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## **Revolution and Assimilation: Understanding the Evolving Identity of the Punjabi Sikh Diaspora in California during the Early Twentieth Century<sup>1</sup>**

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This paper examines the evolving identity of the Punjabi Sikh diaspora in California during the early twentieth century, focusing on the relatively neglected role of the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society and its interactions with the Ghadar Party. In doing so, the paper adds to previous global accounts of the Ghadar Party by examining the politics of identity construction at a micro-level. It also adds to previous work on the role of the Diwan Society, by arguing that, beyond just creating a safe space for the immigrant group, it actively campaigned to better the newcomers' social status in the United States.

**Keywords:** Ghadar Party, Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan, Punjabi, Sikh, Diaspora

On April 24, 1918, Ram Singh and Ram Chandra entered a courtroom in San Francisco to be tried for their involvement in the Ghadar mutiny, a conflict that sought to overthrow colonial rule in India through violent means.<sup>2</sup> Midway through the trial, Singh stood up, crept towards his co-conspirator, pulled a revolver from his coat pocket, and assassinated Chandra. Singh was quickly shot and killed by police in the courtroom. Chandra was assassinated because he was suspected of being a double-agent for the British.<sup>3</sup> Singh died as an individual loyal to his revolutionary ideals.<sup>4</sup>

In 1923, Bhagat Singh Thind marched into the United States Supreme Court in an attempt to gain American citizenship. Like many Asian immigrants at this time, Thind migrated to the United States with the hope of finding economic success. Whereas in Punjab his job prospects were slim, the United States offered

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of my Master's Thesis at the University of California, Santa Cruz, completed in April 2015. I am grateful to my adviser, David Brundage, for his guidance, and two anonymous reviewers for suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> Singh and Chandra were members of the Ghadar (Revolution) Party, which sought to overthrow colonial rule in India through violent means.

<sup>3</sup> Gobind Behari Lal, letter to editor of the *March of India*, June 18, 1956. South Asian Digital Archive, Papers of Godha Ram Channon. <https://www.saadigitalarchive.org/item/20141120-3998>.

<sup>4</sup> The information given in this paragraph is from Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2011), 55.

Thind (and other immigrants) many employment opportunities.<sup>5</sup> Yet simple employment was not enough – Thind sought citizenship and the rights guaranteed by it. Challenging the racialized citizenship laws at the time, Thind sued the United States, arguing that due to Punjab’s genetic history he was actually white and therefore should be allowed to become an American citizen. Thind was unsuccessful in his efforts.

Singh and Thind represent alternate pathways of understanding identity and belonging for Punjabi-Sikh immigrants in the United States. Following their emigration from northern India, Sikhs faced severe discrimination in the United States. Bhagat Singh Thind and Ram Singh are representative of the alternative pathways taken by Punjabi-Sikh immigrants when negotiating identity in the face of discrimination. Their stories mirror two prominent California organizations that promoted their respective ideas. The Ghadar (translating to “revolution” in Punjabi) Party, founded in 1912, aimed to overthrow colonial rule in India by violent means. This group viewed the United States as a temporary home to gain capital and education. Immigrants who followed this path often expected to return home to Punjab to resist British colonization. Founded in 1912, the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society aimed to elevate the social status of Punjabi-Sikhs in California.<sup>6</sup> This organization viewed the United States as a final home for the immigrant community and lobbied for better treatment of the newcomers. These two groups had starkly different goals regarding the United States and homeland politics. Though the exact amount of members in these two groups remain elusive to historians, their active nature illustrate a serious push to reconsider a Punjabi-Sikh consciousness in the United States.

Punjabi-Sikh immigrants first entered the racial hotbed of the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Tensions began when the group began finding industrial and agricultural work on the West Coast, as their presence created competition for white Americans. Such pressure is especially visible when looking at industrial labor newspapers, letters from workers, and local magazines. These economic strains culminated into the 1907 Bellingham riot. For example, Punjabi-Sikhs in Bellingham, Washington were forcibly herded to the town hall to be cast out of town.<sup>7</sup> While Bellingham represented the boiling point for tensions, Punjabi-Sikhs would face similar discrimination across the United States. Out of this discrimination, two groups were created: the Ghadar Party – which favored a

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<sup>5</sup> Letters from Thind to his father reveal that he left for the United States to find better employment opportunities. South Asian Digital Archive Bhagat Singh Thind. <https://www.saadigitalarchive.org/collection/bhagat-singh-thind>.

<sup>6</sup> Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society, *Articles of Incorporation*. Alameda County, 1912. Stockton Sikh Temple, Ghadar Collection, Safe 1.

<sup>7</sup> G. Perinet, “Have We a Dusky Peril?” *Puget Sound American*, September 16, 1906, South Asian Digital Archive, Bellingham Riot Collection <https://www.saadigitalarchive.org/browse/subject/bellingham-riot>.

return to a Punjab homeland – and the Khalsa Diwan Society – which viewed the California community a new homeland, and saw no need to return to Punjab.

Tensions further increased after the 1914 *Komagata Maru* incident. This event arose when a group of Indian immigrants began a seaward move to Canada during the summer of 1914. Holding nearly 100 passengers, primarily of Sikh faith, the ship was blocked from docking in Canada. Immigration officials cited a lack of proper migration papers, and also believed the sudden increase in immigrant workers would disrupt the labor markets. The *Maru* was forced to turn around and return to India. After a tiring three-month journey, passengers returned to the soil of their homeland. However upon their return to India in 1914, the group was placed under guard by the British. A scuffle between soldiers and travelers quickly broke out, leaving 19 dead and many wounded.<sup>8</sup>

The *Komagata Maru* incident is one that represents a pivotal and traumatic shift in the Punjabi-Sikh timeline. Much like the Bellingham riots, it was a conflict that occurred due to exclusion and subjugation. The Ghadar Party and the Diwan Society responded to such conditions differently. The Bellingham riots, and other constant discrimination faced by Punjabi-Sikhs laborers, inspired the creation of the Diwan Society. It was this organization's goal to advocate and protect their community across the United States. After the *Komagata Maru* incident, the Diwan Society rallied for Indians to be included as American citizens through a series of letters, petitions and proposed legislation; the violence of the *Maru* could be navigated through these various legal channels. In contrast, the 1907 Bellingham riots proved to the Ghadarites that the United States should only be seen as a temporary place to gain capital and education before a move back to Punjab should be made. The *Komagata Maru* incident further confirmed the group's view of the West as a racially hostile place. The event inspired the group to launch their planned rebellion, leaving the United States to retake their home.

Whereas the Ghadar Party is often cited when considering immigrant nationalism or Punjabi-Sikh history, the importance of alternative organizations such as the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society is hardly explored. The work presented in this paper expands upon scholarship by Maia Ramnath's *Haj to Utopia* (2011). Ramnath details the global workings of the party – focusing on the group's organizational structure and global networks. Ramnath tracks how Punjabi-Sikhs became radicalized while working against a global colonial structure. While Ramnath presents the global party as a highly organized group, little is known about how this organization fostered identity among its constituents in California. I add to Ramnath's global account by examining the politics of identity construction at a micro-level. From placing the Ghadar party in conversation with the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society, another large Punjabi-Sikh organization of the time, and

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<sup>8</sup> Hugh Johnston, *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru: The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar* (Vancouver, Canada: University of British Columbia Press, 2011), 142-160.

viewing the revolutionaries under a local lens, one can see the Ghadar movement's reach and effectiveness. Moreover, by comparing the two organizations one is able to understand the various articulations of identity and belonging for Punjabi-Sikhs in California.

My work also expands on scholarship presented by Joan Jensen in *Passage from India* (1988). *Passage from India* was one of the first works to look at the Punjabi-Sikh diaspora in the United States. Her work chronicles the immigrants' initial move from Punjab to the United States, and how the group attempted to negotiate a radical identity in the face of colonial oppression. Jensen also presents one of the first in depth look at the Ghadar party in the United States, and though *Passage* covers the revolutionary group in detail, little attention is given to the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society. Jensen credits the Diwan Society with building California's first Sikh Temple in 1915, and posited the act as important because it created a safe space for Punjabi-Sikh immigrants to practice their religion and cultural customs – an act integral to preserving Punjabi-Sikh identity. Jensen argues that the temple also served as a politicized meeting place for Sikhs to come together and discuss issues or problems they faced.<sup>9</sup> While the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society should be recognized for the creation of this temple, there was more to the group than this construction. A closer look at the organization reveals the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society to have been a highly active and complex advocacy group for Punjabi-Sikhs in the United States. More than creating a safe space for the immigrant group, the Diwan Society actively campaigned to better the newcomers' social status in the United States.

The work presented in this paper builds on the framework presented by Russell Kazal in "Revisiting Assimilation: The Rise, Fall, and Reappraisal of a Concept in American Ethnic History." In this work, Kazal builds a framework where immigrant groups assimilate into the United States through a process of Americanization. As Kazal argues, Americanization is produced when the group adopts "something that sets one off from non-Americans."<sup>10</sup> The Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society adopted a political agenda that ran opposite to the Ghadar Party. By distancing itself from the Ghadarites, the assimilative Diwan Society hoped to fight against the radical stereotypes placed upon Punjabi-Sikhs from its revolutionary counterpart.

Though the Ghadar Party has dominated current scholarship on Punjabi-Sikhs, recently uncovered archives have revealed the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society to have been an equally important group when considering Punjabi-Sikh identity. Archival discoveries at the Stockton Sikh Temple in California present

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<sup>9</sup> Joan Jensen, *Passage from India: Asian Indian Immigrants in North America* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1988), 179-180.

<sup>10</sup> Russell Kazal, "Revisiting Assimilation: The Rise, Fall, and Reappraisal of a Concept in American Ethnic History," *The American Historical Review*, 100, No. 2 (April 1995): 439.

new documents regarding the Punjabi-Sikh diaspora in the United States and the Diwan Society. The documents shed light on how the latter group was founded, what its original aims were, and how it hoped to achieve its goals. These documents depict the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society as a contrast to the revolutionary Ghadar Party. Documents such as the Diwan Society's Articles of Incorporation, pamphlets, ledgers and letters all point to an active interest in assimilation within the United States. By closely examining these new sources, I am able to articulate the group's reach, effectiveness and importance within California. These documents are directly compared against Ghadar literature. Pamphlets, newspapers, letters, interviews and court testimonies from the early twentieth century all allow for one to gauge the goals and ideas of the revolutionaries.

### **Emigration from India**

Yet before one can fully understand how these groups were different, one must first understand their shared history in India. The Punjab is a region in Northern India known for its lush and desirable farm land. Punjab translates to "The Land of Five Rivers." Its name derives from having the five largest rivers in India flow through the region. The combination of wetlands and waterways allowed for an ideal agricultural scene. Though considered the agricultural heart of India, Punjab is best known as the birthplace of Sikhism. The creation and impact of Sikhism allowed many to embrace a physical and spiritual identity unique to anything in India at the time.

Sikhism itself represented a spiritual shift from the religious norms of India. Founded in 1469 by Guru Nanak Dev Ji as a response to the ceremonial intricacies of Islam and Hinduism, the conception of Sikhism represented a move away from the traditional religions of India.<sup>11</sup> The very creation of Sikhism allowed for Sikhs to embrace a unique spiritual identity. This identity was intensified with the martial organization of Sikhs in 1699.<sup>12</sup> The newly militarized community became known as the Khalsa, a term that translates in Punjabi to "free" or "self-sovereign." If an individual is Sikh, he or she is a part of the Khalsa. It is a collective name that indicates the sense of community found within the religion.

The formation of the Khalsa not only brought Sikhs together through a shared community, but it also gave rise to a unique physical identity. Members of the Khalsa are expected to keep their hair uncut, but tied neatly in a turban. While the very creation of Sikhism allowed for many Punjabis to differentiate themselves spiritually from other religious groups, the establishment of the Khalsa marked these individuals as physically dissimilar. Their outward appearances created a specific physical identity different to their fellow Indians. Their unshorn beards and

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<sup>11</sup> Nikky Guninder-Kaur Singh *Sikhism: An Introduction* (London, England: I.B. Tauris & Co. LTD, 2011), 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

turbaned hair allowed for a Sikh to be easily identified against their clean-shaven counterparts.<sup>13</sup>

The geographic location of Punjab also helped solidify a Punjabi-Sikh identity in India. As the northern most part of India, Punjab serves as a gateway into the region for foreign invaders. Sikh-Punjab remained independent from any foreign advances until the area fell under British control in 1849.<sup>14</sup> The constant presence of a foreign Other that took the form of a Mughal or British state allowed for a Punjabi-Sikh identity to become better expressed.<sup>15</sup> The religious, political, and physical differences between the foreign rulers and Punjabi-Sikhs only added to the latter groups' formation of identity.

The promise of striking it rich as a successful farmer in the Punjab attracted many people from all across India, leading to great internal migration and eventual economic complications. Masses of individuals flocked to the area in hopes of becoming successful farmers. The population of Punjab increased 20% between 1855 and 1881, and 16% between 1881 and 1901.<sup>16</sup> The addition of all the farm laborers increased the productivity of many farms, yet the influx of hopeful land owners disrupted the land market. Prime agricultural land was limited and highly coveted, driving up rent rates and land prices by 1,000% between 1870 and 1900.<sup>17</sup>

The economic competition was intensified by a series of droughts. Such conditions dried out local water supplies, leading to stagnating agricultural output. The Punjab was economically wrecked by the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and its once bountiful lands had turned unfertile.<sup>18</sup> The agricultural market was crippled, and the addition of laborers crowded the already impacted job market. Yet the recent inclusion into the colonial world offered opportunity for many in the area. With their history of resistance, Punjabi-Sikhs were seen as ideal soldiers who were often recruited into the British ranks as soldiers or policemen. Most soldiers were able to go abroad to other parts of the British Empire. The Punjabi-Sikh soldiers abroad allowed for a strong network to be created across the British Empire. Temples and

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<sup>13</sup> Nikky Guninder-Kaur Singh *The Birth of the Khalsa: A Feminist Re-Memory of Sikh Identity* (New York, New York: State University of New York, 2012). 97-99.

<sup>14</sup> Sikh-Punjab remained independent from the Mughal Empire, and only fell to Colonialism after the Anglo-Sikh wars of 1839-1849.

<sup>15</sup> J.S. Grewal *The Sikhs of the Punjab* (Cambridge, England: University of Cambridge Press, 1990), 53.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce La Brack, "Sikhs in the United States" in, Melvin Ember, Carol R. Ember, Ian Skoggard, *Encyclopedia of Diasporas: Immigrant and Refugee Cultures Around the World. Volume I: Overviews and Topics, Volume II: Diaspora Communities* (New York, New York: Springer, 2004), 1904-1905.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

labor recruitment firms began to emerge in places like Hong Kong creating landing spaces for immigrants who wanted to leave Punjab.<sup>19</sup>

### **Turmoil and Transformation: Punjabi-Sikhs in the United States**

The western United States offered Punjabi-Sikh immigrants economic opportunity that was absent in British-India, and the perception of the United States as a bountiful place for work became solidified after the 1882 Chinese Exclusion law. Word of a labor shortage along the Pacific Coast had reached hopeful North-Indian travelers, spurring a move to the United States.<sup>20</sup> One such landing spot for many travelers was Bellingham, Washington.

Though job opportunities were plentiful, the increase of Punjabi-Sikhs in the Pacific North-West created competition between the newcomers and the local, white Americans. The newcomers were met with suspicion, and many feared that the group would slowly take over the area. This fear is best seen when looking at the 1906 article “Have We a Dusky Peril?” Published in *The Puget Sound American*, this article compares the growing Punjabi-Sikh population to the recently excluded Chinese. The author stated that the newcomers “will prove a worse menace to the working classes than the ‘Yellow Peril’ that [had] so long threatened the Pacific Coast.”<sup>21</sup>

The racial prejudices found in “Have We a Dusky Peril” were acted upon in the 1907 Bellingham riot. On the night of September 6, 1907, 600 white workers took to the streets of Bellingham, Washington to violently round up Punjabi-Sikh immigrants.<sup>22</sup> The angry mob entered into the living spaces of the migrant workers, beat the newcomers and in some cases stole their valuables. Police did little to suppress the violence, but managed to secure the majority of the Punjabi-Sikh population in town hall to be sheltered from the violence. By morning, a majority of these persecuted peoples left on train to either California or Canada.<sup>23</sup>

The Bellingham riot was not an isolated incident of racism between working white Americans and the “foreign” Punjabi-Sikhs, but instead representative of the larger public perception held toward the immigrant group. According to an investigation conducted by H.A. Millis, the head of the 1909 federal immigration commission, Sikh immigrants were seen as “the most undesirable of all the Asiatic immigrants”<sup>24</sup> to come to the United States. This perception was widespread

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<sup>19</sup> La Brack, “Sikhs in the United States,” 1905.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Perinet, “Have We a Dusky Peril?”

<sup>22</sup> Werter Dodd, “The Hindu in the Northwest,” *World Today*, 13, 1907, 1157-1160.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> H.A. Millis, “East Indian Immigration to the Pacific Coast” *Survey* 28, no. 9 (1912), 381, quoted in Franklin Ng, “The History and Immigration of Asian Americans,” 1, *The History and*



throughout the western United States.<sup>25</sup> The casting out of Punjabi-Sikhs sent a clear message to the immigrant community: they were not wanted. Indians often worked for less than the average wage, resulting in easy employment in the manual labor field.<sup>26</sup> Though employers welcomed the cheap labor, this did not mean the newcomers were accepted into American society.

The violence in Bellingham was but a symptom of the larger condition of racism in the United States and Canada. The suspicion many white workers held toward Punjabi-Sikh workers was also based on their mysterious and foreign appearance. The immigrants were seen as ethnically different. Their turbans and beards not only marked them off from white Americans, but from other immigrants group also in the United States during the early twentieth century. Violence toward Punjabi-Sikh newcomers grew as more anti-immigrant riots spread throughout the Pacific Northwest.<sup>27</sup>

### **Reclaiming the Homeland: The Rise of the Ghadar Party**

From this constant discrimination grew two distinct and influential organizations that aimed to elevate the social status of Punjabi-Sikhs in the United States – The Ghadar Party and the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society. By 1913 Punjabi-Sikh workers in the Northwest began to hold meetings discussing their mistreatment in the United States.<sup>28</sup> Many of the newcomers began to lose hope in the United States as a place of viable settlement. Some pushed for a return to Punjab, though the oppressive colonial government found in the homeland still was not ideal. These anti-colonial sentiments were scattered throughout the Northwest without any meaningful direction until philosopher Har Dyal mobilized the immigrants to take action.<sup>29</sup> In a 1914 speech to the Punjabi-Sikh laborers in the Northwest, Dyal laid out the basic tenets of the Indian revolution, including a boycott of English goods and a renouncement of the colonial government.<sup>30</sup> However, the most important facet of this revolutionary movement was a return to India. Though an exact date was unclear, the Ghadarites had hoped to strike

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*Immigration of Asians in America: the Peoples of the East, Southeast, and South Asia* (Fresno, California: Taylor and Francis, 1998), 109.

<sup>25</sup> Similar sentiments are seen in Dodd, “The Hindu in the Northwest,” and A.W. Mangum Jr to Mother, September 8, 1907, South Asian Digital Archive, *Bellingham Riot Collection*. <https://www.saadigitalarchive.org/item/20110910-354> and Dodd.

<sup>26</sup> A.W. Mangum Jr. to mother.

<sup>27</sup> Violence against Punjabi-Sikh immigrants also took place in the 1907 Vancouver Race Riots and in the 1910 St. Johns Riots. See Johanna Ogden “Ghadar, Historical Silences, and Notions of Belonging: Early 1900’s Punjabis of the Columbia River,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 113, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 171.

<sup>28</sup> Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*, 25.

<sup>29</sup> “British Rule Oppressive: So Says Har Dyal, Hindu Revolutionist Regarding India,” *Astoria Daily Budget*, May 5, 1913. 2.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

England at its most vulnerable moment, and planned to return to India to fight against British while England was at war with Germany.<sup>31</sup>

The Ghadar movement viewed the United States as a hostile and undesirable place. Though the group pushed for immigrants to return to India, the revolutionaries could not do so until the oppressive colonial regime was done away with. To the revolutionary group, the United States was seen as a temporary place to gain capital and education, they would eventually return to India to help liberate the country from British rule. In a 1957 letter, the former President of the Ghadar Party, Bhagwan Gyanee, reflected on the motivations for revolting against the British. "It was the general awakening of Indians due to the atmosphere of freedom in the USA & Canada that brought the Ghadar party forward."<sup>32</sup> The revolutionaries were inspired by America's emphasis on economic freedom and individualism.<sup>33</sup> However, this did not mean that newcomers viewed the United States as a desirable home. Instead, the Ghadarites hoped to implement such ideas in a liberated and unified India, free from racial hierarchy.

A return to India is apparent in Ghadar programs and literature. In 1912, Ghadarite Jawala Singh organized a scholarship for six Indian students to come to the United States to study at the University of California, Berkeley. The Ghadar Party covered "free board and lodging, all expenses for clothes, books, stationary, medicine, postage," and anything else necessary for college (including tuition fees).<sup>34</sup> Singh and other Ghadarites hoped to empower Indian youth by providing them a pathway to success through education. However, the end goal of such a project was that the students would return to India, enlightened by western education. Harnam Chima – one student who was received the scholarship – reasserted such a claim in his 1907 essay *Why India Sends Students to America*. Chima posited that the purpose of the scholarship was to "imbibe free thoughts from free people and teach the same when [immigrants] go back to [India] to get rid of the tyranny" of the British.<sup>35</sup>

For the Ghadarites and students like Chima, the United States represented a space where immigrants would gain education and capital before their eventual return to India. California was a training zone for these newcomers before they began on their quest of liberation. Both Jawala Singh and Harnam Chima understood the opportunities presented by UC Berkeley. Students could become educated while being immersed in a society founded on freedom and self-

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Bhagwan Singh Gyanee to Jagjit Singh, February 17, 1957. South Asian Digital Archive, Bhagwan Singh Gyanee Collection. <https://www.saadigitalarchive.org/item/20120805-918>.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Jawala Singh, "The Guru Govind Singh Sahib Educational Scholarships," January 1, 1912. South Asian Digital Archive, Philanthropy Collection. <https://www.saadigitalarchive.org/item/20111025-425>.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

determination. Enlightened students would then return to India to spread such ideals in their homeland.

Although the Ghadar Party is often cited when considering Punjabi-Sikh nationalism and identity, it was not the only prominent organization of its time. In 1912, a new group came into being that aimed to elevate the status of Punjabi-Sikh immigrants in California. Though originally conceived by revolutionary advocates, the society's goals were strikingly different from the party. Whereas the Ghadarites urged Punjabi-Sikhs to return to India, the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society focused on improving the social status of the immigrants in the United States. Instead of revolution, the Diwan Society sought American citizenship and acceptance.

The goals of the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society were laid out explicitly in the group's 1912 articles of incorporation. The first goal included offering the Punjabi-Sikh community a safe space to practice their religion. This was possible through supplying the group with religious "assistance, counsel, or encouragement."<sup>36</sup> This support was possible due to the group building the Stockton Sikh Temple in 1912.<sup>37</sup>

The second goal of the Diwan Society was to improve the overall quality of life for Punjabi-Sikh immigrants in the United States. "To initiate and carry out such measures as may ameliorate and improve the moral, social and religious conditions of the laboring classes of all nationalities, but particularly Sikhs."<sup>38</sup> This is the only time that the Articles of Incorporation mention the specific targeting of Punjabi-Sikhs from a certain occupational background. By centering their efforts around the laboring classes, the Diwan Society makes clear that their primary focus is on the worker, opposed to the Ghadarite focus on students. The other main goals of the society allowed the group to form as a church.<sup>39</sup>

The foremost purpose of the Diwan Society was to aid Punjabi-Sikhs, and elevate the social status of immigrant group in the United States. Though the group was created during the time the Ghadar Party began gaining traction, it was explicitly stated in the Articles of Incorporation that the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society and its members had "not taken any part whatsoever in any political, sectarian, or independence movement."<sup>40</sup> The articles make clear that the Diwan Society was not focused on homeland politics, but instead focused on the domestic sphere of the United States. The Diwan Society and the Ghadar Party both begin with the similar goal of elevating the social status of Punjabi-Sikhs. However the two organizations' way of achieving this goal was strikingly different. The Ghadar

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<sup>36</sup> Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society, "Articles of Incorporation." May 11, 1912. Stockton Sikh Temple, Ghadar Collection, Safe 1.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

Party's aim was to remove the oppressive and foreign colonial rule in Punjab, arguing that self-sovereignty was what was needed. In contrast the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society acknowledged that the western United States served as a new home for many in the Punjabi-Sikh diaspora. While the organization did not explicitly renounce the revolutionary movement, the Diwan Society focused more on Punjabi-Sikh perception in the United States.

While the differences between these two groups can be seen in their conception, their ideological differences become even more clear after the 1914 *Komagata Maru* incident. In 1914, a group of hopeful Indian immigrants began their seaward journey from Hong Kong to Vancouver. Aboard a vessel named the *Komagata Maru*, 376 passengers – 24 Muslims, 12 Hindus, 340 Sikhs in total<sup>41</sup> – had dreamt of moving to the west in hopes of starting anew. The journey was long and uncomfortable, as hopeful immigrants' packed into the small hull for over a month at sea.<sup>42</sup>

The voyage of the *Komagata Maru* was organized by the Ghadar party, and the passage of the ship was meant as a political statement that drew aim at the exclusionary nature of Canada and the United States. Those on board had many ties to the immigrants already in North America. Many had made plans to live or work with those who already gained entry. If accepted, the inclusion of these newcomers would only further strengthen the population of Indian immigrants. Most would have to thank the Ghadar Party for organizing their passage, creating new Ghadar sympathizers. However, if denied, the Ghadarites could point to this incident to showcase the cruel exclusionary attitudes of western governments – further cementing their claims that British rule did not belong in India. The Ghadarites had hoped to challenge the trend of Indian exclusion. As argued by Johnston, the group “saw it as an act of patriotism, which win or lose, would win”<sup>43</sup> the Ghadars fame, or bring awareness to their cause of independence.

Upon reaching Canada, the *Komagata Maru* was told it could not dock. British officials had been tracking and keeping tabs on Ghadarite activity. The chartering of a ship was enough for British officials to tip off the Canadian border agents to the immigrants' arrival.<sup>44</sup> All on board were considered to be Ghadarites and extreme agitators. Though most of the travelers had proper paperwork, various reasons were given to deny their entry. The number of people aboard was considered to have been sizable enough to impact the local economy. While a multitude of excuses were given as to why these individuals could not enter Canada, the main justification was that their presence would disrupt the local job market.

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<sup>41</sup> Johnston, *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru*, 33.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Johnston, *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru*, 25.

<sup>44</sup> Seema Sohi *Echoes of Mutiny: Race, Surveillance, and Indian Anticolonialism in North America* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 137-142.

Canadian immigration officials were adamant on not allowing the immigrants entry, and the *Komagata Maru* was forced to return to India.<sup>45</sup>

Such friction only multiplied upon the *Komagata Maru's* return to India. After their homecoming nearly a year later, the passengers were met by British forces and placed under guard. The travelers were told that their participation in the voyage served as a confession to being affiliated with the Ghadar party, leaving the travelers with the title of political agitators. The passengers were told that their reentry would be considered on a case-by-case basis at a police station miles away. However, on their march a scuffle broke out between travelers and soldiers. What ensued was a chaotic scene of gunfire and fist fights. The conflict raged on into the night, leaving 12 Sikhs dead.<sup>46</sup> Most of the other passengers managed to escape into the night, though 25 were arrested.

Such attitudes are most visible in (the later assassinated) Ghadarite Ram Chandra's 1916 pamphlet, *Exclusion of Hindus from America Due to British Influence*. Chandra argues that the major motivations for Indian exclusion in the United States – such as color, lack of job opportunities and increased competition for American workers – were simply proxy reasons hiding the true intentions behind the exclusion. As argued by Chandra, “The British government itself does not want Hindu's [sic] to come here [the United States]. They might be become imbued with pestiferous ideas of political freedom.”<sup>47</sup> The move to the United States presented immigrants with new environments, language and social cues; however there seemed to be no sharper change than that of politics and government.

Though no official laws were set for Indian exclusion during the time of Chandra's pamphlet, his suspicions were not unfounded. In 1911, 517 Indian immigrants were admitted into the United States, while 861 were debarred.<sup>48</sup> These numbers are a great change from the 1,782 admitted just the year before. These numbers slimmed due to communication between Great Britain and the United States, as fears of anticolonialism and revolution fueled this decrease of admittance. Indian immigrants were seen as unruly, and their presence in the United States was perceived to pose a threat to the Anglo-hegemony found within U.S. culture.<sup>49</sup> Such attitudes helped shape Ghadar rhetoric. The United States was not viewed as a welcoming place, but instead a temporary waystation where immigrants would eventually return home.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Johnston, 104.

<sup>47</sup> Ram Chandra, *Exclusion of Hindus from America Due to British Influence* (San Francisco, California, Hindustan Gadar, 1916), 1.

<sup>48</sup> Franklin Ng, “The History and Immigration of Asian Americans,” 112.

<sup>49</sup> Edward J.W. Park, Xiaojian Zhao *Asian Americans: An Encyclopedia of Social, Cultural, Economic and Political History* (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2014), 563.

Grouping whites as a singular enemy was a major tactic employed by the Ghadar Party. Take for instance the 1914 Ghadar essay, *Zulam! Zulam! Gore Shahi Zulam!* The title of this work translates to “Tyranny! Tyranny! The Tyranny of the White Oppressors!”<sup>50</sup> This essay was a response to the 1914 deportation of a Ghadar leader from Canada. The essay was printed in the widely circulated Ghadar newsletter, and called for Ghadarites in Canada and the United States to take up arms against a white enemy. Though no violence ever occurred, the essay represents how the Ghadar party rallied against a universal enemy. The Ghadarites folded the local white Canadian and American populations as an extension of the white colonial oppressor. Such rhetoric also promoted a return to Punjab, as the United States and Canada was seen as no home for the immigrant group.

Whereas the constant discrimination faced by the Punjabi-Sikhs allowed for the rise of a nationalist Punjabi-Sikh identity in the United States, the 1914 *Komagata Maru* incident served as a call to action for the Ghadar party. The *Komagata Maru* incident lit a fuse under the already motivated and insulted Ghadarites. After being excluded and now violently oppressed, the Ghadarites were only further motivated to attain independence. As Ramnath has noted, the “...already-primed West coast community, [sped up] the escalation of demands for armed action to avenge such a grievous insult.”<sup>51</sup> The Ghadar party now had a singular event to point to when trying to unite the Punjabi-Sikh community in California.

The Ghadar Party was not alone in its efforts, as the group looked to Germany for support for their independence movement. On August 4, 1914, Great Britain declared war on Germany.<sup>52</sup> The Ghadar Party and the German government became natural allies, creating a symbiotic relationship in which the Germans would fund Ghadarite’s revolution.<sup>53</sup> The Germans created instability within the British Empire, and the Ghadarites received funding and the opportunity to attack a distracted colonial state. The Germans were seen as a friend, and sometimes held as a savior. The partnership between the Germans and the Ghadarites is telling as to how the immigrant group viewed their place in the United States. By fraternizing with a foe of both the British and the United States, the revolutionaries accepted these countries as their enemies.

Following the 1914 *Komagata Maru* incident, the Ghadar party set out to organize a return to India from the United States. Meetings were organized throughout California to spread the word of the imminent revolution. At one such meeting, Ram Chandra exclaimed “The ghosts of our ancestors are branding us a

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<sup>50</sup> Darshan Singh Tatla, *A Guide to Sources: Ghadar Movement* (Amritsar, Punjab: Guru Nanak Dev University, 2003), 20.

<sup>51</sup> Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*, 33.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

shameless progeny. They... will never know rest until we cut down every Englishman. Our Motherland is summoning us to come and free her from the clutches of these tyrants!”<sup>54</sup> Chandra’s statements reminded Punjabi-Sikhs of their shared history in India. Moreover, speakers at these meetings emphasized the support given by the German government. These meetings encapsulate years of Ghadar ideologies. While the Ghadar party always urged Punjabi-Sikhs to return to India, these wishes did not become reality until the mid-1910’s. Those who followed the Ghadar ideology sold their land to pay for their passage back to India. The selling off of their goods and land, as Ramnath has argued, is representative of Punjabi-Sikhs “sacrificing an American territorial future for an Indian one.”<sup>55</sup> The purpose of the United States had thereby been fulfilled.

The Ghadar revolution ended up failing. By 1917 most of its leaders were captured in either India or the United States, and trials soon followed in the subsequent months. As previously noted, the trials ended in the assassination of Ram Chandra. The outcome of the trial had detrimental effects on the Punjabi-Sikh diaspora in California. The already persecuted group of immigrants was now further typecast as problematic. The court system represents the highest authority in America – it is where the government is able to impose their laws on rule-breakers. The Ghadarites who planned Chandra’s assassination showed disrespect to this institution. The assassination was more than the removal of a political opponent; it was a performance by the Ghadars. The killing reaffirmed that the revolutionaries did not care about the authority of the United States because their interest was to return to India. However, this painted the remaining community in a negative light. Stereotypes of Punjabi-Sikhs as disloyal, rowdy and undesirable were reinforced.<sup>56</sup> Immigrants were then seen as a troublesome bunch that practiced anarchy and had no regard for American customs. It is through this negativity one sees the emergence of a counter to the Ghadarites – the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society – a group that viewed California as a final home for the immigrants instead of a midpoint.

### **From Indian to American: The Rise of the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society**

Following the spectacular and public demise of the Ghadar party, the Diwan Society pushed to change the public stereotype of Indians in California. The dramatic conclusion of the Hindu-German conspiracy trial prompted many to view the foreigners as unruly, uncivilized and anarchist. The Diwan Society had set out

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> The revolutionaries were often painted in a negative light, as seen in French Strother, “Fighting Germany’s Spies IX: The Hindu German Conspiracy,” *This World’s Work*, vol. 13. September, 1918. South Asian Digital Archive, Freedom Movement Collection. <https://www.saadigitalarchive.org/item/20111101-4468>

on a community outreach effort that aimed to change the perception of Punjabi-Sikhs in the United States, specifically for those in California.

This effort first began when the Diwan Society sent a letter on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1918 to President Woodrow Wilson. The letter urged the President to support the Indian independence movement. Though the Diwan Society lobbied for Indian Independence, the group made sure to distance themselves from their revolutionary counterparts. As noted in the letter, the Diwan Society was made up of “those who once claimed India as their home and love her, yet and now belong to this great country [The United States].”<sup>57</sup> The line between revolutionary and loyal American become clearer when looking at the letter signature. The last line of the letter states the Diwan Society represented “the loyal Hindus of California.”<sup>58</sup> This signature was included as a political gesture that distanced the Diwan Society from the Ghadar party. Though the Diwan Society took an interest in homeland politics, this does not mean that the group wished to return to India. The group publicly made clear that the United States was their home. This approach to belonging is opposite to the one embodied by the Ghadarites.

The re-visioning of the Punjabi-Sikh image continued through 1919 with a more localized effort. The Diwan Society was able to obtain testimony from four public leaders in Stockton, California – from the Stockton mayor, Stockton police chief, Stockton Bank president and San Joaquin County District Attorney. These accounts were sent to California Governor William Stephens to depict Indian immigrants as outstanding American citizens. All four testimonies were from community leaders who represented different aspects of American society; the mayor for civic involvement, the banker to depict economic responsibility and the police chief and district attorney to represent the good behavior of the Punjabi-Sikhs.<sup>59</sup>

The January 15, 1919 letter from Stockton Mayor A.C. Oullahan depicted the immigrant group as hard-working, loyal, and peaceful. Oullahan also mentions how Punjabi-Sikhs support various war-time industries such as liberty loans and the Red Cross.<sup>60</sup> The letter from the Stockton police chief echoed similar sentiments but mentioned that the immigrant group was “regarded as peace loving people.”<sup>61</sup> The goal of the letters was to elevate the social status of Indian immigrants in California. White community leaders presented Punjabi-Sikhs as loyal Americans. While these individuals did not advocate for immigration reform, the writers did

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<sup>57</sup> Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society to Woodrow Wilson, December 2, 1918. Stockton Sikh Temple, Ghadar Collection, Safe 1.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> These letters can be found in the Stockton Sikh Temple’s *Ghadar Collection*, Safe 1.

<sup>60</sup> A.C. Oullahan to William D. Stephens, January 15, 1919. Stockton Sikh Temple, Ghadar Collection, Safe 1.

<sup>61</sup> W.M. Simpson to William D. Stephens, January 15, 1919. Stockton Sikh Temple, Ghadar Collection, Safe 1.



agree that the current Indian population in California is one that should be met with respect and acceptance.

All four letters present the Punjabi-Sikhs as ideal American citizens. They are presented as a group who worked hard, followed the law and supported the United States during World War I. The descriptions of this group run counter to the revolutionary image of the Ghadar Party. The very existence of such letters – and the portrayal of immigrants in the testimonies – runs counter to Ghadar ideologies. Instead of promoting a return to India and advocating for the violent overthrow of a western power, these letters show that many immigrants (especially those affiliated with the Diwan Society) cared about their long term image in California. According to the testimonies this group was not one that promoted anarchy and revolution, but instead supported their local communities and government.

The letters also bring to light the group's support of the war against Germany. The letters note that the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society supported wartime efforts such as taking out liberty loans, donating to the Red Cross, and purchasing thrift/war stamps. These claims illustrate how the Diwan Society actively supported American war efforts during World War I – placing the group at odds with the Ghadar Party who partnered with the Germans to overthrow England. Instead of reaching for an opportunity to disrupt the British, the Diwan Society hoped to aid the United States and the allied powers. Their support for the American war effort represents how the Diwan's viewed the United States as a home and nation, instead of a temporary waypoint. The collection of these letters was a calculated political move that aimed to elevate the status of Punjabi-Sikhs in the United States. The immigrants were tactfully portrayed as ideal citizens – supporting war efforts, following the law, and contributing to the local economy.

Though Punjabi-Sikhs were considered a desirable immigrant group, the newcomers still held the status of second-class citizens – it was clear more action was needed by the Diwan Society in order for the immigrants to become further accepted within society. These efforts culminated in the Diwan Society's support for Bhagat Singh Thind in his 1924 case against the United States. Bhagat Singh Thind – a World War I veteran who fought for the British abroad – believed that his involvement in the war should allow him to naturalize as an American citizen.<sup>62</sup> Fed up with his status as an alien ineligible for citizenship, Thind sued the United States government in 1924. While Thind emphasized his involvement in the Great War, the crux of his argument focused on the genealogical history of Punjabi-Sikhs. Thind presented Punjabis as Aryan, and therefore white and eligible for citizenship.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Georgia Warnke, *After Identity: Rethinking Race, Sex, and Gender* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 57-58.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

As Thind's court case unfolded, the Diwan Society viewed the case as an opportunity to forward their cause of social elevation. In 1922 a pamphlet was released by Punjabi academic Pardaman Singh. The document, titled *Ethnological Epitome of the Hindustanees of the Pacific Coast*, argued that Punjabi-Sikh's were descendants of Aryans and those in California should be considered white. The essay was edited by Teja Singh and published by the Diwan Society. The pamphlet was written in response to the Bhagat Singh Thind court case, and aimed to elevate the status of Punjabi-Sikhs in the California by painting them as similar to whites.

The author of the pamphlet argued that India and Europe were both colonized by Aryan empires, and as a result the peoples of these two areas were more similar than previously thought. Singh begins his claims by recounting the history of Alexander the Great. "The Aryans...developed a great civilization in India."<sup>64</sup> After establishing a part of his empire in Northern India, Alexander left behind a community of Greco-Aryan-Punjabi people. "For nearly two centuries the Greek princes ruled the Punjab", mixing and assimilating into Punjab.<sup>65</sup> Singh spent the rest of the essay focusing on the physical similarities between Punjabis and Europeans, while contrasting both with other races of people.

Yet the physical and genealogical similarities between Punjabis and American whites were not the only focus of the Diwan Society, as the group also brought attention to the Sikh faith. The Diwan Society also produced *The Message of the Sikh Faith* – a pamphlet that aimed to educate white Americans on Sikhism and its similarities to other monotheistic western religions. The goal of this pamphlet was to make Sikhism seem less foreign to the average American. Due to many Indians being described as Hindoo, Punjabi-Sikhs were overwhelmingly mistaken for followers of Hinduism. The aim of this pamphlet was to introduce Americans to the ideals of Sikhism and dispel any notions of foreignness associated with the religion. The authors even compared Sikh hymns indirectly to the religious music of Martin Luther (a composer as well as theologian and reformer) when explaining the importance of song in Sikhism.<sup>66</sup>

The campaign to reimagine Punjabi-Sikhs as white Americans was a stark departure from the ethnocentric rhetoric of the Ghadar Party. Recall the speech made by Ram Chandra, who urged Punjabi-Sikhs to murder every Englishman, or *Zulam!*, a call to arms that urged Punjabi-Sikhs to murder any white person they

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<sup>64</sup> Pardaman Singh, *Ethnological Epitome of the Hindustanees of the Pacific Coast* (Stockton, California, The Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society, 1919), 2; South Asian Digital Archive, Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society Collection.

<https://www.saadigitalarchive.org/item/20111027-436>

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>66</sup> Bhai Jodh Singh, "The Message of the Sikh Faith," (Stockton, California: Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society, date unknown), 17, South Asian Digital Archive, Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society Collection. <https://www.saadigitalarchive.org/item/20111031-441>

saw. The rhetoric employed by the Ghadar Party cast Punjabi-Sikhs as different from their white oppressors. This tactic allowed for a rise in anticolonial identity for the Punjabi-Sikhs. However, the efforts by the Diwan Society often presented Punjabi-Sikhs as ideal American citizens. Their literature presented the group as white, and as active members of their local communities. Such an effort showcases how the Diwan Society would have rather merged or assimilated into their surroundings. The presentation of Punjabi-Sikhs as Caucasian is a strikingly different view on identity than the one held by the Ghadar Party.

### Conclusion

The Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society and the Ghadar Party offered Punjabi-Sikh immigrants alternate pathways to understanding identity and belonging. While they shared the goal of elevating the status of Punjabi Sikhs either abroad in California or in the Punjab homeland, their approaches to achieving this goal were strikingly different. Yet although the revolutionary Ghadarites and the assimilative Khalsa Diwans seem ideologically at odds with each other, their leadership and spaces used suggest a cross-pollination that has not yet been examined. Bhagat Singh Thind, for example, was active in the American Ghadarite scene (a fact that was used against him in trial). The founders of the Pacific Coast Khalsa Dhiwan Society, whose signatures are present on the group's articles of incorporation, were active Ghadarites. The historical record does not give us a fully accurate picture of the complex, lived realities of these activists. One letter in particular does point to a divide between these groups. An August 19, 1956 letter between Ghadar revolutionaries speaks of past tension between the two groups. The Ghadarite mentions that before the group embarked on their revolutionary quest, the party "had an open skirmish with the Gurdwara Party<sup>67</sup> in Stockton, who were openly hostile to the Gadar Party."<sup>68</sup> Though the extent or cause of this skirmish is never explained, it is interesting to note that groups were openly hostile with each other.

The Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society and the Ghadar Party understood that something needed to be done to elevate the status of Punjabi-Sikhs either in the homeland or abroad. As discrimination grew, so did their movements of empowerment. Though both parties ultimately failed with their efforts, their messages endured through time. The revolutionary ideals of Ghadar went on to inspire other revolutionary groups in India.<sup>69</sup> The Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society is still around today, though it is not as active as it once was (other Sikh

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<sup>67</sup> It is clear that the "Gurdwara Party in Stockton" is the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society, as the organization built the Stockton Sikh Temple in 1912.

<sup>68</sup> Bhagwan Singh Gyanee to Jagjit Singh, August 19, 1956. South Asian Digital Archive, Bhagwan Singh Gyanee Collection. <https://www.saadigitalarchive.org/item/20120805-917>

<sup>69</sup> Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*, 122.

advocacy groups such as the Sikh Coalition (2001) continue the Pacific Diwan's assimilative approach).<sup>70</sup> The Ghadar Party and the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society shared a similar aim, and though the two groups had a strikingly different way of approaching their goal, their efforts made a large impact on the Punjabi-Sikh diaspora in the United States. Even with the organizations' failed attempts to gain in independence or citizenship, their efforts defined Punjabi-Sikh identity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century northwest.

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<sup>70</sup> The Sikh Coalition and the Sikh American Legal Defense & Education Funds are Sikh advocacy groups who lobby for the rights of Punjabi-Sikhs in the United States. These groups became more active after 9/11, when a series of xenophobic events affected Sikhs in the United States.

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