nation remains embedded within collective Sikh consciousness even while the separatist embers have largely gone out.

> This section has illustrated that there is a particular narrative thread running throughout modern Sikh history which defines Sikhism in particularistic terms. This interpretive framework is inextricably linked with Sikhs' need to mobilize against both the colonial and Indian state. They have adopted the language of self-determination, nationhood, and history to naturalize their territorial claims, and this particular interpretation of Sikh identity remains influential and pervasive among Sikhs in Punjab as well as throughout the diaspora. E. 1966–Present Day: Akali-Congress Tensions, '1984' and the Khalistani Movement

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From 1975 to 1977 Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency across the country, a period officially known as 'the Emergency'. Gandhi cited threats to national security, an

economy weakened by drought, oil crises and strikes, and growing disorder across the country as reasons necessitating this action. There was resistance across the nation, in response to which Gandhi ordered a massive crackdown on protests and the arrest of opposition leaders. In Punjab, the Akali Dal launched a large-scale campaign of civil disobedience, and it is estimated that up to 40,000 Akalis were arrested during this time period (Grewal 1991, 214). Gandhi was ousted from power in 1977 but returned in 1980, leading to renewed tensions between Gandhi and the Akali Dal.

Although back in power in 1980, Gandhi and the INC faced unprecedented threats to their electoral base and needed to make changes to its rhetoric in order to stay in power. This period happened to coincide with the rise of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a popular preacher and head of the Sikh religious institution Damdami Taksal, who argued for the implementation of the ASR and for greater Sikh autonomy in general. Bhindranwale vocally disseminated an anti-Indian rhetoric and urged Sikhs to join his cause, gaining broad support among rural Sikhs.

Several commentators have noted that this phase of Sikh history must be understood not just as an explosion of communal rage, but also as part of an effort by the Congress-led central authority to retain control. Mandair notes that Congress Party's 'solution to this dilemma was to divert the attention of the Hindu voting bloc by recreating the figure of a new internal enemy of the Hindus: the Sikhs. Indira Gandhi and her policy makers did this by derailing the Akali Dal's ostensibly secular and non-violent stance' (2015, 129). The government, along with the media, highlighted Bhindranwale at the expense of other Sikh factions, including the Akali Dal. His supporters had clashes with opposing groups as well as the police and paramilitary forces. 'By neatly conflating the image of Bhindranwale as the arch "Sikh terrorist" with the "Punjab problem," "Khalistan" and the "Hindu-Sikh conflict," the Sikhs as a whole came to be perceived

as the enemy within, ready at any moment to collude with the "foreign hand" of India's arch-enemy and neighbor, Pakistan' (ibid, 131).

In 1983 Bhindranwale moved into the Golden Temple complex and began stockpiling weapons. The central government allowed him to set up and reinforce his base without interference until June 1984, when it sent the Indian Army to invade the Golden Temple and destroy Bhindranwale and his supporters. Many Sikhs were arrested and killed during the attack as well as in the immediate aftermath. Months later, Indira Gandhi's Sikh bodyguards assassinated her in retribution for the attack, which set off a wave of anti-Sikh protests in Delhi and throughout India (Singh, Kushwant 1999).

The events of 1984 were a watershed moment for modern Sikh identity, galvanising an entire generation of Sikhs and instilling in them a sense that Sikhs are a sovereign nation trapped in the confines of India. For the next decade, Sikh militants waged war against the Indian state as part of a separatist movement, known as the Khalistani movement (named after the proposed Sikh homeland of 'Khalistan', which translates as the 'land of the pure'). India responded by repressing the movement, arresting its leaders and declaring President's Rule in Punjab from 1987 to 1992. The atmosphere in Punjab was a turbulent one at the time and both the state apparatus and militants inflicted violence. The state profiled young Sikh men who wore turbans and beards en masse, essentially criminalising them (Axel 2001). The events of 1984 and the Khalistani movement have been crucial to shaping contemporary Sikh identity. For many Sikhs, they 'forced a reevaluation of the Sikh community's place in India, a restructuring of the community's institutions and organizations, [and] rupture of its traditions' in a 'framework largely determined by a state bound by a different set of agenda [*sic*]' (Tatla 2015, pp. 316–317).

The Khalistani movement and discourse received a great deal of support in the Sikh diaspora, with diasporic Sikhs becoming much more politicised and aware of their religious identity.

The Khalistani movement lasted until the mid-1990s, since when there has been a cessation in major hostilities between Sikhs and the central government. The Sikhs' current situation in Punjab is characterised by increasing social, cultural and political assimilation with the rest of India. Anti-Indian sentiment has largely subsided, and the Sikh elites favour peaceful coexistence. This does not mean that Khalistani discourse has completely vanished; there is a small but dedicated minority within Punjab that remains committed to it, and it has a resurgence in popularity from time to time when some event sparks the collective ire of Sikhs. The notion of Sikhs as being a distinctive nation with their own unique history and homeland has remained relatively constant since Partition, and remains embedded within collective Sikh consciousness even while the separatist embers have largely gone out.

IV. Sikh Mobility and transnationalism

There is a parallel Sikh history to be told – the history of Sikh migration to regions beyond Punjab. Sikh migration has been taking place since the pre-colonial period. As far back as the Guru period, many Sikhs travelled to and settled in regions beyond Punjab. Many of these early Sikhs ventured to other South Asian cities, such as Banaras, Patna (both in present-day Bihar), Dhaka (present-day Bangladesh), coastal Odisha and Dhubri (in present-day Assam), to establish businesses and trading outposts.

They also formed congregations in their new locations. Small groups of itinerant Sikhs came together to practice their faith through '*kirtan* (congregational singing), sat in *pangat* (in a

line) and participated in *langar* (community kitchen)', all of which fostered a sense of community (Banerjee 2013, 166). The Sikh Gurus also encouraged these faraway *sangats*, and over the centuries, these non-Punjabi Sikh communities continued to thrive. Thus, Sikh migration is not an exclusively modern, or even a colonial, phenomenon.

The modern era of Sikh migration began during the colonial period. Of the approximately 24 million Sikhs in the world, between 1.5 and 2 million live outside Punjab. The vast majority of these diasporic Sikhs live in the UK, Canada and the United States, although there are also significant numbers in Oceania, the Arab Gulf states, East Africa and the Far East (Singh and Fenech 2014). Despite 'different trajectories, Sikhs remain a well-defined community in every location, clearly demarcated from other South Asian communities and the host society' (ibid, 510). This is accomplished through the institution of the Gurudwara, which acts not only as a place of worship, but also as a place for social and political mobilisation for many diasporic Sikhs.

Perhaps the first famous example of a diasporic Sikh is Maharaja Duleep Singh, the last emperor of the Sikhs and the son of the famed Sikh emperor Ranjit Singh. Duleep Singh sat on the throne for five years as a young child, under the regency of others. Once the British took over, they exiled him to Britain in 1854 at the age of 15, where he lived for most of the rest of his life. Maharaja Duleep Singh's story of surrender, exile and diasporic existence is depicted opulently in much-circulated portraits from the era. Brian Axel suggests that the image of Duleep Singh first 'outlines the emergence of the Sikh as a preeminently mobile sign', and served as the first indication that Sikh *Panth* was becoming increasingly 'translocal' (Axel 63). The image and persona of Duleep Singh as a diasporic subject projects a sense of tragedy, for he is perceived among Sikhs as having lived a lonely and isolated existence. Axel rightly points out that the

themes apparent in the representation of Duleep Singh would often be incorporated into the way that Sikhs understand the diasporic experience.

For Sikhs in less exalted social positions, migration often transpired as a result of British colonial practices, especially through their policy of preferentially recruiting Sikhs for the British Indian Army and Civil Service (Tatla 1995). As soldiers for the British, Sikhs were sent to other British colonies in Africa, the Mediterranean and Europe, and many soldiers decided to settle in their new locales. Additionally, in the early twentieth century, Sikh soldiers also fought in the First and Second World Wars in large numbers, and some subsequently settled in the United Kingdom (Tatla 1995).

In addition to military service, Sikhs were also recruited to serve as civil service personnel or to work on other colonial projects, such as helping to build the railways in Uganda and Kenya, serving as police officers in Hong Kong, or working in the mines or as security personnel in Malaya. Malaya become such a popular destination that many Sikhs migrated there to work as 'caretakers, watchmen, bullock cart drivers [and] dairy keepers' (Tatla 1995, 70). From among these Malayan immigrants, some moved on to Thailand and Sumatra, and from there some Sikhs also went on to Australia, New Zealand and Fiji.

Colonial rule also affected the economic opportunities for Sikh farmers. During British rule, Punjab became a large exporter of grain, which brought in surplus cash and began to make voluntary migration possible for Sikh peasants. Much of the migration to North America, in particular, was enabled by these cash surpluses. Sikhs began making their way to North America at the turn of the twentieth century, both to Canada and the United States. They settled mostly in Southern California or the Pacific northwest regions of Oregon, Washington and British Columbia. They worked on 'California farms, on the Pacific Railways, and various sawmills of

British Columbia, Oregon, and Washington' (Singh and Fenech 2014, 3). Many of these Sikhs did not arrive directly from Punjab, but came from other British colonies, such as Hong Kong and Singapore (Tatla 1995). Once they had arrived, they built Gurudwaras in Stockton, California, and Vancouver, British Columbia, that remain active to this day. However, both the United States and Canada increased immigration restrictions against Asians in the 1920s, leading to a significant dwindling of Sikh and other Asian immigrants to those countries.

As early as the start of the twentieth century, diasporic Sikhs had a variety of links with Punjab. In the early 1900s, Canadian and Malayan Sikhs sent funds to the Chief Khalsa Diwan in Amritsar in Punjab (a charitable organisation that was also affiliated with the Singh Sabha reform movement) in order to help with the construction of a young girl's school (Singh and Fenech 2014, 507). Throughout the 20th century, Sikhs abroad have sent funds to aid with or fund the construction of new infrastructure, help repair or expand Gurudwaras, and support family members. Multiple Sikh diasporic organisations have formed whose primary purpose is to send aid to Sikhs (and others) in Punjab or India.

Diasporic Sikhs have also shown an inclination to become involved with the politics in their homeland. An early example of this is the Ghadar Party, a revolutionary anticolonial organisation aiming to bring about Indian independence from the British. The Ghadar Party, which derived its name from an Arabic word meaning 'rebellion' or 'insurrection', was founded in San Francisco in 1913. Although it was a pan-Indian organisation, its members were principally Sikhs from Punjab. Party members often met at Gurudwaras along the western coast of North America. The Gurudwaras 'served as sites for […] resistance, anticolonial mobilization, and state surveillance', and were also linked with other Gurudwaras across the Pacific Ocean, forming a 'network of labor migration and anticolonial politics' (Sohi 2014, 6). The party

published a weekly newspaper named *The Ghadar*, and many party members returned to India (principally Punjab) to carry out revolutionary activities and mobilise the populace to resist the British. Sikhs in the Ghadar Party viewed anticolonial resistance as being continuous with, and even mandated by, Sikh ideology, but they did not necessarily consider themselves as being at odds with the rest of India.

After the Parition of Punjab in 1947, Sikhs began migrating overseas in search of new opportunities. This was particularly true of those Sikhs who, having had to migrate from West Punjab to East Punjab due to Partition, were left with a relatively small allocation of land. This happened to coincide with the gradual relaxation of immigration policies among many Western nations. The United Kingdom opened its doors to immigrants in order to help make up for labour shortages in the post-War period, and Canada and the United States reversed their earlier restrictions against Asian immigrants. During the late 1960s and 1970s, these countries became major destinations for many Sikh migrants, mostly farmers but some professionals as well (Singh and Fenech 2014).

Throughout the 1980s and up until the mid-1990s, Punjab was a site of political upheaval. While it is difficult to trace the exact nature of the effect this upheaval had upon Sikh migration, Pashaura Singh and Louis Fenech argue that 'Punjab's political culture and periodic instability and the Sikh peasantry's highly competitive social ethos gave rise to an incipient culture of migration' (2014, 5). It is certainly the case that the Sikh diaspora not only provided fertile ground for Khalistani discourse, but also provided material and moral support for the movement. The institution of the Gurudwaras proved to be 'an important site of mobilization […] for the Khalistan movement, both directly through the raising of funds, and indirectly, through promoting a highly stylized version of the conflict and Sikh history' (Fair 2005, 132). Militant

groups had been shown to have international supporters who assisted with coordinating their activities and providing material support. Diasporic Sikhs also created new media outlets in order to help promote Khalistani discourse, including newspapers, magazines, and starting in the mid-1990s, digital content as well.

Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, several diasporic Sikh organisations have formed whose primary purpose is not to help facilitate linkages with Punjab, but to help Sikhs integrate into their new host communities. These organisations, such as the Sikh Coalition and Sikh-American Legal Defense and Education Fund (Saldef) in the United States, avoid framing themselves as diasporic organisations, preferring instead to describe themselves as community development organisations. This is a significant shift, suggesting that the Sikh population in these countries is large enough and has been residing there long enough (to include second- and third-generation Sikhs) that they feel that Sikhs should be able to seamlessly become a part of their host nations and imbibe their social and political culture. This development also happened to coincide with 9/11, after which public discourse in liberal Western nations has revolved much more around state security and defeating terrorist threats. Accordingly, organisations such as Sikhnet and Saldef have shifted the focus of the Sikh community in the United States away from Punjab politics, and towards achieving greater assimilation with their new societies.

Sikh migration from Punjab still continues apace today. A cottage industry consisting of professionals such as travel agents, marriage bureaus and educational institutions has evolved in Punjab for those who seek to make the move. Additionally, family networks continue to provide links and support between Sikhs abroad and those in Punjab, particularly since every village in Punjab has at least a few households with members who have emigrated abroad.

V. Conclusion

As we have seen, the narratives of Sikhism as either an ethnic nation or a world religion have both been mobilized at different historical moments, and are pervasive among the Sikh diaspora. As I will discuss in the following chapters, the narrative of Sikhism as a world religion is closely linked with the interpretation of Sikhism as an authentically liberal religion grounded in abstract values and ideals. The Sikh diaspora is not ideologically homogenous, but contains many different perspectives and even intra-diasporic tensions. I focus on one particular segment of Sikh diasporic discourse because this segment is crucial to understanding the emerging character of Sikh diaspora, and the developing relationship between the putative 'margin' (the diaspora) and 'center' (Punjab) of Sikhism.

Chapter 4: Overview of Websites

I. Introduction

In the following section, I briefly introduce each of the websites that I analyse in the subsequent chapters. For the purposes of this chapter only, I have organised the websites by character type in order to convey something about their general look, 'feel', character and construction. I will also give an overview of each website's central logic, its authorial voice and its intended audiences. The four categories I have identified are (1) activist websites, (2) lifestyle websites, (3) advocacy organisational websites, and (4) general interest websites. I offer this typology in order to convey how and why visitors might encounter these websites.

However, as I noted in the Introduction to this dissertation, I have organised the subsequent analytical chapters by rhetorical modality rather than category type. In the chapters immediately following this one, I will analyse how liberal diasporic Sikh websites rearticulate Sikhism as authentically liberal through three separate discursive strategies. These strategies are implicit rather conscientious, and this is precisely what makes them so powerful. The re-interpretation of Sikhism is accomplished not just through the adoption of liberal ideology, but also through the performance of liberal epistemology. This particular chapter serves as a way to familiarise the reader with the various data, before that data is filtered through this dissertation's primary conceptual framework.

II. Activist Websites

One of the categories of website I analyse is activist websites, which includes the official website of a progressive Sikh youth organisation called 'Jakara', as well as the Jakara-affiliated blog called 'The Langar Hall'. Both of these websites are self-consciously directed at Sikh youth in the diaspora, including school-aged children and adolescents, university students and young adults, as well as older professionals and social progressives. They are 'activist' in that they seek to bring about social and political change among the Sikh community, but also to help align Sikhs with other, larger social progressive movements. For them, the social progressivism of Sikhism is one of its greatest strengths and is something that should be highlighted and more fully realised. They are most likely to see Sikhism and Punjabi culture as occupying distinctive realms, and to argue for a clearer delineation between the two; while the former is viewed as having a great deal of politically progressive potential, the latter is viewed with much less enthusiasm. These websites' rationale for existing is that Sikhs need to develop spaces to discuss sensitive social and political issues, and the internet has helped to provide that space.

The salient feature of both of these youth activist websites is that they are blogs: The Langar Hall is explicitly a blog, while the Jakara website's content is disseminated primarily through its blog. A blog is a type of website that is characterised by regularly updated content, in the form of diary-like 'posts', presented in an informal and conversational idiom. Posts are displayed in reverse chronological order and are organised by tags and keywords, and typically allow for comments from readers. These technical differences make blogs more confessional in nature, creating a sense of intimacy and equality between the writer and audience. The very

adoption of a blogging format and label is itself a kind of discursive move, for it is more personal and dialogical than traditional websites.

Political and social blogs have become a key site of activist sub-cultures, and blogs are seen as an exemplary way to facilitate discursive activism (Shaw 2012, 2012b; Gabriel 2016; Crossley 2015). Discursive activism is defined as a 'speech or texts that seek to challenge opposing discourses by exposing power relations within these discourses, denaturalising what appears natural […] and demonstrating the flawed assumptions and situatedness of mainstream social discourse' (Shaw 2012). Moreover, in the context of activist blogs, 'it is not usually the individual blog post that is politically significant, but the network of interlinked blog posts on a shared topic' (Shaw 2012b, 375). Thus, one of the reasons that The Langar Hall and the Jakara website are able to disseminate their interpretation of Sikhism so effectively is precisely because the digital format they employ reinforces their message of social progressivism and disrupts traditional discursive norms.

A. Jakara.org and Thelangarhall.com

Both of the websites that fall under this category are affiliated with a Sikh youth organisation based in California called 'Jakara', a Sikh term that translates loosely as an invocation, a call or a 'shout in unison especially during religious service' (Punjabi-English dictionary, online). Jakara is an influential organisation among diasporic Sikh youth, particularly in the United States, and has a strong web presence. The website was launched in 2002 and is located at www.jakara.org. The organisation describes itself as a grassroots, community-mobilisation organisation that focuses largely on diasporic Sikh youth, but also engages in social issues that affect all Sikhs.

The second of the two websites I examine is a Jakara-affiliated blog called 'The Langar Hall' located at www.thelangarhall.com. The blog was started in December 2007 and remained active until its last post on 26 October 2014, although the archives remain online. The blog derives its name from the concept of '*langar*', which is literally translated as 'free community kitchen'. In the Sikh context, *langar* refers to the practice of Gurdwaras serving a free meal to all attendees, seated together, without distinction of caste, gender or economic status. A principle of radical equality is intrinsic to the very concept of *langar*. In most Western countries, the '*langar* hall' of a Gurudwara refers to the designated area where attendees sit together and eat, and although it is not officially permitted or encouraged, where they frequently talk to one another. Thus, the title of 'The Langar Hall' attempts to evoke a sense of egalitarianism, dialogue and the social space of a community.

For the purposes of conducting this research, I first accessed The Langar Hall in October 2015. Upon first viewing, the blog's visual and textual references reveal it to be both youth-oriented as well as activist in nature. The titles of its blog posts, and the accompanying images, are provocative and tend to embrace controversy rather than shy away from it. Common themes include feminism and gender equality, sexual abuse, gay rights, political oppression, immigrant rights and Sikh marginalisation. The design aesthetic also evokes Sikhism in subtle ways. The site's colour scheme is in bold hues of blue and white with touches of saffron (both blue and saffron are important colours in the Sikh tradition).[4] It offers relatively simple navigation, with a main body that continuously scrolls down to reveal new posts. There is also a relatively

[4] More recently, Sikhs have begun debating about whether saffron truly has historical importance in Sikhism, or whether this special status comes from modern Hinduism's adoption of saffron as a color with religious significance.

straightforward way of retrieving archives based on date and category using a drop-down menu, as well as links to subpages entitled ‘About’ and ‘Contact’.

The Jakara website is a much more comprehensive website than The Langar Hall, for although its central feature is also a blog, it provides a much broader array of information about the organisation’s activities and campaigns. Accordingly, the web design and navigational options are more complex. The current iteration of the website was launched in 2002, and I accessed the website between October and December 2015. The primary homepage backdrop is a blurred photographic image of a Sikh gathering known as a *Sarbat Khalsa*, which literally translates as ‘a collective meeting of the entire Sikh nation’, in which Sikhs periodically gather at Darbar Saheb, Amritsar, to debate and discuss pressing matters that affect Sikhs as a whole. The image of the *Sarbat Khalsa* is evocative, because it is meant to be a democratic, consensus-building process that is designed to help Sikhs move forward on controversial issues. From Jakara’s perspective, the concept of the Sarbat Khalsa echoes the way that it views its own role and mission, which is that of a space for discussion and debate on controversial issues.

The composite ‘authorial voice’ of The Langar Hall is that of a young, educated, second-generation diasporic Sikh who sits in an uncomfortable space vis-à-vis their relationship with Sikhism. The posts are written by several different writers, each of whom uses a pseudonym that is drawn from a Sikh or Punjabi context. Contextual clues peppered throughout the posts indicate that the authors are young adults who have grown up in the diaspora, principally in North America. The content and the tone in which the articles are written is not critical so much as confessional and exasperated. She feels irrevocably connected with it but is nevertheless discomfited by several Sikh practices, and is attempting to reconcile the two.

The Langar Hall's intended audience is multi-layered. At one level, the audience is largely the same as the composite persona of the author, which is a relatively young, diasporic Sikh who has an ambivalent relationship with Sikh identity, and who is willing to enter the dialogic space being constructed by The Langar Hall. Yet there is another, less apparent interlocutor, and that is the Sikh who resists or disagrees with The Langar Hall's progressive discourse on Sikhism. The blog functions as a polemical and persuasive discourse aimed at this more conservative Sikh, who would theoretically oppose the frankness and subversiveness of The Langar Hall's idiom. This imaginary interlocutor is invoked often, although never explicitly named.

There is some continuity between The Langar Hall and the Jakara website blog, although the latter focuses more on organisational announcements and Sikhism-related news, rather than on critical discussions. For this reason, both the authorial voice and the intended audience are less dynamic and more streamlined, but largely overlap with those of The Langar Hall.

III. Lifestyle Websites

A second category of websites that I examine is what I broadly term 'lifestyle' websites. This includes two separate websites, 'Kaur Life' and 'Kaurista', as well as a social media account, the Instagram account entitled 'StylewithKaur'. In many ways, lifestyle websites are a continuation of more traditional forms of lifestyle media, primarily magazines. There are three notable aspects of lifestyle discourse that are relevant for our context. First, this discourse is highly gendered, being focused largely on women. Secondly, as we will see, it is inherently particularistic. It is designed to appeal to and meet the needs of ever-proliferating, specific sub-cultures (of women),

and the internet has further facilitated this particularity. Thirdly, it is aspirational, in that it seeks to offer a model of norms and behaviour for women to work towards.

The concept of lifestyle covers a broad range of subjects, including dress, behaviour, travel, cuisine, leisure activities and interior design. More than that, it 'designate the tastes, attitudes, possessions or ways of behaving of any social group which distinguish it from any other social groups' (Abercrombie et al., 2006). Thus, lifestyle differences not only reflect group identities, they also further engender them. Some examples of these particular group identities include 'working mothers, female fitness enthusiasts, sophisticated black women, and fashion-forward twenty-somethings' (Duffy 2013, 4), each of whom is construed as possessing their own, unique lifestyle habits, needs and desires.

In recent decades, lifestyle discourse has migrated online, not just in the form of the digitised content of corresponding print magazines, but also in the form of 'digital-only' websites, blogs and social media accounts that are operated by individuals, particularly women. When this transition first began taking place in the 1990s and early 2000s, scholars presumed that it would lead to a greater degree of 'consumer control', 'redeployed power relations', 'digitally enabled social change' and 'upended media hierarchies' (Duffy 2015, 48). Instead, what has happened is that the imperatives of commercialism have taken on a new form, but still remain present in imperceptible ways. For instance, not only do many lifestyle websites engage in 'hierarchical, market-driven, and self-promotional' practices, but digital lifestyle discourse has also turned the very self into a 'brand' (ibid, 49).

One important effect that digital technologies have had on lifestyle discourse in Western countries is that it has enabled religious identity to be integrated into this matrix, particularly

those outside the fold of Western Christianity. Kavakci and Kraeplin (2017) note that 'many Muslims are finding digital products and spaces where faith and fashion co-exist', opening up space for what has been termed the 'Islamic culture industry' (852). Digital lifestyle discourse suggests that for Muslim women living in Western societies, multiple identities are overlapping: those of liberal secularism, consumerism, and Islamic religious and cultural mores. Diasporic Sikh women occupy a similar position, in which they must reconcile their Sikh identity with different dimensions of liberal secular citizenship, such as individualism and consumerism.

The particular websites I am studying focus on lifestyle and social issues, although they do not necessarily eschew political issues. They are similar to the youth activist websites detailed in the previous section in two ways. First, they target young, educated diasporic Sikhs who are trying to make sense of their Sikh identities, although this particular audience is primarily female. This is underlined by the fact that all three websites, 'Kaur Life', 'Kaurista' and 'Style with Kaur', incorporate 'Kaur', a Sikh religious surname for women, into their titles. The second similarity is that they draw a relatively clear boundary between Sikhism and Punjabi culture. Whereas 'Punjabiness' is seen as being synonymous with a particular lifestyle, Sikhism is viewed as being much more free-floating. These websites suggest Sikhism can indeed be grounded in liberal lifestyles, including individualism and consumerism.

A. Kaurlife.org

One of the websites I examine is Kaur Life, a lifestyle website founded in 2014 devoted to diasporic Sikh women's lifestyle issues. The website is located at KaurLife.org, and I first

accessed the website from October to December 2015. In defining its mission, the website states that it seeks not only to support Sikh women, but also to contribute to a world where 'Kaurs are empowered with self-confidence and the spirit of Sikhi', and where 'Kaurs are steadfast and solid in their identity as Sikh women'. (Kaurlife.org, 2017) Most of the website's content is largely contributed by readers themselves, sometimes posted under their real names, sometimes posted anonymously. The website's design is colourful and dominated by images. Each of the stories featured on the homepage is accompanied by large, evocative photographs, with many of them featuring Sikh women.

Kaur Life views itself as a supportive space where Sikh women can come for inspiration and guidance about how to stay committed to orthodox Sikh identity in diasporic contexts; it thus appears to be mostly conservative. The website's choice of categories is significant, because they belie an emphasis on Sikh practice. The links to the category subpages, listed on the main homepage, include '*Saroop*', 'Arts', 'Lifestyle', 'Equality', 'Cool Kaurs', 'Kirtan' and 'Around the Web'. The category of '*Saroop*' is particularly significant in the Sikh context. The word translates as 'Sikh form', and refers to the Sikh bodily form, which includes keeping unshorn hair and wearing turbans. (Kaurlife.org, 2017) It is a metaphor for the physical expression of Sikh identity, an identity that cannot be hidden away but is visible to everyone at all times. The specific articles included in this category seek to strengthen the resolve of Sikh women, and to show them that it is possible to resist Western cultural expectations even though it may not necessarily be easy. The inclusion of this category shows that Kaur Life assumes its reader has a stake in being an active Sikh, rather than a passive one.

B. Kaurista.com

Kaurista is a Sikh women's lifestyle website founded in 2011 and located at www.kaurista.com, with the tagline 'young and fearless'. Like Kaur Life, Kaurista provides a space to broach topics that are not readily discussed among Sikh women, including dating, sexual assault and interfaith marriages, among other things. This ethos is reinforced by the website's logo, which consists of the website's name in large, capital typeface, on top of which sits a vibrant, hot pink-coloured crown. The image immediately evokes a relaxed, tongue-in-cheek, youthful sensibility. The different sub-page categories listed in the header include 'Self', 'Health and Beauty', 'Inspiration', 'Entertainment', 'Singh's Space', 'Community' and 'Ask Kaurista', all categories that are much more oriented around Western lifestyle categories rather than religious practice.

In contrast to Kaur Life, which is more concerned with strengthening Sikh identity among diasporic Sikh women, Kaurista seeks to play a more neutral role. The website takes on the persona of a best friend or confidante, one who is always supportive and non-judgemental. One of the website's primary features is an advice column called 'Ask Kaurista'. The column often addresses matters are not publicly discussed in traditional Sikh fora, and which are often (implicitly) viewed as contrary to Sikh belief, such as dating. The very fact that the website addresses these issues is a radical one. In so doing, Kaurista legitimises these issues and the very process of modernisation and acculturation through which they arise. (Kaurista, 2017)

C. 'Style with Kaur' Instagram Account

I also examine the Instagram account of Karan Kaur, whose account goes by the name of 'Style with Kaur'. The account was started in 2014, and I accessed it between February and May 2016. It consists exclusively of images that depict Karan Kaur in different outfits, poses and international locales. Karan Kaur may be described as sleek, sophisticated and modern. She has received attention from other Sikh media, such as the Kaurlife.org, which published an interview with her in August 2014. Her attire is largely Western, but also includes South Asian clothing. She sports a large variety of designs and colours. The consistent feature throughout all of the various iterations of Karan Kaur is her turban, usually black, but sometimes in other colours as well. The turban is the one constant throughout all of the images, an instant signifier of her religious identity.

This particular digital site is shaped by the conventions of Instagram, which is a photo- and video-sharing service that allows for virtually no text. Thus, by design, Instagram encourages users to post photographs that contain context clues within the image itself. This leads users to create images that are well thought-out, curated, posed and highly edited. It also places a high premium on creativity and uniqueness. In order to stand out on Instagram, photographs must be unique and have their own special imprint. Whether casual or formal, there is nothing incidental about the photographs or the outfits. As much as it is a tribute to Sikh women, the account is also a tribute to the vision and taste of Karan Kaur in particular. All of the elements are carefully thought-out and contribute to her overall ethos as a beautiful and cosmopolitan young Sikh woman. 'Style with Kaur' represents the successful integration of Sikh women into the neoliberal logic of conspicuous consumption, despite their external religious

differences. Thus, the narrative of individuality and empowerment is co-opted by neoliberal imperatives.

IV. Advocacy Organisation Websites

The next category of websites that I examine is what I term 'advocacy organisation websites', or those websites that are affiliated with Sikh advocacy organisations. The particular websites I examine happen to associated with organisations centred largely in the United States. Two of the websites are for the Sikh Coalition and the Sikh American Legal Defense & Education Fund. The third website is for an organisation called United Sikhs, which is an international humanitarian organisation that has offices in several countries. Their activities include lobbying for legal changes on matters pertaining to Sikhs, garnering support among Sikhs on issues that they believe deserve their collective attention, and offering media expertise about Sikhism when the need arises. The United Sikhs also participates in various humanitarian campaigns around the world, such as disaster relief.

The work of these organisations takes place in the 'offline' sphere, but their online presence also serves several crucial functions. Their respective websites (along with other forms of digital outreach) serves as the principle marketing, recruiting and information-delivery system for these organisations. Rather than being simply incidental to their work, the website has become an integral document, one that each organisation uses not only to define its own character, but also to define and widely disseminate a vision of contemporary Sikh identity.

The websites represent the realisation of Sikhism as a universal religion, for it situates Sikhism squarely in the liberal secular domain and offers a glimpse of how this situatedness is

achieved. Notably, these websites do not acknowledge a direct connection between Sikhism and Punjabi culture, for such a connection is irrelevant to their mandate. Rather, they focus on framing Sikhs as model Americans, or Sikhism as a universal world religion.

A. SikhCoalition.org

The Sikh Coalition is a Sikh advocacy organisation in the United States. The organisation was founded in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and the website, www.sikhcoalition.org, went online in October 2001. I accessed the website between October and December 2015. The website describes them as a 'community-based organization' whose goal is to help create a world where Sikhs may freely practice and enjoy their faith. Like most such organisations, the Sikh Coalition has multiple target audiences. In this case, the audiences include the American public, as well as Sikhs themselves. (Sikh Coalition, 2017)

The Sikh Coalition website is a modern, professional website that features information about its activities, resources for those wishing to know more about Sikhism, and ways for interested individuals to become involved with the work of the organisation. The website's colour scheme is orange and blue, two colours that, as I mentioned in the context of 'The Langar Hall', have deep associations with Sikhism. Underneath the main logo on the website's homepage is written 'the voice of a people', a phrase that has multiple effects. It positions American Sikhs as 'a people', or a singular and unified collectivity. It also argues that they are a marginalised population in need of a voice to represent them and advocate on their behalf. And lastly, it positions the Sikh Coalition as the single most authoritative voice in Sikh activism in the United States.

The Sikh Coalition seems to eschew defining itself as a diaspora community organisation. It does not address itself to Sikhs' homeland, either Punjab or India, in any way, and treats Sikhs more as a member community of the American social landscape rather than as a diaspora. Thus, even while it meets some of the requirements of a 'diaspora community organization', which are organisations that 'provide the services and representations that their community needs to improve their situation and adapt to their new host environment' (Taveras 2011, 12), it does not meet the most basic requirement of actually helping to maintain ties to the host region or country, or even viewing its constituent community as a diaspora. The website focuses its content on Sikhism-related events in the United States, providing no textual or visual reference to Punjab.

B. Saldef.org

I also examine the web discourse of another Sikh advocacy organisation, the Sikh American Legal Defense & Education Fund (Saldef). Saldef was founded in 1996 and went online at www.saldef.org that same year. I initially accessed the website between October and December 2015. The Saldef organisation and website are totally independent of the Sikh Coalition, but because their work overlaps to such a large degree and they are catering to the same base, it is impossible not to compare and contrast the two organisations.

Like the Sikh Coalition website, the Saldef website has the look and feel of a brochure for Sikhs in America, but it has a more familiar and colloquial style. Its headlines are more animated, punctuated by the use of exclamation marks, and the homepage is dominated by images rather than text. Saldef does not assume such an authoritative position vis-à-vis Sikhs as

the Sikh Coalition in America, presenting itself more as a concerned party working on behalf of Sikhs rather than as the singular, authoritative representative. Through both textual and visual means, the Saldef website redefines Sikhism as recognisable, relatable and fundamentally amenable to the middle-class values of the modern United States. (Saldef, 2017)

C. UnitedSikhs.org

United Sikhs is an international humanitarian organisation that engages in various campaigns throughout the world. The website is located at www.unitedsikhs.org and was launched in 1999. I accessed this website from May 2016 to September 2016. In contrast to the Sikh Coalition and Saldef, United Sikhs' primary orientation is global, rather than national. The homepage has a relatively simple design but contains links to several different category subpages, giving the impression that it is a comparatively 'large' and complex website. Like the other websites in this category, the focus is not on the individual writers or contributors, but on the organisational ethos as a whole. The primary audience is slightly different, because while it is certainly aimed at Sikhs, it is also aimed at a certain non-Sikh public – those visitors who are globally aware, cosmopolitan, socially progressive and interested in humanitarian aid.

The website negotiates a central tension between defining itself primarily as a humanitarian organisation without a partisan religious agenda versus defining itself as primarily a Sikh organisation. The subpages listed at the top of the homepage include 'Civil and Human Rights', 'Multifaith', 'Community Service' and 'Empowerment and Education', all of which are conspicuous in their non-partisanship. The 'About Us' section of the website describes the organisation as a 'U.N. affiliated, international non-profit, non-governmental, humanitarian

relief, human development and advocacy organization' that aims to empower 'disadvantaged and minority communities'. It further describes itself as a 'grass-roots organisation' that believes in the 'development of enlightened and progressive societies', 'participating in cross-cultural and social dialogues' and in working with 'coalitions that share a common vision based on the belief that there is no greater endeavour than to serve, empower and uplift fellow beings'. At no point on the lengthy page does the website describe the organisation's work as being to specifically advance Sikh interests, to protect the rights of Sikhs or to fulfil a Sikh vision of society. (United Sikhs, 2017)

Nevertheless, the website does have a clear connection with Sikhism, muted though it may be. Although the website never explicitly states as much, its very reason for existing is to realise what it believes to be the Sikh commitment to charity and social justice on a global scale. The very name of the organisation as well as its aid programme, 'Sikh Aid', prominently featured on its website, indicates this. Much of the content on the website is dispensed in the form of press releases, and one of the purposes of these documents is to declare Sikh solidarity with communities around the world who have been victimised by terrorism, natural disasters or governmental oppression. The website constructs a general, abstract 'Sikh community' and serves as the representational voice for it. The press releases act as a way to mediate interfaith and intercultural relations, ensuring readers that Sikhs are charitable, peaceable and willing to stand with others. Thus, while there is certainly a central tension between constructing a global discourse versus constructing a particular Sikh discourse, this tension is largely resolved by interpreting Sikhism as being intrinsically amenable to global humanitarianism.

V. General Interest Websites

The final category of website that I discuss is what I term ‘general interest websites’, a category that is defined not just by its generality, but also by its avowed neutrality and apolitical nature. The three websites that fall under this category, ‘Sikhnet’, ‘SikhChic’ and ‘Sikhri’, all ostensibly exist to provide information, resources and general commentary on Sikh affairs. In contrast to the websites discussed thus far, they are aimed at educated, older, mature diasporic Sikhs. However, the apoliticality of these websites is misleading. They do not eschew the political, but they rest upon a particular understanding of the relationship between religion and politics. This understanding is that the essence of Sikhism is located in its spiritual practice. While Sikhs can and do have political concerns, the political exists beyond the fundamental substance of Sikhism.

A. Sikhnet.com

The first website in this category is Sikhnet, which is one of the oldest and most comprehensive Sikhism-related websites online. Located at www.sikhnet.com, the website went online in its present iteration in 1996. I researched the website from October 2015 to March 2016. Sikhnet is an independently registered corporation, and the website acts a news and resource portal for Sikhs worldwide. It features Sikhism-related news stories from around the world, educational cartoons and videos for children, *Gurbani*-related audio downloads, a 24-hour streaming radio service, a matrimonial service, discussion forums and editorial comment. Of all of the websites I examined, Sikhnet’s content and web design changed the most frequently, something that is probably a function of its dedicated professional staff. Over time, Sikhnet has become a well-known and respected brand among Sikhs, instantly recognisable as a professionally operated and resourceful website.

Sikhnet explicitly emphasises its neutrality in multiple ways. It describes itself as a 'global virtual community for Sikhs' that seeks to provide 'spiritual education and resources in a non-judgemental, neutral environment intended to inspire and uplift all those who participate in it'. It aspires to be 'universal, uniting, inspirational, uplifting and neutral', while refraining from taking sides in controversial Sikh topics. Many of its founding members and present-day staff are affiliated with a sect of white American Sikhs known as the 'Happy, Healthy, Holy Organization', more commonly referred to as '3HO'. While Sikhnet does include information about 3HO founder Yogi Bhajan and his beliefs throughout the site, the site's explicit focus is on Sikhism and the Sikh community more broadly. It disavows any attempt to proselytise about Yogi Bhajan or 3HO, stating that it is not 'funded by, nor does it represent, 3HO or any other sect, or organization'. (Sikhnet, 2017)

Despite its assertion of neutrality, I suggest that Sikhnet actually does make several provocative arguments, even though these claims are often presented as facts. It argues that Sikhism should be defined and understood as a diverse and cosmopolitan tradition, and one of the key vectors of diversity, as Sikhnet understands it, is ethnicity. Sikhnet prominently displays images of white Sikhs throughout the website, something that is not seen on the other websites I examine. In the subsequent chapters, I will further analyse how this aspect of Sikhnet complicates the discursive relationship between Sikhism and Punjab. For now, I simply point out that the inclusion and naturalisation of such images does indeed constitute a kind of argument. Like all texts, Sikhnet is not without its own, uniquely textured claims.

B. SikhChic.com

SikhChic, located at www.sikhchic.com, was founded in 2007 as a daily online magazine that covers art and culture in the Sikh diaspora. I researched this website from October 2015 to December 2015. Sikhchic's content is diverse and does not have an obvious central focus. It covers Sikhism-related topics across the geographical and historical spectrum, although it keeps its focus on the diaspora. It features reports, stories and opinion pieces. Much of its content is reprinted from other news outlets and re-edited for the SikhChic website, but there is a considerable amount of original content as well.

SikhChic developed out of what was perceived to be the lack of an independent media space for Sikhs. In the 'Our Mission' section of the website, website founder and editor T. Sher Singh writes that the idea for SikhChic developed out of the need for Sikhs to have an independent media presence: 'some small space to stand on and share thoughts and ideas with others in the community. With full-throated ease. Without fear of censure and chastisement.' (SikhChic, 2017) For SikhChic, having a space to share thoughts and ideas is clearly crucial for any community's growth and well-being. The website draws on traditional Western media tropes, particularly those found in print journalism, to create content that humanises Sikhs and gives them agency. It also selectively highlights stories in the mainstream Western media that cover Sikhs and Sikhism-related issues.

SikhChic relies a great deal on visual imagery and has a colourful web design. The main body of the homepage consists of a number of recently featured stories with accompanying pictures, and the stories displayed on the homepage are rotated frequently. Sitting atop the SikhChic homepage is a header that lists the different categories and subpages on the website. The list is vast in scope and includes 16 different categories, such as 'film/stage', 'poetry', 'sports', 'fashion' and 'humour'. Additional categories throughout the website include

‘roundtable’, ‘talking stick’, ‘1984’, ‘resources’, ‘heroes’, ‘friends’, ‘1947’, ‘current events’, ‘Sighing answers’ and ‘daily fix’. Such a wide range of categories creates the impression that SikhChic is an exhaustive and compendious website, although notably much of the content is borrowed from other news sources and reprinted on the site. The website manages to be both highly produced as well as highly familiar, creating the expectation that the content will be both journalistic as well as personal.

Although SikhChic views itself largely as a neutral informational resource and discussion space, it nevertheless performs a certain intellectual role. SikhChic actively humanises Sikhs by interpolating them into the prevalent Western media narratives and presenting them in a positive light. Its content is geared towards highlighting Sikh success stories, such as Sikh athletes, artists, politicians and celebrities. Such positive representations function as a way of illustrating that Sikhs possess the values and capacities required for a community to thrive in a liberal society. Positive representations generate ‘recognition’ of Sikhs, both in the literal as well as the social sense of the term. Thus, although SikhChic initially appears to have a relatively straightforward mandate, it is actually performing a discursive argument about the appropriate mode of Sikh representation.

C. Sikhri.org

The final website I examine is that of the Sikh Research Institute (hereafter Sikhri), located at www.Sikhri.org. Sikhri is a non-profit research institute that produces educational content about Sikhism, and is aimed at both Sikhs and non-Sikhs. I researched the website from October 2015 to April 2016. The organisation was founded in 2009 and is based in New Jersey in the United

States. It is a sleek, professional and technologically driven organisation. The website plays a large role in how the organisation promotes itself, delivers its content and disseminates its philosophy.

Sikhri describes itself as an educational content provider, but it would be more accurate to call it a Sikh consulting firm. Like all effective consulting firms, Sikhri (1) identifies a fundamental lack or problem (in this case, among the Sikh community), (2) articulates what is at stake if this lack remains unaddressed, and (3) positions itself as uniquely able to fill this particular gap. The gap that Sikhri seeks to ameliorate is one that would be familiar to most diasporic Sikhs, and it is that diasporic Sikhs have been unable to effectively transmit Sikh knowledge to subsequent generations of Sikhs. What is at risk, which remains implicit throughout Sikhri's discourse, is that Sikhs will eventually lose sight of their tradition. (Sikhri, 2017)

Sikhri offers strategic solutions to address this problem. The content it produces includes Sikhism-related curriculum aimed at various age levels, custom-designed workshops, and week-long conferences for Sikh professionals seeking to connect with Sikhism on a deeper level. It has programmes designed for children, parents, Sunday school teachers, young adults and Gurudwara management boards. It also produces articles and reports, as well as a podcast. In 2014, it co-produced a play, called *Kultar's Mime*, which is designed to evoke conversations about the 1984 anti-Sikh violence in India. Sikhri builds its authority and ethos not only through its content, but also through its rhetorical choices. Its minimalistic web design and extensive use of business-speak underlines its credibility as a valid source of knowledge about Sikhism.

I characterise the Sikhri website as a 'general interest website' because, like Sikhnet and SikhChic, it claims to function as a neutral informational resource for Sikhs. Like these other two

websites, its content and rhetorical strategies contradict its claims in unexpected ways. Sikhri seeks ‘to connect people with the teachings of Sikhi, making them accessible and easy to digest, for people of all ages, genders and backgrounds’. However, while it makes Sikhism more legible, it also ends up defining Sikhism as cosmopolitan, spiritualistic and similar to self-help discourse. Thus, it proliferates a specific interpretation of Sikhism even when it claims not to.

VI. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have offered a general introduction to each of the websites that I will be analysing in more detail in the following analytical chapters. Many of the themes and motifs that I have pointed out in these descriptions will come up again. However, I will not be treating the websites or the website categories as the individual units of analysis. Rather, I will treat these websites as collectively constituting a single category, which is liberal diasporic Sikh discourse. I will illustrate how the basis for grouping all of these disparate websites together in such a way is not necessarily their content or explicit focus, but their shared, underlying interpretive strategies. The particular strategies I will draw out are selective translation, performing the critique of religion, and depicting Sikhs as virtuous citizens. This analytical frame will allow for a more considered analysis of how the websites’ implicit arguments can contradict their explicit intent.

Chapter 5: Discursive Modality - Translation

I. Introduction

This chapter is about how liberal diasporic Sikh discourse online translates Sikhism into the liberal secular imaginary. By translation, I refer to the way that this discourse embraces the idea of translation, as well as to how it uses translation as a technique for bringing Sikhism into the liberal secular imaginary. Scholars of religion frequently argue that translation involves far more than finding linguistic equivalencies for religious terms and concepts, but involves the 'expurgation' of 'ostensibly untranslatable' and 'irrational' aspects of religion (Calhoun 2011, 85), and the concomitant highlighting and centring of those aspects of religion that most readily conform to liberal secularity. Translation is not simply a self-evident tool that one can employ at will. It has a momentum of its own and is driven by the exigencies of power and ideology, and it often takes place spontaneously and imperceptibly.

This chapter examines how liberal diasporic Sikh discourse translates Sikh religious difference and bring it into the liberal secular system of equivalence. A great deal of the collective energy of Sikh institutions in the diaspora is dedicated to defining Sikhism, including its belief system, structure, and social practices. These definitions often appear to function as 'obvious' and 'unremarkable', given that they seem to be uncontroversial factual statements. Such definitions, however, are always a form of translation. This chapter shows how obvious and perfunctory definitions are formed and sustained.

There are two primary types of translation in liberal diasporic Sikh discourse online. The first occurs in the form of persuasive definitions, which is when the websites offer textual or visual definitions or representations of Sikhism in what appears to be a relatively factual way, but which are nonetheless argumentative. By their very nature, such definitions obscure the fact of their own argumentativeness. By unpacking them, it becomes apparent that certain aspects of Sikhism are foregrounded and posited as constituting the most authentic core of the religion. The websites that often feature such definitions are those that, ironically, do not directly engage in debates about what constitutes authentic Sikhism. For them, Sikhism is already a conceptually stable entity that possesses relatively clear contours. It is precisely these self-evident definitions of Sikhism that turn out to be much more opaque.

The second kind of translation, which I refer to as 'applied Sikhism', is when these websites apply Sikh principles to 'real-world' contexts. This particular form of translation operates both explicitly and implicitly within the discourse. It operates explicitly in the sense that, although the websites rarely use the word 'translation', many websites do see themselves as engaged in the critical interpretive work of making Sikh beliefs relevant to the realities of diasporic life. This includes discerning the appropriate Sikh position on topical political issues and confronting a more individual-centric vision of religiosity. It operates implicitly because it continues to take place even when there is no obvious attempt at putting Sikhism in conversation with another entity, such as a political ideology or stance, a religion or a quotidian reality. Thus, it operates through logic, figures of speech and reference choices.

This second form of translation also reveals that a dichotomy between Sikh beliefs and Sikh practices animates liberal Sikh discourse. As I stated in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, this discourse contains and perpetuates a dichotomy between religion and culture, and this dichotomy

can also be recast as one between 'Sikh beliefs' and 'Sikh practices'. Discursively, the former is treated as a conceptually stable and unitary entity, while the latter is understood to be inherently heterogenous. Sikh practices, in contrast, are thought to be those which result from the interpretation and application of Sikh beliefs to real-world contexts. Liberal Sikh discourse does not explicitly acknowledge or promote this as a framework for understanding Sikhism, but discloses it through the text in other ways, as I will suggest.

Both kinds of translation have a complicated relationship with the concept of 'authentic' Sikhism. On the one hand, liberal diasporic Sikh discourse undermines the notion that an authentic or originary Sikhism could be place-based. On the other hand, this discourse does effectively suggest that an authentic version of Sikhism exists, one that can be accessed only through truthful and enlightened interpretation. In each of the examples that I present in this chapter, the websites refer to or construct a definition of what is, for them, a pure version of Sikhism. From their perspective, each of their arguments is an authentic, if partial, representation. The promise of authenticity, more so than the exact content of it, is what is most important here. So, the concept of authentic Sikhism enables it to be continually reinterpreted, because the correct version of 'authentic' Sikhism can be continually contested and deferred while always remaining a tantalising possibility.

II. Persuasive Definitions of Sikhism

A. Invisible Logic and Ideological (In)Coherence through Composite Images

Among diasporic Sikh websites, persuasive definitions are frequently offered through visual means. There is a semiotic significance to all of the elements that appear on a website, and visual signs or graphics often function as ways to symbolically represent Sikh identity. This is particularly notable in the context of composite images, which contain several smaller, discrete images. They are unique visual signs because their semiotic significance derives not only from the individual images in them, but also from the relationship all the different elements have with one another and with the whole composite. The relationality is often opaque to the viewer, but nonetheless the composite image 'makes sense' because it is animated by the logic of liberalism.

Below I include two examples of composite images that depict Sikhs from seemingly diverse backgrounds, and which act as visual definitions of modern Sikh identity. The first is from Sikhnet.com, while the second is from SikhCoalition.com. In the section below, I will unpack the disparate elements of the collages and address their significance.

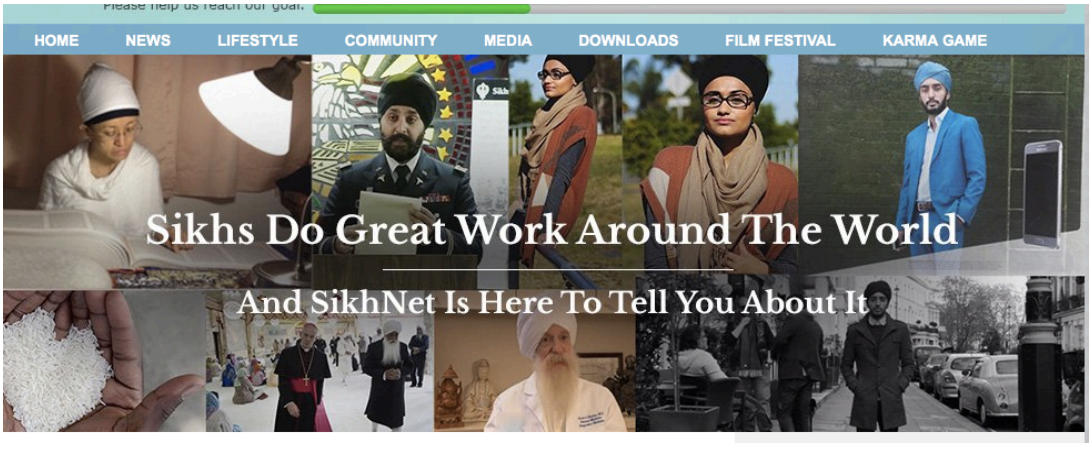


Figure 1. Sikhnet website graphic

This Sikhnet graphic has often been used as the homepage 'header image', which is the section that runs across the top of a given website's homepage and acts as a concise introduction to the entire website. At first glance, this graphic appears to be an ordinary and unremarkable picture. This particular header shows Sikhs of both genders, across a wide age range, and in multiple contexts (both religious and secular). The top row features a middle-aged woman reading from the Guru Granth Sahib, an image of a well-known (among Sikhs) Sikh-American army major named Major Kamaljeet Singh, two images of a young Sikh woman named Karan Kaur, known for her Instagram account of 'Style with Kaur', followed by an image of a young Sikh man from the Instagram account 'Singh Street Style'. The bottom row of the graphic includes an additional four images. It starts with a picture of a pair of cupped hands holding a white substance that looks like rice, and may be a type of puffed rice called *phulian* that is often dispensed as part of *parshaad* (a consecrated food offering dispensed at Gurdwaras). This is followed by an image of a Catholic priest and Sikh man walking together inside a Gurudwara, and an image of an elderly seated Sikh man looking towards the camera with small Buddhist statues placed upon a shelf behind him. The final image is a black and white image drawn from Singh Street Style, showing a similar (and possibly the same) young Sikh man standing on a busy sidewalk and looking towards the camera.

Why are these individual images meaningful, and why are they placed together in this way? In employing this collage, Sikhnet presumes that the images and their associations will immediately resonate with its audience. They are meaningful because they cite implicit liberal assumptions about the value of egalitarianism, secularism and consumerism. Liberalism functions as both the common thread that binds these individual images together as well as the

larger paradigm that gives them meaning. Not only do the individual images inhabit the liberal paradigm, but the liberal paradigm inhabits each of the images.

The picture of the middle-aged Sikh woman wearing a turban and reading from the Guru Granth Sahib evokes the fact that Sikh women can participate in this particular religious act. It is grounded in a liberal-inspired interpretation of gender equality as an equality of actions and opportunities. While Sikh women can theoretically read from the Guru Granth Sahib at any time, most *granthis* (custodians of Gurudwaras) are men. This particular image makes both a descriptive as well as prescriptive argument, highlighting the fact that Sikh women are granted full equality by Sikhism, while also serving as a reminder that this equality should be fully realised as often as possible. The picture also references an imagined dichotomy between the liberal egalitarian West and the patriarchal East, and situates Sikhism as contravening these traditional stereotypes of Eastern religions, placing it firmly on the side of the enlightened West.

The second image in the top row of the header is that of a turbaned Sikh man in an American military uniform speaking at a podium, and shows a glimpse of a large stained-glass window behind him. The man is Lieutenant Colonel Kamaljeet Singh Kalsi, a Sikh-American army doctor who was granted a religious accommodation by the US army in 2009 so that he could serve while keeping his turban and beard. He is frequently referenced in campaigns to allow Sikhs to serve in the US military while being able to wear their articles of faith. The image of Major Kalsi signals the desire for American Sikhs to assimilate into American public life. This contradicts two separate theoretical positions: those who would question Sikhs' loyalty to the liberal nation-state, and those who would question Sikhs' loyalty to their own tradition, viewing the Sikh community as a sovereign political entity. It suggests that maintaining Sikh religious

identity and liberal citizenship are not irreconcilable states of being, but can be (easily) integrated.

The third and fourth images are both of a young Sikh woman sporting a turban, wearing highly stylised clothing and posing like a fashion model. The side-by-side juxtaposition of the two images of the young woman striking two different poses draws attention to the woman's corporeality and mode of self-presentation. This young woman is a Punjabi-Sikh fashion blogger living in Australia named Karan Kaur, whose Instagram page, 'Style With Kaur', features photographs, mostly of herself, in various outfits. She has recently received attention both in the Sikh digital sphere and from some international press outlets, including Sikhnet, for her emerging status as a fashionable Sikh and Instagram personality. As an individual and as a symbol, Karan Kaur is merging Sikh identity with modern life in Western countries, where fashion is often viewed as an aspect of individual, authentic self-expression. She represents the view that one can authentically inhabit both Sikh and Western liberal identities.

The second row of the collage begins with the photograph of a Catholic priest and an elderly Sikh man with a long white beard walking out of a Gurudwara together, and is a visual reference to the concept of pluralism and inter-faith dialogue. Pluralism, or the 'commitment to recognize and understand others across perceived or claimed lines of religious difference' is a basic principle of liberal society and is 'embedded in a range of political, civic, and cultural institutions' (Bender and Klassen 2012, 2). The idea of inter-faith dialogue presumes that seemingly intractable religious differences can be transcended to arrive at a common terrain where a deeper affinity can be realised. This way of thinking is further predicated upon the belief that religious identity can and should be relegated to the private sphere, creating space for

religious groups to both literally and figuratively ‘meet’ on the basis of their shared humanity and citizenship.

This graphic translates Sikhism as a religion that is diverse but unified. It is egalitarian, hospitable, and has a strong sense of civic responsibility and a willingness to embrace Western cultural conventions. It is these images that are presented as definitive, rather than images of Sikhs socialising with other Sikhs, wearing traditional Punjabi clothes, or looking ill at ease in Western institutions. While this collage certainly displays a range of different ways of being Sikh in the modern world, it focuses this range squarely within liberal modernity.



Figure 2. Sikh Coalition website image

This particular header image, drawn from the Sikh Coalition’s ‘About Sikhs’ page, works in a very similar manner. Whereas the Sikhnet graphic defined Sikhs through their unity-in-diversity, this graphic makes references to subtler aspects of liberal belonging that have to do with personality and temperament. Liberal ideology not only produces a distinction between the

public and private space, it also produces ways of inhabiting the private sphere and of being a private citizen. The ideal liberal citizen is transparent, friendly, malleable and non-threatening. This image defines Sikhs as fundamentally embodying those qualities.

The collage contains six different images of Sikh individuals drawn from different times and places, juxtaposed to appear almost as if they are standing next to one another. It creates the illusion that the Sikhs are standing with their hands embracing one another, forming a half-circle and facing the camera. The heads of each individual Sikh are all positioned to look like they are at about the same height. They are all smiling and looking in the same direction, fully disclosing themselves to any viewers. The collage depicts the Sikhs as transparent, non-threatening and amenable to order and uniformity.

Like the Sikhnet image, this particular graphic is equitable in terms of how many female and males it includes, and in terms of the age range that it covers. The image self-consciously draws attention to the equal distribution of 'space' along gender lines. The egalitarianism has a performative element of it, highlighting the fact that not only is it important for Sikhs to practice gender equality, but it is equally important for Sikhs to be *seen* practising gender equality. Sikhism's egalitarianism must be foregrounded in recognisable ways, even in the relatively mundane context of creating a collage.

Both of these composite images are particularly potent examples of persuasive definitions. They are self-contained, are not accompanied by written text, and (by virtue of their very nature as header images) are meant to be quickly digested. While they purport to convey an obvious and uncontroversial message about Sikh identity, there is an actually an entire hidden liberal logic that renders them meaningful.

B. Expanding the Visual Grammar of the Sikh Race

In addition to composite images, other visual elements throughout these websites also function as persuasive definitions of Sikhism. Sikhnet, in particular, has produced several colour illustrations that either depict important figures and scenes from Sikh history, or that construct fictional scenes as a way of illustrating Sikh ideals. These illustrations are disseminated through the header images featured at the top of Sikhnet's webpages, or as part of an ongoing series of illustrations that are aimed at Sikh children. The latter kind of illustration is accompanied by an audio file that narrates the related story. The illustrations function as a didactic mechanism for proselytising a certain interpretation of Sikh identity.

Most Sikhs are ethnically Punjabi and most illustrations of Sikhs depict them as such, but the figures shown in these images are drawn as either ethnically ambiguous or as white. This interpretation expands the visual parameters of how Sikhs are typically represented. Below are four of the header images and four of the children's illustrations:



Figure 3. Sikhnet header A.



Figure 4. Sikhnet header B

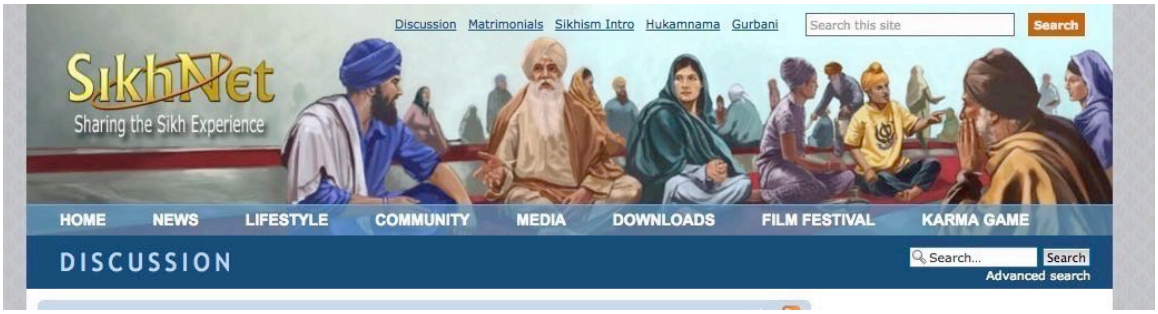


Figure 5. Sikhnet header C

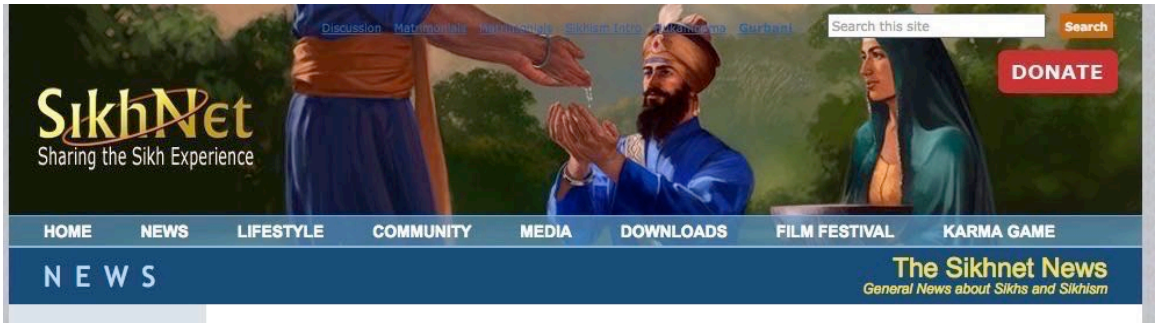


Figure 6. Sikhnet header D



Figure 7. Sikhnet children's story – Bhai Taru's Life of Fearless Love



Figure 8. Sikhnet children's story – Guru Tegh Bahadur and the Magical Land



Figure 9. Sikhnet children story – Akali Phula Singh



Figure 10. Sikhnet children's story – Bhai Lehna Ji's Devotion

Two kinds of figures are depicted in these illustrations. The first are historical figures, including Guru Gobind Singh (figure 7), Guru Tegh Bahadur (figure 9), Bhai Lehna/Guru Angad Dev (figure 11), Bhai Taru (figure 8) and Akali Phula Singh (figure 10). This is the category of figures about whom we have relatively precise biographical information and who can be located

in a particular place and time. They are all considered ethnically Punjabi. The second type of figure in these illustrations is the anonymous figure of the imagined *sangat* (congregation) depicted in figures 4, 5, 6 and 9. The individuals are interpolated into the scenes but they cannot be categorically identified. Relatively speaking, there is more latitude in being able to imagine this anonymous *sangat* as non-Punjabi, although historically speaking even this is unlikely.

The choice to depict both these types of figures as racially ambiguous or as white is discursively significant. Whiteness is seen as an 'unmarking' of the body (Frankenberg 2001), as the normative way of imagining a universal subject devoid of ethnicity, race and the cultural baggage that often comes with those things. Similarly, artistic reinterpretations of the race and ethnicity of historical religious figures can also be observed in Christianity (Kelley 2002; Nasralla and Fiorenza 2009), where such aesthetic choices are bound up with the exigencies of racial politics. By depicting the Sikh figures in this way, Sikhnet argues that the particular ethnic (and by extension, linguistic and cultural) heritage of both the Sikh Gurus and the original *sangat* is not of primary significance, and that we must broaden our understanding of early Sikh history. This approach shifts the focus away from place, culture and ethnicity and draws out the metaphorical values of these episodes in Sikh history.

To understand the particular significance of whiteness in this context it is important to situate whiteness within the liberal imaginary. In general, liberalism explicitly disavows the importance of race and other such categories of difference, and advocates for human rights and equal citizenship for all. Yet the rise of liberal secularism also precipitated and coincided with the emergence of the category of 'whiteness', not just as a neutral descriptor, but as a way to designate a universal subject position. Shona Hunter argues that 'whiteness operates as the metaphor for the dominant liberal norm. It is the unknown empty standardising ideal against

which race can be seen' (Hunter 2015, 11). Thus, 'liberalism and whiteness become fused in their claims to represent *human generality*', and the 'everythingness of whiteness is the embodiment of liberal values, individualism, universalism, rational progress and equality' (ibid). In this way, whiteness is coeval with the capacity for embodying liberal norms.

Thus, representing the Sikh Gurus and early Sikh figures as white constitutes a 'universalising' tendency in a dual sense. First, it turns the Sikh Gurus, early Sikh figures and the metaphorical Sikh *sangat* or community into abstractions rather than culturally and historically situated individuals. Since the Gurus are so central to Sikhism, this act effectively extracts Sikhism from its spatial and temporal locatedness and translates Sikhism into a universally available identity. Secondly, this act specifically reinterprets Sikh identity as white, the universal signifier of subjecthood. While these illustrations expand Sikh identity, they also delimit it in certain ways. Inclusiveness is not being defined in the broadest possible sense, but in terms of universal, liberal, white subjectivity.

C. Persuasive Definitions through Informational Resources

In addition to the visually mediated definitions found on the websites, persuasive definitions are also to be found in other elements throughout these sites. Many of the websites have a section that offers basic information about Sikhism, such as history, fundamental beliefs and demographics. One such example is the Saldef website, which offers 'Sikh American Information Cards' for sale. The cards list a brief primer on Sikhs in the form of six bullet points and are available in both English and Spanish.

The information cards distil and quantify what they consider to be the most essential information about Sikhs. Each of the six bullet points begins with a numerical value of some kind. Below is a reproduction of each point:

> 99%: Percent of all the people wearing Turbans in U.S. are Sikhs
> 1: Sikhs believe in one God
> 5: Sikhism is the fifth largest religion in the world
> 100: Number of years Sikhs have been in the U.S.
> 700,000: Population of Sikhs in the U.S.
> 25,000,000: Population of Sikhs worldwide
>
> (Saldef, 2017)

This information card conveys pertinent information in a relatively concise and efficient way, giving a snapshot of not just Sikhism, but contemporary Sikh society. Quantification is viewed as an inherently useful way of disseminating information and contextualizing Sikh identity in a systematic manner. These cards take the unruly mass of Sikh experiences and funnel it into something easily legible and recognizable. These information cards act as a metaphorical 'map' of Sikhism, directing the viewer to how to understand where Sikhism is located. The only aspect of religious ideology that is mentioned here is Sikhism's belief in one God, making it instantly recognisable as a monotheistic religion. The other information is primarily demographic, meant to contextualise the Sikh population in the United States, as well as in the world. The assumptions underlying these set of facts are that (1) it is important to clarify Sikhism's monotheistic nature, and (2) it is to visualize Sikhs using modern demographic categories. Although this appears to be a perfunctory set of facts, these information cards are simultaneously 'disciplining' the unruliness of Sikhism.

These persuasive definitions show that Sikhism is constantly being translated in imperceptible ways. Although there is an entire conceptual apparatus informing this process, it

actually takes place spontaneously. It is a form of translation that obscures the signs of its own presence, and this is precisely what makes it so effective and powerful.

III. Applying Sikh Principles

A. Political Advocacy

The second form of translation that I focus on is applied Sikhism. Several of the websites are concerned with how Sikh principles could be applied to 'real-world' issues, but sometimes these issues are beyond the scope of daily life for diasporic Sikhs. I focus on a particular example involving The Langar Hall and its effort to discuss the Sikh position on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The blog has written several posts about the conflict in passionate terms, urging Sikhs to support the Palestinian cause and join the larger anti-Israeli agitation. This particular conflict belongs to a class of political issues that are a step removed from diasporic Sikhs' immediate experience, and are thus comparatively more abstract. I do not wish to undermine the importance of the conflict in general, nor do I wish to trivialise the commitment of those Sikhs who deeply feel that Sikhs are obligated to take an interest in this issue. I simply delineate between broadly 'first-order' diasporic Sikh concerns, such as adapting to Western dress and diet, bullying in schools, employment discrimination and immigration reform, and more abstract, 'second-order' diasporic Sikh concerns, such as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict or climate change (another topic that The Langar Hall writes frequently about). Yet the discussion around this topic possesses a unique rhetorical value precisely because of its abstractness.

It illustrates how liberal diasporic Sikhs are imagining themselves as belonging not just to a Sikh nation, but to a larger global community. One of the cornerstones of liberal diasporic Sikh

discourse is precisely that Sikhs should view themselves not only in parochial terms, but in abstract, universal terms. This issue requires that Sikhs recalibrate both their sense of belonging and sense of obligation. The Langar Hall draws on Sikh philosophy, history and their collective experience of oppression to argue that an authentic fulfilment of Sikhism could only mean a pro-Palestinian position.

The discussion around this topic also serves as a backdrop for highlighting intra-diasporic differences among Sikhs. As we will see, the liberal Sikh perspective self-consciously differentiates its own position vis-à-vis other 'traditional' diasporic Sikh positions. The other Sikh positions are shown to possess a completely different understanding of the theoretical stakes presented by the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Rhetorically speaking, part of the disagreement hinges on how closely to delimit the scope and definition of Sikh interests.

The Langar Hall explicitly frames its discussion of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in a way that calls attention to the translation-oriented nature of its discussion. It does so not by citing specific textual quotes, facts or news sources, but through its own interpretive agency. A post titled 'Sikh Solidarity with Gaza' notes that, 'if we take these concepts, dissect them for understanding, and then apply them to what the plight of the Sikh and Palestinian is today […] we see very clearly where we as Sikhs need to stand when it comes to the right to determine one's own destiny.' It makes the general assertion that within the Sikh worldview, 'all human lives are equal and should be cherished', but that in Gaza, 'the lives of an entire people are being deemed worthless'. In writing this, it outlines the stakes of the conflict for Sikhs in particular, which is that one of the most fundamental Sikhs beliefs is being violated on a large scale. It contrasts Sikh belief, on the one hand, with a corrosive reality, on the other, making the issue as existential as it is material. (The Langar Hall, 2012)

There are three specific ways in which The Langar Hall places Sikhism in conversation with the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The first method is by drawing on Sikh philosophy, which is based both in *Gurbani* and in more informal sources of Sikh thought. A post titled 'From Khalistan to Palestine' draws upon the Sikh concepts of the *Miri-Piri*, which it translates as 'the bonding of both Spiritual and Temporal Power', *Degh-Tegh*, which it translates as 'the upliftment of the downtrodden/shunned/oppressed sections of a community through charitable service and physical resistance', and *Sant-Sipahi*, which it translates as 'Saint-Soldier'. All three terms originate in the Guru Period and refer to the belief that Sikhs must overcome the conventional dualities of the temporal versus the transcendental, or the political and the spiritual, and must embody both aspects of these dichotomies. As in this particular blog post, these concepts are often marshalled as a way of stressing that Sikhs not only have the prerogative to fight against oppression, but the obligation to do so. (ibid. 2014)

The blog also invokes Sikh historical narratives to support its position, particularly those that revolve around the concept of social justice. In a post originally titled 'Wither a Voice: Sikhs and Palestine', the writer reprints a note of solidarity called 'Sikh Solidarity with Palestine dated from January 12th, 2009'. The note was circulated among Sikhs through email and on Facebook and was reprinted in its entirely on The Langar Hall. The note recalls multiple episodes from Sikh history that would be familiar to Sikh readers everywhere, posing them as a series of questions and then offering the answer in definitive terms:

> Why did Guru Nanak Sahib seek to abolish the caste system in South Asia? Why did Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib sacrifice his life for the sake of others (non-Sikhs) right to freely practice their religion and live free of persecution? Why did Guru Gobind Singh, our tenth Guru, give birth to the Khalsa, an armed body of full-time revolutionaries in 1699? Because for Sikhs, fighting against all forms of tyranny and oppression is a spiritual obligation. (ibid., 2009)

By bringing the Sikh past into the present in this way, the text draws out what it views as the universal spiritual principles that animate these episodes. This text not only translates Sikhism's history of social progressivism and activism into a real-world context, but also translates the very Sikh principle of *sarbat da bhalla* ('welfare of all') in a universalistic way. It fundamentally reorients the locatedness of Sikhs. I do not suggest that this locatedness is either correct or incorrect, only that it is made possible because of the liberal imaginary.

A third way that The Langar Hall positions Sikhism in relation to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is by positing an affinity between Sikhs and Palestinians based on their shared status as oppressed minorities who have faced communal and state violence. One of its published articles, entitled 'Longing for home, from Palestine to Punjab', is organised around the ideas of displacement and collective trauma. As the title suggests, it encompasses both Palestine and Punjab in this frame, noting that the 'the arbitrary borders of nation-states' have kept both Sikhs and Palestinians away from 'their history, their roots, and for many, their homes'. Notably, when referencing Partition this particular article does not refer to the Sikh experience in particular, but pulls back the focus to the Punjabi or South Asian experience at large. This might seem to contradict my contention that liberal diasporic Sikh discourse defines Sikh identity in ethno-territorial terms. However, this post is not seeking to define Sikh identity in such a way, but seeks to show that Sikh identity can inhabit multiple spheres of belonging. Ultimately, the multiple spheres and cross-cultural comparisons serve to underline the idea that the universal human experience transcends such external differences. (ibid. 2011)

The blog's discussion around this conflict also draws a comparison between Sikh and Palestinian experience with state violence. A post entitled 'Solidarity with Oppression: The Danger of a Sikh-Israel Alliance' argues that the two communities have had similar experiences:

> collective state punishment in the name of counter-terrorism is nothing new for Sikhs. Just as all Palestinians are made to suffer because of Israel's supposed goal of rooting out terrorism (i.e. Hamas), all Sikhs in north India suffered in 1984 and the years after because of the Indian government's same supposed goal. (ibid. 2014)

This particular comparison is particularly evocative for diasporic Sikhs because the time frame for these counter-terrorism activities is a contemporary one that covers the last 30 years. In positing these affinities between Sikhs and Palestinians, The Langar Hall is not translating Sikh beliefs, but is treating these historical experiences as part of the 'text' of Sikh identity and is drawing a parallel between that identity and the Palestinian cause.

The 'intra-diasporic' aspect of this discourse is invoked by the blog's references to how other Sikhs are reacting (or not reacting) to this topic. The blog theorises about and critiques the different Sikh positions on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In the same post cited above ('Solidarity with Oppression: The Danger of a Sikh-Israel Alliance'), it specifically critiques the decision of an individual affiliated with the World Sikh Organization (WSO) to co-author a piece that allies Sikhs with both India and Israel. The WSO is a Canadian-Sikh advocacy organisation that focuses largely on lobbying the Canadian government regarding Sikhs in India. The Langar Hall asks: 'Given this common struggle that Sikhs and Palestinians share, why then would WSO or other Sikh organizations or leaders go out of their way to support Israel's blatantly oppressive policies and tactics?' Although the post does not claim to understand the rationale of the WSO's editorial, it does acknowledge that some Sikhs espouse a theoretical counter-position on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict:

> I know there are Sikhs who look at Israel as a source of inspiration, a successful model for Sikh nationalists who see no hopes for freedom or sovereignty in the state of India. I will leave the question of Sikh nationalism itself aside for now but must at least assert that following in Israel's footsteps would likely be the worst thing that could happen to

> the Sikh quom today. One's freedom cannot be based on the subjugation of another. (ibid.)

Although it is entirely expected and unremarkable for members of a religion to possess differing views on a given topic, the fact that The Langar Hall points out that this is significant not just because it is an alternative view, but because it is an alternative view based on a fundamentally different understanding of Sikh identity. This alternative understanding views Sikh identity in ethno-territorial terms, as a nation that could conceivably model itself on Israel. This is precisely the framework that liberal diasporic Sikh discourse seeks to contest, and contextualises the difference between The Langar Hall's and the WSO's perspectives. Thus, differing interpretations about (1) which topics are inherently relevant for diasporic Sikhs, and (2) how Sikhism should be placed in conversation with the selected topics get to the crux of what makes liberal diasporic Sikh discourse a definitively unique perspective on Sikh identity.

B. Reshaping the Terms of Solidarity

In the following section, I examine what happens when the site of difference with other communities rests not on religion, culture or politics, but on an aspect of identity that is not often explicitly discussed in Sikh society: sexuality and sexual identity. I examine the response that two of the advocacy organisations, Sikh Coalition and United Sikhs, had to a mass shooting that took place in a gay nightclub called Pulse in Orlando, Florida on 12 June 2016. An American Muslim shot and killed 49 victims and wounded another 58. The shooting received a great deal of media coverage throughout the United States and the rest of the world. Many groups, particularly socially progressive ones, issued statements and showed support for the LGBTQ community as well as for American Muslims. Sikhism makes no explicit declaration on the

question of sexual identity and homosexuality has not generally been openly practised in traditional Sikh society. However, the responses of these Sikh advocacy organisations pre-empt any theoretical conflict between Sikhism and queer identity while still being able to translate Sikhism into the liberal secular idiom. They do this by sidestepping the issue of either embracing or rejecting queer sexuality, and instead posit an underlying affinity between Sikhs and the LGBTQ community by virtue of their shared status as relatively marginalised populations.

The Sikh Coalition and United Sikhs both showed their solidarity by publishing content on their respective websites. The Sikh Coalition published a blog posts titled 'Orlando Sikh Community Responds to Tragedy' and 'Post Orlando: Prayers, Caution & Know Your Rights', while the United Sikhs published a press release titled 'The American Sikh Community Offers Help and Stands in Solidarity With the Victims of the Orlando Shooting'. All three documents have a similar theme and tone, with their primary purpose being to express condolences for the attack and show solidarity with both the LGBTQ community and American Muslims. The subject(s) on whose behalf they speak are multiple, including Sikhs as a general group, American Sikhs, Orlando Sikhs and the organisations themselves.

This liberal diasporic Sikh response functions as a way of enabling Sikhs to participate in the national mourning, but it is also allows it to translate Sikhism in a way that emphasises its compassion and *seva* (selfless service). The United Sikhs press release does this explicitly, noting that 'The Sikhs of Orlando, whether children or adults, have shown their humility, respect and devotion with this act of seva (selfless service), a core tenant of the faith.' (United Sikhs, 2016) The Sikh Coalition illustrates rather than states this principle, and quotes its Executive Director: 'We continue to shed tears across the country in the wake of this violence and we pray for the

victims, their families and those impacted by this tragedy.' (Sikh Coalition, 2016) This illustrates that there is a conscientious effort to base these responses in Sikh principles.

Both organisations explicitly declare their solidarity with the LGBTQ community, but the basis of this solidarity is somewhat complex. The press release posits an affinity between Sikhs and the Orlando shooting victims based both on their shared status as fellow Americans, and as disempowered Americans in particular. The Sikh Coalition includes a quotation from a community organiser, 'We are all American and we are strongest when we stand together during this difficult time', and goes on to note that after such events, 'minority religious communities are acutely vulnerable to backlash, and we urge every Sikh to exercise extra vigilance and caution during this period of heightened anxiety'. (ibid.) The United Sikhs strikes a very similar note, writing that 'The Orlando Sikh community […] stood alongside their fellow Americans to give condolences and show support for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender community', and that Sikhs have also been 'victims of hate crimes and backlash'. (United Sikhs, 2016) Thus, these responses to a hate crime in which the victims were targeted because of sexual orientation do not specifically address the matter of sexual orientation, but base their solidarity on their civic obligation and the shared experience of victimhood.

Through this example, these websites have 'applied' Sikhism in a way that enables it to show support in general rather than specific terms. They uphold liberal principles by recognising the fundamental humanity, equality and autonomy of the victims, and by recognising their religious and civic obligations to lend support. The responses do not address the question of sexuality in particular. There is a metaphorical encounter taking place in this discursive situation, but it is not an encounter between Sikhism and queer sexuality; rather, it is an encounter between Sikhism and national mourning. These advocacy websites have appropriated and inhabited

liberal principles in a way that enabled them to reshape the terms of the encounter, illustrating that there are multiple ways of embracing liberal values.

C. Individual Spirituality

Another way in which Sikhism is translated into the liberal imaginary is by rearticulating it through the prism of individualistic spirituality. In the modern liberal idiom, religion is generally defined as an organised system of beliefs, whereas spirituality is recast as an individualistic, experiential, syncretic and private alternative to organised religion. It occupies a discursively ambiguous region and is often reconfigured as either supplementary or antagonistic to religion. Most significantly for our context, spirituality is frequently viewed by practitioners as the 'individual part of religion', and is used to 'distinguish emphasis on personal growth and development from corporate or institutional matters' (Bender 2007, 6–7). Although modern spiritual discourse owes its genesis to many different factors, spirituality and liberalism conceptually converge at the celebration and 'sacralization' of the individual (Heelas 1996). In this section, I will illustrate how the Sikhri website translates Sikhism by (1) promoting syncretic spirituality, and (2) focusing on the power and potential of the individual, as opposed to the community or institution.

Sikhri communicates its generally syncretic approach through its textual choices. Although its primary source is Sikhism, it nonetheless utilises 'the synergy of other faiths, traditions, and philosophies that further the realization of divine potential within each individual as long as they do not contradict with Gurmat'. (Sikhri, 2010) Sikhri advocates for a spiritual vision that draws upon Sikhism but cannot be reduced to it. It is suggesting that Sikhism can

remain relevant only if it opens itself up and allows its transcendental and universal spiritual dimensions to flourish.

Sikhri constructs a framework where the individual is the primary agent and site for nurturing this spirituality. It does not relegate traditional Sikh institutions or the collective Sikh community to lesser importance, but it does argue for the primacy of individual experience through the way that it designs and advertises its content. The 'About' page discusses how its 'institutional mission earnestly seeks to heighten individual and communal awareness in all spheres of life', and to 'provide a platform' where 'the full realization of human potential is pursued'. Sikhri describes its week-long workshop as a 'unique learning opportunity will help young adults discover their inner-self, build stronger relationships, and infuse the Sikh spirit in future goals and successes'. (Sikhri, 2017) The tropes of heightening human awareness and realising the full human potential resonate strongly with the Human Potential Movement, itself closely aligned with the New Age movement. The Human Potential Movement views the individual self as having infinite potential, and believes that humans can, through proper guidance and training, progressively realise greater amounts of this potential in realms such as creativity, empathy and spiritual awareness.

The idea of self-cultivation is evoked in other parts of the website, such as the description for another Sikhri programme called *Grihast*. *Grihast* is the name of a three-day retreat that Sikh Research Institute offers to young married couples, to 'strengthen their values in marriage and family relationships'. The term, *grihast*, generally refers to the householder's life or domestic life. The description suggests that the workshop will help foster 'deeper relationships' between couples, will help develop 'family management skills', and improve 'communication techniques' by offering a 'contemplative and reflective environment to work on personal development'. The

Grihast content includes examples from both the 'Sikh faith and culture', from the 'text and spirit of the Guru Granth Sahib', and 'from personal reflections and experiences', suggesting that the workshop is not designed strictly as a way to translate Sikh marriage into the contemporary diasporic context, but takes the Sikh influence as only one of many different source of influence on a contemporary diasporic Sikh couple. Such language references the New Age belief that individuals can cultivate the self's many capacities through spiritual or mental practices. (Sikhi, 2016)

Through subtle shifts in language, Sikhri translates Sikhism in a way that meets the requirements of a modern liberal society which values spirituality above organised religion. It understands spirituality to be a project of continual self-cultivation and evolution. It attempts to position Sikhism as a spiritual technology that is not inimical to the individual's flourishing, but can actually help further it.

IV. Conclusion

The examples presented here are certainly widely varied, but they are united by the fact that they each function through the same rhetorical modality. Each of them involves the selection and foregrounding of particular aspects of Sikhism at the expense of others, and in each case the process is shaped and driven by the mandates of liberal discourse. In each instance, the websites proffer a definition of Sikhism that aligns it, in some respect, with the liberal ideal of what a religion should be. At the most fundamental level, this means defining Sikhism as universalistic and inclusive, while also showing it to be eminently adaptable to the liberal secular state. The

fact that it can be shown to successfully occupy the paradoxical space between the universal and the state-centric is precisely what makes Sikhism most congruent with the liberal imaginary.

Chapter 6: Discursive Modality - Critique

I. Introduction

This chapter focuses on a second rhetorical modality, which is critique. By 'critique' I do not mean in the conventional definition of the term, which is analysis, examination, or evaluation, although all of those meanings are enfolded into the sense in which I use it. I refer to critique as a tool that instrumentalizes rationality and that is directed towards the observation and analysis of all manner of phenomena, including and especially religion. This specific definition of critique is based in the 'Enlightenment presumption that the true, the objective, the real, the rational, and even the scientific emerge only with the shedding of religious authority or "prejudice"' (Brown 2009, 11). Critical rationality, as it is also known, is intimately connected with the liberal paradigm; it presupposes the centrality and sovereignty of the individual and of reason, and believes in the former's inherent capacity to deploy the latter. It is often taken to mean 'polemical rejection', 'immanent or deconstructive analytical practices' or to 'identify the search for a secreted truth within a tissue of mystifications' (ibid, 3).

Liberal diasporic Sikh discourse online incorporates these valences, but most importantly, it views critical rationality as a way of giving individual Sikhs a choice with respect to religion. It not only allows them to choose whether or not to embrace Sikhism, but also allows them to consider how and on what terms it should be embraced. As a modality, being 'critical' means using rationality (or one's understanding of what constitutes rationality) in order to defend, assess, break apart, and otherwise adjudicate Sikhism. It means emphasizing the means of this adjudication as much as the ends achieved.

Before discussing specific examples from the Sikh diasporic websites, I offer a brief explication of the relationship between critical reason and religion. Most modern societies inherit 'the Enlightenment presumption that the true, the objective, the real, the rational, and even the scientific emerge only with the shedding of religious authority or "prejudice." This presumption reaches an apex in the Kantian dictum that everything must submit to critique, even reason itself' (Brown 2009, 4-5). Not only is critique rational, it is also resoundingly secular. From this perspective, the ability to be sufficiently critical is defined by the ability to throw off the yoke of premodern authorities, especially religion, which is irrational and outmoded. Although scholars have deconstructed this conceptual distinction for decades, this dichotomy between the rational and the religious still appears to hold currency throughout public discourse.

A more nuanced reading of secularism argues that liberal societies do not entirely prohibit religion from having a place in the public sphere, so much as they validate and recognize only certain kinds of religiosity. In other words, liberal secularism rearticulates, rather than banishes, religion in specific ways. In the previous chapter I discussed this as form of translation. In this chapter, I discuss how diasporic Sikh websites rearticulate Sikhism as amenable to liberal secularism by performatively critiquing Sikhism, valorizing critical rationality as an essential skill for Sikh to have, and calling on Sikhs to inculcate this capacity amongst themselves.

The websites that most often use this interpretive strategy are those that seek to challenge traditional Sikh authority or Punjab-centric Sikh practices. Accordingly, they do not have a deferential attitude, but position themselves as radical and progressive. Yet, none of these discourses betrays much awareness that their own position is grounded in a particular set of historical and cultural ideologies. Rather, they view themselves as being objective and neutral.

Despite their commitment to unsettling conventional wisdom within Sikh societies, these websites do not acknowledge the ways in which their own discourse benefits from received wisdom of liberal epistemology.

II. Critique for Critique's Sake

A. Nonconformity

A frequent theme on these diasporic websites is the idea that critique is not just a means to an end, but is an end in itself. The freedom and the ability to be critical is one of the ultimate signs of an enlightened community. This point comes across quite clearly in a post on The Langar Hall published on January 18th, 2013, titled 'Sikhi: A Nonconformist's Religion'. As the title suggests, the post argues that Sikhism encourages nonconformity, and in this regard, likens Sikhism to other nonconformist philosophies and movements such as indie film or punk music. For the writer, nonconformity means radically subverting oppressive social norms so that the individual is able to practice their faith free from unnecessary encumbrances or prejudices, and enjoy 'the freedom to live her life as she wishes', and 'in the manner which is most personal and ideal for her mindset' (Singh, Guneeta 2013). In this context, nonconformity is defined as the very ability to exercise critical thought. Not only is nonconformity a way to throw off the yolk of social oppression, but it is also a precondition for spiritual fulfillment.

The framework of the post treats the individual as the locus of spiritual experience and as the one who must manage the flow and content of their own spiritual experience. While society 'has always had a way of detaching individuals from their true selves as we become more

exposed to the mindsets of others', 'Sikhism emphasizes the need for individuals to extricate themselves from social ills in order to reach spiritual fulfillment.' The post suggests that Sikhism 'allows the practitioner freedom from dogmatism' and encourages her to use this freedom to enhance their 'devotion to God and truthful living'. Other religions may emphasize the ritual or disciplinar aspects of behavior, in Sikhism 'it is your internal commitments that count' (Ibid., 2013). In emphasizing the way that Sikhism enables individual freedom and prioritizes internal rather than external devotion, this post shows itself to be embedded in an ideology that views religion as a matter of personal choice. It reproduces the normative liberal assumption that 'religion is primarily about belief in a set of propositions to which one lends one's assent' (Mahmood 2009, 73), and that the individual employs critique to whether or not, and to what extent, she chooses to embrace a particular religion.

This particular post brings forth another interesting contradiction, which is that critical rationality is viewed as simultaneously lying both within and beyond Sikhism. It makes references to Gurbani and to episodes from the life of the Sikh Gurus as a way of illustrating that Sikhism is inherently invested in the individual's ability to exercise their critical faculties. It asserts that 'Guru Nanak rejected the practice of rituals' because 'such acts cannot truly be indicative of someone's devotion to God', and that he asserted that 'belong to nobody, and nobody belongs to us' as a way of helping to 'emancipate individuals from the confinement of bodies, and transcend into spirit form' (Singh, Guneeta 2013). Additionally, Guru Angad 'made a choice to distance himself from society, but in doing so, decided to use it as a chance to enhance his personal values' (Ibid., 2013). Through these examples, the article argues that Sikhism already possesses the requisite resources for inculcating a critical nonconformist subjectivity.

On the other hand, the article does not treat Sikhism as the ultimate authority on the matter, for the overarching standard against which Sikhism and other cultural elements are being measured is nonconformity, or critical rationality, itself. At various points in the post, the author draws on quotes by Alan Keightley, a contemporary philosopher of religion, and Henry David Thoroeau, the 18th century writer and philosopher, both of which the article describes as encouraging nonnormative ways of experiencing the world. Keightley and Throeau are placed in conversation with the Sikh Gurus. The post also references indie film and punk philosophy as representing an iconoclastic break with social norms, thereby enabling the individual to find their true moral compass. Ostensibly, the post juxtaposes these different elements as a way of illustrating that this particular message of Sikhism is also echoed throughout other, non-Sikh figures and movements. However, I argue that the post effectively upholds the message of nonconformity, or the critical discernment of social norms, as the universal value against which all of these disparate elements must be judged. In this framing, critique exists above and beyond Sikhism, and this discourse views it as necessary that Sikhism submit itself to the dictates of critical rationality.

The post represents nonconformity as iconoclastic, as something that unsettles normative liberal values, but in fact, nonconformity is also a liberal value. Insofar as nonconformity is defined as the individual's drive to relentlessly question all norms, it echoes the Kantian notion that 'everything must submit to critique, even reason itself' (ibid, 11). Liberalism absorbs conflicting and contradictory tendencies, so while liberal nation-states encourages unity and normativity, a particular strain of liberal culture also valorizes dissent. Talal Asad speaks to this contradiction when he notes that this conflict is 'intrinsic to liberalism as an evolving discursive tradition, and what is plausibly liberatory in one context is clearly repressive in another' (Asad

2009, 26). Critique and the right to dissent are a part of the liberal tradition, as long as that dissent is grounded in essential liberal values.

B. De-centering authority

Another notable example of this discourse appears on Sikhchic.com. The article is titled 'Kittey Likhia? Where is it Written?', with the second half of the title being a literal translation of the first half, and was published on September 24th, 2016. The article criticizes what it views contemporary Sikhs' overly literal and textual approach to Sikhism, and encourages them to employ their own capacities for critical thinking as they seek to practice Sikhism in their daily lives. Most importantly, the article views critical thinking as an ineffable but important part of Sikh religiosity, without which Sikhism would become reduced to a series of rituals.

The author's central point is that an overly textual approach to Sikhism has dulled the critical capacity of Sikhs. He laments that he comes across too many people who, in response to discussions or debates about controversial issues, will immediately ask for a corresponding reference in the Guru Granth Sahib: 'It is as if now that we have access to the supreme guidance of Guru Granth Sahib, all else is to be discarded. No more brain, no more thinking, no more common sense …?' (Dhaliwal, 2016). In such an approach 'there is no place for any thought based on terminology which is not in Guru Granth, or has no express, explicit mention in it', including many 'present-day issues' such 'Divorce, Abortion, Homosexuality, Artificial Intelligence …' (ibid). As he sees it, this literal-textual approach is delimiting precisely because it cannot directly address all of the realities of modern Sikh life. It signals a failure of imagination and of critical thinking.

The article suggests that Sikhs should marshal their own critical capacities, locating these capacities within Sikh tradition. It notes that rather than relying upon 'the age-old shackles plied by priests, godmen and brokers', they should employ the Guru-bestowed 'ability to think for ourselves – not as a blind, unthinking monolith but as individuals who strived for *'munn neevan, mat ucchi*' (ibid). The phrase referenced here, '*munn neevan mat ucchi*' is a quote drawn from the Sikh *Ardaas,* and translates as a message that Sikhs should be wise but humble. The phrase differentiates between different aspects of the mind, with 'munn' being akin to ego and 'mat' being a form of Enlightened understanding attained through the grace of God. While munn is self-willed, mat is acquired through submission to the divine.

This particular article challenges what the author perceived as a dichotomy between Sikhism as a set of ossified, textually-grounded beliefs, and Sikhism as a set of guiding principles that can be interpreted in multiple ways and can address a variety of (new) contexts. In this dichotomy, the former version of Sikhism is backward looking, stagnant, and grounded in tradition, while the latter version of Sikhism is forward looking, dynamic, and grounded in principles. By giving in to the former version, the author fears that Sikhs will become 'Bible-thumpers' and that 'technology, all human progress would be declared 'kuttha' – unclean'. Accordingly, Sikhs who favor this version of Sikhism would prefer that 'the Gurus -- preferably Guru Nanak himself, right at the outset, and in a finality, leaving nothing for the Gurus that followed -- had compiled Guru Granth in the form of 1001 questions … and short, instant, ready-made, spoon-fed answers'(Dhaliwal, 2016). Rather than give in to this passive thinking, the article asserts that Sikhs should be able to extract and apply the message of Sikhism in a more universal way. Thus, the dichotomies between 'traditional' and 'modern' Sikhism, as well as between Sikh belief and practice, function throughout this particular text, although they are never

explicitly named. The article exercises its own form of critique through its discernment of what is precisely is missing in contemporary Sikh discourse, while also holding up critique itself as something to be valorized.

C. Individual ethics

A third instance of this emphasis on critical thinking appears on the website Kaurista, in the an advice column that that is a regular feature on the website. An anonymous writer (or perhaps several writers) going by the name of 'MizKaurista' responds to questions that have been emailed by readers. Like any advice column, the questions cover a range of issues, addressing them in a way that is relevant for young women in the Punjabi Sikh diaspora. An examination of the archives indicates that the most dominant theme thus far has been dating and romantic relationships. I examine two particular responses, and outline the ways that response is predicated upon a dichotomy between traditional cultural norms and individual ethics. In both instances, MizKaurista's response privileges the individual's ability to discern the proper course of action for themselves, rather than relying upon other forms of authority. The capacity for critical reason is implicitly located within Sikhism, but it is also located in the self qua self.

For most Punjabi Sikh families, marriages have traditionally been arranged, and dating and romantic relationships have been frowned upon or seen as socially transgressive. In recent decades, this pattern has significantly altered, both in Punjab and in the diaspora. Increasingly, young Sikhs are entering into romantic relationships with one another and even with non-Sikhs, and 'love' marriages are becoming more normalized, if still somewhat less desirable from the perspective of older generations of Sikhs.

In a particular edition of the column, titled 'Forbidden Fruit', MizKaurista responds to a reader who questions the website's very policy of answering (and thereby legitimizing) dating-related question. The reader writes:

> Is it not in the Sikh Code of Conduct not to have any relationships outside of marriage? This is the kind of conflicting information that heightens the struggle for girls like me. Seriously, don't your parents forbid you from dating? (MizKaurista 2011)

The question suggests an intractable conflict between what it perceives as Sikh beliefs, as enshrined in the Sikh code of conduct, and the daily life of a diasporic Sikh woman. Although the question does not explicitly spell out this tension, it cleaves to the traditional narrative about diasporic Sikhs, which perceives an inelucatable tension between the two entities.

The response reframes this conflict and transforms it into a dichotomy between external norms versus internal ethics, ultimately privileging the latter even while it situates it firmly within a Sikh framework. In the response, MizKaurista writes that the question has 'brought to light one of the most fundamental ethical dilemmas our community faces', for young diasporic Sikhs are confused about whether it is most ethical to listen to one's parents, to other Sikhs, to religious preachers, or to other role models in the mass media. Rather than looking to these 'conflicting voices' for guidance, MizKaurista suggests that the reader look to strengthen her own individual reasoning and interpretation of Waheguru's *hukam* (command): 'For no matter what any authority allows you or forbids you to do their wishes are naught in the face of Waheguru's *hukum*.' This response calls upon the reader, and young Sikh women in general, to shed their reliance on external authorities and develop their own critical capacities for reflection.

Developing this critical attitude is not represented as being contrary to the Sikh spirit, but as an even more authentic fulfillment of it than the status quo. However, in the text, the genesis of this critical reason is not strictly delimited to Sikh tradition. The text directly addresses the

readers in a way that makes it clear that this critical aptitude must come from within their own self. The ambiguity is telling, for it suggests that the source of this crucial critical reason is ephemeral.

This privileging of interior over exterior ethics is echoed elsewhere on the Kaurista website. In another edition of the advice column, titled 'Companionship versus Religion' (2014), a reader asks for advice about her relationship predicament, agonizing over whether she should convert to Islam in order to marry her Muslim boyfriend, or break off the relationship altogether. As the reader describes it, converting to Islam would alienate her from her own family, and she herself is largely uninterested in becoming a Muslim. On the other hand, she is loath to give up this relationship. The primary tension perceived by the reader is between romantic love and parental love or filial obligation.

MizKaurista's response reframes the conflict, so that it is between religious identity as a series of external obligations versus religious identity as a mode of personal self-fulfillment. She priveleges the latter, rearticulating Sikhism so that it is primarily a matter of personal faith. In her response, she writes that 'religious faith is about your soul not just your boyfriend. Convert only if it's what you want because you know doing so will make you a better person' (2014). In order to do so, the reader must actively and critically engage with the question of their own faith:

> 'Your challenge is to find out who YOU are. Do YOU want to maintain your Sikh identity? Do YOU want to delve deeper into Sikhi or is another path better for you?…The truth is that boyfriends, relationships, family drama and other dilemmas come and go. The only constant is the person looking at you in the mirror every morning'. (ibid)

While the overall response certainly grounds this capacity for critical discernment in Sikh ethics, it also locates it within the self qua self. Thus, this critical reason is discursively defined as originating both within Sikh tradition as well as beyond it. In both instances identified here,

MizKaurista critically reframes the reader's questions in a way that ultimately instantiates Sikhism's liberal credentials. In both responses MizKaurista encourages her readers to use their own critical reason, even while she is ambivalent about where it originates.

I've tried to call attention to the way that liberal diasporic Sikh websites view critical rationality as an end in itself and as a moral imperative. Diasporic Sikh discourse suggests that in order to be true to both the Sikh principles of truth and justice, as well as to the transcendental self, Sikhs must use their critical rationality at all times. Thus, while critique is a central theme in diasporic Sikh discourse, it is defined in paradoxical, even contradictory, terms. While this discourse wields critique, it does not sufficiently acknowledge how the terms of its critique are both produced and circumscribed by the liberal idiom.

III. Sikhism's disposition towards the world

Liberal diasporic Sikh websites also enact a critique of Sikhism by assessing whether Sikhism is sufficiently open to the 'Other', which may be other religions, other ethnic minorities, or other oppressed groups. In the liberal idiom, individuals are transformed into citizens, and disparate forms of community are transformed into the liberal state. One of the requirements of the liberal paradigm is that individuals relinquish forms of identification that are based on more 'irrational' grounds, such as religion, and to identify as either citizens of a particular state, especially across lines of ethnic, cultural, or religious difference. At times, this liberal sense of belonging can also be refracted on a cosmopolitan or universal scale, so that individuals view themselves as belonging to the global fraternity of humankind.

Religious groups that seek to recast themselves as appropriately modern and liberal must show a willingness to cooperate with other groups and individuals, and at times this imperative of 'openness' is expressed in a (self)disciplinary tone. Among diasporic Sikh websites, particularly youth-oriented blogs and websites, a common concern was whether the Sikh community at large was showing sufficient openness and compassion towards 'Others' writ large, whether it be other religious groups or other minority communities. Many writers and discussants felt that the Sikh diaspora tends to be insular and xenophobic, and that this should change.

Before moving on, I will pause to describe a particular concept that is often cited among the liberal Sikh diaspora online, and that is 'intersectionality'. This concept is often used as a way to explain why Sikhs have an obligation to cooperate with other communities. Intersectionality is both a theory and an analytic lens that is commonly used among social progressives today. It views systems of oppression that are based on social categories, such as race, gender, and class, to be fundamentally interconnected and mutually constituting. Accordingly, it believes that any robust analysis of any form of social oppression must examine the other interlinking categories, rather than focusing solely on one single aspect.

Intersectionality began as an academic concept within gender studies, but slowly 'expanded from being primarily a metaphor within structuralist feminist research to an all-encompassing theory' (Carbin and Edenheim 2013, 233). The term has proven so pliable that it has proliferated within popular discourse as well, including the Sikh diaspora. The feminist website, Feminist Current, notes that Millenials use the term broadly to 'denounce anyone who explores topics or holds political views they don't like, particularly any critique of queer theory's definition of gender as a chosen and individual identity, sexualization, objectification, and/or the

sex industry' (Martin 2015). As a result, young activists 'apply an oversimplified (or simply erroneous) analysis of intersectionality to topics that are complex' (ibid). Thus, intersectionality is particular way of framing identity issues that appeals to young activists today because it allows for a flexible and nuanced analysis of how power functions in society. Yet, the term's vagueness and all-encompassing nature can easily render it both ineffective and potentially harmful. In diasporic Sikh discourse, 'intersectionality' can function as an effective concept, but it can also obfuscate as much as it clarifies.

Intersectionality and the call for Sikh openness are prominent topics on The Langar Hall. I examine a particular post from April 15th, 2014, which is called 'Vaisakhi Intersectional Inspiration'. The post posits that contemporary Sikhism falls short of its own progressive ideals and that it must endeavor to correct itself. This analysis requires the writer to position himself both inside and outside of Sikhism. Only by standing 'outside' in an ostensibly neutral position, could he both measure Sikhism's inability to live up to its own ideals, as well as juxtapose it with other ideologies. And yet, his position as an 'insider' is precisely what enables him to critique and assess Sikhism with some amount of credibility.

It uses the occasion of Vaisakhi to contemplate the social justice aspects of Sikhism. Visakhi is an important religious holiday that commemorates the day on which the 10th Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, introduced an initiation ceremony called *Amrit Sanchar* and created the *Khalsa*, the body of initiated Sikhs. The author writes that the *Khalsa* is 'a body of revolutionaries given the responsibility to tear down tyranny and oppression in *all* its forms' (Brooklynwala 2014), and that Sikhism naturally evinces 'an intersectional analysis of oppression, recognizing the all forms of injustice were equally deplorable, whether based on caste, gender, economic class, or religion' (ibid). However, the writer laments contemporary

Sikhs ‘don’t always live up to this important ideal as a community’ since they ‘so often perpetuate one form of subjugation while attempting to challenge another’ (ibid). The text constructs a dichotomy between Sikh beliefs and Sikh practice, implicitly suggesting that Sikhs should find a way to remedy this gap and renew their commitment to social justice.

The article suggests that Sikhs should look beyond their own tradition for inspiration, particularly to feminism. The feminist canon, particularly the writings of women of color and Third World feminists, is viewed as being deeply relevant for Sikhs on the occasion of Visakhi, ‘a moment when our ancestors formalized their commitment to Sikhi, to bridging the spiritual and political, to becoming freedom fighters, to initiating the Khalsa’ (ibid). Here too, the article points out the way that Sikhism already contains an impetus to overcome the duality between spiritual and social concerns. Further in the post, the writer gives a lengthy quote from a 1983 essay by the American radical feminist Marilyn Frye, called ‘Oppression’, which describes the experience of oppression in metaphorical terms. The very use of these external references as a way of elucidating Sikh principles underscores the idea that Sikhism must look beyond itself if it wants to recover its own tradition. Thus, this article argues that the way to recover the gap between Sikh belief (in social justice) and Sikh practice is to look beyond Sikhism as a way of instigating self-critique and self-reflection.

The Langar Hall provides another pertinent example of diasporic Sikhs critiquing Sikhism’s openness, or lack thereof, to other traditions. This particular post is called ‘The Divisive Taboo of Halal for Sikhs’, and although it focuses on the Sikh prohibition against consuming halal meat, it is also about how Sikhs can live up to the ideals of religious inclusivism and inter-faith unity. Like the majority of other posts on TLH, this specific post has a confessional, first-person perspective, includes reflections from the writer’s personal life. The

author describes how he experienced this prohibition as he was growing up, and suggests that is part of an anti-Islamic narrative that circulates within the Sikh community more generally. The writer challenges the received wisdom on this prohibition, in line with what he sees as the general Sikh principle to 'think critically, question everything I'm told, and to always keep the love of Waheguru' in his heart (Brooklynwala 2011). He is concerned that the taboo impinges upon the principles of inclusivity and inter-faith unity, noting that 'Sikhi is arguably one of the most inclusive philosophies of the major world religions. Yet it seems to me that prohibiting the eating of an animal slaughtered the Muslim way serves only to divide' (ibid). The article constructs a dichotomy between Sikh practices and liberal inclusivism, while also constructing a dichotomy between what it views as authentic Sikh belief (which is always inclusive) and Sikh practice (which in this example is exclusive). As I will illustrate, the article suggests that Sikhism can overcome this impasse by both looking within its own tradition as well as by looking beyond it.

The post recounts several different forms reasoning that are used to justify this taboo among Sikhs. Within Sikh tradition, there is no single definitive reason for why Sikhs are prohibited from eating halal meat, but there is historical evidence to suggest that the taboo dates back to the Guru period. One form of reasoning involves the *Sikh Rehat Maryada* (Code of Conduct), which inludes a section that expressly prohibits the consumption of meat 'slaughtered the Muslim way'. The Rehat Maryada was published in 1950 after a decades-long '(attempted) consensus-based process'. The writer rejects the notion that Sikhs must follow this taboo simply because the Rehat Maryada recommends that they do so. He objects to treating the Rehat Maryada as a timeless text that immune from revisions, but thinks Sikhs should use critical reason to 'continually look inward' and reflect on the principles enshrined therein. As he states

it, the Sikh community should continue to 'ask questions about where we are and where we are going?' (ibid), and direct their critical reason at venerable Sikh institutions and texts.

The article also examines the general ethical argument against halal meat, which holds that the process of making meat is unnecessarily slow and painful for the animal. Many Sikhs argue that it is permissible to consume '*jathka*' meat, which refers to a process where the animal is killed swiftly and experiences relatively little pain. The author rejects this argument and cites two research studies and a newspaper article to make the counter-argument that the halal method of animal slaughter is less painful, and that 'in fact, if the animal is not killed immediately with a single swipe, it is not considered halal' (ibid). He further counters that if Sikhs were seriously concerned about animal welfare, they would oppose factory farming of animals altogether. With this counter-argument, the article brings this particular taboo into the domain of ethics and counters the Sikh ethical claim with a different, oppositional ethical claim.

The post engages a third form of Sikh reasoning against halal meat, which is an ethical objection to the blind ritualism inherent in the 'ritual or sacrificial killing of an animal'. He counters this reasoning by way of personal anecdote, arguing that whether a ritual is 'blind' or has value depends upon who is performing the task. He recounts that based on his own conversations with Muslims and Jews, they do not view halal or kosher meat as an empty ritual but as a way of giving respect both to the animal and God. He notes that: 'Even if we don't see it as a necessary step for our own religious practice as Sikhs, I would argue that it is not fundamentally contrary to the Sikh way of life'. The article suggests that the ethical objection is devoid of substance, however it is not clear if he is suggesting that Sikhs should freely consume halal or kosher meat without a guilty conscience. Here again, the author draws upon an extra-

textual source, which is the experiences of Muslims and Jews, as a way of critically reflecting on the Sikh taboo against halal (and kosher) meat.

Through critically engaging these different forms of Sikh reasoning against halal meat, the article diffuses what it views as an opposition between Sikhism and the liberal principle of inter-faith unity. The sources of inspiration for this critical engagement do not stem from within Sikhism, but primarily from beyond it. Additionally, the article also suggests that Sikhs need to distinguish between those aspects of Sikh belief that remain relevant, and those that do not. The relevant beliefs are those that resonate with liberal values, while other, historically and culturally contingent beliefs (such as many of those enshrined in the Rehat Maryada) should be dispensed with. As the article sees it, this is the only way forward.

Another example is a Kaurista.com editorial from February 2015 titled, 'Islamophobia: "But I'm Not Muslim"', addresses the ways that South Asian communities of color, including Sikhs, can help fight Islamophobic discourse. The essay is an impassioned take on why 'brown' or South Asian members of society, particularly the United States, should take up the fight against Islamophobia, treating such a stance as both natural and necessary. The essay never specifically identifies the reader, and never addresses the reader in terms of their gender, racial, or religious background. However, the essay is published on a website by and for Sikh women, so it is safe to say that the essay's recommendations are aimed at Sikh women and, perhaps young South Asians more broadly. It references the structuralist notion that 'systems' of oppression are inherently interconnected and calls for South Asians to 'keep intersectionality in mind'.

The article assumes that there is something structurally similar about all hate crimes, and that this binds together the racial and religious minorities under attack. It posits an essential affinity between different communities who have 'brown skin and/or religious head coverings' (Sawhney 2015) by virtue of their shared experience of violence in America, with links to news stories about violence against a Hindu Temple, a Sikh man, and Indian man, a Mexican man, and Muslim college students. It further goes on to tie these incidents to Islamophobia, arguing that 'It is as though we, as a nation, have become immune to Muslims and anyone who looks Muslim to be harassed, beaten, shot, and/or killed' (ibid).

The article sets up a dichotomy between working for self-interest (where the 'self' is defined as the Sikh community) and working in the interest of everyone. Although 'everyone' is defined in vague terms, it is used to refer to both fellow Americans as well as to humanity at large. The author argues that 'South-Asians … have different reactions to the oppression of their own religion versus the oppression of others', and that 'if we respond to discrimination by defending solely our own identity at the expense of others, we are only fueling hate in this world'. Rather, she suggests that Sikhs should 'Befriend individuals from all walks of life and become a global citizen'. They should become educated about other cultures and religions so that they may 'be able to stand up for the communities being threatened' (ibid). In this dichotomy, the former mode of being is myopic and ultimately destructive, while the latter is enlightened.

The article suggests that Sikhs should overcome their myopia by looking both inwards and outwards. By 'truly following the religious paths we identify with' and also by taking inspiration from an intersectional approach, Sikhs can alter their sense of locatedness. The article sees Sikhs as being in need of edification and progress, and this is something they can only achieve by

relying upon liberal values. Intersectionality is the standard that Sikhs and Sikhism must seek to live up to.

For Kaurista, intersectionality is not just a theoretical principle, but something it performs through the creation and promotion of its content. Other examples throughout its website include articles with titles such as '5 Truths About Skin Color For Black Women' (Love 2015), 'I Am Brown. And I Am Not A Terrorist' (Kaurista 2016), and 'Post-Wisconsin: A Reflection One Month Later' (MizKaurista 2012), all of which discuss social justice issues that are not strictly related to Sikhism or Sikh feminism. The tone of these articles is similarly didactic, encouraging Sikhs to open themselves up towards others and to actually identify with them.

Because 'intersectionality' is not a self-evident concept that has a stable meaning, evoking it in vague ways can have a disempowering effect. The concept effectively turns the experience of being oppressed into something that is common and consistent among different social groups, and flattens out the particularities of each group's experience. It holds Sikhs responsible for showing solidarity with other groups, and censures them for being overly partisan and insular. Because of this, it functions as a way to both claim Sikh identity but also distance oneself from it, to show that one is Sikh but also capable of being non-Sikh, or more than simply a Sikh.

The Kaur Life website provides an interesting counter-example to this trend of critically reflecting upon Sikhs' openness. The article actually makes the case that Sikhism should not in undermine its principles in the interest of greater inter-faith unity, but rather, should uphold sanctity of tradition above all else. The article is an opinion piece posted on September 14th, 2016 called 'The Inter-Faith Anand Karaj'. *Anand Karaj* is the name of the Sikh marriage ceremony, which takes place in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib. The context of the article

is an incident that occurred at a Gurudwara in the town of Leamington Spa, UK on September 11th, 2016, when a group of Sikhs protested an inter-faith Anand Karaj taking place there between a Sikh and non-Sikh. The protestors argued that the Anand Karaj is reserved for Sikhs only, and the protest led to the arrest of over 50 Sikhs. This was not the first such event of its kind, since the issue of inter-faith marriages taking place in Gurudwaras has been 'contentious and debated for decades' (Kaur, Lakhpreet 2016). The British media have generally been critical of such an attitude, viewing it as fundamentalist or contrary to the spirit of modern British values.

This particular debate is not only taking place between Sikhs and the British public, but also between Sikhs themselves. This article constructs an implicit dichotomy between 'traditional' Sikhs, i.e. the protestors, who feel that the Anand Karaj is reserved only for Sikhs, versus the more 'modern' or 'moderate' Sikhs, who feel that, as the author of this piece describes it, 'the "inter-faith Anand Karaj" is actually consistent' with the Sikh value of believing in the equality of all people, and that banning it would violate this belief (ibid). The former position is exclusivist and insular, while the latter is broadly inclusive and progressive.

Yet, unlike the other examples described above, Kaur Life does not endorse the more liberal and progressive position. The article draws upon historical and scholarly references to make a distinction between Sikh marriage in general and the Anand Karaj ceremony in particular, arguing that while an interfaith Sikh marriage may not be contrary to Sikh principles, an interfaith Anand Karaj ceremony is prohibited since by definition, the Anand Karaj is 'to be between Sikhs because they are accepting the Guru as the center of their life' (ibid). Interfaith Sikh marriages, however, are another matter entirely and such couples 'can consider pursuing other ceremonies to sanctify their union and honor their commitment. A marriage does not have

to be religious in nature; it can still be beautiful, meaningful, and celebratory without being an Anand Karaj' (ibid). By drawing this distinction, the article maintains a certain fidelity to Sikh principles without having to reject the notion of inter-faith marriages altogether.

Also, the very fact that the article takes seriously the question of Sikhism and inter-faith marriages suggests that it believes that Sikhism should address the issue in some way. In its own way, then, this article constitutes a critical evaluation of Sikhism by assessing how Sikhism measures up against a crucial liberal criteria. The article still acknowledges that in the liberal paradigm, a religion must exhibit a requisite openness to inter-faith marriage. All of the above examples illustrated that liberal diasporic Sikh discourse sees the need to hold Sikhism accountable for its attitude towards all kinds of of 'others'. This malleability and willingness to question its own beliefs is a precondition for any religion to be considered enlightened in the liberal context.

IV. Sikhism's internal disposition

Diasporic Sikh discourse online also trains its critical lens on whether or not Sikhism's relationship to itself, especially around the topic of egalitarianism. These discussions most often take place around gender and cast. Of the two, gender was the far more popular topic of discussion, and in the following sections I focus on gender-related discussions among these websites.

It is widely acknowledged that equality is one of the bedrocks of liberal thought, although there is no consensus on how precisely it should be defined. In general, all people equally

possess 'the core moral rights to individual liberties' (Arneson 2015, 213), however there are differing opinions on what other rights are encompassed within this. For some, all that matters is 'democratic political equality', which, when filtered through a state context, comes down to the right to an equally-weighted vote (ibid). Additionally, there is also social equality, or the belief that 'to some degree there should be equality of rank, power, and status among members of society and that in these ways members of society should relate as equals' (ibid). Others feel this also extends to equality of opportunity, meaning that society should ensure that all individuals have 'adequate material means and developed skills' so that they can make 'effective use' of their freedoms (ibid). Thus, the concept of equality has several permutations, but by and large equality is viewed as something that must be created and ensured by entities external to the individual, such as governments or social institutions. In Sikh public discourse, 'equality' is not defined solely in terms of political or social rights, but as something that can be granted through shifting the collective Sikh perception about what is acceptable or not acceptable for Sikh women. Equality was viewed as a function of perception and recognition rather than solely as a set of empirical facts.

One of the most interesting ways this plays out is through a debate about how Khalsa or 'orthodox' Sikh women should look and behave, particularly in regards to adorning the symbols of the faith. To contextualize this discussion, it is important to briefly consider how physically conspicuous Sikh identity can be. In 1699, the 10th Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh introduced an initiation ceremony that enabled Sikhs to mark their heightened commitment to the Sikh way of life, which means following the Sikh '*rahit,* or code of conduct as strictly as possible', as well as pledging to wear the 5 *kakkars* or 5 K's (karah or steel bracelet, kirpan or dagger, kachera or type of undergarment, kanga or wooden comb, and kesh or uncut hair (Mandair 2013, 125) at all

times. In addition to keeping their hair unshorn, Sikhs must also keep the hair on their head covered. Traditionally, men wear turbans as a head covering, and Sikh women wear a long scarf called *dupatta* or *chunni*. These five articles of faith are all physical markers, and are to be 'worn as bodily signifiers marking a Khalsa as different from others, one who could not hide behind others in difficult times' (Mandair 2013, 60). Thus, conspicuousness is intentional, rather than incidental.

The initiation ceremony and subsequent requirements are the same for both men and women. Nevertheless, there is a gendered aspect to this identity. Because of their turbans, Sikh men are more visible, and many scholars contend that 'Sikh men are the privileged site for negotiating Sikh identity' and that 'the Khalsa male continues to produce the normative model which all other Sikh identities are weighed against, generally through negation or deferral, and the authoritative reference of Sikh identity' (Jakobsh 2015, 190). The key distinction between Khalsa men and women, and the signifier that makes Sikh men the more conspicuous representative of the faith, is the turban.

There are a significant number of Sikhs who argue that Sikh women should also don the turban. They make a historical argument to suggest that Khalsa Sikhs are not only required to keep and cover their unshorn hair, but they are also specifically required to wear turbans. This requirement, they argue, extends to women as well. The issue remains a contested one among Sikhs. For Sikh women, this injunction could be viewed as either in imposition or as a privilege, depending upon the degree to which they embrace the Sikh *rahit*. Many Sikhs, both men and women, both 'traditional' and 'liberal', have embraced this trend. Accordingly, the turban is 'increasingly being presented as normative garb for Sikh women' (Jakobsh 2015, 194). In the following section, I examine the discussion that diasporic Sikh women have around this issue,

particularly those that view the wearing of the turban as a fundamental right for which they must fight.

Many (but by no means all) Sikh women who willingly embrace the turban view it as a matter of equality. This rationale views the turban, referred to in these discussions as *dastaar* or *keski*, as a way for Sikh women to claim an equal stake in the performance and representation of Sikh identity. Doris Jakobsh, in her work on the discourse around Sikh women's 'turbaned identity' (2015a, 2015b) has described the varied Sikh rationale for legitimating this practice. Historically, the turban was the provenance of the upper classes or a mark of royalty, a figurative crown signifying one's social status. Sikhs consider the turban a blessing bestowed upon them Guru Gobind Singh as a way of signifying their uniqueness and self-respect. Accordingly, many Sikh women view the turban as an essential way of commanding respect for their religious identity. The issue here is not just whether Sikh women have the *right* to wear turbans (since there is nothing stopping them from doing so), but about whether the turban-clad Sikh woman can become the normative and even emblematic representative of Sikhism.

The website Kaur Life engaged this idea in a confessional essay titled 'The Sikh Identity is Only For Men' written by a diasporic Sikh woman who wears a *dastaar.* The essay is primarily concerned with the collective Sikh attitude toward turban-clad women, which she describes as derisive and dismissive. For the author, the lack of Sikh support for turbaned women betrays the deepest principles of the faith, diminishes the importance of Sikh women, and speaks to the generally sorrowful state of Sikh society. The article calls for Sikhs to reflect on their collective condition, and to embrace rather than reject turbaned Sikh women. I suggest that the essay is undergirded by a series of dichotomies that (1) effectively characterize Sikhism itself as

a form of continual critique, and (2) draw on liberal notions of equality to help reinforce the idea that wearing the turban is mandatory for Sikh women.

Within the essay, culture (both Punjabi and otherwise) is construed as a realm that enforces normative gender standards, while Sikhism allows women to contravene gender norms in an empowering way. Culture is viewed as patriarchal, while Sikhism is viewed as liberating. This article suggests that by embracing the idea that the turban is an exclusively male accessory, the Sikh community has chosen to hew too closely to Punjabi and broadly western cultural norms, to 'societal standards of normal,' to the 'popular', the unobtrusive, and the inoffensive. In this account, culture is a meta-structure that demands conformity, and its specific content is always patriarchal.

By contrast, the article describes Sikh tradition as socially 'revolutionary', as fighting 'against societal norms', as enabling Sikhs to continually 'be different and challenge the societal norms around us through the Gursikh path'. Rather than being restrictive, it is enables individuals to flourish. Specific roles are 'not meant for one gender over any other', but are broadly inclusive, 'regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, social class, race, education level, or any other distinction'. Sikhism is a way of life that naturally resists the pressure to conform, particularly in the way it views women. In other words, Sikhism is itself a form of continual critique.

The writer encourages Sikhs to reconcile this dichotomy by recognizing and reconnecting with the critical nature of Sikhism. She encourages Sikhs to 'start questioning which values and traditions are moving us forward and which ones are countering the decades of progress…' She further argues that the Sikh Gurus 'asked us to constantly evaluate how we are living our daily lives, and when something no longer makes sense, it is time for a change. I think in limiting our

Kaurs, we are failing to live this revolution'. The article asserts that the way to overcome this problem is by recreating a unique Sikh culture that is inspired and bounded by Sikh principles, rather than conforming to the surrounding cultural morass. Sikhism itself possesses the requisite critical tools, if only Sikhs themselves would recognize it.

Enacting a distinction between culture and religion enables Sikh women to be selective about which aspects of culture to embrace. In her study of diasporic Muslim women in Germany and the United States, Katherine Ewing noted that the category of culture allowed for a critical distancing between Islam and the cultural practices of their families, particularly in the matter of gender equality (Ewing 2015, 208). In a similar vein, distinguishing between religion and culture enables Sikh women to articulate more clearly what they view as deficient in Punjabi cultural practices. As is the case in this essay, this spatial dichotomy also aligns with a temporal dichotomy between an authentic Sikh past and a debased Sikh present.

Another binary operative within this essay is between Sikh belief and Sikh practice, or between how the essay thinks Sikhs should be behaving, versus how they are actually behaving. The author explicitly alludes to this, writing that she is 'trying to reconcile the dichotomy between how our panth [sic] currently views the Sikh female identity and what I have understood of our Guru's message'. Although the essay does not use these specific terms, the essay implicitly defines belief as first-order principles enshrined in *Gurbani,* while it characterizes practice as the translation of those principles in action. She quotes a passage from Gurbani that speaks to the importance of externalizing one's devotion, and notes that although *Gurbani* 'focuses primarily on the developing consciousness of an individual and recognizing our internal divinity' it also stresses the 'significance of the physical identity'. From this principle, she extrapolates that upholding the physical requirements of Sikh identity is mandatory for both

women and men, and argues that she cannot imagine that the Sikh Gurus would have 'agreed with the sentiment that only men should carry the Sikh identity'. As the writer sees it, there is a direct line between *Gurbani*'s emphasis on the physical aspect of Sikh identity, the idea that Sikh men and women are equally entitled to Sikh identity, and the practice of Sikh women wearing turbans.

The article treats turbaned Sikh women as a direct and authentic translation of Sikh belief, rather than one among many possible interpretations. Ironically, what makes this particular interpretation so compelling is that it draws on western liberal notions of egalitarianism, which view equality in literal terms, as equality of action and opportunity. Those Sikhs who dismiss the idea of women wearing a turban are translating Sikh belief inauthentically, or not bothering to reflect on and translate it at all. This illustrates that even when Sikh discourse advocates for a position that appears to be more traditional and restrictive (by considering the turban mandatory rather than optional for women), the discursive modality and concepts it employs still distinguishes it as being part of 'liberal' Sikh discourse.

The topic of equality is a common one throughout the other diasporic Sikh websites as well, particularly The Langar Hall. The idea that there is an intractable divide between Sikh beliefs and Sikh practice in the area of gender equality is a recurrent theme. One notable post was published on 12 March 2009, and is titled 'Thee Di Mangh?' (translated as the 'desire for a daughter?'). The post recounts an experience that the writer had at a Gurudwara, where the *granthi* (Gurudwara custodian) was giving a *katha* (discourse) in which he discussed a particular *shabad* (hymn). The hymn was about worldly desires and yearnings. During the course of his

katha, the *granthi* gave the example of people yearning for the birth of a daughter, as well as for the birth of a son, as common desires among people:

> In my experience, the yearning for a daughter and son are never used together to help the sangat [congregation] think beyond their wants and just accepting Waheguru's will. Common examples are a yearning for a *betaa* [son] or a mother caring for a *betaa* (we could also add a big house and nice car to the list). I have never heard of a yearning for a *betee* [daughter] or caring for a *betee*. (2009)

The author of the blog post was surprised to hear this example, because having a daughter would not be a common desire for a Punjabi Sikh family, since son preference is generally the norm:

Although, in this instance, the writer felt that the *katha* seemed to affirm the idea of gender equality, this particular experience served as an occasion to highlight the general 'contradiction between theology and contemporary practice of Sikhi' in most *kathas.* She suggests that although *granthis* must resort to using examples that a Punjabi Sikh audience could relate to, they do have the space to alter the particular examples they use and 'reinforce the principles of Sikhi' that Sikhs are 'not practicing'. Thus, the writer suggests that the gulf between belief and practice can be resolved through the *granthis* using their critical faculties to expand their repertoire and challenge the Punjabi Sikh imagination.

V. Conclusion

As I outlined in the Introductory chapter to this dissertation, liberal diasporic Sikh discourse is animated by a series of inter-related dichotomies, in which tradition, culture, and Punjabi-based identity occupy one end, and abstract, the universal, and the liberal value-based identity occupy the other end. It redefines Sikhism as an authentically liberal religion using critique as a rhetorical modality. Critique takes on multiple permutations among liberal diasporic Sikh

websites online. In many instances, it is viewed as a tool that helps to achieve the desired purpose of making Sikhism more authentic, egalitarian, and open to inter-faith cooperation. It is also viewed as an end in itself; something to be valued on its own terms because it is an essential aspect of human nature and the very thing that makes humans unique. It is viewed as being derived from within Sikhism, which has a tradition of challenging prevalent social norms, as well as existing beyond it. Thus, critique has an ambivalent nature and purpose within this discourse.

As we have seen, critique is viewed as an unassailably neutral practice. It has a moral cache, for a thought or opinion immediately seems superior when it is based on critical self-reflection, reasoning, and evidence. By contrast, when something is accepted simply because it is dogma or received wisdom, it not only bears the stigma of being calcified knowledge but also confers some of this stigma onto the individual or community who professes to accept it. In critiquing Sikhism, these websites separate those elements that are overly dogmatic, outmoded, or oppressive from those that are experience-based and have ongoing relevance in the modern world. This often gets configured as the desire to separate increasingly corrupt Sikh 'practices' from exalted Sikh 'beliefs', the latter of which are seen as closely aligned with self-reflective and thoroughly apolitical. Thus, critiquing Sikhism is about redefining it through a modern, liberal, secular lens.

Chapter 7: Virtuous Citizenship

I. Introduction

A third rhetorical modality that is common among Sikh diasporic discourse online is depicting Sikhs as virtuous liberal citizens. In this chapter, I discuss the multiple online 'practices' Sikhs use to create and shape their liberal subjectivities as transnational citizens. I build upon work that has expanded the notion of citizenship to include ethical, cultural and consumptive dimensions. I further expand the concept of liberal citizenship to include bodily, spatial, and class dimensions. Diasporic Sikhs are virtuous liberal citizens not only because of their civic practices, but because they embody liberal subjectivity in manifold other ways. Understanding citizenship not simply as a legal status, but as an entire subjectivity, helps to contextualize just how transformative the liberal idiom can be. This expansive understanding of liberal citizenship will also explains many of the rhetorical elements that are present among diasporic Sikh websites.

Citizenship has traditionally been conceptualized as a status that confers upon the 'subject' the privilege of being a recognized member of a state, entitled to certain benefits in exchange for swearing fealty to the state. Citizenship is primarily seen as a civic institution, but liberal citizenship extends beyond norms and practices and designates a particular way of being and thinking. This comparatively ineffable aspect of citizenship has been theorized alternatively as 'cultural citizenship' (Rosalie 1994; Ong 1999; Beaman 2016) or 'moral citizenship' (Fumanti and Werner 2010; Schinkel 2010) or the particularly apt 'virtuous citizenship' from Mattia Fumanti (2010). These terms are useful precisely due to the fact that immigrants engage in an ongoing process of self-cultivation and self-fashioning in order to live up to the value-based

requirements of liberal citizenship. Virtuous citizenship is not only disciplinary, but is also creative and productive. The term very aptly captures the sense that there is an aspirational relationship with this 'creative' aspect of citizenship, and that it actually confers a sense of recognition and affirmation upon the participant.

These terms all describe the way that the parameters of citizenship are much broader; however, I draw on the concept of 'subjectivity' as a way of describing the depth of the transformations required by liberal citizenship. 'Subjectivity' refers to one's sense of self and way of experiencing the world. It is context-dependent and therefore fluid; one can simultaneously be a politico-legal subject, an aesthetic subject, a social subject, or a consumer subject, depending upon the frame of analysis. Each system of power projects and produces its own ideal subject, and individuals are motivated to discipline and cultivate themselves in order to inhabit each particular subjective mode. While achieving the status as a citizen of a liberal state confers legal recognition, it is achieving liberal subjectivity that confers true social and cultural recognition.

This process is inherently variable; ideology is never totalizing, and subjectivity and recognition are never entirely secured. This indeterminacy means that the individuals (or groups) continually perform their subjectivity, and that the rules and sites of performance are continually updated. However, subjects frequently behave as if liberal subjectivity and recognition can be fully achieved, presuming that both liberal ideology and the identity that it confers are rational and fixed things. In the following chapter, I discuss how diasporic Sikh discourse online represents Sikhs as inherently embodying liberal subjectivity and as being ideal liberal citizens. I call attention to how this discourse treats citizenship and subjectivity as ends that can be finally achieved rather than processes that are continually in flux, a presumption that is itself a part of

liberal epistemology.

I also view citizenship as encompassing multiple dimensions, including consumer practices, modes of bodily representation, modes of spatial representation, and respectability politics. Diasporic Sikh websites engage and appropriate these discourses, implicitly adducing them as evidence of their suitability for liberal citizenship. These disparate elements span a broad range, each speaking to an essential aspect of liberal subjectivity as diasporic Sikhs understand it.

II. Liberal Subjectivity and Agency

The prototypical liberal subject is autonomous, stable, and able to exercise his agency freely in accordance with his rational free will. In this view, identity is fundamentally viewed as a metaphysical substance that exists *a priori*. There are many different variations on this essential vision; however, it is generally posited that the individual's capacity to think and act ethically is a natural consequence of their innately rational nature. Many scholars, particularly those studying gender, have problematised this conception of agency (Abu-Lughod 1990; Butler 1991, 2010; Mahmood 2005) and the corresponding subject that undergirds it. In its place, they elaborate on the 'performative' subject as one who does not 'precede its expression' (Butler 2010, 147) but is constituted though repetitive acts of self-constitution that bring him or her closer to the prevailing norms. However, the discussions that take place among the diasporic Sikh websites presume an essentially liberal subject, one who is largely autonomous and able to exercise their agency freely. This is ostensibly meant as a way of empowering Sikhs, but as I will illustrate, can also be disempowering in certain ways.

One particular roundtable discussion published on the site, titled 'A New Challenge for Punjabi', published on 11th April, 2015, is emblematic of the approach that SikhChic takes with regard to representation and Sikh agency (Singh, Gurtej, 2015). Although the article is meant as a way to initiate discussion rather than act as a definitive declaration, the casual logic and assumptions underlying the discussion are instructive. The article informs readers that the Punjabi language is being withdrawn from school curricula in the United Kingdom, and considers possible actions that Punjabi-Sikhs could take that ameliorate this state of affairs and perhaps start reversing this trend. Discursively, the article places the responsibility of this situation on Sikhs themselves, rather than interrogating the cultural or political processes that enabled it. Representing Sikhs in this way makes them the primary agents of their own cultural and political situation. The exclusion of the Punjabi language from UK curriculum is not directly relevant to Sikhs' ability to fulfill the obligations of citizenship, however the kind of subjectivity that enables Sikhs to view themselves as autonomous agents is precisely what enables them to have a sense of belonging in the United Kingdom.

This particular SikhChic roundtable assumes a one-to-one relationship between Sikh identity and the Punjabi language, and presumes that readers will share these assumptions. It ultimately proposes the solution that Punjabi speakers in the UK should sit for the A-level exam in Punjabi in order to keep the exam operational, thus providing a reason for Punjabi to remain within UK school curricula. The article presumes that Sikhs have a responsibility to be concerned about this, and that Sikhs have a meaningful relationship with the Punjabi language. This would seem to contravene the way that liberal diasporic Sikh discourse typically frames Sikh identity, as abstract and universal. This speaks to the deep ambivalence at the heart of this discourse, which simultaneously elides the close connection to Punjab while also recognising its

historical and linguistic significance to Sikhism. However, this article deploys the tools of liberal epistemology (by presuming autonomous liberal agency), even while it seems to embrace ideas that situate Sikhism within an ethnic framework. It shows how this discourse can deploy liberal modalities in its approach to Sikhism, even if it can be more ambiguous in terms of its content.

I suggest that this article sets up a dichotomy between Sikhs as active autonomous agents versus Sikhs as passive individuals. This dichotomy is never explicitly foregrounded but it provides the overarching framework within which this article's arguments rest. The writer notes that he was surprised by the 'lack of any discussion about this news item on the *sikhchic.com* wesite [sic]. Is it some sort of fait accompli?' Through the illusion to a *fait accompli*, or accomplished fact, the writer calls attention to the perceived passivity of diasporic Sikhs in accepting this state of affairs as final rather than finding ways to challenge it. The article further suggests that 'It is the laggard mentality that is hitting Punjabi below the belt. We Punjabis seem to have become very good at talking the talk, but do we always walk the walk?' There is a moral distinction being mapped onto the dichotomy between the active and passive subject, which construes the active citizen as someone with the power to shape the public sphere, and the passive subject as relatively feeble and ineffectual.

In directly interpolating the reader, the article also offers a series of practical steps that can be undertaken. The writer asks: 'Did you ever try to hone your Punjabi language skills and ever thought of sitting the A level exam?' She goes on to make a more definitive call to action when she calls on 'all the Punjabi adults out there to have another look at your A level and university certificates' and to 'prepare for and sit A level exams. This will be our intellectual *daswandh*'.[1] This suggestion has more metaphorical rather than practical value. While it is

theoretically possible for adults to sit and retake A level exams, practically speaking it would be difficult to mobilise and manage on a large enough scale to make a difference. However, going beyond practical steps, this invocation asks Sikhs to conscientiously assume a more active approach to citizenship. It calls on them to fundamentally alter their subjective positioning.

The writer not only focuses on specific actions that individuals can take in their own lives, but also calls for more institutional action. She writes: 'Is it not possible to have at least five schools in Punjab under the aegis of the Cambridge system? Those sitting Punjabi A level in Punjab would keep the system alive globally.'

The article further asserts that 'the Punjab School Education Board needs to lift its game and provide a globally recognised education framework. With a recognised system will come the facility of cross-credits.' This is especially notable because the article appeals to the idea that diasporic Punjabi-Sikhs and the Punjab School Education Board are natural allies, and assumes that diasporic Sikhs would be able influence educational policy in Punjab. While there is no reason to doubt that many diasporic Sikhs would enthusiastically support this idea, it ignores the complicated socio-political realities of Punjab and India more broadly. Educational curriculum and language policy in India has always been a highly political matter, particularly in relation to religious minorities. Suffice it to say that by focusing solely on framing Sikhs and Sikh-adjacent institutions as autonomous agents capable of effecting change in the public sphere, the article simultaneously disregards the other socio-political factors that could possibly constrain Sikh action.

Although the article does not do this, elaborating on some of the alternative, structural reasons why Punjabi has been excluded from the UK curriculum might be a useful exercise because it highlights why the liberal emphasis on assuming full autonomy can actually be

disempowering. For instance, it is possible that diaspora Sikhs' relationship to Punjabi is changing because there is an increased pressure to assimilate to British culture, which might require them to embrace Anglophone conceptualisation, thought, and speech, and thus delimit their ability or inclination to study Punjabi closely. Or, perhaps it signals the erosion of Sikh religious institutions in the British diaspora, which are normally a conduit for young Sikhs to learn Punjabi. This might mean that young British Sikhs become alienated from Punjabi at a younger age, thus diminishing the possibility that they would study it later on in their educational career. In contrast to these declinist arguments, another possibility is that young Sikhs are opting out of studying Punjabi at British schools because they are actually getting enough Punjabi instruction through their local Sikh temples or at home, and thus have no need or wish to study it in school. In this case, this would be a positive development from the perspective of Punjabi Sikhs. I am not suggesting that this, or any other article, is obligated to consider every theoretical possibility before discussing a topical matter. Rather, I am calling attention to the general pattern within the digital content on diasporic Sikh websites, which has been to place the weight of responsibility upon Sikhs themselves rather than considering how systems of power both produce and constrain the possibilities for action. This reflects the fact that these websites are rearticulating Sikh identity through the lens of liberal subjectivity.

In another editorial published by SikhChic.com titled 'Are We Ready for Another 1984?', writer Kanwal Kaur ruminates on anti-Sikh violence and sentiment in India (2015). Although the article is ostensibly about the author's experiences as a Sikh in India, I suggest that the primary thrust of the article is actually about the need for Sikhs to embark on a course of self-improvement and remedy the various ills that currently plague them. The SikhChic website is

aimed at diasporic Sikhs in terms of its style, tone, and ostensible scope, and the website's tagline is 'The Art and Culture of the Diaspora'. In this sense, the article is directed at diasporic Sikhs even if uses the Indian context as a point of departure for conceptualising diasporic Sikhs' existential needs. As I will illustrate, the article shows Sikhs as being subjected to structural socio-political violence while also insisting that they are autonomous moral agents in charge of their own condition. In this way, the article performatively reframes Sikhs as liberal subjects. Even while evocatively describing Sikh disempowerment, it constructs Sikhs as free to take action towards a course of moral self-improvement.

The essay begins with an evocative description of the amalgam of events that have come simply to be known as '1984' in the minds of modern Sikhs. As I described in Chapter 3, the term encompasses the Indian Army's attack on Darbar Saheb, the Indian Army's attacks on other gurdwaras and villages throughout Punjab, and the anti-Sikh riots that took place throughout India in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination. Using first-person narration, the author recounts her own experience during the riots, writing that:

> I saw that all those who were being dragged to the divider of the street were beaten up by mobs… Their turbans were thrown off their heads and truck and car tyres were being put over their heads and set alight…Seeing the sight, my young mind could only think that those who were being burnt alive looked like my father or my elder brothers. They all had turbans and were Sikhs…I understood that now they can kill me too…And I saw even worse all the way home.

Through this account, the writer humanizes one of the most significant, larger-than-life events of the 20th century Sikh history. The description itself reproduces a sense of helplessness and trauma. Although the very narration of this experience is itself an expressly political act, it is the personal and human element of the experience that remains central.

The author goes on to describe a contemporary experience that occurred in 2013, in which she and her family faced harassment due to their Sikh identity. She recounts how she and her

family purchased a home in a predominantly Hindu area in India, and soon thereafter started facing escalating harassment from their neighbors because they were Sikhs. The violence culminated in an angry mob gathering outside their home, and ultimately the family was forced to leave the area:

> Talk then turned to the evening of 31 October, 1984. They began to speak openly: "You are Sikhs. You Sardars, don't forget we all have vehicles in our houses and we will take out the petrol and pour over you and your house and burn you alive."… The only reason: we are Sikhs…There is no justice where a voice of minority is not heard and that voice has to gasp for breath to live.

In describing this most recent experience, the writer's tone began to shift. No longer confined to just her personal experience, she speaks to the collective Sikh experience. This time, the sense of powerlessness is expressed on a wider scale, on the behalf of Sikhs (and minorities) more broadly. The writer comments that the rising scourge of Hindu fundamentalism is making life unlivable throughout India, and that Sikhs must take heed. The violence towards Sikhs has not abated as the immediate event that anchored it (1984) fell further into the past, but has actually congealed into permanent disdain. The very continuity of this violence demands that it be considered in a broader light. As the author sees it, anti-Sikh violence does not emerge as part of a reactionary response to an event in time, but is a larger structural issue.

The author then begins to outline the ways in which Sikhs can take action, but rather than addressing the socio-political issues affecting Sikhs, it shifts the focus onto endemic existential problems *within* the Sikh community. The article never addresses this abrupt change of subject and tone.

> I have to say with regret that our Sikh leaders are asleep, there is no unity among us, we go to gurdwaras to have langar and chat sessions…Our kids are not being taught Sikh History, most importantly about 1984. We as Sikhs do not give intellectual knowledge to our kids. Our preachers at the gurdwara do not give the information and knowledge that speaks of our rights…Do we ever talk of 1984 amongst our families and to our kids? Do

> we tell our kids the stories of 1984, leave alone 1947?… Do we help Sikhs in need? Do we try to accommodate Sikhs looking for employment?…Isn't it the time to amend our gurdwara policies and laws to meet our current and urgent needs?

The litany of concerns revolves around the failure to transmit knowledge to the younger generations. However, there is also the sense that Sikhs are failing to instill pride about Sikh identity. While the author focuses on 'intellectual knowledge' and history, what she actually seems to be saying is that contemporary Sikhs are not grounded in anything. They are alienated from their own history and tradition. It is this existential lack that truly makes Sikhs unanchored and vulnerable to violence.

This article does not directly address citizenship, but rearticulates Sikh subjectivity through the lens of liberalism. It does so by casting Sikhs as autonomous moral agents who have both the capacity and the responsibility to rectify their own internal weaknesses, and in so doing, to assume a position of strength and empowerment. It encourages Sikhs to embark on a journey of self-cultivation, a virtue that has been enfolded into the paradigm of the liberal subject (Rosenbaum 1987; Thomas 2004). What makes this especially pronounced is the way the article so dramatically shifts registers from external critique to internal critique, from an account of structural violence to a blueprint for developing collective agency.

A. Visual constructions of liberal citizenship

Diasporic Sikh websites also reimagine Sikhs as ideal liberal citizens through visual rhetoric, particularly photographs. To quote Elena Creef, I draw attention to how the images can not only be 'subjected to the same kind of critical and theoretical scrutiny, interpretation, and analysis as literary texts', but can also actively 'instruct us how to "read" the narrative of citizenship' (Creef

2004, 9). I examine how the images have the paradoxical effect of making liberal citizenship both aspirational, as well as presenting it as something that is essentially intrinsic to a community. The photographs act as persuasive definitions, containing both dimensions of this logic at once. They affirm the narrative that citizenship is attainable for new immigrants through dedication, hard-work, and submitting to regulatory regimes of respectability, while also naturalising the notion that Sikhs are ideal liberal citizens because Sikh tradition itself is fundamentally resonant with the deeply help principles of liberal democracy. Thus, these photographs merge Sikh action and Sikh beliefs, presenting them as one and the same. They represent Sikh subjectivity as immanently adaptable to a variety of contexts.

B. Whole and Fragmented Subjectivities

Visual representations of Sikhs as ideal liberal subjects is by representing them as bodily subjects who are 'whole', by which I mean they are represented as
fundamentally empowered, active, healthy, happy, and self-possessed. This particular framing makes sense if we compare and contrast the way that differently oriented Sikh websites depict Sikhs. The meaning generated through liberal diasporic Sikh discourse online must be understood relationally, vis-à-vis the more traditional 'Punjab'-oriented discourse. On their own, the images of Sikhs on the liberal diasporic websites I examine are not particularly notable. They depict Sikhs in relatively inconspicuous terms. However, the particular pattern of visual rhetoric and its stark contrast with Khalitani websites actually serves to render the inconspicuous images of Sikhs more conspicuous and overtly marked. While liberal diasporic discourse depicts Sikhs as whole and empowered, Khalistani websites depict them as fragmented and vulnerable.

Scholar Charlotte Ross has pointed out that throughout the history of western civilization, fragmentation is a recurring trope that is associated with traumatized, marginalized, and vulnerable subjectivity, while wholeness is associated with intact, fulfilled, healthy, and cohesive subjectivity (Ross 2011). In this context, the 'body' is not just a physical thing, but also extends 'outward' to include subjectivity, or a sense of how one is situated in the world. As Ross argues, 'the boundaries of the 'whole' body, are ever shifting and elusive, reaching out to incorporate new fragments of the world'. Wholeness, then, is about more than just bodily integrity, but also includes the perception of one's own social integrity (or lacktherof).

Inscribed onto this bodily subjectivity are a host of extra-bodily markers, having to do with social normativity. This visually-mediated empowerment evokes the sense that Sikhs are thriving in modern liberal democracies, and conversely, that liberal society gives all those who truly desire it the opportunity to be happy, healthy, and prosperous. As I will elaborate more fully in the following section, bodily subjectivity is not apolitical, but actually serves to locate Sikhs securely in the liberal secular imaginary.

This conceptual apparatus, unstable though it may be, has remained influential in many modern, western societies. 'Whole' individuals and communities are, generally speaking, privileged, in that they are recognised, empowered, and have agency. This privilege is subtly expressed in their bodily presentation, through things such as their manner of dressing, their apparent health, and their general disposition. Marginalised communities seek to obtain this wholeness for themselves, and one of the ways they attempt to do this is by mimicking and absorbing themselves into the image of the dominant community (as far as is possible).

Appreciating the semiotics of wholeness on these websites requires an atypical reading of

these images, for it demands us to be attentive to that which is largely normative and thus, not immediately visible or conspicuous. The images of Sikhs presented on websites such as SikhCoalition.org, Saldef.org, and SikhChic.com reduce their subjects' foreignness as much as possible. They blend into the background of liberal democratic life. Sikh markers of difference, especially the turban and beard, still exist, but they are muted as much as possible:



Figure 11. Saldef 2014 annual report cover banner. From Saldef.org.



Figure 12. Turban myths banner. From Saldef.org.



Figure 13. Sikh American deputy in Harris County, Texas. From Saldef.org

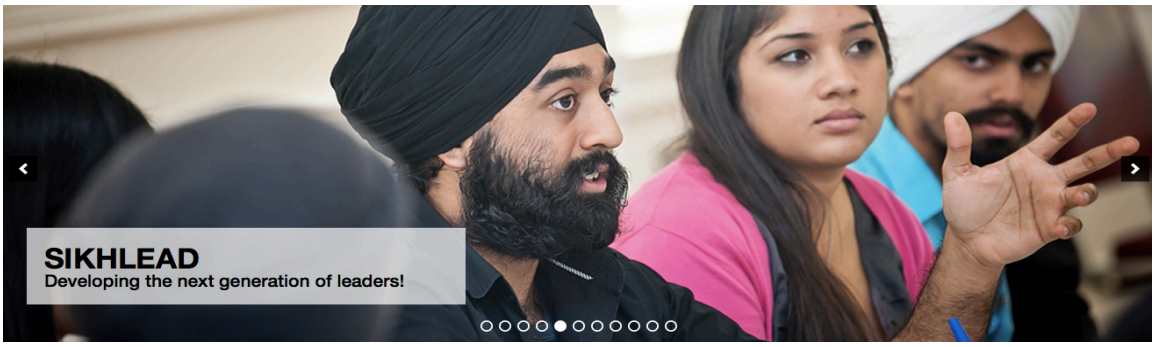


Figure 14. Sikhlead banner. From Saldef.org.



Figure 15. Sikh Coalition Dekalb County legal settlement press conference. From SikhCoalition.com.

The Sikhs presented in these photographs are not passive receptacles of meaning, but are depicted in active poses. They are actively engaged in the work of liberal democracy, whether it be appearing in a television studio, police work, or participating in a press conference. Their body language and attire attest to their relative prosperity and health. Their expressions are not inscrutable, but open and familiar.

By way of contrast, Khalistani websites present a very different take on Sikh bodily subjectivity. They show Sikh bodies as largely vulnerable or radicalized. Rather than attempting to mimic more dominant social groups or norms, Khalistani highlights the fragmented nature of Sikh subjectivity:



Figure 16. Bhai Gurpal Singh Babbar. From Neverforget84.com.



Figure 17. Burning Sikh during 1984 Riots. From SikhLionz.com.



Sukhwant Kaur, whose brothers-in-law were among 28 beaten up in jail, with family | Photo Credits: The Tribune

Figure 18. Grieving Sikh family. From Sikhsangat.org.

All of these photographs, obtained from several different Khalistani websites and blogs, emphasize Sikh vulnerability in some way. The first two photographs, of a deceased fighter and a Sikh being burned by violent mobs, depict this vulnerability in an explicit way. The third image is that of a Sikh family whose family members were injured in acts of police brutality. The family appears bereft, and the images collectively suggest that even those Sikhs who are not directly political remain vulnerable to different forms of state violence. The Sikhs pictured here are passive: violence is being done or has been done unto them. Together, all of these project a collective image of Sikhs as being wholly vulnerable.

On the other hand, pro-Khalistani bodies also depict Sikh subjectivity as being fundamentally radicalised, which signals a fragmented subjectivity in a different way. This can be seen in the following examples:

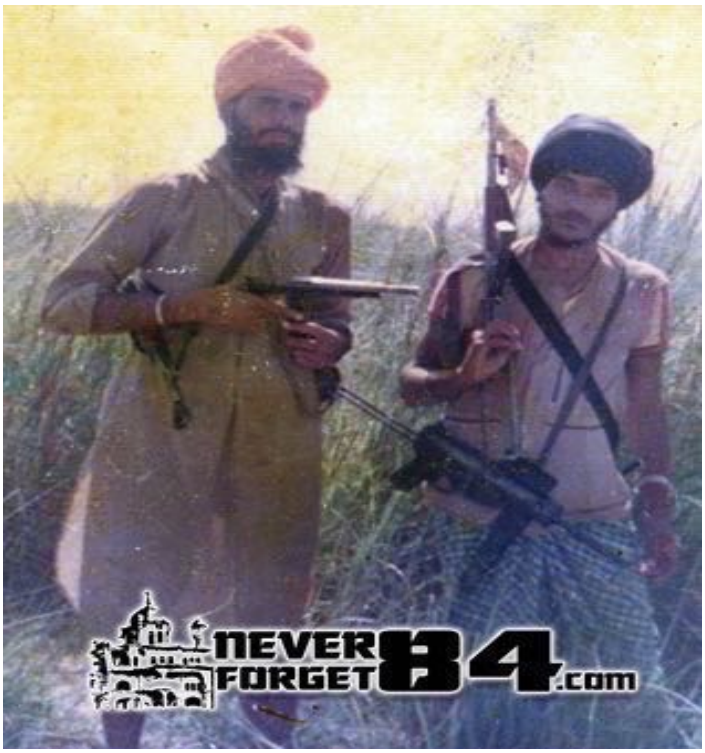


Figure 19.



Figure 20.

To a liberal public, the Sikhs in these images read as radical and angry. They are attired in clothing that appears exotic and outmoded, and their brandishing of weapons instantly signals that they may be dangerous. The very publication and circulation of such explicit photographs is an act of radical political protest. This radicalness is partly the result of being at such a distance from the source of political and social power. In a liberal context, anger and radicalness are a symptom of a fragmented subjectivity.

In different ways, these images of Sikh vulnerability and radicalness point to fragmented subjectivities, since both signify marginality. In this context, the images of Sikh 'wholeness' on the advocacy websites are rendered meaningful precisely because of their difference from the images on Khalistani websites. The visual representation of Sikh 'wholeness' assures Sikh readers that they are safe from persecution and violence, and assures non-Sikhs that Sikhs are nonthreatening and reliably familiar. It downplays any hint of Sikh vulnerability or subversiveness, and instead, projects total strength and self-possession.

III. Socio-Political Normativity

A. Civic Participation

These same images situate themselves according to a different metric, which is that of socio-political normativity. The primary operative dichotomy in terms of class representation is one of socio-politico-economic normatively versus socio-political-economic radicalness. In this section, I continue to refer to Figures 12, 13, 15, and 16, call attention to how these images represent Sikhs as occupying the 'middle class', a rhetorical category that in the contemporary liberal democratic (especially American) context, is synonymous with social and political normativity.

Although the category has traditionally been conceived in economic terms, middle class identity also encompasses a set of social, political and civic values.

A thriving middle class is viewed as both a requirement for and consequence of healthy liberal democracy. In liberal rhetoric, the lower class is frequently cast as deviant and stagnant while the upper classes are cast as greedy and corrupt. Both of these states of being suffer from an excess of negative human proclivities. In contrast, middle class values are the very essence of moderation. They include industriousness, emphasis on education and specialised skills, savings, consumption, and leisure. Middle class values also 'include a preference for moderation and stability over revolutionary change.' If some of these characteristics sound contradictory—that is because the category of the middle class is a more an index of inclusion rather than a set of empirical and consistent facts. It is primarily a metric of one's willingness to conform to the socio, political, and economic (particularly consumption-based) aspects of life in modern liberal democracies.

While it is certainly true that many Sikhs are middle or even upper-middle class, this discourse largely obscures the blue-collar, labor-intensive work that many Sikh immigrants often engage in, either at some point in their lives or, for some Sikh immigrants, throughout their entire lives. With the exception of the Sikh police officer (a profession that is typically considered blue-collar or working class), most of the Sikh subjects above are portrayed as professionals, or, at the very least, as professional-looking. The professional credentials of these Sikhs can be gleaned from location, as well as from their formal or semi-formal attire. The fact that the Sikhs depicted in these images are shown in relatively relaxed postures indicates a lack of physical exertion in their professions. The defining characteristics of blue collar work is its requirement of (relatively speaking) increased physical exertion. By contrast, the Sikhs in these

images are by-and-large engaged in professions that require relatively little physical labor.

The choice to focus largely on those Sikhs with professional occupations belies not only a pride in white-collar work, but also in educational achievements. The fact that they seem to be clean, healthy, well-groomed, and relaxed indicate that they have enough income and time to invest in their image and well-being. Achieving this indicates a kind of successful assimilation, thus it is important for both immigrant communities, and for their host countries, that immigrants be able to do this successfully.

As depicted in the photographs above, the judicial system, educational institutions, and the media all constitute important, even mandatory, aspects of modern secular societies. Historically, they are institutions that have consciously attempted to be devoid of any trace of religion. The places associated with these institutions, such as a television studio or courthouse, function as their symbolic representatives. Situating Sikhs within these spaces is a way of illustrating that Sikhs are capable of merging with the scenery of American civic life, and that they are capable of being good, effective, and thoroughly secular Americans

The websites include a preponderance of images in which it depicts Sikhs as engaged in civic activities, such as police work, military work, or political work, and frequently includes images of Sikhs in uniform. In addition to Figure 14 above, below are some additional examples:



Figure 21. Canada's Sikh Defense Minister at NATO meeting. From Sikhchic.com.



Figure 22. Lt Col Harjit Singh Sajjan takes command of The British Columbia Regiment (Duke

of Connaught's Own). From SikhChic.com.



Figure 23. Sikh in U.S. Armed Forces. From SikhCoalition.com.

These images depict Sikhs as being actively involved in the work of liberal democracy. Rather than being just passive bystanders, they are active participants in its' management and functioning.

This situating act also delimits the parameters of Sikhism. This visual rhetoric uses the nominal division between 'secular' and 'religious' spaces to effectively construct Sikh identity as a social identity, and to performatively illustrate that religiosity is but one aspect of Sikh-American's larger (liberal) identity. In the photographs above, the particular locations include the inside of a courtroom, a courthouse, a television studio, and a classroom. The images avoid the appearance that Sikhs are prioritizing their religious acts or spaces above their other civic duties. Sikh identity is rearticulated as something that has limits, as something that can be circumscribed, as something that can be activated or deactivated depending upon the setting. Sikhs are shown as being comfortable inhabiting secular locations, and are able to delimit their

religious selves to the appropriate time and place.

B. Consumer Citizenship

Another way that diasporic Sikhs online cast themselves as liberal citizens is through practicing consumer citizenship by adopting a‘lifestyle’ discourse. This is an emerging trend among middle-class and upper middle-class youth in western societies. Lifestyle discourse rests at the intersection of conspicuous consumption and social media. In recent years, economic and consumer practices have increasingly become a part of the way that scholars conceptualise citizenship. In this discourse, ‘the economically active citizen participates in society by consuming “appropriately”’, ‘in ways that enable work on the self-as-project or that allows the person to meet their responsibility to the state’ (Riley et al 2010, 36). This discourse emerges out of the larger context of neoliberalism and free-market logic, and turns consumerism into not only an individual right, but also an obligation.

As we will see, the presence of Sikhs in the ‘lifestyle’ economy is viewed as empowering because it marks even greater levels of Sikh involvement in the cultural logic of life in modern, liberal societies. The most prominent example of this is in the person of Karan Kaur, who runs the popular Instagram account of ‘Style with Kaur’. Karan Kaur’s ‘Style with Kaur’ Instagram account, was started in 2014, and consists exclusively of images that depict Karan Kaur in different outfits, different poses, and different international locales. Karan Kaur does not claim to promote any particular style aesthetic, but her style may be described as sleek, sophisticated and modern. Her attire is both Western and South Asian (although mostly Western), and she sports a variety of designs and colors. The consistent feature throughout all of the various iterations of

Karan Kaur is her turban, usually black, but sometimes in a different color matching her outfit. The turban is the one constant throughout all of the images, an instant signifier of her religious identity.



Figure 24. Karan Kaur in Murano, Veneto, Italy. From Karan Kaur's 'Style with Kaur' Instagram account.



Figure 25. Karan Kaur in a Punjabi village. From Karan Kaur's 'Style with Kaur' Instagram account.



Figure 26. Karan Kaur in a 'traditional' salwar kameez outfit. From Karan Kaur's 'Style with

Kaur' Instagram account.



Figure 27. A display of luxury make-up, perfume and jewelry items. From Karan Kaur's 'Style with Kaur' Instagram account.



Figure 28. Karan Kaur in Paris. From Karan Kaur's 'Style with Kaur' Instagram account.

One of the appealing aspects of the life that Karan Kaur depicts is the preponderance and conspicuous display of beautiful objects, such as clothing, purses, shoes, and jewelry. When these items are on her person, Karan Kaur is photographed in such a way as to highlight these objects and make sure they are visible. In a few photographs, several of these items are placed together and photographed alone. They are luxury or designer items, and the manner in which they are photographed denotes a kind of casual decadence.

Another covetable aspect of this Karan Kaur's social media account is the intangible quality she possesses of having good taste. The clothing and accessories are certainly attractive, but they are rendered even more remarkable through the way they are put together and transformed into something that is unique. These photographs clearly rely on a particular modern and upper class aesthetic, the latter of which is an arbitrary category closely associated with social (upper) class.

She fits the physical profile of what would be considered a sophisticated, beautiful, fashionable young woman in most contemporary, Western societies. Through her person, Karan Kaur is an example of a Sikh woman who bears the physical insignia of Sikh identity while still adapting that identity to a modern, western lifestyle in a spectacularly successful way.

In an interview with the website Kaur Life, Karan Kaur explains what prompted her to start her Instagram account, and she frames her response in terms of recognition and empowerment (KaurLife.org, n.d.). She comments that once she started wearing a dastaar (turban) at the age of sixteen, she realized that she 'became a walking advertisement for Sikhi', and that she 'wanted to wear clothing that didn't just represent' her, but also Sikhism itself. She did not want people to 'get the wrong impression about who Sikhs are', but rather, she wanted to make sure that Sikh women are viewed (especially by non-Sikhs) as fashionable, noting that 'I

have not once seen anyone comment or appreciate a women's dastaar or her sense of style on an international scale in the fashion industry'. She wanted to change that, to 'make a name' for herself and other Sikh women, and to see what the 'fashion industry has to say about turbaned Kaurs'. Through this framing, she makes it clear that consumer citizenship is a means of acquiring and projecting empowerment, not just on her own behalf, but on behalf of Sikhs in general.

For Karan Kaur, Sikh women can achieve a form of empowerment through being recognised as fashionable and by being integrated into the semiotics of the global fashion industry, both as models and as consumers. She is showing the world that Sikhs can be beautiful and chic, and that the exotic dimension of their religious identity need not to render them unattractive or unassimilable. 'Lifestyle', then, is not just a way for individuals to conform to neoliberal logics of self-expression, but also ways for entire communities to signify their willingness to integrate into modern, western, and liberal societies.

It is also important to note that the notion of fashion, and being fashionable, is seen as a way of expressing and reinforcing one's individuality. Fashion only makes sense in a context where individuals are valued and judged for who they are on their own terms, thus, it really only makes sense in a society that has thoroughly absorbed basic liberal precepts. Thus, Karan Kaur's discourse helps to naturalise the idea that Sikhs are willing and able to inhabit liberal subjectivity.

IV. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined how liberal diasporic Sikh discourse rearticulates Sikh identity by representing them as virtuous liberal citizens. In the examples analysed above, the websites

(or Instagram account) each articulate in different ways how Sikhs live up to the varied dimensions of liberal citizenship. They do this by instrumentalising various modalities of virtuous citizenship, which includes the ability to act as autonomous moral agents, the distinction of enjoying a relatively privileged and cohesive subjectivity, the capacity for socio-political normativity, and the capacity for consumer citizenship. Through this particular modality, this discourse circumvents the matter of having to explicitly define or critique Sikhism (although both of those modalities continue to overlap with this one), but focus instead on discursive representations.

This modality certainly defines Sikhism in ways that extend beyond the Punjabi ethno-territorial scope, and makes frequent references to the global or cosmopolitan dimensions of Sikhism. However, it is much more centered on civic contexts in liberal democratic states. It effectively redefines liberal citizenship itself as a kind of universal, transcultural condition, and frames Sikh identity as being fundamentally aligned with universality.

Chapter 8: Conclusions

I. Findings

This dissertation has examined how liberal diasporic Sikh discourse redefines Sikh identity through the medium of the Internet. Specifically, it asks the following questions: How are the dichotomies inherent within this discourse produced and perpetuated as such? How does the digital nature of this discourse have an effect? What does this discourse ultimately tell us about the nature of diasporic Sikhism? As the findings illustrate, 'liberal' diasporic Sikh discourse is distinctive and cogent, and is distinguished not only by its ideological orientation, but also by the particular modalities that it employs. This discourse actively reinterprets Sikh identity as cosmopolitan and universal, rather than parochial. Liberalism, or a certain idea of what liberalism is, provides the language and grammar to actually accomplish this re-articulation, and also exerts a powerful pressure to do so in the diasporic context. This is not only because most diasporic Sikhs reside in liberal democracies, but also because liberal discourse has become a globalized force. This dissertation has charted the ways that Sikhs have imbibed and interacted with liberalism, resulting in a liberal Sikh discourse that functions in unique ways.

The development of this discourse signals multiple things. First, it signals the need to pluralise the Sikh diaspora not only in demographic terms, but also in terms of ideological orientation. Secondly, it commands us to consider the fact that diasporic Sikh identity is not just an extension or continuation of Punjabi Sikh identity, but is in fact a new way of being Sikh. This is not just an intended consequence of this discourse, but something that the discourse actively seeks to create. The needs and impulses to redefine Sikh identity in this way are not

novel or recent, but they are cogently expressed through the medium of the Internet. Collectively, these websites are a privileged site for examining liberal diasporic Sikh discourse.

One of my dissertation's primary contributions is that it illustrates how liberal diasporic Sikh discourse functions not just as a distinctive ideological orientation, but also as a set of particular modalities of interpretation and action. The emphasis on form, rather than solely on content, actually allows us to appreciate more fully how this discourse functions. It enables us to appreciate the tropes, themes, contradictions, and tensions that propel this discourse. Paying attention to the modalities of this discourse allows us to understand how transformative it is, and how it functions both consciously and unconsciously.

Studying websites, rather than engaging in more traditional ethnographic work, yields unique benefits. It allows us to view discourse at a macro-level—in ways that extend beyond the intentionality of particular individuals and organisations. There is a great deal of heterogeneity between the various websites, and each of the websites is produced by several different individuals. And yet, there are still broad similarities in the way that these websites collectively reframe Sikh identity. Websites enable us to see continuities of discourse even when, on the surface, it appears to be discontinuous.

Additionally, websites are fundamentally considered a marginal or supplementary tool vis-à-vis the more recognised institutions of the Sikh diaspora, such as the *Gurudwara*. Whereas the *Gurudwara* is the central site where diasporic Sikhs congregate, carry out religious services, socialise, and plan community events (Takhar 2014), websites have largely been viewed as a means of dispersing information, networking, or as a space where discussions occur. However, in this research I have examined how websites are a generative source for reshaping Sikh identity, rather than simply supplementing it. This transformative element of web discourse can

only be detected and understood if we view the websites as constituting a discourse, rather than simply as a one-dimensional text. Conceived as a discourse, websites become a dynamic entity that actively reshapes the terms of the debate around Sikh identity.

In this respect, the structural position of diasporic Sikh websites is similar to that of the Sikh diaspora vis-à-vis Sikhism as centered in Punjab. While Punjab has always been considered the central site and generative source of Sikh identity, this research shows that the diaspora is increasingly subverting this relationship. While they may not be able to gain a foothold in the management of *Gurudwaras* throughout the diaspora, the organisations and individuals who generate these websites have made deft use of the Web as a means of articulating and disseminating their vision.

The Internet has been able to uniquely provide a space where diasporic Sikhs have been able to come together to create a distinctive discourse. The web makes it easier to articulate Sikhism as a universal religion because the Internet itself mimics the kind of abstract universality that diasporic Sikhs are trying to inculcate. Although websites have specific server locations, they simultaneously exist everywhere all at once. The medium reflects the message, making it a more powerful tool for disseminating that message.

This research also shows that it is not only academics who are problematising how religion has been conceptualised, but practitioners as well. As I examined, the discussions taking place on the websites consciously and astutely challenge the presumed contiguity of Sikh identify and Punjabi identity, recognising that in many ways this formulation is historically contingent rather than self-evident. However, even while performing this critique, these discussions inscribed another problematic set of assumptions, which is that religion is modular. It inherits the presumption that religion is a stable and universally applicable category, and de-

emphasizes those aspects of Sikhism that fall short, exceed, or otherwise contradict the category's imperatives. Thus, liberal diasporic Sikh discourse challenges one set of assumptions about Sikhism while simultaneously reproducing another.

One of the other major effects of this diasporic discourse is that Sikhism is being subtly redefined in abstract terms. These websites communicate the message that what matters most about Sikhism is that which is abstract and universal. It is the aspect of Sikhism that enables an individual to directly commune with the divine, and rely upon their own individual ethics and critical rationality (rather than dogma and rules). Discursively, Sikhism is being re-articulated as a philosophy or set of guidelines, rather than as an entire way of life that encompasses the body, the social, and the political. The version of Sikhism that emerges from this discourse is one that is abstract and idealised. The transformation itself should be recognised and acknowledged. Thus, diasporic Sikh discourse is effectively diminishing that which makes it radically different.

II. Limitations of the Study and Directions for Further Research

One major limitation of this research is that it focuses only on the digital iteration of liberal diasporic discourse, and this methodological spotlight gives us only a partial picture of how influential this discourse really is. More ethnographic information about the Sikh individuals and organisations that adopt this orientation would be useful. Because terms like 'traditional' and 'liberal' Sikh identity assume meaning partially through their mutual opposition to one another, it would be illuminating to do extended interviews and participant-observation with individuals and institutions that subscribe to these identities and interrogate how these competing frameworks of Sikh identity function. It would be particularly interesting to analyse whether

diasporic Sikhs themselves recognise and acknowledge these competing agendas. If not, how might they conceptualise intra-diasporic, or even intra-Sikh differences? A project conceived more expansively would help focus attention on how diasporic Sikhs narrate their own identities, conflicts, and their relationship to constancy and change.

This dissertation has demonstrated that the need to continually problematise those aspects of religious identity that seem relatively inconspicuous or unremarkable, because despite their ostensible un-remarkability, they actively shape the way that we understand religious identity. By foregrounding diasporic Sikh tendencies to reinterpret Sikhism through the lens of liberal universalism, we are able to arrive at an understanding of how distinctive and radically different this discourse is. Equally, by foregrounding a relatively marginal site of religious production that is the Web, we can see how meaning is generated in new and surprising ways. We must continue to foreground the unsightly and seemingly mundane aspects of religious identity in order to understand how that identity is being continually redefined and circumscribed. Doing this will reveal the operational dimensions of not just Sikhism or religion in general, but of liberal universalism as well.

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List of Figures

Figure 1. Sikhnet website graphic. From Sikhnet.com. Accessed 30 August 2015. URL: N.A. Wayback URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20150909072743/http://report.sikhnet.com/

Figure 2. Sikh Coalition website graphic. From SikhCoalition.com. Accessed 4 August 2017. Available at: https://www.sikhcoalition.org/about-sikhs/. Wayback URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20170804225504/https://www.sikhcoalition.org/about-sikhs/

Figure 3. Sikhnet header A. From Sikhnet.com. Accessed 15 December 2017. URL: N.A. Wayback URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20080722050935/http://fateh.sikhnet.com:80/gurbani

Figure 4. Sikhnet header B. From Sikhnet.com. Accessed 8 January 2016. Available at: http://fateh.sikhnet.com/s/SikhIntro. Wayback URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20171009224631/http://fateh.sikhnet.com/s/SikhIntro

Figure 5. Sikhnet header C. From Sikhnet.com. Accessed 14 December 2015. Available at: http://www.sikhnet.com/discussion/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=7627&sid=db47119019af29a6f367cbc937282ec7. Wayback URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20171009230618/http://www.sikhnet.com/discussion/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=7627&sid=db47119019af29a6f367cbc937282ec7

Figure 6. Sikhnet header D. From Sikhnet.com. Accessed 10 September 2015. Available at: http://www.sikhnet.com/pages/download-banis.

Figure 7. Sikhnet children's story - Bhai Taru's Life of Fearless Love. From Sikhnet.com. Accessed 10 October 2015. Available at: https://www.sikhnet.com/stories/audio/bhai-tarus-life-fearless-love. Wayback URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20171009232626/https://www.sikhnet.com/stories/audio/bhai-tarus-life-fearless-love

Figure 8. Sikhnet children's story - Guru Tegh Bahadur and the Magical Land. From Sikhnet.com. Accessed 20 December 2015. Available at: http://www.sikhnet.com/stories/audio/guru-tegh-bahadur-and-magical-land. Wayback URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20160308081930/http://www.sikhnet.com/stories/audio/guru-tegh-bahadur-and-magical-land

Figure 9. Sikhnet children story - Akali Phula Singh. From Sikhnet.com. Accessed 10 October 2015. Available at: https://www.sikhnet.com/stories/audio/akali-phula-singh. Wayback URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20171009233137/https://www.sikhnet.com/stories/audio/akali-phula-singh

Figure 10. Sikhnet children's story - Bhai Lehna Ji's Devotion. From Sikhnet.com.. Accessed 10 October 2015. Available at: https://www.sikhnet.com/stories/audio/bhai-lehna-jis-devotion>

Wayback URL:
https://web.archive.org/web/20171009233326/https://www.sikhnet.com/stories/audio/bhai-lehna-jis-devotion

Figure 11. Saldef 2014 annual report cover banner. From Saldef.org. Accessed 11 October 2015. Available at: http://saldef.org/about-us/annual-reports/#.WduxB4ZJkU0 Wayback URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20151228033033/http://saldef.org/about-us/annual-reports/#.WduxiIZJk9c

Figure 12. Saldef 2014 annual report cover banner. From Saldef.org. Accessed 11 October 2015. http://saldef.org/about-us/annual-reports/#.WduxB4ZJkU0 Wayback URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20151228033033/http://saldef.org/about-us/annual-reports/#.WduxiIZJk9c

Figure 13. Sikh American deputy in Harris County, Texas. From Saldef.org. Accessed 10 May 2015. Available at: http://saldef.org/news/sikhswhoserve/#.WduegIZJk9f. Wayback URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20171009163059/http://saldef.org/news/sikhswhoserve/#.WdukW4ZJk9c

Figure 14. Sikhlead banner. From Saldef.org. Accessed 11 October 2015. Available at: http://saldef.org/

Figure 15. Sikh Coalition Dekalb County legal settlement press conference. From Sikhcoalition.org. Accessed 15 October 2015. Available at: https://www.sikhcoalition.org/our-work/legal-and-policy/legal-settlement-with-dekalb-county-school-district/. Wayback URL: https://www.sikhcoalition.org/our-work/legal-and-policy/legal-settlement-with-dekalb-county-school-district/

Figure 16. Bhai Gurpal Singh Babbar. From Neverforget84.com. Accessed on 14 November 2015. Available at: http://www.neverforget84.com/shaheeds/shaheed-bhai-gurpal-singh-babbar/comment-page-1 Wayback URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20171010231144/http://www.neverforget84.com/shaheeds/shaheed-bhai-gurpal-singh-babbar/comment-page-1

Figure 17. Human Rights? In India? From SikhLionz.com Accessed 16 May 2016. Available at: http://www.sikhlionz.com/humanrights.htm. Wayback URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20171010231654/http://www.sikhlionz.com/humanrights.htm

Figure 18. Grieving Sikh family. From Sikhsangat.org. Accessed 16 May 2016. Available at: http://sikhsangat.org/2016/state-sponsored-massacare-of-innocent-sikhs-pilgrims-pilibhit-weve-forgotten/. Wayback URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20171010235049/http://sikhsangat.org/2016/state-sponsored-massacare-of-innocent-sikhs-pilgrims-pilibhit-weve-forgotten/

Figure 19. Sikh men in Punjabi village. From NeverForget84.com. Accessed 14 November 2015. Available at: http://www.neverforget84.com/shaheeds/shaheed-bhai-waryam-singh-

booraynangal. Wayback URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20171011150341/http://www.neverforget84.com/shaheeds/shaheed-bhai-waryam-singh-booraynangal

Figure 20. Sikh holding firearm. From NeverForget84.com. Accessed 14 November 2015. Available at: http://www.neverforget84.com/gallery/Bhindranwale-Tiger-Force-of-Khalistan/Bhai-Waryam-Singh-Booraynangal/Bhai-Waryam-Singh-Booraynangal.jpg.html. Wayback URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20171011125823/http://www.neverforget84.com/gallery/Bhindranwale-Tiger-Force-of-Khalistan/Bhai-Waryam-Singh-Booraynangal/Bhai-Waryam-Singh-Booraynangal.jpg.html

Figure 21. Canada's Sikh Defense Minister at NATO meeting. Copyright Virginia Mayo/Associated Press. From Sikhchic.com. Accessed 3 May 2016. Available at: http://sikhchic.com/our_heroes/the_extraordinaries_canadas_harjit_singh_sajjan. Wayback URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20171010174811/http://sikhchic.com/our_heroes/the_extraordinaries_canadas_harjit_singh_sajjan

Figure 22. Lt Col Harjit Singh Sajjan takes command of The British Columbia Regiment (Duke of Connaught's Own). From Sikhchic.com. Accessed 10 November 2015. Available at: http://sikhchic.com/our_heroes/he_was_our_eyes_ears_in_afghanistan_lt_col_harjit_singh_sajjan. Wayback URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20171010175612/http://sikhchic.com/our_heroes/he_was_our_eyes_ears_in_afghanistan_lt_col_harjit_singh_sajjan

Figure 23. Sikh in U.S. Armed Forces. From SikhCoalition.com. Accessed 10 September 2017. https://www.sikhcoalition.org/our-work/ending-employment-discrimination/sikhs-in-the-u-s-armed-forces/. Wayback URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20171010180547/https://www.sikhcoalition.org/our-work/ending-employment-discrimination/sikhs-in-the-u-s-armed-forces/

Figure 24. StylewithKaur in Murano, Veneto, Italy. From StylewithKaur Instagram account. Accessed 16 June 2016. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/BGoFtSUrM_Q/?hl=en&taken-by=stylewithkaur

Figure 25. StylewithKaur in Punjabi village. From StylewithKaur Instagram account. Accessed 17 June 2016. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/zrOw-wLM2o/?hl=en&taken-by=stylewithkaur

Figure 26. Stylewith Kaur in salwar kameez. From StylewithKaur Instagram account. Accessed 20 May 2017. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/BToK6aGgUc1/?hl=en&taken-by=stylewithkaur

Figure 27. StylewithKaur display. From StylewithKaur Instagram account. Accessed 23 June 2016. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/BEXarnsrMwu/?hl=en&taken-by=stylewithkaur

Figure 28. StylewithKaur in Paris. From StylewithKaur Instagram account. Accessed 17 May 2017. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/BL8Ks8OhIgs/?hl=en&taken-by=stylewithkaur