

Beyond Borders: The Sikh Quest for Identity and Belonging (Final Project)

Gurman Kang

Soci 3430

Jennifer Shaw

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The Sikh diaspora, one of the world's most significant and widespread, has been shaped by various factors, including economic and political instability in India. Furthermore, preserving cultural and religious identity has emerged as a significant motivator, shaping the experiences of Sikh migrants and their new homelands. This essay will explore the complex interplay of these factors, shedding light on the motivations behind Sikh migration and its impact on migrants. As Andrew Milne states in the article "Sikhs: A Stateless Nation, a Powerful Cohesive Diaspora and a Mistaken Identity," "Sikhs can be considered as a 'stateless nation'...but they constitute a cohesive diaspora with considerable weight, despite being greatly dispersed across the world, and increasingly so due to the possibilities afforded to them by globalization" (Milne, 2022). This highlights that the Sikh diaspora is one of the most significant and widespread worldwide.

The Sikh diaspora has its roots in various historical events, most notably the partition of India in 1947, which led to the displacement of a large number of Sikhs. Earlier waves of migration during the British colonial period, such as the Komagata Maru incident, also played a role. The Komagata Maru incident, as Macklin (2011) argues, can be seen as a chapter within the larger founding narratives of Canada, highlighting the early struggles of Sikh migrants in seeking new homes. Discrimination and social tensions in India have also fueled Sikh migration. The rise of Sikh nationalism and the demand for an independent Khalistan in the 1980s led to a period of conflict and motivated many Sikhs to leave India. The underlying factor behind these motivations is that preserving the Sikh religion and culture is a significant reason for Sikh migration.

The Komagata Maru arrived in Vancouver in 1914. The ship carried 376 hopeful Sikh migrants seeking better lives, only to be met with exclusionary immigration policies. In the text, *Historicizing Narratives of Arrival: The Other Indian Other in Storied Communities*, Audrey Macklin (2011) highlights this event as systemic racism embedded in Canada's immigration system at the time. However, the resilience shown by Sikhs in the face of rejection foreshadowed their determination to carve out spaces in hostile environments.

Macklin emphasizes the dehumanizing nature of the legal process that the passengers of the Komagata Maru were subjected to. It highlights how the judgment of narrative in the Munshi Singh case, a test case for the admissibility of all passengers, painted the immigrants as liars and unskilled labourers, regardless of their actual backgrounds. Macklin argues this was a way of denying their claims to identity and community, further solidifying their status as outsiders. Macklin's analysis of the Komagata Maru incident underscores the deep-seated racism that has shaped Canada's immigration policies. The incident was not just about excluding a particular group of people but also about constructing a particular kind of Canadian identity – one that was white and European. Despite their injustice and hardship, the Sikh migrants on the Komagata Maru displayed remarkable resilience. Their struggle, though ultimately unsuccessful in the short term, foreshadowed the determination of Sikhs to carve out spaces for themselves in Canada, even in the face of adversity.

The text clearly states that the Sikh migrants on the Komagata Maru were "seeking better lives," indicating an economic motivation for their migration. While not explicitly stated in this passage, the fact that the passengers were Sikhs travelling together suggests a desire to maintain

their community and identity in a new land. This is further supported by Macklin's argument that the legal process sought to deny their "claims to identity and community." The Komagata Maru incident highlights the challenges Sikhs faced in preserving their identity within a system designed to exclude them. The Komagata Maru incident profoundly shaped the experiences of the Sikh migrants involved. Facing exclusion, dehumanization, and ultimately rejection, they experienced firsthand the hostility and racism prevalent in Canada at the time.

The Komagata Maru incident exemplifies the complex interplay of economic motivations, the desire to preserve cultural and religious identity, and the response to discriminatory policies that have shaped Sikh migration and settlement. It underscores the resilience of Sikh migrants in the face of adversity and their determination to carve out a place for themselves and their community in a new land.

Decades after the Komagata Maru, another significant part of Sikh migration comes the partition of British India in 1947, which was not just a line on a map—it was a rupture, dividing families, homes, and dreams. In 1947, Sikhs made their way from modern-day Pakistan to current-day India with a suitcase that held more than their belongings; it carried the weight of a diaspora in the making. In an article published by *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* in 2018 titled "Violent Punjab, quiescent Bengal, and the Partition of India," authors Manjeet Pardesi and Sumit Ganguly give insight into the partition of India, which resulted from the British decision to divide the subcontinent into two independent dominions: India and Pakistan. The division of the subcontinent also included the division of the state of Punjab, which was divided into two parts: Punjab (India) and Punjab (Pakistan). The Punjab was one of the most

affected areas, with nearly four and a half million Hindus and Sikhs moving from the western regions to eastern Punjab. Anywhere between 180,000 and 500,000 Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs died in the Punjab during this migration and the accompanying atrocities.

As a consequence of this violence and exodus, the Hindus and Sikhs virtually disappeared from western Punjab. The partition of the Punjab was particularly violent for the Sikh community. The Sikhs spread throughout the Punjab and did not form a majority in any district. The Muslims formed the majority in the western regions, while the Hindus and the Sikhs combined formed the majority in the east (Pardesi & Ganguly, 2019). Catherine Besteman's book *Militarized Global Apartheid* discusses consolidating a nationalist identity connected to political membership (Besteman, 2020, p.23). This concept highlights the role of racialization in shaping migration patterns. The process of creating national identities often involves excluding and marginalizing certain groups based on race or ethnicity. This exclusion can create social tensions and discrimination, pushing people to migrate for belonging and acceptance. Sikhs faced discrimination and social tensions in India, which fueled their migration. The quote helps to explain why this discrimination occurs, linking it to the broader process of nation-building and identity formation.

The Partition was a period of immense political upheaval and violence. The text emphasizes the "rupture" and the immense loss of life, highlighting the instability that drove Sikhs to leave their homes in search of safety and security. The text mentions explicitly Sikhs moving from modern-day Pakistan to current-day India. This can be seen as an attempt to preserve their cultural and religious identity within a newly formed nation where they felt a sense

of belonging. The violence and displacement experienced during Partition likely strengthened the desire to maintain their identity in the face of adversity. The Partition undoubtedly shaped the experiences of Sikh migrants. The trauma of violence, loss of homes and livelihoods, and the severing of community ties would have had a profound impact. The influx of Sikh migrants into India following Partition significantly shaped the demographics and cultural landscape of the communities they joined. Their arrival contributed to these communities' diversity while presenting challenges of integration and rebuilding lives.

In essence, the Partition of India serves as a prime example of how political instability forced Sikhs to migrate to protect their cultural and religious identity. This historical event had a lasting impact on the Sikh diaspora, influencing their motivations for migration and shaping their own experiences and the communities they became a part of.

If Partition tore Sikhs from their land, 1984 shook their faith in the Indian state. There was a rise in Sikh nationalism and the demand for an independent Khalistan in the 1980s. As Van Dyke states in the article published in 2009, "The Khalistan Movement in Punjab, India, and the Post-Militancy Era: Structural Change and New Political Compulsions," "From approximately 1980 to 1992, the Indian state of Punjab was riven by an internecine, anti-state conflict involving a movement to establish a separate independent Sikh state of Khalistan" (Dyke, 2009, p.975).

The rise of the movement was to preserve the Sikh religion, identity and culture; however the result of that can be seen in a book published by the University of Washington Press in 1998, *The Sikh diaspora: The Search for Statehood*, author Darshan Singh Tatla lets one know that the

assault on the Golden Temple on the command of the India Prime Minister in June 1984, referred to as Operation Blue Star, followed the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Sikh communities faced massacres across India this created an "exodus of Sikh families to Punjab. Some families tried to escape abroad" (Singh, 1998, p.58). These events catalyzed migration, particularly to Canada, the UK, and the US. These events, often referred to as the "1984 Sikh Genocide," had a profound impact on Sikh migration patterns. However, it is important to acknowledge in the article "A Historical Analysis of Media Reportage on the Sikh Genocide of 1984: Implications for National Security of the Indian State" published by Technium Social Sciences Journal in 2022 authors Anup Singh Choudry, Isabirye Joel, Mbabazize Mbabazi, Ojo Olusola highlights that the Indian government's justification for storming the Golden Temple, claiming it was necessary to remove a few militants or Sikh freedom fighters, was false propaganda aimed at discrediting the Sikhs. The military operation had been planned for two years prior, despite the presence of "militants" at that time, and continued for years afterward (Choudry et al., 2022, p.655). Proving that the Indian government at the time was targeting Sikhs, and many innocent Sikh lives were in danger as a result of it.

As a reaction to the events of 1984, Sikhs sought refuge worldwide. In some cases, their escape was driven by the political and social turmoil in Punjab, where a bullet-for-bullet policy and sweeping powers granted to security forces led to widespread human rights abuses, including torture and extrajudicial killings (Singh, 1998). These actions not only endangered militants but also targeted innocent civilians, leaving them with little choice but to flee. Despite the urgency of their plight, many Sikh refugees were not granted official refugee status but instead temporary

stays in host countries. For example, asylum applications rose significantly in Germany from 1,083 in 1984 to 6,554 in 1986, and most applicants were only allowed temporary residence.

Similarly, the United Kingdom saw thousands of Sikh asylum seekers between 1984 and 1992, yet only a fraction received formal refugee recognition. Approximately 800 individuals denied asylum were granted exceptional leave during this period (Singh, 1998). Sikh refugees dispersed globally. In Southeast Asia, Thailand and the Philippines hosted several hundred and 2,500 refugees each, while North America became a prominent destination. Canada, despite its reputation for liberal immigration policies, deported many Sikh asylum seekers. Between 1981 and 1984, 2,800 Sikhs applied for asylum in Canada but faced deportation, as Canadian authorities often dismissed their claims of persecution. In the United States, Sikh applications surged from 34 in 1990 to 8,010 in 1996, though the number granted asylum remained minimal (Singh, 1998).

Many Sikh migrants faced discrimination and were labelled as economic migrants rather than legitimate refugees, a distinction that blurred their status and exacerbated their challenges. A striking case was a Sikh deported from Germany in 1994 who was tortured to death shortly after his return to India. In 1987, a ship carrying 174 Sikh refugees, including 173 men and one woman, arrived in Nova Scotia. Their arrival was met with hostility, public outrage, and indifference from the Canadian government. Despite efforts by community leaders to provide bonds and legal support, the government remained unsympathetic. Countries like Switzerland and Canada conducted independent investigations into conditions in Punjab, confirming the brutality faced by Sikhs, yet their policies remained restrictive (Singh, 1998). In the book *The*

Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World, published by The Guilford Press in 2020, authors Hein de Haas, Stephen Castles, and Mark J. Miller highlight that people fleeing danger have special legal protections. The 1951 UN Refugee Convention defines a refugee as someone fleeing their home country for fear of persecution for their race, religion, nationality, social group, or political views (Haas et al., 2020, p.31). The Sikhs at the time who left Punjab did so because of the fear of persecution based on their religion.

The events of 1984 remain a deeply traumatic memory for many Sikhs. The violence and sense of betrayal experienced during that period continue to shape the Sikh community's collective consciousness. An underlying reason for migration was to save their lives and preserve their religious identity. The attack on the Golden Temple, a sacred site for Sikhs, symbolized an assault on the Sikh cultural and religious identity. The subsequent violence reinforced a sense of vulnerability and the need to protect their identity. Sikhs sought to escape abroad to preserve their community and cultural practices in environments where they felt safer and more accepted. The experiences of Sikh migrants were shaped by the trauma of 1984 and the challenges they faced in seeking refuge. Their experiences were often fraught with discrimination, hostility, and the difficulty of navigating complex asylum processes. These experiences influenced their settlement patterns, community formation, and their relationship with their homeland.

In Catherine Besteman's book *Militarized Global Apartheid* the concept of "The global south is not a creation of the global north...but the global north has engaged in a variety of practices that have made life in the global south insecure and, in some places, unsustainable, whether through political/military interventions, austerity regimes, or resource extraction"

(Besteman, 2020, pp. 40-41), supports the claim that political and economic instability in India has been a factor in Sikh migration. It suggests that the actions of the global north have contributed to creating instability in the global south, which includes India. This instability can include economic hardship, political conflict, and social unrest, pushing people to seek better lives elsewhere. Events like the Partition of India and the violence of 1984 have displaced Sikhs. These events can be seen as examples of the instability caused by the actions of the global north, as described in the quote.

The Sikh diaspora stands as a testament to the resilience and determination of a community that has faced numerous challenges throughout history. From the economic aspirations of the Komagata Maru passengers to the upheaval of Partition and the violence of 1984, Sikhs have consistently sought better lives while striving to preserve their cultural and religious identity. Their migration journeys, often born out of adversity, have shaped their own experiences and the social and cultural landscapes of their adopted homelands. The Sikh diaspora's story is integral to the global migration narrative, highlighting the complex interplay of economic, political, and cultural factors that drive people to seek new beginnings.

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