

# GROUP IDENTITY IN AN EMIGRANT WORKER COMMUNITY:

## *The Example of Sikhs in early Twentieth-Century British Columbia*

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### SIKH PIONEERS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

**T**HIS ARTICLE INVESTIGATES the multiple identities of Sikh workers employed in the expanding resource-based economy of British Columbia before 1914. These workers went through a process of identity definition and redefinition common to many immigrants, even though their particular case had specific historical and local contexts. In British Columbia they naturally associated among themselves according to kinship, caste, and village affiliation, but their circumstances encouraged them to broaden their sense of who they were. Their experience in a foreign, but British, colonial setting, and their distance from the constraining influences of home (both the regulation of village and family and the supervision of the state) encouraged them to expand their horizons. In their overseas setting, these workers were exposed to pan-Indian nationalism and to developing Sikh ethno-nationalism in a more open and vital way than they would have been at home. Tensions between their community and the British regime in India were growing; and these tensions found their fullest expression in their overseas environment. Sikh workers on the Pacific coast of North America were at the leading edge of change in attitudes and loyalties among their compatriots at home and abroad, and, for this reason, they were – out of all proportion to their numbers – a source of concern to British imperial authorities.

One could describe Sikh pioneers in British Columbia as a diaspora community, but with a major qualification. They were an immigrant population comprised of mostly transient workers, or, to use a generally accepted social science term, sojourners.<sup>1</sup> Their demographics, strategies,

<sup>1</sup> One historian who has objected to the term “sojourner” is Timothy Stanley. Stanley is aware of the inappropriateness of the term when applied to Chinese merchant families who settled

and behaviours fit the sojourner pattern: they were almost all adult males working to remit savings to relatives at home, intending to stay only until they met a monetary objective, and generally succeeding in returning to India within one to five years. Some went back and forth between India and Canada many times and some lived out their lives in Canada, but very few brought their families to join them even after the Canadian government changed its regulations to make that possible. As a consequence, the society that they initially created in British Columbia was in no sense a microcosm of the one they left behind; rather, it was a worker community that, when stripped of religious and ethnic identifiers, resembled those of other groups of ethnic workers of that era – Italians, Chinese or Japanese – who were in competition for the same kinds of labouring jobs.<sup>2</sup>

The Sikhs were late arrivals in British Columbia and had little chance in the early years to build their numbers. The Canadian immigration file on South Asian immigration starts only in 1903, and there is little evidence of entry before that. Between 1903 and 1908, when Canada stopped the influx, more than 5,000 South Asians entered British Columbia. Most of them were Punjabi Sikhs. In 1911 the census count in British Columbia was about 2,300. Many had moved on to Washington, Oregon, and California, and many had returned home. In the months following the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914, about half of the remaining men left the province; and by the summer of 1915, the population still in the province (or, indeed, anywhere in Canada) was only 1,100. The departures of 1914-15 included those who intended to participate in an abortive rising against the British in India. Men also left at that time in response to a recession in British Columbia, which is probably what motivated the greatest number to leave. With most of them intending to go home sooner or later, the loss of jobs was a great incentive to do so immediately.

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permanently in Canada, beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century. The term is useful, however, in characterizing a great many Asian and European immigrants to Canada and the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including the vast majority of Sikhs and other Punjabis who found labouring jobs in British Columbia. See Timothy J. Stanley, "Chinamen Wherever We Go": Chinese Nationalism and Guangdong Merchants in British Columbia, 1871-1911," *Canadian Historical Review* 77, 4 (1966): 475-504.

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Johnston, "Patterns of Sikh Migration to Canada," in *Sikh History and Religion in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Joseph T. O'Connell, Milton Israel, and Willard G. Oxtoby (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 296-313. For a discussion of Sikh migration within a larger context of labour migration, see Sucheng Chan, "Overseas Sikhs in the Context of International Migrations," in *Sikh Studies: Comparative Perspectives on a Changing Tradition*, ed. Mark Jurgensmeyer and N. Gerald Barrier (Berkeley: Berkeley Religious Studies Series, University of California Press, 1979), 191-219.

Sikh sojourners, intending to stay for only a few years and motivated primarily to accumulate capital for their families in Punjab, had low expectations of life in North America. Under the best of circumstances, one could expect sojourners to be slow to take an active interest in the social and political life of the country in which they worked. Even if they were so inclined, immigrants from Asia were absolutely discouraged. Canada's formal policy has generally presumed that immigrants are potentially permanent residents and citizens. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, Canada treated Asians as temporary workers. In British Columbia this underlying attitude was made obvious by the provincial legislation that denied the franchise to people of Chinese, Japanese, and Indian origin. Sikh sojourners were quick to note the irony that their British-subject status did not give them the rights of full citizenship in British Columbia, or even the right of entry. Their second-class status in a British dominion like Canada gave Sikhs ammunition when they began to look more critically at their relationship to the British in India.<sup>3</sup>

#### SIKH EMIGRANTS AND THE BRITISH IN INDIA

When their migration to British Columbia began, Sikhs had been under British rule in Punjab for a little over half a century. In this half century, emigration had become a major outlet for their community, particularly in the central districts of Punjab. This emigration, directed first to British outposts in East and Southeast Asia and then to Australia, Canada, and the United States, was indirectly fostered by British policy. The Sikhs comprised a community with a dominant core of peasant proprietors who enjoyed a special relationship with the British regime. The British regime had identified them as prime recruits for the army, as colonists for irrigation tracts developed in West Punjab, and as servants of the Empire in outposts like Singapore, Hong Kong, and Shanghai. Early in the relationship, Sikhs and other Punjabis tended to see the British mainly as a source of benefits.<sup>4</sup> The British were the agents of

<sup>3</sup> Norman Buchignani and Doreen Indra, *Continuous Journey: A Social History of South Asians in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985), 17-70; Narindar Singh, *Canadian Sikhs: History Religion, and Culture of Sikhs in North America* (Nepean, ON: Canadian Sikh Studies Institute, 1994), 30-61; Hugh Johnston, *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru: The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1979), 1-23; Hugh Johnston, *The East Indians In Canada* (Ottawa: CHA, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Prakash Tandon's perspective on the British in his family autobiography *Punjabi Century, 1857-1947* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961).

economic development in Punjab – roads, railways, telegraph, irrigation. And these were developments that drew Punjab into an international world of commercial exchange.

The consequence of British-led development in Punjab could be seen in the late nineteenth century with the progressive commercialization of Punjabi agriculture. The symptoms of this commercialization were evident in rising land values and in the escalation of a culture of mortgage and debt. The emigration of sojourners was one consequence. In an environment of rising expectations, peasant families were raising cash through mortgages to invest in the outward voyages of men who were expected to bring back foreign earnings.<sup>5</sup> The districts that made the greatest advances in commercial agriculture were the main sources of sojourning emigrants. One could emphasize the burden of debt that landholding families took on to send their sons abroad. But one should keep in mind the opportunities that these families were seeking by exploiting opportunities within the larger British world.

Economic development in Punjab also led the Sikh community from an initially positive view of the British regime to an increasingly negative one. The beginnings of the shift were evident in the decade that Sikh sojourners first reached British Columbia. Up to that point most Punjabis, and especially the elites, had accepted the British regime and prospered under it. Because the British had delivered stability, more than two generations of Punjabis had accorded their regime some legitimacy. For their part, the British made a deliberate pitch for the loyalty of the peasant-proprietor class, which, incidentally, was the main generator of Punjab's emigration. But British policy had mixed results.<sup>6</sup>

The British had inherited a complex map of land tenure systems in Punjab, including both landlord-tenant regimes and small-scale peasant proprietorships. The latter took several forms, but a typical one was ownership of village lands shared among kinspeople. The rulers who preceded the British had tended to undermine the position of the large landowner and to strengthen that of the peasant occupier, and British policy solidified this situation.<sup>7</sup> British officials had proceeded, village by village, to determine and define land ownership, systematically giving

<sup>5</sup> Himadri Banerjee, *Agrarian Society of the Punjab, 1849-1901* (Delhi: Manohar, 1982), 47-75; Richard G. Fox, *Lions of Punjab: Culture in the Making* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 35-51.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to Banerjee, *Agrarian Society*, 78-103; and Fox, *Lions of Punjab*, 27-35; see Hugh Kennedy Travaskis, *The Land of the Five Rivers: An Economic History of the Punjab from the Earliest Times to the Year of Grace 1890* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), 234-79.

<sup>7</sup> Xinru Liu, "Small Land-Holdings in the Punjab: The Historical Perspective," *Punjab Past and Present* 16, 2 (1982): 387-97.

preference to those who were actually paying the tax assessments. The result was to confirm Punjab's status – distinct within India – as an area with a strong core of independent peasant proprietors. In their definition and registration of landownership, British officials launched a social and economic revolution by making property transfers more feasible. A regime in which land had been acquired only through inheritance gave way to one in which land could also be bought and sold. This development was essential in the commercialization of Punjab's agriculture and, indirectly, it stimulated emigration.

The central districts of Punjab, where the Sikh population was concentrated, were the domain of peasant proprietors. In the border regions of Punjab, the landlord-tenant system was more common. It was in the central districts, where village property typically belonged jointly to village residents, that the British focused their recruitment for the British India army. It is well known that, from 1857 – after the mutiny of the Bengal army – the British preferred Punjabis as recruits and, among Punjabis, they preferred the sons of Sikh peasant proprietors. In the British India army of 1900, Sikhs, although less than 1 percent of the population of India, made up 12.5 percent of Indian recruits. In the theory of martial races to which the British subscribed, the defining characteristic of a martial race was loyalty to authority, or obedience to command, and this is what they believed they had in members of the Sikh and Muslim populations of Punjab. Throughout their rule in Punjab, the British were conscious of the rural roots of their Sikh recruits and attempted to follow policies that would bind Sikh peasants to their regime.<sup>8</sup>

Emigration, military service, and peasant proprietorship were interrelated features of the central districts of Punjab under the British. The very earliest Sikh immigrants to British Columbia were veterans who had been drawn away from their villages by army recruiters and who had first seen lands beyond Punjab through military service. For some of these men, the sequence had been military service, then employment in Hong Kong or Singapore in the police or as watchmen, and then immigration to Canada. These were the vanguard, but following them were relatives – brother, uncles, and cousins – who set out for Canada directly from their villages. The attraction was wages that could be converted into a small fortune when brought back as savings to Punjab. As a rule, emigration and military service were alternatives: in the

<sup>8</sup> Fox, *Lions of Punjab*, 43-51; E.K. Marengo, *The Transformation of Sikh Society* (New Delhi: Heritage Publisher, 1976), 106-17.

districts of central Punjab, where military recruiting was heaviest, emigration was less frequent.<sup>9</sup> But both military service and emigration served village society in exporting men who could then send money back. Investment in village land and buildings was the ultimate objective.

Through military recruiting the British forged a strong connection between themselves and Sikh villagers, but this was a connection in which they maintained a superior-inferior relationship. The number of British in India was miniscule.<sup>10</sup> Punjabi villagers would see the lonely figure of the British magistrate or collector, responsible for a district of a million people, or, a little closer at hand, a deputy magistrate responsible for an area containing a few hundred thousand. Or they would see the British as police inspectors and sometimes deputy inspectors. In Indian regiments of the British Indian army, the officers were all British. The British response to challenge was uncompromising and punitive, as they demonstrated in putting down the revolt of a fanatic Sikh sect in the 1870s. But up to 1900 the British were able to regard Punjab comfortably as secure territory.<sup>11</sup>

The British sought to minimize their challenges as foreign rulers by interfering as little as possible with Indian social structures and cultural practices. By their very presence, however, they affected change; and the policies they adopted inevitably had transforming outcomes. Their selective approach to military recruitment had an impact on community identity because it emphasized the differences between the communities in which they recruited and those in which they did not. For Sikhs, the opportunity to go into military service (while Hindus were ignored) put a premium on religious identity. And British assumptions contributed to a narrowing definition of Sikh identity. In the nineteenth century the Sikhs were a diverse group in terms of religious practice. The British, however, took the Khalsa form of the bearded and turbaned Sikh as required; and they associated it with military values. For Sikh recruits, the beard and turban as well as the other Khalsa symbols became not simply permissible, but mandatory. Many were first initiated into the

<sup>9</sup> W.H. McLeod, *The Sikhs: History, Religion and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 105; W.H. McLeod, "The First Forty Years of Sikh Migration: Problems and Some Possible Solutions," in *The Sikh Diaspora: Migration and the Experience beyond Punjab*, ed. N.Gerald Barrier and Verne A. Dusenbery (Columbia, MO: South Asia Publications, 1989), 39-40; Marengo, *Transformation of Sikh Society*, 106.

<sup>10</sup> In the early years of the twentieth century, there were about 100,000 British in India, including 70,000 British troops.

<sup>11</sup> Sri Ram Sharma, "Punjab in Ferment: In the Beginning of the 20th Century," *Punjab Past and Present* 14, 1 (1980): 121-45.

Khalsa on entry into the army because British commanding officers required strict maintenance of the Khalsa symbols.<sup>12</sup>

The arrival of Sikh sojourners in Canada occurred at a major turning point in the relationship between the British and the Sikhs. A community that the British utilized and favoured had begun to articulate a sense of identity that emphasized its distinctiveness in ways that created problems for the British regime. By 1900 a Sikh reform movement had been gathering momentum in Punjab for two decades. This movement had been patronized by the British and was located primarily among the Sikh elite – large landowners, the aristocracy, and religious leaders. It began as a movement that encompassed diverse understandings of the Sikh tradition but, increasingly, it promoted the Khalsa form as the only authentic Sikh form while insisting on the separate (from Hinduism) nature of the Sikh tradition. In this phase Sikh reformers protested their loyalty to the British while pursuing an assertive agenda; however, their promotion of the Sikh identity led them to make issues of matters for which the British regime was answerable – the written language used in schools, the management of shrines shared by Hindus and Sikhs, and the legal recognition of Sikh religious rites.<sup>13</sup>

The Sikh reform movement began in the urban centres of Punjab and with the elite, but its leadership proselytized the countryside by funding the publication of tracts and by sending missionaries to the villages. It was through military barracks, however, that reform ideology most effectively reached the rural population. Sikh soldiers from rural families were active participants in reform societies, and by the late 1890s these societies were being organized within army units. Some of the early Sikh immigrants to Canada brought with them the influence of the reform propaganda that they had encountered as soldiers.

Sikh reform propaganda emphasized the separate identity of the Sikhs. Coincidentally, however, the British in Punjab provoked a reaction in the rural population that united the peasant proprietor class, whether Hindu, Sikh, or Muslim. British officials had been

<sup>12</sup> Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 361–2.

<sup>13</sup> Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*, 258–377; N. Gerald Barrier, “Sikh Politics in British Punjab Prior to the Gurdwara Reform Movement,” in O’Connell et al., *Sikh History and Religion*, 159–90; Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 136–47; Kenneth W. Jones, “*Ham Hindu Nabin*, The Arya Sikh Relations, 1877–1905,” *Punjab Past and Present* 11, 2 (1977): 330–55; Brian P. Caton, “Sikh Identity Formation and the Rural Idea, 1880–1930,” in *Sikh Identity: Continuity and Change*, ed. Pashaura Singh and N. Gerald Barrier, 175–93 (New Delhi: Manohar, 1999); N. Gerald Barrier, “Sikh Emigrants and their Homeland: The Transmission of Information, Resources and Values in the Early Twentieth Century,” in Barrier and Dusenbery, *Sikh Diaspora*, 49–89.

watching with alarm the land transfers taking place under the market conditions that the British regime had introduced. Their fear was the destabilization of rural Punjab as land passed out of the hands of the traditional peasantry into those of moneylenders. Moneylenders were acquiring land; but what was more notable, and what the British should have paid more attention to, was the expansion in the holdings of the more aggressive and efficient of the traditional landowners (an expansion that contributed to the commercial viability of Punjabi agriculture).

In 1900 the government of Punjab enacted legislation to prohibit (unless with special official sanction) the transfer of lands from traditional landowners to moneylenders. The measure had a short-term impact on land prices, which fell 18 percent and then recovered. It provoked no disturbances, but it was a precondition for what happened in 1907, when the government introduced legislation to alter the form of tenure in a region of west Punjab that had been developed through irrigation. The intent of the government was paternalistic: it sought to preserve the region for traditional peasant proprietors while maintaining a strong government regulatory presence. The legislation, however, misread the interests and acceptance level of the people most directly affected. It represented too much government interference with too little consultation. Although the legislation affected one irrigation area only, it generated widespread protest. Ties of kinship and economic interest carried the agitation from West Punjab to the central districts. The government eventually backed down and withdrew the legislation, but it had passed through a defining moment in its relations with the Punjab peasantry.<sup>14</sup>

In 1909 one of the leading members of the Sikh community in Vancouver burned his military honourable discharge certificate as a public demonstration of his alienation from the British regime in India. This man came from one of the central districts of Punjab and jointly owned village land with three brothers. He had served five years in the British Indian army, and two and a half years each in the Hong Kong and Shanghai police forces, before finding his way to Vancouver in 1906. His anti-British militancy reflected a changing mood among Sikhs, which found its most ready expression among those who had gone overseas. His act was not an isolated one but, rather, was imitated by many of his fellow sojourners.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> N. Gerald Barrier, "The Punjab Disturbances of 1907: The Response of the British Government in India to Agrarian Unrest," *Modern Asian Studies* 1, 4 (1967): 353-83.

<sup>15</sup> See Johnston, *Voyage of the Komagata Maru*, 11 for a reference to Bhag Singh. See references in Vancouver newspapers as extracted by Kesar Singh in *Canadian Sikhs and Komagata Maru Massacre* (Surrey, BC: published by the author, 1979), 52.



In 1908, also in Vancouver, this same individual had gone through the initiation rites of a Khalsa Sikh (presumably he was a lapsed Khalsa). In taking this step he was part of a significant Khalsa revival among Sikh sojourners in British Columbia and on the Pacific coast.<sup>16</sup> His two symbolic acts – burning his discharge certificate and entering the Khalsa – allied him simultaneously with pan-Indian militancy and Sikh religious separatism. There was no necessary conflict between these two phenomena. His decision to perform these acts, two and three years after arriving in Canada, illustrates ferment within the sojourner community to which he belonged. Men who had emigrated for economic reasons were being politicized and were demonstrating, more openly than they could have in Punjab, a newly discovered hostility towards the British.

#### DISCOVERING A NATIONAL IDENTITY

In Canada, Punjabi sojourners were encouraged by the other Indians they encountered to think in national rather than in ethno-religious terms. Indian students had begun to enroll in American educational institutions on the Pacific coast at much the same time as Punjabi sojourners first began to land at Vancouver and Victoria looking for work. For these students, the decision to seek further education in the United States (rather than Britain) had profound political implications. A few state colleges and universities in Washington, Oregon, and California had begun enrolling Indian students. In addition, a number of Indians registered at high schools and primary schools in Seattle and Berkeley.<sup>17</sup> Out of this small student population came several activists who tirelessly travelled the coast from British Columbia to California, supported both by student networks and networks among Punjabi sojourners. One of these students eventually published a short study of the Punjabi immigrant community.<sup>18</sup> Others were notable for their social mission to the immigrants, offering night classes, organizing employment bureaus, representing the immigrants to Canadian and American authorities and the media, and sporadically publishing newspapers for distribution among their compatriots. All of this work

<sup>16</sup> Teja Singh, *Jiwan Katha: Sant Atar Singh Maharaj* (Patiala: Director Bhasha Vibhag, 1946), 290-389; Minute Book of Khalsa Diwan Society, Vancouver, cited by Singh, *Canadian Sikh*, 47.

<sup>17</sup> GDK, "Hindus in the United States," *The Span of Life*, March 1912, 6-11 (copy held in AC, RG 7, C21, vol. 202, file 332).

<sup>18</sup> Jogesh Misrow, *East Indian Immigration on the Pacific Coast* (Stanford, CA: 1915, republished 1971 by R and E Research Associates, San Francisco), 46.

had political content that was both critical of the British regime in India and conscious of a national identity that could bring people from different regions together against a common opponent.

A few prominent student activists were Punjabis. A majority, however, came from other parts of India – as far flung as Bombay, Bengal, and the Northwestern Frontier Province.<sup>19</sup> They were the products of various regional Indian elites that had been co-opted by the British and westernized through education at Indian institutions developed on British models. They belonged to an Anglicized class long loyal to Britain, but with aspirations to the higher ranks of the British Indian bureaucracy that the British monopolized. British-style education had given them a common command of English and a means of bridging regional cultural differences. Since the mid-1880s, through the All-Indian Congress movement, representatives of their class had been campaigning for constitutional change that would open up better opportunities in government for Indians. By the early years of the twentieth century, however, a split had developed between moderates and extremists. Indian students on the Pacific coast could speak the language of the moderates, especially when dealing with Canadian or American officials; but the extremist position had an unmistakable appeal for them.<sup>20</sup>

The extremist position had gained a degree of popular credibility during recent agitations in Bombay and Bengal. In 1897 the government of Bombay had created a national martyr by prosecuting a high-caste Hindu politician on a charge of sedition.<sup>21</sup> In 1905 the British viceroy had provoked an upsurge of nationalist feeling in Bengal with his decision to partition that province, separating a predominantly Muslim east from a Hindu west. Partition had an administrative rationale – Bengal was a large and unwieldy province – but it threatened the Hindu middle class, who saw, in the reduction of their province, a loss of opportunity in government and business. Within twelve months the initiative in the anti-partition campaign among Hindu Bengalis passed

<sup>19</sup> James Campbell Ker, *Political Trouble in India, 1907-1917* (Delhi: Oriental Publishers, 1973), 119-23. *Political Trouble* was originally prepared for senior officials in the Government of India as a compendium of intelligence reports received by the Criminal Intelligence Department. The 1973 edition is a reprint.

<sup>20</sup> Harish K. Puri, *Ghadar Movement: Organization, Ideology, Strategy* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1993) Puri, *Ghadar Movement*, 30-67; Johnston, *Voyage of the Komagata Maru*, 1-15; reports of immigration inspector W.C. Hopkinson to Canadian Deputy Minister of the Interior, 1909-14, AC, RG 7, file 332.

<sup>21</sup> Gordon Johnson, *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism: Bombay and the Indian National Congress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 93-8.

from moderates to militant nationalists. On university campuses in Bengal, students organized societies to support militant tactics – the boycott of government services, government schools, and British goods. As militancy progressed to violence, Bengali students became involved. The police contained the violence with wholesale arrests and prosecutions; and violence cost the extremists the support of moderate nationalists. Nonetheless, the protest in Bengal energized the nationalist movement throughout India. Some of the students who chose at this time to leave for North America had been identified as subversives by the police in Bengal and faced arrest if they stayed or if they ever chose to return.<sup>22</sup>

In British Columbia, Indian student activists, based in Seattle and San Francisco, as well as Indian businesspeople settled in Vancouver and Victoria, promoted organizations and associations that emphasized the common identity of all Indians – whatever their religion or regional culture. The United India League, the Hindustanee Association, and the Hindu Association of the Pacific Coast were brief-lived but deliberate attempts to represent the Indian expatriate community as a whole. The organizers understood Hindustan and Hindu as inclusive words that embraced all Indians, and their intent was generally accepted by Muslims and Sikhs. The Sikhs, however, had their own organization, the Sikh temple management committee, which they formed early in their history in Canada. Their leaders participated in the pan-Indian associations as well as in the temple society, but the temple management committee was their primary instrument of social and political action. And the temple management committee was the only organization in the sojourner community that had staying power.

By the eve of the First World War, anti-British militancy expressed within the small expatriate Indian community on the Pacific coast of North America had become a major concern to the British government in India.<sup>23</sup> Attention focused on the virulent propaganda of the Hindustan Ghadar (Mutiny) party based in San Francisco with supporters up and down the coast, including key members of the British Columbia Sikh community. The Ghadar Party was a source of anxiety to the British during the First World War, and they were quick to press the Americans (once they had entered the war) to arrest and put on trial

<sup>22</sup> Ker, *Political Trouble in India*, 119–20, 451.

<sup>23</sup> In an internal CID Circular of April 1914, the director of criminal intelligence for India wrote that he considered “the rabid discontent of the Sikhs and other Punjabis as one of the worst features of the present political situation in India.” Cited in Hugh Johnston, “The Surveillance of Indian Nationalists in North America, 1908–1918,” *BC Studies* 78 (1988): 3–27, 16.

key Ghadar Party members. In Post-Independence India the Ghadar Party is remembered as an icon of militant resistance to the British, which Indians generally wish to claim. While the Ghadar Party involved the cooperation of Sikhs and non-Sikhs, recent Sikh scholarship has tended to stress the primacy of the Sikhs in the Ghadar movement. What no one can escape, however, is the Ghadar assumption of an Indian national identity bridging religious and regional divisions.<sup>24</sup>

#### SHARING A REGIONAL IDENTITY

Among the Sikh sojourners working in British Columbia were Hindus and Muslims from the same districts in Punjab. The Sikhs, as 85 or 90 percent of the sojourner population, were the majority that incorporated the others.<sup>25</sup> By all accounts Punjabi sojourners functioned as a single community in North America, with the Sikh temples serving as the meeting places for everyone. The central importance of the Sikh temple, or gurdwara, has two principal explanations. First of all, the Sikhs comprised the only group with enough numbers to erect and maintain temples or community centres. Second, it was natural for Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus in Punjab to participate in each other's festivals and to enter each other's shrines. In Punjab, Muslim and Hindu holy men attracted followings among Sikhs and vice versa. Popular religious culture – what the reformers of all faiths called superstition – was also widely shared by all Punjabis.<sup>26</sup>

In Punjab, Sikhs were a minority, vastly outnumbered by Hindus and Muslims. Even in the central districts, where they were concentrated, Sikhs were a minority. But in rural Punjab they were a minority with considerable prestige. As independent peasant proprietors in the most prosperous districts of the province, they had economic status to back up their religious distinctiveness and their past association with Sikh

<sup>24</sup> On the involvement of the Sikhs in the Ghadar Party see Puri, *Ghadar Movement*, 12-120. See also Harold Jacoby, "Some Demographic and Social Aspects of Early East Indian Life in the United States," and Mark Juergensmeyer, "The Ghadar Syndrome: Immigrant Sikhs and Nationalist Pride," in Juergensmeyer and Barrier, *Sikh Studies*, 159-71 and 173-89, respectively. For additional titles related to the Ghadar Party, see: Arun Coomer Bose, *Indian Revolutionaries Abroad* (Patna: Bharti Bawan, 1971); Emily C. Brown, Har Dayal, *Hindu Revolutionary and Rationalist* (Tucson: Arizona University Press, 1975); and Joan M. Jensen, *Passage from India: Asian Indian Immigrants in North America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988).

<sup>25</sup> US Senate, *Reports of the Immigration Commission: Immigrants in Industries, Japanese and Other Immigrant Races on the Pacific Coast and Rocky Mountain States*, part 25, vol. 1, 61st Congress, 2nd sess. doc. 633 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1911), 339.

<sup>26</sup> Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*, 139-203.

rulers. In his 1956 novel, *Train to Pakistan*, Khushwant Singh describes a village on the Indian-Pakistan border in 1947.<sup>27</sup> The village landowners of the novel were all Sikhs and their tenants were all Muslims. They lived in separate sections of the village but shared a common sense of village identity and brotherhood, until the tragic rupture that came with the partition of India and Pakistan.

The structure of Khushwant Singh's village followed a Punjab-wide pattern: a division between landowning families and client families who leased land or provided labour and services. Where the Sikhs owned the land, the client families might be Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh. In the predominantly Muslim West Punjab, the entire village population would generally be Muslim and in east Punjab it would be Hindu. However, in the productive central districts, as well as in the irrigation colonies of the west, Sikhs were an advantaged economic group used to living alongside Hindus and Muslim, albeit generally in a patron-client or employer-employee relationship. With this background Sikhs found it natural to share space with Punjabi Hindus and Muslims in an oversea situation, but as the presumed host group.

In Canada officials and the media frequently referred to immigrants from India as Hindus, using the term as a generic description of all Indians. In their dialogue with the Canadian government and with the Canadian public, Sikhs sometimes used the term in the same way. For many Sikh pioneers, this was not an issue: they understood Sikh to mean a specific category of Hindu. This did not diminish for them the importance of the Sikh identity. In their petitions to Canadian, Imperial, and Indian authorities for relief from discriminatory immigration regulations, their leadership emphasized their Sikh identity, making the argument that Sikhs were a special asset to the Empire and deserved fair treatment.

In the early sojourning community, Punjabi Hindus and Muslims had little opportunity or occasion to make separate statements about themselves. For Hindus, particularly, the distinctions between themselves and the Sikhs were easy to ignore. Caste and kinship affiliations cut across religious boundaries; and membership in the same kinship group or origin in the same village could be more important to them

<sup>27</sup> Khushwant Singh, *Train to Pakistan*, (New York: Grove Press, 1956 and 1981 editions). For studies of populations in Punjab villages, see Tom G. Kessinger, *Vilyatpur, 1848-1968: Social and Economic Change in a North Indian Village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974); Murray J. Leaf, *Information and Behavior in a Sikh Village: Social Organization Reconsidered* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); M.C. Pradhan, *The Political System of the Jats of Northern India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966).

than religious identity. Moreover, Punjabi Hindus tended to see Sikhism as a part of their own religious culture and frequently included devotion to the Sikh gurus within their regular routine of prayer.

Spoken language served as the most obvious cultural marker distinguishing Punjabis from Bengali-, Marathi-, or Gujarati-speaking students and businesspeople from other parts of India. Written language, in contrast, performed another function, although for most Indians it was not a tool they could use. Literacy levels among sojourners were low, reflecting the low state of literacy in rural Punjab at the turn of the century.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, in Punjab the written language had become an issue for the elite, with reformers demanding recognition of the religious script of the Sikhs. They were responding to the competing assertion of Hindu claims for Hindi and Muslims claims for Urdu. (Urdu had been the court language of Muslim emperors and the Sikh maharajas and it retained its official status under the British.) Formal Hindi and Urdu were literary languages considerably removed from ordinary Punjabi speech; but common Punjabi could be written in the Hindi or Urdu scripts – or the Gurmukhi script of the Sikhs. As a consequence, while spoken Punjabi brought Hindu, Muslims, and Sikhs together, the written language served to divide.

By the time the first Sikh sojourners arrived in Canada, Sikh reformers had been promoting Gurmukhi as a standard form of written Punjabi for about twenty years.<sup>29</sup> They did so by opening their own schools in Punjab, by pressing for Gurmukhi in government schools, and by developing Gurmukhi fonts for printing, producing and publishing secular literature. Competition over language was driven by status consciousness, not separatism. The Sikh minority could not have argued for Gurmukhi on the basis of numbers; nor could they have imagined that their community could function independently: the Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim populations were too intermixed. What they wanted was recognition of the importance of the Sikhs within Punjabi society. The special treatment the British had given Sikhs had encouraged this ambition, and it supported a Sikh tendency to consider the Sikh and Punjabi identities as one and the same, even though the Sikhs were a small minority in Punjab.

<sup>28</sup> Less than 1 percent of male Sikhs in the Punjab were literate in 1891 and about 1 percent in 1901. Of the literate, one in twenty knew English: Marengo, *Transformation of Sikh Society*, 100–5.

<sup>29</sup> Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*, 349–51; Christopher Shackle, “Some Observations on the Evolution of Modern Standard Punjabi,” in O’Connell et al., *Sikh History and Religion*, 101–9.

The secular use of Gurmukhi to reach sojourners in Canada served to equate the Sikh and Punjabi identities; however, in contrast to those at home, Sikhs in Canada were an overwhelming majority of the Punjabi community. English, Punjabi, and Urdu were all used in the early periodical publications produced by members of the Indian immigrant community in North America. *Free Hindustan*, published in Vancouver in English by a Bengali student activist, appeared in 1908. A short run of *Swadesh Sewak*, reproduced in handwritten Gurmukhi, followed. Significantly, this was the cooperative production of two Punjabi Hindus and a Sikh. Next came *Sansar*, published in Victoria by a Punjabi Sikh in both English and Gurmukhi. (Early issues of *Sansar* in 1911 used handwritten Gurmukhi, but by 1912 the editor had obtained Gurmukhi printing fonts.) In 1914 a Gujarati (Ismaeli) Muslim, resident in Vancouver, began publishing the *Hindustanee* in English.<sup>30</sup> By this time the first issues of the highly inflammatory *Ghadar* weekly from San Francisco had appeared in Urdu and Gurmukhi editions, with Urdu the original language and Gurmukhi a translation.

These publications were intended both for the immediate immigrant community and for audiences beyond – although they were likely to be intercepted by Indian government postal authorities when shipped back to India. Those published in English were more moderate in tone and were written with a possible Canadian or British as well as Anglicized Indian audience in mind. Urdu potentially reached an educated Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh audience across Northern India, while Gurmukhi was for Punjabis and, particularly, Sikhs. All of these publications were secular in content, and it was for secular rather than religious reasons that some of them used Gurmukhi. Although all but a few percent of the immigrants were illiterate, they had access to Gurmukhi and Urdu publications through public readings in the temples. They could generally understand the content, whatever the script, because the basic vocabulary of Urdu and Punjabi is much the same. Scripts, however, had symbolic importance. Urdu was a language of the educated and was appreciated for its refined expression. But Gurmukhi was acquiring significance for Sikhs as a representation of their place in Punjabi society. By publishing in Gurmukhi, activists signalled their desire to reach out to Sikhs and to appeal to their sense of Punjabi and Indian identity.

<sup>30</sup> Puri, *Ghadar Movement*, 48-9, 50-51, 58, 76-8; Copies of the *Swadesh Sewak*, *Sansar*, the *Hindustanee* and the *Hindustan Ghadar* can be found in the H.H. Stevens Papers, Add. Mss. 69, Vancouver City Archives.

## LOCAL, CASTE, AND KINSHIP IDENTITY

The sojourner experience, far from the constraints of family and village life, allowed some relaxation of normal rules of conduct. Nonetheless, because patterns of association were deeply entrenched, and because accounts of what men did would eventually get back home, village norms tended to assert themselves. Sikh sojourners were conscious of the geographical boundaries, village ties, and caste distinctions that defined them. In Punjab, families from south of the Beas River generally did not marry into families to the north; and in Canada men from the two regions tended to move in separate circles. The formal and informal recruiting of men to work in Canada followed village and kinship networks, and these networks led men from job to job in Canada.<sup>31</sup> Because kinship linked strings of villages in Punjab, the impetus to migrate followed this pattern, and immigrants from associated villages stuck together.

Most of the sojourners were members of a single caste group with social customs that distinguished them from other caste groups in Punjab. In their home society, marriage within caste was the rule and inter-caste marriage the rare exception.<sup>32</sup> The dominant farming caste of central Punjab was the Jats, and this was the caste group that provided most of the immigrants to Canada. The Jats were also the largest caste group within Sikhism and most of the Jats of central Punjab were Sikhs. (Jats in western Punjab were mostly Muslims and in the east they were mostly Hindus.) As was true of other castes, Jat identity cut across religious lines, but they were the caste most strongly identified with Sikhism. For many Hindus and Sikhs in the early twentieth century, the ties of caste were more important than were differences in religious practice. Sikh Jats, however, married almost exclusively among Sikh Jats.<sup>33</sup>

The Sikh Jats who filled the ranks of Punjabi sojourners in North America represented a very small slice of Punjabi society. They were just one of ten major landowning castes in the central districts; but they were the caste that supplied the emigrants, and their greater ability to fund overseas travel seems to have been the reason for this. They were sending out emigrants when their most immediate neighbours were not. Largely

<sup>31</sup> Archana P. Verma, *The Making of Little Punjab in Canada: Patterns of Migration* (New Delhi: Sage, 2002), 97-126; McLeod, "The First Forty Years," 41 (see comment on Chamars).

<sup>32</sup> W.H. McLeod, *The Evolution of the Sikh Community: Five Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon press, 1976), 92-104; Sewa Singh Khalsi, "The Sikhs and Caste: The Development of Ramgharia Identity in Britain," in Singh and Barrier, *Sikh Identity*, 25-73.

<sup>33</sup> Marengo, *Transformation of Sikh Society*, 113-47.



excluded from overseas migration were less successful landowning castes and merchant and trading castes (who had less incentive to go) as well as artisan and menial castes. Typically, in a village of Jat Sikh proprietors, the sons of the landowners joined the migration while the sons of the artisan and menial families – the carpenters, barbers, weavers, water carriers, sweepers, and leather workers – stayed behind.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the commercialization of Punjabi agriculture had enabled some advancement among traditionally disadvantaged caste groups. Wages paid in cash, work found outside the village, and opportunities to rent or even purchase land had allowed caste communities, or individuals within them, to improve their socio-economic position.<sup>34</sup> These developments probably explain the presence of a number of carpenter and weaver caste immigrants among sojourners in British Columbia. Members of one non-Jat landowning caste, Mahton Rajput, also formed a small but significant element of the BC sojourner community. The Mahton Rajputs were *mali*, or garden crop farmers, rather than field crop farmers like the Jats, and they were accorded a lower social status within rural Punjabi society. But they proved to be remarkably successful in British Columbia.<sup>35</sup>

Although the central message of Sikhism denied the importance of caste, caste consciousness was a reality among Sikhs. In rural society the segregation of caste groups could mean, besides the prohibition of intermarriage, the observation of rules of purity and pollution (notably taboos about sharing food) and the maintenance of separate temples for the landowning families and low-status menial or servant families in the same village. In British Columbia the excessive features of caste seemed to have disappeared and everyone worked together. The community was too small to afford the luxury of exclusion, the conservative influences of home villages were muted, and the emphasis of the leadership was on reformed Sikhism. All contributed to the creation of temple communities that reflected the essential spirit of Sikhism.

Although the community was inclusive, it contained geographical, caste, and kinship constituencies. Kinship networks in particular tied the sojourners back to Punjab. For these men emigration was a commitment to family, not an escape. The decision to emigrate was a family matter, and young men left their villages only with the permission of the elders of their immediate or extended families. Because they did so as the agents of a family economic strategy, no matter how long they stayed

<sup>34</sup> Himadri Banerjee, "Agricultural Labourers of the Punjab During the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century," *Punjab Past and Present* 9, 1 (1977): 97-116.

<sup>35</sup> The Mahton Rajput's are the subject of Verma's *The Making of Little Punjab*.

away their primary concern was the welfare of the people they left behind. Overseas, their closest companions were the kinspeople with whom they travelled and worked. As a result, they were seldom free from reminders that their success or failure would reflect on family.<sup>36</sup>

In Canada members of various caste and kinship groups were able to combine for entrepreneurial purposes – the purchase of a property or a lumber mill. When these ventures broke up, they did so along caste lines. The prime example was a joint Mahton Rajput-Jat saw milling venture that lasted several years before splitting into separate Mathton Rajput and Jat lumber companies.<sup>37</sup> In temple politics as well, caste and kinship were the building blocks of community cooperation. With some care, temple management committees recruited members who represented the geographical, caste, and kinship units that made up sojourner society. They were conscious of differentiation within their community but worked constructively with it.

#### SOCIAL CONTACTS IN CANADA

Outside the work site, life in Canada offered Punjabi sojourners little contact with other social groups – white, Asian, or First Nations. Even at work jobs were distributed along ethnic lines, with Canadians and British and American immigrants monopolizing skilled and supervisory positions and “ethnic” workers competing for unskilled work. Punjabis worked together and roomed or bunked together while pooling resources to minimize their costs and to maximize their economic opportunities. The absence of women and children contributed to their isolation as a group. At least half of the original sojourners were married and had wives and families at home. Among the rest, there were almost no marriages with non-Sikhs (although a number of marriages with Mexican women did occur among Sikhs in California).<sup>38</sup> Prejudice (which was manifest on all sides), language barriers, and the pattern of their lives were all factors inhibiting marriages in Canada.

Among those who reached out to Sikh sojourners in Canada were retired British Indian military and civil officers settled in Vancouver and Victoria. One Protestant church attempted a mission to the

<sup>36</sup> Verma, *Making of Little Punjab*, 97-127.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 215, 218-9.

<sup>38</sup> According to one observer there were only three marriages between Sikhs and other Canadians up to the 1940s: M.W. Smith, “Sikh Settlers in Canada,” *Asia and the Americas*, August 1944. On Sikh-Mexican marriages see Karen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices: California’s Punjabi Mexican Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

Sikhs; and members of the Socialist Party of Canada – a precursor of the Communist Party of Canada – established links with the Sikh leadership. A number of individuals involved in Western expressions of Indian religious philosophy (Vedanta and Theosophy) took an interest in Indians who had arrived in their midst. In these various quarters the sojourner community found friends and sympathizers; but in each case the relationship was too limited to accomplish much in terms of integrating the immigrants into general Canadian society. The leadership of the sojourner community welcomed help in enlightening North Americans about their faith and in challenging the discrimination that they faced as a consequence of government policy and legislation; but they welcomed help on their own terms, not as a reward for providing potential converts to any other cause or faith. Aside from a brief-lived subcommittee of the Socialist Party, the sojourners community formed no organizational linkages with other groups in Canadian society.<sup>39</sup>

The sojourner community was vulnerable to internal division orchestrated from outside. Canadian immigration officials maintained close surveillance for political as well as immigration reasons.<sup>40</sup> Informants within the community worked for the immigration department, and the community knew who they were. These men were the nucleus of a small faction hostile to the main leadership and at the centre of a series of assaults and murders in 1914-15. This internal violence within the community had a basis in personal rivalries and differences, but it also expressed the tensions of the sojourner experience in Canada.

<sup>39</sup> Col. Falk Warren to the Undersecretary of State for India, 2 January 1907, AC, RG 7 col. 384, file 536999 pt. 1; S.S. Osterhout, *Orientalism in Canada: The Story of the Work of the United Church of Canada with Asiatics in Canada* (Toronto: United Church of Canada, Committee on Literature, General Publicity, and Missionary Education, 1929), 190-8; Peter Campbell, "East Meets Left: South Asian Migrants and the Socialist Party of Canada in British Columbia," *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, no. 20 (Fall, 1999): 35-65; Teja Singh, *Jiwan Katba*, 290-384. One mainstream group that did agitate for fair treatment of the Sikhs in Canada was the Canada India Committee, which was based in Toronto and formed in 1915. Copies of its publications can be found in AC, RG 76, vol. 536999 pt. 2.

<sup>40</sup> Johnston, "The Surveillance of Indian Nationalists." For a larger context see Richard Popplewell, "The Surveillance of Indian Revolutionaries in Great Britain and on the Continent, 1905-14," *Intelligence and National Security* 3, 1 (1987): 56-72; and, by the same author, "The Surveillance of Indian 'Seditionists' in North America, 1905-15," in *Intelligence and International Relations, 1900-1945*, ed. Christopher Andrew and Jeremy Noakes (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1987), 57.

## POLITICS AND IDENTITY

The pioneer Sikh and South Asian community was remarkably politicized during its early life in British Columbia. What Sikhs and other South Asians encountered in Canada – their disenfranchisement, the extraordinarily discriminatory immigration rules, and their general reception as unwelcome aliens – was for many the beginning of a political education. They attributed their difficulties abroad to their subordinate status at home: to British rule in India and its consequences. Their leaders campaigned – unsuccessfully – for the right to vote in Canada and for changes in immigration policy that would allow the immigration of Indian women. But the focus of their rhetoric was on the situation in India. For English-speaking audiences they spoke of home rule, peacefully achieved; in Punjabi, however, the militants espoused direct action as a way to challenge the British. Immigrants who had come to North America mainly to make money gained in the process an expatriate forum within which they could articulate their reservations about and objections to British rule. The rhetoric and debate that engulfed them made them acutely aware of the options before them: continuing their political passivity, struggling to reform India within the British system, resorting to violence in order to get rid of the British, or, in a few cases, cooperating with Canadian and imperial authorities. They differed among themselves about the course to take. The return of the Ghadar volunteers, however, provided striking evidence of the appeal of the last of these options to an activist minority.<sup>41</sup>

Social, political, and economic developments over the past 100 years have put an immense distance between the pioneer generation and the contemporary Sikh community. Even so, in the past twenty years we again witness tension and the perception of threat – on both sides – in the relationship between Sikhs in Canada and the Government of India. The British have gone and India has been a democracy since 1947, but many Sikhs feel alienated by the Hindu-dominated regime in

<sup>41</sup> For an appraisal of the Ghadar threat by the man who was governor of Punjab at the time, see Sir Michael O'Dwyer, *India as I Knew It* (London: Constable, 1926), 190–212. For the attention given by the governor general of Canada, see Mary E. Hallett, “A Governor General’s Views on Oriental Immigration to British Columbia, 1904–1911,” *BC Studies* 14 (1972): 51–72. Mark Juergensmeyer draws a parallel with the support given Sun Yat Sen by immigrant Chinese. See “The Ghadar Syndrome,” Juergensmeyer and Barrier, *Sikh Studies*, 189. The radicalism of immigrant workers from southern and Eastern Europe is the theme of Donald Avery’s *‘Dangerous Radicals’: Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism in Canada, 1896–1932* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979).

<sup>42</sup> Hugh Johnston, “Sikhism and Secular Authority,” in *Religion and Public Life in Canada*, ed. Marguerite Van Die and David Lyon, 346–62 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

power in their home country.<sup>42</sup> This may be explained by the growth of ethno-nationalism among Sikhs. Pioneer militants sought Indian independence, while militants today seek a separate state for Sikhs. These sound like different objectives, but there is a link through time. The cohesiveness of the Sikhs has been evident throughout, although their external allegiances, sense of common community, and self-definition have been changing.

For the pioneers, British Columbia provided a hothouse for political education and for the testing of loyalties and identities. At play in the formation of sojourner identity were many elements: the relationship of the Sikhs to the British; the relationship of Sikhs to Indians from elsewhere in the Indian subcontinent; the relationship of Sikhs to other immigrants from their own region in India; the relationships that existed among subcategories within the Sikh community; and the relationship of Sikhs to mainstream Canadian society. These were elements of a tangle of loyalties and attachments that involved the following: acceptance and rejection of a subordinate status within an imperial system; a new sense of Indian nationality; a familiar association of people of common culture and language; an intense sense of local and kinship difference among people of similar background; and a wall of distance, indifference, and hostility between the sojourners and mainstream Canadian society. The last element belonged uniquely to the sojourners' experience, but all presented themselves with additional force in their overseas setting.