



Sikh Research Journal

Vol. 2 No. 1

This article is from *Sikh Research Journal*, the online peer-reviewed journal of Sikh and Punjabi Studies

Sikh Research Journal *Vol. 2 No. 1 Published: Fall 2016.

<http://sikhresearchjournal.org>

<http://sikhfoundation.org>

Cosmopolitanism, Tradition and Identity: Framing the Sikh Experience in California

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Revised, August 18, 2016

Abstract

This paper analyzes academic accounts of major aspects of the Sikh experience in California. In addition to providing an overview of various studies of the Sikh community, this paper points out implicit assumptions in these studies, as well as gaps in the literature. Issues discussed include Sikh religious identity, cultural practices and socioeconomic status, as well as the evolving national and global context in which the California Sikh community has grown. A specific academic framing of the community that is analyzed and critiqued is the classification of Sikh immigrants into “cosmopolitans” versus “transnationals,” the former term being imbued with normative desirability as more cultural flexible or adaptive. The critique offered here challenges historical representations of the early twentieth century Sikh community in India that underlie this framing, as well as highlighting insufficient consideration of societal contexts and constraints facing the community in twentieth century California.

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Introduction

Based on inferences from US Census data (which record data on languages spoken at home), there are about a quarter million Sikhs in the United States. About half of these are in California.¹ The Sikh presence in California is therefore quantitatively important, as well as having a long history. Indeed, historically, Sikhs dominated the population of “Asian Indians,” constituting perhaps 50 to 70 percent of that US Census group from 1910 to 1940, and 80 to 90 percent of those in California.² More recently, large influxes of Indian immigrants associated with the growth of information technology have made Sikhs and Punjabis a much smaller percentage of Indian Americans, but they still represent a significant presence, especially in California, and they are an important part of the state’s societal mosaic, along with many other minority ethnic groups.

This paper seeks to focus attention on the current state of knowledge of the Sikh community in California.³ There have been several academic studies of this community, but many of them are

* I am immensely grateful to Rahuldeep Singh Gill for extensive comments and intricate conversations that helped me immeasurably in shaping and revising this paper. Michael Hawley also provided similarly extensive and patient comments. The final product is well short of meeting all the issues and challenges they raised, and they are totally blameless for that shortcoming.

¹ These figures are based on data constructed by Sanjoy Chakravorty, who, along with Devesh Kapur, are my co-authors on a forthcoming book on Indians in America (Chakravorty, Kapur and Singh, 2016, forthcoming). I am indebted to them for many ideas and a great deal of information, although they bear no responsibility for the material in this paper. There are a little over three million people of Indian origin in the US, or about one percent of the population. The number in California is about 560,000, or about one-sixth of Indian Americans. Therefore Indian-Americans have disproportionately settled in California (which has about one-eighth of the US population), and Sikhs even more so.

² These estimates are based on numbers reported in Leonard (1993) and La Brack (1988a), but which were compiled from earlier studies of immigrants from India, referenced in those works. Further inferences are required here, since these earlier Censuses did not collect language data. Since the numbers were quite small (about 2,500 nationwide), direct tabulation from local records has been used by various authors to establish that immigrants from India who were in rural California in this period were almost all Punjabis, and predominantly Sikhs within that group.

³ The Sikhs are a faith community founded in the early 16th century by Nanak, who is considered by Sikhs as their Guru, or spiritual guide and teacher. He was succeeded by nine others, Guru Gobind Singh being the last of these human successors, and subsequently the sacred text, Guru Granth Sahib, serves the role of the community’s spiritual

dated. Thus, we have access to multiple historical accounts, and scattered ethnographic studies, but there has been no major study for several decades. After providing an overview of academic studies on California Sikhs, the paper discusses the framing of these existing works, pointing out certain analytical features that have not been previously highlighted, especially in juxtaposition. In particular, the issue of Sikh identity surfaces in a manner that deserves further attention. Specifically, this paper surfaces and critiques an academic framing of the community that classifies Sikh immigrants into either “cosmopolitans” or “transnationals,” the former term being meant to connote cultural flexibility and pluralism, and the latter being characterized as embodying cultural narrowness. The critique offered here challenges historical representations of the early twentieth century Sikh community in India that underlie this framing, as well as highlighting insufficient consideration of societal contexts and constraints that shaped the Sikh immigrant experience in twentieth century California. The penultimate section of the paper goes on to discuss the global and national context in which the California Sikh community has evolved, and some of the current challenges it faces. The paper ends with a summary concluding section.

Studies of the Sikhs in California

There are three major book-length scholarly works on the Sikh community in California, in addition to shorter studies that have been conducted.⁴ The earliest of these was by Bruce La Brack (1988a), which was based on work primarily done in the 1970s, though it incorporated follow-up fieldwork done through 1985. The title of his book, *The Sikhs of Northern California 1904-1975*, is a good indicator of its broad scope.⁵ La Brack provides a quite comprehensive linear account of the Sikh community in California, including its early days and the transition effected by the opening up of immigration in 1965 through the Immigration and Naturalization Act. The well-known narrative is one of a community that was static in numbers on the one hand and cut off from its homeland roots on the other, as a result of restrictive immigration policies introduced in the 1920s, being replenished through family reunification provisions once those restrictions were relaxed. Punjabi Sikh men could now bring brides from India, as well as other relatives, and Punjabi and Sikh traditions were renewed in the California Sikh community, as it

preceptor. Almost all Sikhs are from the Punjab region of South Asia, the site of the founding of the faith, or descendants of those from that region, so Punjabi cultural and social patterns have been significant in Sikh tradition and practice. These brief statements are meant as an introduction for those with no knowledge of the community, and do not bring out the complexities of identity and history that form much of the background for this paper.

⁴ Leonard (1993) surveys numerous studies going back to 1923, and through the 1970s, including several books, but these are often not purely academic works in the modern sense. One of these, Jacoby (2007), is essentially a reprint of a manuscript that originally dates back to 1978, and was based on research conducted in the mid-1950s, but it includes many detailed interviews that are still of value.

⁵ The dissertation version of La Brack’s work is descriptively subtitled *A Socio-historical Study*. La Brack also discusses food, dress, language, marriage, family structures, and leisure activities.

grew once more. La Brack discusses these changes in cultural and social norms, as well as the economic and family life of the community, in a careful, systematic manner.⁶

A second book-length study was that of Margaret Gibson (1988), *Accommodation without Assimilation: Sikh Immigrants in an American High School*. The fieldwork for this book was done in the early 1980s. As the title indicates, the focus of the book was quite different than La Brack's broader study. Gibson analyzed the experience of Punjabi (almost all Sikh) high school students in a community in the Sacramento Valley. The name of the community is disguised as "Valleyside" to provide anonymity, but it was in all likelihood in or around the Yuba City area, which is the site of a large Sikh community. Gibson provides a sympathetic portrayal of the community and their challenges. Several themes emerge, including the prejudice and pressures to "westernize" faced by the Sikh immigrants, the conscious efforts of the community to balance old and new cultures (captured in the title of the book), differences between first and second generation with respect to the acceptable level of acculturation along with shared values across generations, and a strong desire for economic betterment through education and hard work. These are familiar themes in analyses of immigrant experiences in America, but Gibson provides a richness of detail and particularity that is valuable in understanding major aspects of the California Sikh experience in one of the community's largest concentrations.

The third academic book on the Sikh community in California is that of Karen Leonard (1992), *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans*. This book is similar to that of Gibson in its relatively narrow scope, as opposed to La Brack's broader canvas. As the subtitle indicates, it focuses on a very specific and atypical subset of the community, which came into existence almost exclusively between the two world wars, in the era of severe restrictions on immigration and citizenship. Several hundred Punjabi men (almost all Sikh and most of the rest Muslim) married Hispanic women, and raised families in the Imperial Valley near the Mexican border. Some of these families were also formed in, or moved to, other parts of California, including the Yuba City and Stockton areas. Leonard interviewed many of these individuals across the state in the early 1980s. Her book shares with La Brack's its historical focus, and La Brack also analyzed this specific community, including making comparisons with other Sikh communities in California and elsewhere in his own work.⁷ The book's title summarizes its conceptual theme, which is used to frame and organize the detailed ethnographic research in the book. Leonard explicitly downplays approaches to ethnic identity that emphasize inequalities of power and marginalization, instead asserting about the Punjabi immigrants and their descendants that they "view their ethnic identity as a resource which they employed flexibly over the life cycle."⁸

⁶ La Brack (2012) provides a very useful summary account of the earlier period, updated to include newer research by others. This includes the formation of the Ghadar Party (discussed later in this paper) and the role of the Stockton gurdwara in the religious, social and political life of the early Sikh community.

⁷ See La Brack (1988b). La Brack and Leonard (1984) also collaborated on an analysis of Punjabi-Mexican families.

⁸ See Leonard (1993), p. 18.

All three of the above studies have overlaps as well as differences. What is striking about them, however, is how long ago they were conducted: the fieldwork for them was done in the 1970s or early 1980s, over three decades ago. However, these studies have continued to influence academic study and perceptions of the Sikhs. Gibson's work is, in fact, cited much more than the other two: using Google Scholar counts as a metric, it has over 1100 citations.⁹ However, Gibson's work appears to be relatively less known in Sikh Studies, instead having its impact in broader studies of immigrants and education in the US.¹⁰ This direction of impact was possibly influenced by Gibson's switch away from studying the Sikhs to examining other California immigrant communities, after her work on Sikhs was completed. Bruce La Brack also moved on to other academic pursuits, but has stayed in touch with the Sikh community, and offered recent perspective pieces, but not new research. Interestingly, given the seminal nature of his work, his book (including the dissertation version) has only about 80 citations in Google Scholar.¹¹ Karen Leonard has also not done any subsequent empirical work on the California Sikh community after the work for her book, focusing on other communities like Hyderabad Muslims in their diaspora. However, she has written regularly on religious pluralism in America, and continues to comment on aspects of the Sikh experience in that context. Her book on Punjabi-Mexicans remains her best-known work, with over 350 citations in Google Scholar.

Identity

Identity is, of course, a complex phenomenon, with many dimensions. We have thus far used the terms 'Sikh' and 'Punjabi' without examining them, but they are central to the focus of this paper. The term 'Punjabi' is perhaps less difficult, if taken as a designation of location of birth. This can be extended straightforwardly to descendants as well, but when 'Punjabi' is interpreted in terms of culture, the term becomes more complicated, since the components of culture are neither fixed nor circumscribed.¹² At one level, the term 'Sikh' is even more complicated, because of the variations in beliefs and practices that it encompasses.¹³ For the purposes of this

⁹ The citation numbers from Google Scholar are from August 1, 2016: these numbers grow over time, so will be different depending on when this paper is read. Google Scholar has the benefit of being wide-ranging, but it is obviously not the only measure of citations, or of academic influence more generally. It is also important to recognize that citation counts of related articles are not included in the tallies reported here.

¹⁰ A reasonable conjecture is that most of Gibson's citations come from outside Sikh Studies.

¹¹ Arguably, this illustrates both the limitations of intellectual processes in academia (a function of the venue of publication and the location of the author) as well as those of any specific citation count.

¹² Obviously, this statement is relatively bland, but underlying it is an enormous theoretical literature that seeks to come to grips with 'culture.' For example, see Bourdieu (1977) and Clifford (1988). Furthermore, while it is clear from history that Sikhs originated as a faith community, much of that history is intertwined with Punjabi culture, even among Sikhs not born in the Punjab. Recently, perhaps following a usage among Jews in America, some diaspora Sikhs describe themselves as 'culturally Sikh,' implying that they do not observe beliefs or practices of the faith. However, in this case, it is arguable that they primarily mean 'culturally Punjabi' – sometimes with additional specificity, such as being Jat or Khatri.

¹³ A tendency has arisen in Sikh Studies to frame this variation as a 'problem' for Sikh identity, but this is typically done in isolation, without acknowledging that such diversity can be found in every faith tradition, and even in

paper, it is enough to recognize the complexities, but also the fact that there are some clear implications of what each of these terms implies, as well as their differences.

La Brack is explicitly focused on the Sikh community, and invariably uses the term, although often pairing it with Punjabi. Gibson refers to Sikhs in her title, but then shifts – with a clear explanation – to the term ‘Punjabi,’ to encompass a small proportion of non-Sikh families in her observation sample. Leonard does not use the term ‘Sikh’ in her title, but does acknowledge their preponderance among the Punjabis who married Hispanic women. However, her view of Sikh identity is heavily influenced by the highly contested work of Harjot Oberoi (1988). She writes, “In particular, he [Oberoi] has shown that Sikh-Hindu boundaries were fluid and that a separate Sikh community began to be constructed only in the nineteenth century.”¹⁴ This claim about the nineteenth century construction of a separate Sikh community is historically inaccurate, and has been refuted by many, including the foremost scholar of Sikh history, Jagtar Singh Grewal, in several definitive works (e.g., Grewal, 1990; 1997). Grewal provides a careful counterpoint to Oberoi’s specific arguments, and makes clear that, in the main, Sikhs viewed themselves as a distinct faith community from at least the seventeenth century, during their founding period.¹⁵

In line with her reliance on Oberoi, Leonard favors the term ‘Hindus’ to describe Punjabi-Mexicans. In fact, this term was applied to all immigrants from South Asia in the early twentieth century, including Sikhs and Muslims. It was a combination of a racial, ethnic and national term, although the three religions were distinct traditions,¹⁶ and while India was not an independent nation at this time, as part of the British Empire, British India was a recognized entity. Indeed, the use of the term ‘Hindu’ had strong racist and xenophobic connotations. Nevertheless, Leonard, based on her interviews with second-generation Punjabi-Mexicans, asserts that they

subsets of larger traditions (e.g., diversity among Catholics, as opposed to the obvious split between Catholics and Protestants). The most prominent example of this approach is McLeod (1989). Michael Hawley has emphasized to me the complexities of identity that go well beyond the scope of the current paper, suggesting that “notions of consciousness, personhood, agency, and truth” are involved in the concept, and that considering a combination of subjectivity and experience might provide a more satisfactory conceptual framework. These issues will have to be tackled elsewhere, in future work.

¹⁴ See Leonard (1992), p. 25.

¹⁵ La Brack and Leonard both characterize the Sikh faith as being built on an amalgam of Hindu and Muslim antecedents, though this position is not present in La Brack’s sole-authored works. This was a common view at one time, but has since been discredited. An alternative academic claim, that Sikh belief is essentially built on a so-called Sant tradition, has also been shown to be both ahistorical and conceptually problematic: see Singh (2001). Mann (2010) provides the clearest and most comprehensive analysis of the founding of the community. Gill (2016) provides a fresh analysis of the early-sixteenth century work of Bhai Gurdas Bhalla, in which the distinctiveness of the Sikhs as a faith community is quite apparent.

¹⁶ Indeed, the problematic category here is not ‘Sikh,’ but ‘Hindu,’ since the extent of diversity and temporal change within that appellation has been quite radical. Oberoi’s statement of this is typical of many scholars, “An extralocal religious community of Hindus is therefore a modern creation; linguistic and historical evidence indicates that it never existed in the past” (Oberoi, 1994, p. 17); but then he inaccurately seeks to establish a similar claim for Sikhs. It was also common for outsiders to use ‘Hindu’ as a term for any inhabitant of South Asia, whatever their faith tradition.

embraced this Hindu appellation: they “took pride in an ethnic identity as “Hindus” in rural California until new immigrants from South Asia challenged their claim to that identity.”¹⁷

The sympathetic view of the self-identification of the second-generation Punjabi-Mexicans as Hindus may be reasonable, but in later writings, though not based on any new fieldwork, Leonard (2007) extends her perspective to contrast earlier and later Punjabi immigrants. Repeating her views on the supposedly recent development of a distinctive Sikh identity, she claims “The first Punjabi diaspora reflected the Punjab’s late-nineteenth-century plural society, where occupation and language were more important than religion [p. 54],” and “The Punjabi pioneers, most among them Sikhs, were cosmopolitans [p. 55].”¹⁸ From this perspective, she goes on to claim that, “Arguably, the religious pluralism still lingering at the time of the early Punjabi immigrations abroad has given way to a narrow transnationalism in the late twentieth century, an emphasis on the Sikh religion at home and in the diaspora for the sake of identity [pp. 55-56].” This interpretation relies heavily on the faulty claims of Oberoi discussed earlier in this section, namely, of a lack of a separate identity for Sikhs until the late nineteenth century and of fluid religious identities in the Punjab of that period.

The two terms, ‘cosmopolitans’ and ‘transnationals,’ also need some explication. There is a large literature that explores this dichotomy, but here we rely on Leonard’s own interpretation, leaving the larger issues to future research.¹⁹ Cosmopolitans are individuals who are familiar with, or familiarize themselves with other cultures, and can move between cultures. Transnationals, on the other hand, create insulated cultural worlds typically based on family and religious ties. The problem here is in the oversimplification of the dichotomy used by Leonard, versus the complexity of the real world. There is also a related tendency in the literature that treats religious faith expressed in a form that differentiates a community from the mainstream, or that requires conformity within the faith to such differentiating norms, as being somehow undesirable.²⁰

¹⁷ See Leonard (1993), p. 16.

¹⁸ In other writing, Leonard (2006) offers yet another perspective, where she acknowledges that “Constrained by laws that denied them citizenship, prevented them from bringing wives or brides from India, and limited their marriage choices in the United States, the Punjabi men could not be transnational and became cosmopolitan. [p. 95]” This is quite different from her other claim that these individuals came to the United States from a cosmopolitan society in Punjab.

¹⁹ See Leonard (2006), pp. 92-93. Leonard explicitly appeals to the work of Stuart Hall (1996) and Pnina Werbner (1999), but her application of their theorizing is arguably problematic, as discussed later in this paper. Michael Hawley has emphasized that there is a very large and recent literature that is relevant here, but discussing it is beyond the scope of the current paper.

²⁰ As an illustration of this tendency in the Sikh context, Pashaura Singh (2013), wants to allow “the multiplicity of Sikh voices throughout the Sikh World today and throughout Sikhism’s history to be heard without privileging any singular one [p. 47]” so as to get away from “the meta-narrative of the Khalsa [those who undergo the initiation ceremony that includes maintaining long hair]. [p. 27]” He explicitly sees this removal of privilege as the only way to avoid “the trap of ‘essentialism’ [p. 47]” but in doing so he postulates a binary which is much more extreme than that used by Leonard. A potential consequence of Pashaura Singh’s position is a rejection of the validity of any shared norms as a basis for a faith community, which is itself an extreme but unacknowledged normative position. Of course there is a difference between a scholar wishing to examine all perspectives and all expressions of a particular identity without privileging any, versus the perspectives of those within the community, but Pashaura

The problem is that crucial aspects of the Sikh experience in California do not easily fit Leonard's model of so-called cosmopolitanism. This is apparent in her own fieldwork. She writes, "In outward appearance, the Sikhs initially had been marked by the beard, long hair, and turban required by orthodox Sikhism. Retention of these characteristics proved difficult in the face of American (*sic*) prejudice. Moreover, many [Mexican Catholic] wives preferred their men to be clean-shaven. Several women explicitly linked the giving up of the turban and beard to their wedding day."²¹ Her desire to adhere to the thesis that Sikh religious identity was a later (and implicitly undesirable) addition to the self-perceptions of Sikh pioneer immigrants leads her to discount her own examples, such as the Sikh who "changed his name from Singh to Ram because, having taken off the turban and beard, he felt he was no longer a Sikh and did not want to dishonor the Sikh religion..."²² Furthermore, as explained by La Brack as well as Leonard, children in this community did not learn the language of their fathers, and were socialized in the religion of their mothers.²³ All these examples suggest a set of constraints that are not consistent with the image of insouciant cosmopolitans, but instead point to a "fraught co-existence."²⁴

While Leonard describes a situation that existed before World War II, Gibson (1988) shows that the pressures faced by the Sikh community in "Valleyside" were similar, coming from the majority community in this case. The opinion of Valleysiders, or non-Hispanic Whites in the community is clear, "Maybe we feel threatened by seeing these people not becoming Americanized. I don't think the people already here are going to make any effort to socialize unless they do westernize themselves."²⁵ And again, "Valleysider students said they believed in religious freedom and the right of every individual not to conform, but in practice they penalized those whose standards were different. Sikh students were even pressured to abandon unshorn hair, turban, and steel bangle – all outward marks of their Sikh faith and identity... 'We have numbers on our side,' explained one Valleyside senior, a bright, popular student and a class officer... To this Valleysider youth, being American meant 'acting like white people.'"²⁶

Singh's position appears to deny any dominant set of shared values normative validity, since such values must, according to him, be an expression of "essentialism."

²¹ See Leonard (1992), p. 128.

²² See Leonard (1992), p. 127.

²³ Jasjit Singh (2015) documents the importance of families in imparting religious traditions in the context of British Sikhs.

²⁴ This phrase is due to Clifford (1994), p. 328, where he states, "[T]he diaspora discourse and history currently in the air would be about recovering non-Western, or not-only-Western, models for cosmopolitan life, nonaligned transnationalities struggling within and against nation-states, global technologies, and markets – resources for a fraught coexistence." This conceptualization is subtler than Leonard's: although it uses the term 'cosmopolitan,' it does so while recognizing that it does not have to imply a Western model of what that term implies. Clifford does not have the Sikh example specifically in mind, so an interesting project for further investigation is to examine how the case of the Sikhs of California might modify his conceptual model.

²⁵ See Gibson (1988), p. 74.

²⁶ See Gibson (1988), p. 161. This situation is not restricted to Gibson's field site, or to her time of investigation. The author can attest to at least one Sikh family in Silicon Valley in the 1990s cutting their sons' long hair in the face of constant bullying and teasing in school. The father had a PhD and had studied in Europe, and the mother was also an educated professional, so they were 'cosmopolitan' in every aspect, it seems, except their desire to transmit a

Gibson characterizes a community that wants to “become proficient in the ways of white America but to maintain a strong anchor within the Punjabi community [p. 141],” with generational differences about the appropriate speed of acculturation, but agreement that members of the community should not be pressured into changing: “if a girl wishes to wear a *salwaar-kameez* or if a boy wishes to keep his long hair and wear a turban, they should not be teased and made to feel that they must conform to the majority standard. [p. 141]” It is important to realize that Gibson’s observations are made in a community where many Sikhs have given up their outward marks of faith. They may not follow the route of the Sikh in Leonard’s study who changed his name from Singh to Ram when he cut his hair, and, instead – like those in Leonard’s study who traveled to the Stockton gurdwara when they could – their local gurdwara still serves as a social and political center as well as a spiritual one. Gibson’s fieldwork provides a picture of the mainstream Sikh community that is more nuanced and accurate than Leonard’s, one where Sikh identity has meaning and persistence, and where being Punjabi does not overwhelm being Sikh as a form of self-identification.²⁷

Context and Implications

Both the earlier and more recent Sikh history in California need to be understood in the context of more expansive events. An obvious set of developments were the changes in US immigration laws, first tightening and then loosening the entry of South Asians into the country. The tightening occurred after World War I. After World War II, the Luce-Celler Act of 1946 and the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 allowed a tiny number of new immigrants from South Asia and restored the possibility of citizenship. These changes eventually allowed Dalip Singh Saund, a Punjab-born Sikh, to become the first Asian-American to be elected to the US Congress in

particular non-mainstream expression of their faith. This example further illustrates the conceptual weakness and empirical problems of Leonard’s analysis. It is also worth pointing out that Gibson’s title, *Accommodation without Assimilation*, captures something of an alternative conceptualization of the perspectives of the Sikh community. There is also a different perspective, which echoes Leonard in some respects, and comes from Sikhs who do not maintain long hair and feel marginalized within the community: see, for example, Mooney (2015). Michael Hawley, who drew my attention to this article, makes a similar observation. Fenech (2014) provides one possible response to this position, as to the status of certain external observances: “The Khalsa in certain texts not only inherited the spiritual mantle or ‘robe’ of the Guru but was even metaphysically equated with him...” (p. 241).

²⁷ As a further example, in October 2015, the author gave a talk to a section of the Sikh community in Fresno, in California’s southern central valley. Later, the host for the visit, a college-going Sikh who had not grown up with a beard and turban but adopted these articles of faith as a young adult, took us for dinner to a local pizzeria. The host explained that the term Punjabi was the common form of self- as well as external identification in Fresno and surrounding areas, but also that there were five gurdwaras in the area, all thriving. During dinner, several younger Punjabi/Sikh families came in. All the men had short hair, as is true of the majority of the community in that area, but in one case, a son – a small child – was being brought up with long hair. Men in two of the families came out of their way to greet us, and one expressed his happiness (and implicit pride) in seeing two turbaned Sikhs together in that setting.

1956.²⁸ The major legal change occurred in 1965, with the Immigration and Naturalization Act: in particular, the family-reunification provisions of that legislation favored early immigrants like the Sikhs of California in bringing their relatives to the US. To varying degrees, La Brack, Gibson and Leonard all contend with the consequences of this change for the Sikh community in California, but only its early implications, since their empirical work was done in the 1980s or earlier.

At the same time, the new law was creating a more dispersed Sikh community, and one which was a smaller percentage of the overall Indian-American population. An even bigger change came with the information technology (IT) boom, which led to a great increase in the number of Indians coming to the US to work in that sector, especially in California's Silicon Valley. Circumstances in India led to more of those new immigrants coming from southern states of that country, and from urban areas, as opposed to the migration from rural Punjab that had been sustained by family reunification rules. Arguably, this has made the Indian-American story a far broader and more complex one, and reduced the relative significance of the specific story of the Sikhs of California. This is one possible explanation of the lack of major new academic studies of that community, while works on various other Indian-American groups have proliferated, as have studies of the overall Indian-American experience.²⁹ Sikhs have not been totally neglected, but the most recent book-length academic work focuses on taxi-drivers in New York, a highly visible but very small and specific group.³⁰

Meanwhile, another development also shifted focus from the case of the Sikh community in a specific place like California. This was the political unrest in Punjab state in India, which had been an undercurrent of Indian nation-building ever since independence from British rule in 1947. Reasons for this included the religious minority status of the Sikhs, their position on the borders with Pakistan and with the contested region of Kashmir, and issues of economic competition and stability. The situation of Punjab and the Sikhs was not unique, or even the most problematic, in India's complex, heterogeneous quasi-federal system, but it deteriorated in the late 1970s and early 1980s with destabilization of the region after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, accelerated concerns about modernity and loss of tradition among many Sikhs, and covert political manipulation of these concerns by the national government. The year 1984 saw the national government's military attack on the Sikhs' most sacred site in Amritsar, the

²⁸ To be fair, Saund had cut his hair and married a European, and thus would fit Leonard's model of a 'cosmopolitan.' He also had a PhD from UC Berkeley, and was in a different socio-economic position from many of his fellow Sikhs, although he, too, struggled with discrimination at various junctures of his life in California.

²⁹ The broader story is comprehensively told in Chakravorty, Kapur and Singh (2016, forthcoming). Earlier studies of Indian-Americans are referenced in that volume.

³⁰ See Mitra (2012). There are also small studies of Sikh entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley, which are briefly described in Chakravorty, Kapur and Singh (2016, forthcoming), and other studies on the practice of Sikh kirtan (singing of sacred texts), Sikh use of the Internet, and so on, but nothing at the level of the detailed fieldwork described in the three books considered in the previous section. An excellent overview of the history and evolution of the Sikh community in the US is provided by Gurinder Singh Mann in Mann, Numrich and Williams (2001), but that is relatively brief and already 15 years old.

retaliatory assassination of the prime minister in Delhi, and pogroms against Sikhs all over India as counter-retaliation. There followed almost a decade of militant violence and brutal but effective repression by the army and police, restoring a type of normalcy, but with deep and lingering scars.

Events in India had major impacts on the Sikh community in every diasporic location. Understandably, academic attention shifted to the global ramifications of the Punjab violence on these multiple Sikh communities. La Brack, Gibson and Leonard had all done their fieldwork before the events described in the previous paragraph. In any case, Leonard focused on a small, atypical sub-community formed under specific circumstances, while Gibson, who looked at more contemporary concerns, was rooted in the desire to examine immigrant educational processes. La Brack's work was broader, but also done the earliest, primarily in the mid-1970s. Each of them tried to address these new events in their books or articles that were published after 1984 (the publication lags after the fieldwork were substantial), but obviously could not incorporate new observational work.

To the author's knowledge, there has not been any systematic, large-scale ethnographic work done on the individual and collective responses of the Sikh community in California or elsewhere in the United States³¹ to the events of the 1980s in Punjab. Indeed, given the heightened passions of the time, suspicions of terrorism (such as the Air India bombing that has been linked to Canadian Sikhs) and the likely presence of Indian intelligence agents within Sikh community institutions, it would have been almost impossible to conduct such academic work. This gap was filled by more generic work on the Sikh diaspora: interestingly, having discovered the topic, some academics seem to have aligned their new understanding with the claim that the diasporic Sikh community did not self-identify as such, preferring regional, local or kinship identities to the religious one before the tumult of the 1980s.³² This is related in some respects to Leonard's claims about cosmopolitan versus transnational identities, and suffers from the same problems of lack of a full understanding of Sikh history.³³ An important link between the events in Punjab and Sikhs in America (including California) that has only been partially explored is the increase in the number of Sikhs emigrating illegally from Punjab, often subsequently seeking

³¹ On the other hand, Nayar (2004) provided a book-length study of the Sikh community in British Columbia, Canada.

³² Different versions of this claim can be found in Leonard (1989), McLeod (1989a) and Dusenbery (1995).

³³ The best known version of such claims about the post-1984 constitution of a Sikh diaspora is the work of Axel (2001). This is not to say that Axel is ignorant of Sikh history or the evolution of the contemporary community. Nor is the argument here that there was not a significant change in identity consciousness among Sikhs – many grew their hair long and adopted turbans as a statement of solidarity with their coreligionists in Punjab after 1984. Axel is a sympathetic analyst, but it seems that his thesis is predetermined by debates in his discipline, with the Sikh case designed to fit in somehow. Leonard's treatment of the Sikhs with respect to cosmopolitans versus transnationals also has this flavor.

asylum as a result of the violence in their home state. These Sikhs may often be found working in Sikh-owned businesses, including restaurants and gas stations, as well as driving taxis.³⁴

Besides immigration law and the diasporic implications of the conflict in Punjab, a third context for studying the Sikh community is with respect to the broader forces of globalization, including the ability to share information in quantities and at speeds never before possible. Arguably, the greater ability to stay connected to the “homeland” can reduce the need for traditional paths and pressures of assimilation (or even ‘cosmopolitanism’), as scholars have recognized.³⁵ Another force of globalization, however, is the transformation of the United States itself into a more diverse and potentially pluralistic society.³⁶ While, as current political debates illustrate, this is a process fraught with fears and anxieties, there are also possibilities for immigrant communities such as Sikhs who want to maintain what they see as important attributes and expressions of their faith, even while recognizing that it is only one dimension of their identity. It is in this respect that this paper seeks to make the case that the older work on Sikhs in California needs to be updated, with a fresh examination of what forces are shaping the Sikh community in the state, as well as how the community perceives itself and its adjustment or evolution: sophisticated theoretical work has not been brought to bear on these questions, nor has systematic empirical work been done.

Even historical processes such as the Ghadar movement of the early 20th century, in which Sikhs played a significant role, could benefit from fresh analysis. The Ghadar movement was an international revolutionary movement, striving for independence of India from British rule. As new archival research has shown,³⁷ it was technically founded in Oregon, but soon moved headquarters to California. A significant proportion of its members were Sikhs, and the Stockton gurdwara served as an important meeting place, as documented by La Brack and Leonard. La Brack devotes some attention to the movement, but the best-known book-length academic study is that of Ramnath (2011), *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire*. As her title and subtitle elucidate, Ramnath’s analysis goes beyond the conventional framing in terms of an Indian nationalist movement to one which emphasizes radical anti-imperialism. In this telling, however, the role of the Sikh community in California gets overshadowed, something that has been partially corrected in Rajan Gill (2015), based on new archival research.³⁸

Contexts of immigration, homeland and globalization, stretching back over a century, have come together in modern California. The venue for this has been the process of revising the history and social sciences curriculum for California middle and high schools. Members of the Sikh

³⁴ In addition to Mitra (2012), the work of Chakravorty, Kapur and Singh (2016, forthcoming) touches on the issues faced by Indian immigrants in this category, including Sikhs.

³⁵ In the Sikh context, an early scholarly discussion is that of Axel (2004).

³⁶ See, in particular, Eck (2001).

³⁷ See Ogden (2012).

³⁸ In particular, Gill (2015) details the role of the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society in parallel with the Ghadar Party, including considerations of identity and assimilation.

community in the state, as well as national Sikh civil rights organizations, have actively participated in trying to ensure that the history of the Sikh community in the state receives visibility and recognition. On the other hand, some Hindu organizations in the US³⁹ have suggested ‘South Asian’ and ‘Indian’ as ways of describing the historical community in California, while Karen Leonard has argued for ‘Punjabi.’⁴⁰ This paper provides a case for rejecting Leonard’s claims about identity and naming. Gibson’s extensive fieldwork, and more recent examples such as the case reported in footnote 26, illustrate how the Sikh community is affected by external understandings and responses, including those of scholars. This specific issue is embedded in much broader contestations over South Asian history (not just immigrant history), which are well beyond the scope of this paper.⁴¹ However, the nature of scholarship on Sikhs in California is a central concern, and this paper has sought to shine a light on some weaknesses in aspects of this scholarship, which has then been used to make claims about history and identity that are problematic.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed scholarship on the Sikh community in California, and noted some of its strengths and weaknesses. It has compared the framing of the Sikh community in California as presented in three book-length studies, and argued that a cosmopolitan-transnational dichotomy, as extrapolated subsequently from one of the three studies by its author, does not appropriately reflect key aspects of the Sikh immigrant experience in California. In particular, that framing neglects the nature of social and economic constraints faced by early Sikh migrants to California, versus the situation of later migrants. A further problem with that dichotomy is a lack of understanding of the history of the Sikh community prior to its diasporic manifestations in California and elsewhere, including the use of a discredited analysis of the evolution of the Sikh faith tradition as one of its underpinnings. Examples from several sources, including another of the three studies, further weaken the claim of lost cosmopolitanism.

The lack of recent detailed studies of the Sikh community in California, along with theoretical weaknesses in some past work, lead to a consideration of reasons for these gaps, and thence to a discussion of broader contexts of immigration, homeland and globalization. This includes questions of comparisons of past and more contemporary diasporic political activities among Sikhs in California, as well as political contestation with respect to how the community and its history in the state are represented in the school curriculum. Overall, the paper has sought to

³⁹ Arguably, these groups are ‘Hindu nationalist,’ although they might reject that characterization.

⁴⁰ This was done in emails sent to all the members of California’s Instructional Quality Commission, the body soliciting public inputs and making final determinations.

⁴¹ See Ahmad (2016), for example. Another contested domain has been the effort of several Hindu organizations to fund endowed chairs at various California campuses, to the dismay of many faculty members studying South Asia.

make the case for the necessity of new empirical research, both historical⁴² and contemporary, as well as more careful theorizing. This task is made more important by the fact that California, and the United States as a whole, is an increasingly diverse society that is struggling to come to terms with that diversity and move toward greater pluralism.⁴³ The added dimension of religion as part of that diversity, along with earlier fault lines of race and ethnicity, only multiplies the societal challenges and need for new scholarship in this area.

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⁴² The example of the Ghadar movement illustrates the proposition that further historical analysis of the Sikh community in California is still needed. That case also illustrates the idea that comparisons across different times (Ghadar versus the post-1984 situation) can be illuminating: while the two contexts and responses seem very different, the active responses of the Sikh community in both cases, motivated by ideas of social and political justice rooted in their belief system, have not been fully explored.

⁴³ Diana Eck explains the relationship between diversity and pluralism as follows: "First, pluralism is not diversity alone, but the energetic engagement with diversity. Diversity can and has meant the creation of religious ghettos with little traffic between or among them. Today, religious diversity is a given, but pluralism is not a given; it is an achievement. Mere diversity without real encounter and relationship will yield increasing tensions in our societies." Accessed on August 18, 2016 at <http://pluralism.org/what-is-pluralism/>. See also Eck (2001).

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