

Modern Sikh Warriors: Militants, Soldiers, Citizens

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ABSTRACT

Central to the mainstream Sikh identity is the concept of ethically-justified force, used as a last resort. There is no place for absolute pacifism in this conception of ethical living. Fighters and martyrs occupy an important place in the Khalsa narrative, and Sikhs are constantly reminded of the sacrifices and heroism of their co-religionists of the past. This article explores how the Sikh warrior identity is manifested in the contemporary world. It examines the Sikhs who, in the 1980s and 1990s, were involved on both sides of the Punjab crisis: those militants who fought for a Sikh homeland (“Khalistan”) and those Sikhs in the Indian army who suppressed the insurgency. The article also looks beyond the militants and soldiers to Sikhs employed in modern security-related professions, the broader issue of Sikh symbols relating to the use of force, and violence within the Sikh diaspora. An examination of the Sikhs in various parts of the world reveals additional uses and consequences of ideology, whether in enlistment in the armed forces of the states in which they live, or in the support of the militancy in India, particularly in the 1980s. The conclusion is that the modern Sikh warrior is a nuanced actor behaving in various ways, some overt and some subtle: the warrior is willing to physically fight those perceived to be tyrannous, but most initiatives have shifted to pursuing justice through non-violent means, such as legal struggles for civil rights. Although armed Sikh militancy against the Indian government is in the past, there are strong residual resentments still requiring redress. All of this is of great relevance to understanding the ethics of armed force within modern Sikhism.

KEYWORDS

Armed force; Khalistan; Sikh; rebellion; violence; warrior

Introduction

The public image of the Sikh community is inseparable from associations with physical force. Such conceptions are reinforced by the community’s history and self-perception, both linked with the violent persecution suffered by the community and the armed response. Sikh preachers make frequent reference to the struggles of the Mughal period in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the oppressive hand of Afghan invaders in the eighteenth century to remind ordinary Sikhs of the sacrifices made by their forefathers (Dorn and Gucciardi 2011). Baptized Sikhs wear a dagger as a reminder of these

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events and of their responsibility to meet oppression with a necessary response. In a small example of historical remembrance, a nomadic Sikh sect known as the Nihangs roam Punjab on horseback, dressed as warriors and remain devoted to the martial dimension of their tradition.

But what of the average Sikh today? Is armed force merely an aspect of the Sikh historical identity, or is it a lived reality? In seeking an answer to this question, three areas of enquiry seem most pertinent: the militancy in Indian Punjab during the 1980s and 1990s; Sikh participation in national armed forces in India and abroad; and the world of civil advocacy amongst the Sikhs of both India and the diaspora. The Sikhs are, of course, a community of human beings, and all of the expected diversity of thought and behaviour is reflected in the findings. Sikhs who considered themselves warriors for justice fought passionately against the central government during the insurgency in Punjab, but were met by equally-strongly motivated Sikhs seeking to thwart the rebellion. Sikhs disproportionately enrol in the armed forces of India, but are severely underrepresented in forces abroad. There is no denying that the rhetoric surrounding armed force is important to the identity of those who consider themselves baptized “Khalsa” Sikhs, but in studying the community’s living out of such ideas, and thus the community’s military ethics, one must adopt a nuanced and careful approach, recognizing the different elements within the faith.

Militants’ fight for Khalistan

The most prominent image of the Sikh militant is the Khalistani fighter of the 1980s and 1990s who participated in the rebellion to create the proposed Sikh political state Khali-*stan*.¹ This armed movement was epitomized by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, one of its most militant leaders. While support for an independent homeland via secession from India has all but disappeared within India itself, members of the Sikh diaspora continue to engage with such ideas, pointing to the numerous human rights abuses suffered during the counter-insurgency as proof of the Indian state’s unjust attempts to control the community. What continues to give such a perspective strength? Why did Bhindranwale lead this movement in the first place, and how did his followers relate his rhetoric to their religious identity and duty? What is historically clear is the highly politicized environment in Punjab into which Bhindranwale threw himself, characterized by widespread association of Sikh identity with Punjabi political and historical identity.

Punjabi political identity

Sikh feelings of connection to the Punjab as an imagined geographical entity date to pre-independence politics (Oberoi 1987, 27), competing in a landscape dominated by communalism. The relationship between Sikhs and the British colonial government primarily operated through army life, as discussed below, and peasant relations, such as the construction of western Punjab’s canal colonies and the Land Alienation Act of 1900, which protected them from predatory moneylenders (Tatla 1999, 16). In urban centres, Sikh elites used printed materials and education to promote the Sikh identity and rally the community politically (17).

The Akali Movement,² founded in 1914, was the community's first modern political expression of communal desires, crystallising around opposition to British interference in the management of Gurdwaras (Sikh places of worship). By 1925, the community succeeded in having the British pass the Sikh Gurdwaras and Shrines Act, transferring control to a democratically elected Sikh body, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (Tatla 1999, 18). The movement then acted as the primary representative of Punjab's Sikh elites during negotiations surrounding India's partition. Despite failing to secure an independent Punjab, Akalis quickly marked out an important space in Indian Punjabi politics as the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), a political party advocating for a state within the Indian union that would be dominated by speakers of the Punjabi language. This approach avoided the potentially inflammatory demand for a Sikh-dominated state, with the majority of the region's Hindus claiming Hindi as their mother tongue. Success in achieving a Punjabi-speaking state was followed by further demands relating to the new state's borders, access to river waters, possession of the planned-city of Chandigarh, and the position of the Punjabi language in neighbouring states (24).

During the three successive Akali coalition governments between 1967 and 1980, Punjab hosted the "Green Revolution", a series of developments that drastically improved agricultural output but brought about rapid social change with some deleterious effects. The demand for the capital necessary to purchase the equipment, fertilizers, and other supplies disproportionately privileged those with already significant landholdings, and the replacement of farmhands with machinery increased the economic plight of the lower classes (Deol 2000, 127). Many formerly ploughing their own small farms had to sell their land and become labourers (138), whilst competition with migrants from India's poorer regions helped keep wages low (136). Infrastructure simultaneously improved to meet the demands of the new economy, linking small towns with the outside world and further extending the reach of the news media into rural areas (151).

The politics of the late 1970s and early 1980s in Punjab became quite inflammatory as different groups attempted to discredit the SAD's claim to represent the Sikhs. It was in this context that the party issued the Anandpur Sahib Resolution, a reaffirmation of their positions on Punjabi autonomy, its economy, and legal privileges afforded to Sikhs. In order to counter the resulting civil movement demanding reforms, India's Congress Party secretly began supporting Sikh groups with more extreme demands, thereby discrediting the SAD and winning support for their own local branch of the party (Tatla 1999, 27). Bhindranwale, who had built up a large following by preaching against casteism and promoting initiation into the Khalsa (Purewal 2000, 122), was at the centre of this strategy. His use of force to resolve conflicts and promote his ideology quickly made him a controversial figure (123), as did his fiery rhetoric against the central government.³ Even more disturbing were his threats against ordinary Hindus, leveraging the lives of thousands on the fulfilment of his political demands (Joshi 1984, 144), and ordering the entire Hindu community to leave Punjab (148–149). All were considered suspect and he declared: "Any cap-wearer (Hindu) who comes to us, we should ask him: 'Are you with us or not?'" (Sandhu 2011).

As Punjab spun out of control through a series of communal clashes, assassinations, and anti-government protests, Bhindranwale moved his men into the Golden Temple of Amritsar, the holiest shrine of the Sikhs, in 1982. He used this haven to continue giving fiery speeches and to further his political ascendancy. Conditions worsened until

Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered the army on 5 June 1984 to remove Bhindranwale from the temple, a manoeuvre codenamed Operation Bluestar. The death of Bhindranwale alongside scores of innocents enraged the Sikh community and the operation failed to defuse the poisonous political atmosphere. Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards on 31 October 1984. The court case against all four men involved made note of their open contempt for Indira Gandhi's ordering of Operation Blue star (Register-Guard 1985).

Murderous anti-Sikh riots across Northern India followed the assassination, adding further strength to the message of militant groups in Punjab. The "riots" were anything but random and the Indian National Congress Party was directly tied to the chaos. In Delhi, their "goon networks" looted wealthy Sikh businesses and killed scores of innocents (Purewal 2000, 134). Various commissions held to investigate the riots tied the party to the violence to varying degrees, but the implicated officials were not arrested, a fact that drew continuing condemnation from the Sikh community. Being minorities in the cities in which they were attacked, however, the Sikhs did not respond with organized violence of their own. Bolder and more militant voices gained support amongst the Sikhs of Punjab and the diaspora (Major 1987, 50), thereby adding further to the cycle of violence. It was not until the end of 1992 that these voices lost their appeal and the majority of militant activities were successfully curbed (Purewal 2000, 155).

A significant amount of scholarship shows the economic and political forces that shaped the Punjab crisis, including the pressures introduced by the Green Revolution, Sikh ethnonationalism (Tatla 1999, 12), manipulation by landowners (Purewal 2000, 73), and the complexities of regional elites and their position relative to national elites (Chima 2010, 5). Like other religious conflicts around the world, then, the Punjab Crisis was an expression of long-held political frustration boiling to the point of violence. In addition, Bhindranwale built up a considerable amount of support using religious rhetoric. While many of his followers were opportunistic criminals, most saw themselves as devout Sikhs.

Bhindranwale adopted a rigid stance in his condemnation of all those differing from the mainstream Khalsa Sikh narrative. He sought, for example, to ban the scriptures of a small Sikh sect, the Nirankaris, as well as to prohibit them from even meeting in Punjab (Chima 2010, 44). His rhetorical style was well-suited to the Punjabi cultural context, using shame and honour to promote the Khalsa image (Judge 2004, 3951). Furthermore, he was one of many at the time combining religious rhetoric and the use of "strongmen" to intimidate and eliminate opponents (Purewal 2000, 121). Points in speeches were always reinforced with quotes from scripture, and supporters would quickly rally in his support whenever he met with trouble. His arrest in 1981 due to events surrounding the assassination of a Hindu intellectual and publicist was met with bombings, shootings, the derailing of a train, and the hijacking of a plane (Chima 2010, 64).

In her book *Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogues with Sikh Militants*, Cynthia Keppley Mahmood demonstrates the crucial role religion played in the lives of some of the militants. One man makes reference to the strength he draws from Sikh martyrs, a topic of high frequency in Sikh preaching (Mahmood 1997, 37). He holds up the examples of the martyred Gurus as proof of how justice is attained through sacrifice (41). Other men make reference to the religiosity of fellow militants. One discusses early morning and pre-mission prayers, whilst another discusses his group's leader, who refused to make use of

men who did not have their prayers memorized (170). The cause was so potent in its appeal that it drew in members of the Sikh diaspora, who fought and died in Punjab for over a decade (157). As mentioned, the underlying causes for rebellion were rooted in the community's perceived relationship with the state, further demonstrated by the mutiny and desertion of several thousand Sikh soldiers following Operation Bluestar (Tatla 1999, 28). It is impossible, however, to make any sweeping statements about ideology as the central cause; militants were anything but organized, a fact demonstrated not only by the multiplicity of named organizations taking part in the violence, but also by the opportune participation of numerous criminal and smuggling groups (Major 1987, 55).

Sikhs were also involved on the other side of the conflict, fighting against the Khalistani militants. Major General Kuldip Singh Brar led the attack on the Golden Temple during Operation Bluestar, and Kanwar Pal Singh Gill led the Punjab police force to success throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s. General Brar justified the government's forceful action in 1984 by pointing to earlier efforts to peacefully evict the "terrorists" from the complex, and by accusing the men of defiling the temple, issuing death warrants against innocents, and receiving "foreign assistance" from Pakistan and China (Associated Press 1984). Director General Gill argues that the religious dimension was merely a grab for power, and that the militants never truly enjoyed popular support and were often interested only in personal gain (Gill 2012). Naturally, many in his police force were Sikhs, which supports his point about the militants not enjoying support amongst all Indian co-religionists. Many Sikhs may have been merely hedging their bets to see which side would prevail. The high enrolment numbers of Sikhs in the Indian military (see below) also lends credibility to his argument. Clearly, the events of 1984 were not so potent as to sever all sense of attachment within the community to the Indian state.

In the diaspora there was tremendous support for the Khalistan movement and utter outrage at India's attack on Sikhism's most holy shrine. Though this response has almost always been expressed without violating the laws in effect in the diaspora's respective countries, the diaspora has also been a backdrop for extremism. In Canada, a group of Sikhs based in British Columbia, members of "Babbar Khalsa", placed a bomb aboard Air India Flight 182, killing 329 people on 23 June 1985. Conspiracy theories abound that the entire incident was either masterminded or aided by Indian intelligence in an effort to discredit the Sikhs, but solid evidence for such an explanation has never emerged. Numerous men were implicated in the event, but Inderjit Singh Reyat was the only man ever convicted by Canadian courts. Any discussion around motives cannot be reinforced by solid evidence, though Ajaib Singh Bagri, one of the men eventually acquitted by the courts, is on record as saying, "Until we kill 50,000 Hindus, we will not rest" (Milewski 2007).

With the end of the Punjab crisis, the majority of Sikhs abandoned any hope for creating an independent state. However, in the Sikh diaspora some communities continue to lend such ideology significant weight. Many supporters were born abroad, never directly witnessing the hardship endured by the community during the government's anti-insurgency campaign, though many members within the diaspora have connections through kinship or friendship with those who suffered or fled as refugees. Lavish displays of support for Khalistani militants are still common at public events (Milewski 2007) as

well as in Gurdwaras. Many martyrs of the movement, including the two assassins of Indira Gandhi, are celebrated in speeches and in artwork.

During the insurrection, Sikh militants acted for a variety of reasons, many relating more to Sikhism as an identity than as a religion, a state of affairs all-too-common in the realm of communal politics. Sikhism's traditional use of martyrdom in its rhetoric served as a useful vehicle for motivating these men to continue their struggle against forces that they perceived as threatening against the community's very existence. Ultimately, however, the movement failed; a combination of severe government crackdown with a major effort at political resolution between the central government and regional elites, as well as the constant suffering of rural and low-class Punjabis (Purewal 2000, 155), doomed the separatist movement to failure. Those Sikh warriors who had fought on behalf of the security forces were the victors of that struggle. The election and re-election of Manmohan Singh as Prime Minister (2004–2014), the first Sikh to serve in that office, was also a major step forward for Sikhs in mainstream Indian politics.

Sikhs in the armed forces

Sikhs have long enjoyed a reputation as excellent soldiers, from the Mughal and British periods to contemporary times. The colonial British administration considered the Sikhs a “martial race” and made them the focus of recruiting attempts (Judge 2004, 3949). The Sikhs readily accepted soldiery as it was consonant with the increasingly widespread Khalsa identity (Dorn and Gucciardi 2011). The Sikh military tradition continues in the Indian Army through the Sikh Regiment and the Sikh Light Infantry, the former being staffed mostly by high-caste Jatts and the latter by lower castes (Indian Army 2012a, 2012b).⁴ Sikhs are overrepresented within the Indian armed forces, far surpassing their percentage within the overall Indian population of almost 2%.⁵ Though precise ethnic data on the Indian military is hard to come by, there are some clear indicators. In 1963, Sikhs were 10% of recruits, 20% of commissioned officers, 40% of brigadiers, and 45% of Major-Generals (Madra and Singh 1999, 166). Thus, Sikhs were especially overrepresented at higher ranks. A 1991 report maintained the 20% estimate for commissioned officers and also claimed that up to 25% of Air Force pilots are Sikhs (Kundu 1994, 49).

The high level of Sikh participation in the military may be linked primarily to regional, economic, and social factors, more than to religious identity. In the Indian state of Punjab, the rural areas of the Majha region, for example, see significantly more military enrolment than the Malwa region, a trend that extends back to the British period (see The Indian Express 2011). Sikhs are more likely to enlist in areas with a long tradition of military duty. The correlation between geography and enlistment is paralleled in Pakistani Punjab, where the Potowar Plateau sees higher recruitment than Southern Punjab, mirroring a recruitment trend from prior to independence (Lieven 2011, 262).

Within the diaspora, however, the preference for military duty is not duplicated. Contrary to the South Asian trend, initiated Sikhs who wear the symbols of their faith are under-represented in the armed forces of the countries to which they have long been emigrating. Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom all boast large Sikh communities,⁶ but enlistment estimates reveal a huge degree of under-representation. The causes of this disparity may include factors internal to these military institutions and the

economic aims of new immigrants. The data fly in the face of those essentialists who claim that the martial identity of the community necessarily translates into real-world soldiering.

For Sikhs outside India desiring to enlist in the military, the single largest obstacle has been resistance to their physical appearance. All Sikhs who have been baptized into the Khalsa order are expected to wear five symbols of their faith: unshorn hair, a small comb, a loose pair of shorts worn under the trousers, a metal bracelet, and a blade. These are known as the Five K's, in reference to the words used for each in the Punjabi language: *kesh*, *kanga*, *kachera*, *kara*, *kirpan*. Unshorn hair is, according to custom, worn in a turban, and this has been a source of friction between many Sikhs who wish to enlist and various world militaries. This problem was particularly acute in the United States.

In stark contrast with the historically permissive attitude of the British (see below), American institutions have fluctuated in answering demands by Sikh soldiers to wear the turban. In 1981, the US military passed a regulation to ban “conspicuous” religious symbols in the military, though there had been some tolerance for the turban (Rajghatta 2009). Further changes to army regulations in the 1980s restricted beards to those who had enlisted before 1986 (CrownHeights.info 2005). It was only in 2010 that a Sikh soldier completed basic training whilst wearing the turban after challenging and defeating the 1999 regulations. That same year a Sikh dentist became the first commissioned officer to do the same, quickly followed by a physician. Army policy only officially changed in 2017 to accommodate soldiers seeking a religious exemption to standard uniform regulations, allowing brigade-level commanders to grant a life-long exemption to individual soldiers at their own discretion (Dickstein 2017).

Beginning with the British imperial presence in South Asia, ties between Sikhs and the United Kingdom have long been vibrant. The largest example in terms of numbers was the enlistment of 2.5 million Indians into the British Indian Army during the Second World War. The Sikhs were highly overrepresented (20% of soldiers being Sikh as opposed to 2% Sikhs in the Indian population) and this followed recruiting practices dating back to the British conquest of Punjab in 1849 (“Sikhs Bravery in World Wars” 2011). At that time, authorities encouraged Sikhs to wear the turban; the Khalsa identity was identified as the source of the Sikhs’ unique fighting strength and, as mentioned, they were declared a “martial race”. General Sir Frank Messervy records a total of 192,050 Sikh casualties for both World Wars, all having been men who wore the turban (Birdwood 1953). However, recent figures for Sikh representation in the armed forces of the United Kingdom paint a stark contrast: only 80 of the army’s 150,000 soldiers are Sikhs, and a mere two are Sikh women (Singh 2010). With the number of Sikhs in the UK hovering around 836,000, this marks severe underrepresentation. The community recently petitioned for the creation of an all-Sikh regiment, a motion strongly supported by Prince Charles, but the idea was rejected in 2007 due to concerns raised by the Commission for Racial Equality (Rayment 2007).

Elsewhere in the Commonwealth, visible minority presence in the Canadian military was listed at 6% versus 17% of the civilian working population (Park 2008) as of 2002, with Sikhs a miniscule but undetermined portion of that. Importantly, in 2011 Harjit Sajjan became the first Sikh to command a Canadian Army reserve regiment and in 2015 he was made Defence Minister in the multicultural cabinet of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Jasbir Singh Tatla, the first turbaned member of the Royal Canadian

Air Force, completed his initial training in 2008. Tatla himself frames his enlistment in relation to the social troubles facing sections of the Punjabi community in British Columbia, asking Sikhs to be true to the warrior tradition as soldiers, not criminal gang members. By one soldier's estimate, there are less than 30 Sikhs in the Armed Forces (Ghuman 2010), despite Sikh roots extending back to the enlistment of nine men in the Canadian army during the First World War (Aulakh 2008). The Australian military has similar connections: seven Sikh men fought for the country in that war (Singh 2007). As in Canada, Australian visible minorities in general are under-represented (only 5% of the military while 21% of the population as a whole). The Australian military is attempting to increase representation, and has developed special helmets which fit around the Sikh turban (Hale 2009).

Reasons for such low enlistment numbers relate to the socio-economic profile of those Sikhs immigrating to different Western countries and their response to mainstream society as minorities. Traditionally, many Sikh immigrants to the United Kingdom and the United States were educated professionals. The same was true in Canada, though the community saw a significant boost in numbers as refugees were accepted during the Punjab Crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. Australia's numbers have seen growth as international students find work and obtain permission for residency, and numbers in all of the aforementioned countries have been greatly supplemented through family sponsorship programmes. Recent graduates, professionals, and refugees are not groups which tend to be strongly represented within the armed forces. (The American military, with its citizenship-through-enlistment and extensive funding, may be an exception.) Factors relating to the five K's have also contributed to the reduced desirability of military service within the Sikh community. In addition to facing traditional obstacles to joining the military, Sikh women are often discouraged from assuming the traditionally male profession of soldiering, as reflected by the aforementioned 1:40 ratio (i.e., two women of 80 Sikhs) in the British armed forces.

Worthy of mention is Sikh participation in the private security industry. Though official numbers are not available, many diasporic Sikhs adopt such work, which might be expected of those from immigrant communities, especially for those who might be unskilled and are searching for employment. More notable is Akal Security, an American company originally founded by American Sikh converts who followed the teachings of a spiritual leader named Yogi Bhaajan and united to form Sikh Dharma International. Akal Security has met with considerable success, but its official website makes no mention of its historical connection to Sikhism (Akal Security 2012).

Successful recruitment of diasporic Sikhs into the armed forces requires focused campaigns to educate the militaries on Sikh symbols and assurances to the Sikh public that their identity will be wholly respected. Such respect still eludes the diasporic community amongst members of the general public, however, and many Sikhs devote themselves to remedying this situation.

Sikh citizens: traditional symbols and social advocacy

The Sikh identity is often expressed via the physical form of the Sikh. The warrior aspect is reflected in two symbols, the *kirpan* and *kesh*, in particular. The right to wear both has been a source of struggle as well as pride for Sikhs in many countries. While there is no

widely accepted position on what exactly these two symbols represent, they are both considered indispensable to the Khalsa Sikh, as dictated by Guru Gobind Singh during the founding of the Khalsa in 1699. Various writers have stressed the importance of being recognized as a Sikh through physical characteristics, arguing that this recognition reminds the individual Sikh of all that to which he is bound by virtue of his membership in the Khalsa. For the average contemporary Sikh citizen, the struggle for civil rights is pronounced, often crystallizing in the diaspora around the right to adhere to Sikh precepts on the five K's. Such advocacy runs deeper still; historically, Sikhs were disproportionately involved in the struggle for Indian independence. Today, many are still deeply involved in the attempt to hold the Indian government accountable for human rights abuses during the Punjab Crisis and the anti-Sikh Pogroms of 1984.

The struggle abroad over kesh and kirpan

Kesh (uncut hair) is the most outwardly-oriented symbols of the Sikhs, a clear marker of identity. Within the community, it is a frequent source of controversy; those who wish to assert the strength of their piety have long used *kesh* to do so, whether for political reasons or otherwise. Some have located the vitality of the community in this symbol and have argued that hair cutting is the first step to Sikhism's wider decline. The diaspora has been at the forefront of such defensive arguments due to the increased social pressure on them to abandon the symbol in their non-native lands. Irrespective of initiatory status, Sikhs have come together to fight for the right for community members to keep their hair uncut, especially in the context of employment, especially in security-related professions.

The turban has been banned in various contexts in countries across the Western world, stimulating a variety of different responses. The famous 2004 French ban of all religious symbols in government schools included the Sikh turban, which was initially met with the assertion that it is a cultural symbol, not a religious one (Sciolino 2004). The theological problems associated with taking such a position, as well as the lack of success in the court system, led to the abandonment of that argument. In 2012, the UN Human Rights Committee heard the case of Ranjit Singh, who argued against the French government's refusal to grant official ID to men who would not remove the turban for photo identification. This was judged to be a violation of religious freedoms, but this judgement has not led to a concrete change in French law (Neiyyar 2012).

The United States has also seen its share of controversy around the turban. In the security-obsessed post-9/11 climate of the United States, special training courses in numerous airports were modified to include information about the importance of the *kirpan*, but not about *kesh* (Wald 2002). Despite the installation of body scanners in airports across the country, Sikhs continue to be targeted by security staff; turbans are patted down and swabbed for any chemical residue that may indicate the presence of an explosive device (Maguire 2010). Perhaps the most notable case occurred in 2010, when the Indian ambassador to the United Nations, Hardeep Puri, was detained after refusing to remove his turban at an airport in Houston, Texas ("‘Turban check’ on Indian envoy at US airport sparks row" 2010).

In Canada, the most noteworthy case relating to *kesh* was the controversy surrounding a Sikh man's attempt to make the turban a part of his uniform as an officer in the Royal

Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). A group of retired RCMP officers took the man to court in an attempt to maintain the traditional uniform, simultaneously making a set of theological arguments against the necessity of the turban and attempting to demonstrate its reflection of militancy. The lawsuit failed, and Khalsa Sikhs today face no opposition by the RCMP in wearing the turban (Judge 2003, 1730). Other points of controversy have been a helmet exemption whilst riding motorcycles and in regard to entitlement to worker's compensation (1727).

The place of the *kirpan* in Western society has been the subject of discussion and some controversy in several nations. The Sikhs interpret the significance of the *kirpan* in various ways, whether as a reminder of the Sikh responsibility to uphold justice or as a literal weapon to be used when absolutely necessary. The Sikh Coalition, a prominent civil rights group in the United States, acknowledges both the symbolic and utilitarian dimensions of the symbol: it is "a reminder to fight against injustice and oppression", and it "is only intended [for Sikhs] to protect themselves or others" (The Sikh Coalition 2017). Amar Jit Singh Chandi writes about the *kirpan*, arguing that it was made a symbol with great foresight and pragmatism, as Sikhs have long been using the *kirpan* to defend both themselves and others (Chandi 2010). In Canada, it was only in 2007 (Grewal 2007) that CN Rail decided to allow the *kirpan* onto its trains after two incidents involving the ejection of a Sikh law student (Shariff and Shariff 2006, 491), though the cases most scrutinized in the public eye involve the Quebec school system. A *kirpan* case involving a Montreal student, Gurbaj Singh Multani, received considerable attention across the country, touching on issues of secularism and accommodation within Quebec society. After conflicting decisions from both the board and school governing council, a court declared the legality of the *kirpan* if it were worn under clothing, contained in a secure wooden scabbard, open to inspection, never to be withdrawn, and reported if lost (Smith 2006, 92). The provincial attorney general intervened and, after some further legal wrangling, the case was taken up before the Supreme Court of Canada. After endorsing its symbolic meaning and rejecting the rhetoric around the expected arming of non-Sikh students in response, the court declared the *kirpan* one weapon amongst many in a classroom environment (scissors, compasses, etc.) and ruled that accommodating the *kirpan* does not place unfair hardship on school officials (104–105).

Though Khalsa Sikhs have the support of Canada's Supreme Court within the school system, Quebecois society has by no means accepted the *kirpan*. On 18 January 2011, Sikhs wearing their *kirpans* were barred from entering the Quebecois legislature, a move lauded by the Parti Québécois as an example of Quebec standing up for its cultural values (Toronto Star 2011). Elsewhere in Canada, physical altercations involving the *kirpans* of both children (Chung 2009) and adults (Aulakh 2008) have caught the attention of the press. Sikhs abroad therefore continue in their struggle to educate the public about their traditions and seek the right to adhere to the Khalsa ideal without legal hindrance.

Other civil rights issues

Sikhs abroad have strongly advocated for the rights of Indian Sikhs who suffered during the brutal crackdown post-Bhindranwale and have tried to build awareness around those who perished in the retaliatory attacks following Indira Gandhi's assassination. Much of this work revolves around educating the wider public of these historical events and a

large amount of effort is expended to recognize the “Anti-Sikh Riots” as a “genocide” perpetrated by the Indian National Congress party. Recognition of past wrongs should serve to increase pressure on the Indian government to prosecute those involved. It also reminds Sikh youth of the struggles faced by the community.

Sikh youth play a notable role in these diasporic organizations. For example, the Sikh Activist Network, a Canadian “Youth Movement for Peace, Love, and Justice”, aims to empower Sikh youth, combat the influence of drugs and gang violence, and establish an atmosphere of dialogue within the community (Sikh Activist Network 2017). The front page of their website links to articles about legal internships, the 1984 Sikh genocide, anti-racism initiatives, and updates on the Rajoana issue (see below). Another important Canadian group is the World Sikh Organization (WSO), which has been advocating for the Sikh community since 1984. Besides working on initiatives similar to those of the Sikh Activist Network, the WSO works with various official bodies to spread awareness about Sikhism, including police departments such as the Toronto Police Service (Singh 2012). Other such organizations include United Sikhs, an international group associated with the United Nations, and The Sikh Foundation, a group based out of the United States which goes to great lengths to promote Sikh heritage, art, and various publications.

The power of these organizations to mobilize the diaspora was on full display in March 2012, when the community inside India and across the world united to oppose the execution of Balwant Singh Rajoana, an accomplice in the assassination of Beant Singh, Punjab’s Chief Minister, in 1995. Pointing to the lack of justice for Sikhs relative to those committing violence against the community, Sikh organizations worldwide called on Sikhs to protest in support of Rajoana, despite the man himself never having requested that his execution be stayed; he believed a request for clemency would demonstrate his recognition of the Indian government’s legitimacy. Sikhs expanded their protests to rally against the death penalty itself, and Rajoana’s supporters wore orange as a show of support. Rajoana’s execution, originally scheduled for 31 March 2012, has been stayed as a result of the unrest it precipitated in Punjab. The police response to protests in the city of Gurdaspur resulted in the death of an 18-year-old Sikh, and tensions escalated between right-wing Hindu and Sikh groups. The language of martyrdom which quickly arose surrounding the youth’s death exemplifies the dangerous communalism constantly underlying South Asian politics.

Conclusion

Sikhs who choose to follow the path of the warrior do so for a variety of reasons. In the Punjab crisis, the militancy was driven mostly by a variety of socio-political factors, including communal politics and tensions between the different levels of government. Sikh recruitment to military establishments, though stunted in the West and despite the Punjab insurgency of the 1980s, remains disproportionately high in India, perhaps due to historical recruitment patterns going back to the colonial period. Meanwhile, the struggle with which the majority of diasporic Sikhs concern themselves is the fight for the right to wear the items defining the Khalsa Sikh physical image and to remind the world of rights violations left unanswered. Indeed, the Sikh warrior is a human being, a complex entity encountering social pressures of all kinds and responding in many different ways. The militant, the soldier, and the citizen each inherit the legacy of the Sikh

warrior spirit. Understanding and tackling these tensions and issues contains, we believe, a key to understanding Sikh military ethics.

Notes

1. The proposed state of Khalistan is similar in its geographical boundaries to the nineteenth century empire of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Included is the whole of Punjab, including Haryana, and the mountainous region of Himachal Pradesh. Khalistan literally means “land of the pure”.
2. Akali means “immortal” in Punjabi.
3. The following link is the first part of six videos, totalling nearly an hour in length. In them, Bhindranwale lays out his theological perspective and summarizes his major points of contention with the central government: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rr0RnaQJ_Cc (BirRass Productions 2009).
4. Jatts were traditionally on the lower end of the caste spectrum but have risen to a position of dominance in the economy and the politics of Indian Punjab. They are typically associated with agriculture. Such differentiation is, however, out of place in Sikh theology, in which caste is said to play no role in one’s access to God and salvation.
5. According to the 2001 census, there are 19,216,000 Sikhs living in India, making up 1.9% of the total population.
6. The community in each country reaches the hundreds of thousands, the UK containing the most at 836,000 according to the 2001 census.

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