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Raj Karega Khalsa! - The Evolution of the Sikh Identity

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Raj Karega Khalsa: A Look at the Evolution of the Sikh Identity

Raj Karega Khalsa! - The Evolution of the Sikh Identity

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Professor Murphy

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ABSTRACT

Generally, religion has served as a method of creating a unique identity and history for many groups across history. This concept is especially true for the Sikh community, to the point that they have carved their own niche across the different places they inhabit in the world, whether that be their homeland of Panjab or their extensive population in places like Canada or the United Kingdom. However, this expansion and development of their culture did not come without a cost, formed through countless battles, martyrdom, and revolutions. Chardi Kala, a foundational idea in Sikhi that refers to eternal optimism even in terms of adversity, shows why they are prepared to face severest torture and martyrdom willingly, a unique concept created by the religion (Singh 2002). This literature review examines the history and social factors that contributed to the aforementioned concept and others mentioned in Sikh philosophy. It will go through key moments in the Sikh timeline that will help to explain this distinct identity and how it has evolved into the current day. Additionally, it will help to illustrate the way that cultures can thrive even in the face of severe adversity, sometimes through the simple power of hope and trust in one’s faith.

KEY TERMS

Gurudwaras: Place of assembly and worship for Sikhs
Khalsa: The purified and renewed Sikh community instituted by Guru Gobind Singh Ji
Mughals: Muslim dynasty that ruled India and came into conflict with Sikhs
Vaisakhi: Festival that celebrates the beginning of the Sikh new year and the Khalsa
Misls: Warrior bands or confederacies composed of Sikh soldiers defending their regions
Taksaal: Sikh institution responsible for preserving and promoting the Sikh faith
Sri Harmandir Sahib: Most important place of worship and pilgrimate site for Sikhs
INTRODUCTION

One of the most consistent tools throughout human history has been the ability for individuals to come together and unite for a common purpose. Whether it is gathering together in protest or raising armies, collective unity has been a very effective tactic for countless generations to get what they want. While it is seen across various cultures and states, this concept of concerted action is foundational to the Sikh religion and the community as a whole. This was demonstrated to the world in the 2020 Farmers Protests, where the Sikh community grouped together in large numbers, contributing to one of the largest protests in world history, in an effort to fight for their rights and against the oppression of the Indian government. Flashback a few hundred years in the past, and you see the same tenacity and spirit from the early Sikh leaders and figureheads as they trailblazed the way for those protesting in the current day.

Collective unity is foundational to the Sikh faith along with the ideas of martyrdom, perseverance, and self-sacrifice - three concepts that are unique to the Sikh identity since the inception of the religion. This paper aims to analyze these concepts and how they have shaped the evolution of the Sikh identity, using three distinct periods of time for the Sikh religion. The success of the Farmer's Protests showcased the power of democratic action which is what makes this case study so unique - what is it within the Sikh religion that allows them to position themselves in a way that they consistently come out on top when fighting for their rights? Furthermore, the paper will examine how their ideas can be applied to other movements or protests - especially at a time when more and more people are taking action against oppression and tyranny.
Raj Karega Khalsa: A Look at the Evolution of the Sikh Identity

In order to effectively examine these ideals and the evolution of the Sikh identity, this paper will first look at historical research and writings from scholars on the development of Sikhi. Since this paper primarily draws on historical documents and perceptions of the Sikh faith, the methodology section will focus on the different types of sources that were used for the results. These findings will demonstrate that there is in fact a unique Sikh identity that has evolved through multiple events throughout Sikh history along with showcasing how other groups contextualized this identity through their own lens. The concluding section will finalize these results and will reflect on what it means to be a Sikh and how their stories can be used by the rest of the world.
LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines the history and social factors that contributed to the aforementioned concept and others mentioned in Sikh philosophy. It will go through key moments in the Sikh timeline that will help to explain this distinct identity and how it has evolved into the current day. Additionally, it will help to illustrate the way that cultures can thrive even in the face of severe adversity, sometimes through the simple power of hope and trust in one’s faith. This will be demonstrated through primary sources, religious texts, and writings that demonstrate the different concepts that are present in the Sikh religion. Furthermore, it will present insight into identity creation as a whole - examining how other researchers approach this topic, and while their writings may not be exclusive to Sikhi, they help to showcase how identity can be formed.

IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

As they fight for a right to be viewed as their own distinct group, there has been an increasing trend amongst Sikhs in the diaspora regarding their own sovereign nation. Before looking at some of these demands, it would be beneficial to examine how this type of nationalism is constructed, especially since every successful revolution in the past has relied on a nationalistic identity. Benedict Anderson in his landmark work on the topic, Imagined Communities, describes nationalism as something to be compared to “kinship” rather than ideology. Furthermore, it can be used to reveal why people in such a system feel so strongly about each other:

It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.
For most groups looking to have their own homeland, the concept of an imagined community is central since it shows why people are willing to die for such beliefs. A similar form of social constructionism is theorized by Edward Said in his book *Culture and Imperialism*, where he discusses the way that Western societies have represented the East in a manner that paints them as fundamentally different from the West:

> The Orient was not an objective reality but imagined geography, a place of difference that served as a way of enhancing European identity at home and of justifying the exercise of power abroad.

While Said’s concept of imagined geographies is primarily concerned with the representation of the East, it could be applied more broadly to the way that Western societies have represented other regions, such as Panjab and the Sikh community.

**A NEW RELIGION**

There is no analyzing the Sikh identity without first understanding the origin of the religion itself. Sikhi, one of the largest religions in the world, has perhaps the most recent origins, and yet the remarkable process that it has made in the land of its birth within three short centuries is quite unique (Thapar 1904). For such a recent religion, it is clear that this community has made great strides despite existing for less than five centuries. The fact that it has stood the test of time, during a period where there were already established religions (Hinduism, Islam, etc.), demonstrates that there is in fact a uniqueness within this community. The history of the Sikh religion dates back to 1469, when the first Guru, Guru Nanak Dev Ji was born. In Sikhi, there are ten Gurus, who are described as spiritual teachers and gain wisdom from God. In [Guru Nanak’s] day, virtue had come to be identified with virtuosity, prayer with pretentiousness, piety with perjury and welfare with wealth. Religion was nothing but a refuge for superstition, bigotry,
ritualism, and obscurantism (Sidhu 1994). Sidhu (1994) helps to paint a picture of the kind of environment that led to the creation of the Sikh religion through the initial efforts of the first Guru. As Singh (2011) writes in his book, *Introduction to Sikhism*:

[Sikhi] was intended by its founders to become the heritage, not of any particular group of people, but of the whole mankind. [Guru Nanak] desired that his message should go to every nook and corner of the world in the same way as it had gone through him during his own sojourn in life.

This theory shows that the ideologies taught by Guru Nanak Dev Ji were meant to be a way of life and pervade all of society - not just one particular locality.

The warrior tradition of Sikhi, which began with the creation of the Khalsa, can be seen as another revival of the religion, drawing upon the aforementioned teachings of Guru Nanak Dev Ji. The consolidation of Sikh followers into a warrior community by the tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh Ji, allowed Sikhs to become a self-governing warrior group, a change that would allow them to establish political control over Northern India. The original story of the founding of the Khalsa sees Guru Gobind Singh Ji transforming peasants into steadfast warriors along with eliminating caste and any other social classifications. However, as Dhavan (2011) writes,

The paucity of detailed primary sources from this early period in the Khalsa’s history has left in place a narrative which, for all of its compelling description of how a small community of peasants was transformed into indomitable warriors, ascribes the agency of this change not to the peasants but to their spiritual leader, Guru Gobind Singh.

This characterization by Dhavan suggests a theory that the inspiration to change and become strong warriors stemmed from the individual warriors themselves and not necessarily through the guidance of the Tenth Guru. This theory is supported by research from Dirk H.A. Kolff in his
book, *The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market of Hindustan* (1989), where he ascribes the power of militaries at the time to the male populace “of almost limitless proportions”. For these characterizations to be true, however, it would put a dent in the modern Sikh identity, one which draws from the stories of its ancestors.

**SIKH IDENTITY IN A WORLD LENS**

To dismiss the role played by the Sikh gurus and their tales would create a very one-sided perspective of what eventually became one of the most dominant empires in world history. This has been the issue with early Western literature when it comes to describing Indian traditions and religions as a whole, in that they apply Judeo-Christian philosophies to Indian religious culture.

It has become common practice to lump in major religious groups without understanding the nuances that exist within these different communities. As Harjot Oberoi writes in his book, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries* (1994), he gives an example of Sikh individuals whose actions do not fall in line with the religion, something that “challenges general assumptions about the nature of religion as a well-demarcated and self-conscious unit in Indian society”. This presents an interesting narrative in that religious identity is not necessarily consistent, especially in Indian society. However, this can be said for various groups and organizations, as there will always be members who do not fully align with what they should be doing. In regards to the Sikh religion, there is a prescribed set of rules known as the Sikh Rehat Maryada, a code of conduct and conventions that offers assistance to members that are a part of the Sikh faith. While there are individuals that stray from some conventions, it is understood amongst most constituents that it can be used as a tool on their religious journey.

A major issue that arises with conflating different religious identities together is the higher potential for discrimination. The turban, a defining feature of the Sikh identity, has led to
misunderstandings from individuals not familiar with the religion and its tenets. As Pal Ahluwalia writes in his paper, *At Home in Motion: Evolving Sikh Identities*, “in the West, the identity of Punjabis or Sikhs is almost always subsumed under some other forms of taxonomy - Oriental, Asian, East Indian, Afghan, Paki, Punjabi, etc.”, describing a very narrow lens of how Sikhs are perceived. The cultural similarities between these groups should not allow for them all to be categorized into broad groups, especially in the face of racism and marginalization.

When speaking specifically about the Sikh diasporic identity, Ahluwalia argues that it contains two dimensions:

The ways in which Sikh culture travels and evolves are illustrative of post-colonial transformation and largely dependent on the host culture as well as the product of being part of either an ‘old’ or ‘new’ diaspora.

This description serves to show that this identity is something that is in flux - meaning that it is dependent on either the legacy of colonialism or the age of globalization. This migration within other host nations has led to the formation of Sikh communities throughout different areas, from large metropolitan cities to suburban and rural localities.

The migration of the Sikh diaspora has been crucial for the evolution of the Sikh faith. Creating their own spaces in major cities provides a space for them to practice their faith amongst other ethnic communities. This has transformed the way members of the Sikh religion are perceived and contributes to a modern identity amongst the diaspora. In her paper *Perspectives on the Sikh Diaspora in Italy*, Ester Gallo speaks to the initialization of Sikh gurudwaras and how it represents the progressive emancipation from bonded labor conditions promoted by ethnic communities. Her paper is important in showing how Sikh spaces have evolved since their inception, something that is necessary in a modernizing world. The growth of
Sikh spaces and cultural centers has allowed them to carve a stake within the cities that they reside in, thus furthering a diasporic consciousness. It is important to note that these areas do not necessarily constitute a positive environment for everyone involved. While the gurudwara should be a place for community solidarity, they are often portrayed as places where Sikhs cannot escape instrumental community relations and intra-ethnic power relations (Gallo). For many Sikh immigrants, this leads to a feeling of fragmentation and competition, meaning that these shared spaces can become problematic despite being one of the few places to practice their religion freely.

While many Sikh traditions and customs are derived from historical practices and stories, as Tony Ballantyne notes in his novel, *Sikh Cultural Formations in an Imperial World*, for at least half of the Khalsa’s existence, Sikhism has operated within the broader global contexts fashioned by British imperialism. This existence could be used to describe an identity that in turn would have been damaged as a result of imperialism but this was not necessarily the case for Panjabis and Panjabi Sikhs. As Ballantyne describes, many Sikhs are not necessarily under the term “diaspora”, which would suggest exile from a homeland, an emotional state that they never aligned with. Nevertheless, colonialism still played a crucial role in Panjab (which in turn translated over to Sikhs), due to new education systems, the rearrangement of military systems, and new communication technologies.

A SIKH HOMELAND

In their paper, *Exploring Attachment to the “Homeland” and Its Association with Heritage Culture Identification*, Ferenczi and Marshall open with a statement describing the way that a national homeland leads to an almost romanticized view of one’s homeland:
Social construction of one’s nation of origin as an object of primordial attachment renders emotional ties similar to that of kinship, and an individual’s national identity becomes tied symbolically to family. They use attachment theory to describe this social construction, stating that it can be used to provide a richer understanding of this construct and how it might influence the behavior of an individual. In the aforementioned section, the literature stated that this attachment to the homeland was exaggerated for most Sikhs, due to the fact that prior to colonialism many of them were spread outside the region of Panjab. In her paper, *The Ethnography of Imagined Communities*, Kathleen Hall, uses the Sikh community in Britain as an example, (one of the largest Sikh diasporas), and describes Sikhs as a part of a system called an “incorporation regime”. This is used to denote the processes through which host societies come to define, delineate, and, therein, producing collective identities and statuses that configure the possibilities and limitations of citizenship and national belonging. They are viewed as a distinct group, battling for the right to be seen as either “racial” or “ethnic” groups, for particular peoples.
In regards to Sikhs, the aforementioned concept has resounded since the dissolution of the Sikh empire in the 1850s. As Christine Fair explores in her article, *Diaspora Involvement in Insurgencies*, religious-nationalist movements emerged in response to British “divide and rule” administrative policies, along with a general belief that the solution to the downfall among India’s religious communities was a grassroots religious revival (2005). In the picture above, the map shows the extent of the emperor under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, including parts of modern-day Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan. The empire spanned a large expanse, with Sikh territory making up most of Northern India. However, while this region has been where Sikhs have historically reigned supreme, territory has not necessarily been a huge substantial part of Sikh identity. As Harjot Oberoi explains in his research, the attachment to Panjub as a homeland began during the Partition of 1947, when Sikh political and intellectual elites realized that a Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India were imminent (1987). This is an interesting point because it
begs the question of what land Sikhs identify for themselves if they were to attain sovereignty. Due to Panjab’s connection to Sikh history and culture, it would be remiss to ignore it as an ideological homeland for Sikhs. It would therefore be beneficial to explore this connection to the homeland and identify how diaspora and native Sikhs feel in regard to a sovereign state and the location of that state.
METHODODOLOGY

The above literature examines aspects of the Sikh identity and how that manifests within the diaspora to the point that there has been an increase in calls for a sovereign Sikh nation. This information ties into the major theme of the paper in that it asks the question of what has created and influenced this identity throughout history. More specifically, what is it within Sikh history and ideology that shapes how they can fight and protest for their rights? The above literature presents the narrative of a community that has been shaped by colonization and globalization, which in turn has resulted in some of the diasporic movements that you would see today. However, it does not give insight into the actual history of the religion and traditions themselves, and how Sikhs feel in regard to their own identity.

After seeing how Sikh identity is examined through a worldly lens, this paper’s findings will cover three different time periods in order to examine how this identity was shaped and molded in response to the cultural forces at the time. The first period is the early years of the religion (1500-1600), which while important, has less material to respond to. The second period (1600-1850) is the most substantive and defining, covering over 200 years of events within Sikh history. The final period, while shorter, pertains to the modern era of Sikh identity and will be the most interesting to uncover and learn about, especially to see how the diaspora views itself in relation to its history. Overall, these different periods are marked in this paper for the way that they have shaped Sikh history, which means that they do not necessarily mirror the methods of other scholars and researchers who examine Sikh history.

In order to examine these different periods, this paper will utilize a variety of sources based on the era that is being studied. The goal was to find sources that helped express the unique Sikh identity and what they did throughout their history. This meant that much of the data
was dependent on existing material rather than more quantitative methods. However, by separating the religion into different periods, it becomes easier to explore the nuances that exist within the religion and how it has been influenced. This also meant that many of the sources here contribute to a more qualitative approach, especially since the findings depend on analyzing how Sikhs feel within society. This ties into one of the final sources for the findings, which relies on research collected from analyzing tweets and music related to the Sikh community. These sources give an in-depth look into how young Sikhs feel regarding the tenets of the religion along with displaying how they process their identity as they participate in a world that is molded by globalization and influenced by Western culture.

Since these early time periods are mostly located in the region of Panjab, that is the geographical area that the paper will be bound to. However, references to other areas will be noted, especially from western writers and sources. The more recent time period will utilize data findings from the diaspora, which means it will cover different locations throughout the world but primarily in the following regions: Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The reason for the findings to be centralized around these three nations is because they make up a majority of the diaspora and they are also the source of many diaspora Sikh movements.

For the first two periods, there is not a lot of primary source material that discusses Sikhs and their history, which is why the main sources will be anecdotes/stories, old writings referring to Sikhs, religious texts to help to show how Sikh identity was depicted and formed. These sources come from the literature and writings at the time which discussed Sikhs and their presence in the Panjab region. The next time period transitions into the twentieth century, going into a more modern era. Since the majority of this era will be post-1984, the findings will include the aforementioned sources, but it will also use interviews with Sikh leaders and constituents,
along with the use of tweets and music. These two sources are used because they are a pivotal part of modern history and contribute to the way young Sikhs interact and relate with each other.

Tweets have been used to discuss Sikh history and also for youth in the diaspora to have platforms to deliver their thoughts about their own Sikh identity. These tweets rely on multiple accounts that either are devoted to Sikh thoughts and ideology or users that are Sikh and wish to contribute their philosophy on the religion. This comes in the form of Twitter media, replies, and threads/tweets. Twitter was also an important tool in gathering information in regard to literature and writings that talked about Sikh history. A lot of data was collected from more orthodox accounts, especially since they were more willing to bring up taboo topics which helped to give a sense of how modern Sikhs felt about more sensitive subjects. With the diaspora so spread out, it was interesting to get a gauge of how different the views were. There was a clear difference between those who had an upbringing or understanding of Sikh beliefs in comparison to those who were more westernized with their thoughts, something that usually lead to Twitter arguments. These observations allowed for insight into another unique identity that has been cultivated - a more modern identity amongst Sikh youth growing up in more western environments.

Music plays an important role since it allows artists to express the collective thoughts of a group, something which was pivotal in the farmer’s protests and continues to gain traction through the efforts of various artists. Using the music that came out during the 2020 farmer’s protest will help to give a sense of how Sikh identity has evolved through arts and why this music gave a resurgence to previous Sikh movements. Furthermore, it will use music from artists that describe Sikh history and who also use their platform in an effort to mobilize the youth by teaching them about that history. One artist that has been instrumental in this mobilization is
Sidhu Moose Wala, a young rapper that was recently killed and prior to his death (but also after) was generating a buzz across the world for his controversial lyrics and lifestyle. The selection process for these artists and songs is based on the personal experiences of the author along with general knowledge of what is trending amongst Sikh youth. The best way to replicate this selection process is to use trending charts for music along with exploring what individuals are saying about trending music - another way that Twitter was useful for this paper.

In order to analyze this data, it was important to understand how the different events within Sikh history contributed to a unique Sikh identity. This was done by examining the different writings along with comparing them to sources showing the tenacity of Sikh individuals. The findings are beneficial in that they show an overview of groundbreaking moments in Sikh history which go on to influence identity and traditions.
When you grow up listening to stories of individuals single-handedly taking down animals such as elephants or tigers, soldiers winning battles where they are regularly outnumbered, and being told you descend from warriors, it is clear why one may develop a unique identity from birth. However, while these stories may seem exaggerated, they are an integral part of Sikh culture and history. While they may seem outlandish to western audiences, the findings indicate that there is documented evidence to support the above statements along with writings from scholars that describe the high-spirited nature of Sikhs. Before delving into a discussion of the formation of this identity, it is important to show the actual findings of the evolution of this community. As stated in the methodology section, the findings portion will primarily be separated into three portions combined with sub-categories that will further explore important data regarding Sikh culture and identity. These three portions will cover important Sikh historical events and will be supplemented with writings from scholars who were able to be a part of the Sikh timeline. This will shift into more modern events and ultimately conclude with findings from the diaspora post-1984 - a pivotal year in recent Sikh history.

EARLY YEARS
The Sikh religion was founded in the 1500s and was further developed over the next two centuries through the work of the nine Gurus. The first guru, Guru Nanak Dev Ji, created the religion to eliminate the different distinctions and discriminations amongst humanity along with establishing a direct communion with God. The purpose was to create a universal religion in a union of those who love God and were willing to serve the people around them. As described by Sidhu (1994), “A Sikh of Guru Nanak’s concept respects the adherents of all faiths irrespective of their creeds or ways of worship”, demonstrating the universality of the religion. This tradition
of respect can be seen in Guru Nanak’s friendship with Bhai Mardana, a low-caste Muslim, someone who he never asked to convert. Even the central text of Sikhs, the Guru Granth Sahib, is a compilation of hymns from different sources, be it a king, high-caste Brahmins, or low-caste untouchables. Duncan Greenless, a British scholar who analyzed scriptures from around the world, summarizes the following regarding Sikh teachings:

To tread this path there is no need to ‘renounce the world’ or to adopt the robes or way of life of the ascetic. God pervades the whole world including man’s homes; He is in the heart itself and can be found equally in any environment.

The Sikh path is a simplistic one, more easily compared to a way of life, rather than getting mixed up in unnecessary principles and tenets. He goes on to further summarize the religion as “a practical way of life, leading man straight to his goal, and does not involve itself in verbose theorizing”. These descriptions of the main text of the religion help to show some of the core principles within Sikhi and the influences behind Sikh actions throughout the years.

Prior to the founding of Sikhi, Hinduism was the primary religion within India. However, since Hinduism taught nonresistance and nonviolence, this made it easy for the Mughals to invade the subcontinent and enforce their own rule. This created an environment where Hindus could not freely practice their faith along with facing violence from the Mughals. As Greenless describes:

So utterly were the Hindus degraded that they were the prey to self-abasement and servility, had lost all self-respect and faith in their gods, and most of them being deprived by caste-rules of the right to bear arms they had all but lost that natural manliness which alone could promise a better future. (Greenless xix)
This created a very depraved society, as Muslims and Hindus would come into conflict, along with many seemingly abandoning the core ideals of their religions. The corrupt environment is what allowed for the emergence of a person such as Guru Nanak, who looked to build a nation of individuals that were devoted to God, recognized the equality of humanity, and were ready to die protecting their faith or against tyranny. One of the defining characteristics of Guru Nanak was that he never proclaimed himself to be God, in fact, he felt himself to be the servant of God, a quality that he passed on to his followers. The idea that God was present everywhere created a unique connection with the Creator amongst the followers of Guru Nanak. As described further by Sir C. Gough in *The Sikhs and the Sikh Wars*:

… it might be said that he found salvation in good deeds as the fruit of a goodwill.

[Guru Nanak] set himself to teach men the way of salvation, not as a ruler, but as a servant of God to whom the light had been shown, coming to bring not strife among men but peace. (Gough 17)

His nature and personality made it so that he was a beloved figure across Muslim and Hindu circles, two groups who even went so far as to argue which of them had the right to ceremoniously bury him. These descriptions are meant to paint a picture of Guru Nanak’s identity - something which his followers work to replicate in their daily lives. Sikhs are taught to behave in accordance with Guru Nanak’s teachings, which is why it is important to study his past. In regards to what made his message appealing, once again quoting Gough:

The unostentatious virtue of his own life, the absence of austerity combined with the practice of the moral principles which he preached, appealed to the humanity of those with whom he came in contact. Since he preached no crusade against conventions, he did not excite the wrath of those who were attached to them … (Gough 17)
These preachings were carried on through the work of his successors, also bearing the title of Guru. A western comparison for guru would most closely be the term “prophet”, as these were individuals meant to carry the torch of Guru Nanak and his teachings. The first Guru set the foundation for his successors to work and expand on his philosophy, something that was crucial for a growing religion. Perhaps the most important additions came under the reign of the sixth guru, Guru Hargobind, who established the military tradition of the Sikh faith. As will be discussed in the following section, this culminated in the most critical moments for the Sikh identity.

THE BIRTH OF THE KHALSA

The Khalsa refers to initiated Sikhs, a purified (with the phrase actually meaning “pure”) and renewed community as formalized by the tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh Ji. This era had seen the people of the Panjab region terrorized and oppressed by outside invaders in the form of the Mughals. Guru Gobind Singh Ji, who was the inheritor of the divine legacy of the Gurus before him, sought to create an army of warriors who would lay down their lives to defend the innocent and for their faith. The creation of the Khalsa was unique in and of itself - designed to ignite passion and valor in the minds of his followers who had become dispirited and demoralized in the current society.

On the day of Vaisakhi in 1699, Guru Gobind Singh Ji gathered his followers (numbering around eighty thousand people) to celebrate the festival and listen to his words. To the shock of the audience, he interrupted his sermon by unsheathing his sword and called out for a devout Sikh to offer their head for the sake of dharma (In Sikhi, this term is used to refer to the path of righteousness and duty towards God). This is a concept that carried forward the teachings of the first guru, Guru Nanak Dev Ji, who is quoted as saying:
If you desire to play this game of love with Me,
Then step onto My Path with your head in hand.
When you place your feet on this Path,
Give Me your head, and do not pay any attention to public opinion.

In front of an already shaken crowd, this was a daunting test of faith. It took three calls for someone to eventually present themselves to the Guru, who took the person into a nearby enclosure, with the Guru emerging after with a sword covered in blood and demanding another sacrifice. After repeating this process four more times, each time with an individual from a different caste, the Guru stood before the crowd, who were visibly unnerved by what they had just witnessed. However, he revealed that all five of these individuals were still alive, bringing them back to the congregation clad in new yellow garments and blue turbans. Collectively referred to as the Panj Pyare (the Beloved Five), these were the first initiates of the Khalsa order and were given the surname ‘Singh’. The Guru also received baptism from these initiates, with Guru Gobind Rai becoming Guru Gobind Singh, a process described in the following quotation:

The act of the Guru seeking baptism from his baptized followers, apart from revealing the democratic ethos of Sikhism, shows that God, the Guru and the follower become one in spirit; the moment of baptismal transformation becomes the moment to transamination.

(Gupta 22)

By uniting people from different castes and walks of life, Guru Gobind Singh Ji created a brotherhood that furthered and paid tribute to the legacy of Guru Nanak Dev Ji. A crucial difference was that instead of transferring the reigns over to one individual, Guru Gobind Singh Ji passed the torch to the members of the Khalsa, cementing them in society and eliminating caste distinctions:
[Guru Gobind Singh Ji] roused among the people a feeling of nationalism and infused in them a spirit in which would not let them bow before the aggression and persecution and taught them how to die for the sake of their motherland. (Johar 56)

This transformation also coincided with the birth of various other Sikh traditions which lend to their identity. While those will be explored in the subsequent section, it is important to note this historic occasion as the starting point for a new mentality within Sikhi.

A PHYSICAL IDENTITY

One of Guru Gobind Singh Ji’s primary objectives was to remove the influence of the caste system, an institution that was rejected under the teachings of Guru Nanak Dev Ji but had continued to be a part of the culture. With the creation of this new brotherhood, “he not only reformed the absolute equality of every Sikh in the eyes of God, but he altogether prohibited the observance of caste distinction within the Khalsa” (Johar 56). He sought to transform the Sikhs and infuse in them an entirely separate identity, one that would distinguish them from other faiths. Not only would this single them out amongst others, but it would also instill a feeling of power and virtue. As Guru Gobind Singh Ji states in the Khalsa Mahima:

As long as the Khalsa remain distinct
They have my blessings and power;
The moment the Khalsa adopts [Brahmanical] tradition
I will not bother about them.

Thus, the Guru and his followers maintained a distinct look that would allow anyone to identify a Sikh individual. One of the primary objectives of the Khalsa was to defend the innocent and downtrodden, which is why being able to differentiate between a Sikh versus a non-Sikh is something that would be crucial to those seeking assistance.
The above factors come together in the form of the Five Ks, five items that Khalsa Sikhs are commanded to wear at all times. While oral tradition states the introduction of these items coincides with Guru Gobind Singh’s ceremony of 1699, they were not formally codified until the nineteenth century. The Five Ks consist of the following, in no particular order: kes, uncut hair; kangha, a wooden comb worn in the hair; kara, a steel bangle; kirpan, sword or dagger, and kachera, a type of undergarment. These articles of faith are meant to show a commitment to the Sikh way of life and the teachings of the Gurus. Furthermore, it shows a dedication by Sikhs to molding themselves in the image of the Guru, who himself stated the following in the Dasam Granth:

Khalsa is my true form

Within the Khalsa, I abide

Khalsa is my main support

I am always with the Khalsa.

While there is still considerable debate on the origin of these items, they were still part of customs introduced by the Guru and are nevertheless essential to Sikh identity since they are maintained to this day. The most common element of the Sikh appearance, the turban covers their uncut hair and is a spiritual crown that allows Sikhs to be easily recognized. These items collectively come together as an outward demonstration of the Sikh faith and have played a part in Sikh history. This has been done by the simple maintenance of the Five Ks or when they have been used to test the faith of a Sikh. These tests have been pivotal to Sikh history, coming together to form the foundation for the Sikh identity.
MARTYRDOM AND PERSEVERANCE

The undying resilience and perseverance of Sikhs have been documented and lauded throughout history, but it is important to see where this praise stems from. To start, the previous section discussed the Five Ks and how they have been used as a test of faith, most notably in the martyrdom of Bhai Taru Singh. A devout Sikh, Bhai Taru Singh was imprisoned by the Mughal governor for providing aid to Sikh revolutionaries who were plotting a coup. After being imprisoned and mercilessly tortured, Taru Singh was asked how he was able to withstand such torment, an ability that he attributed to his kesh. Relentless in their attempts to strip him of his mental fortitude, the Mughal rulers offered him a choice of converting to Islam or being executed. Taru Singh is quoted as saying:

Will I never die if I become a [muslim]? Don’t muslims die? I am going to die one day irrespective of my religion, so why should I desert my faith? … I love my faith more than my life and I will defend it at all costs!

With this exclamation, his fate was sealed, resulting in a public display of brutality in which his scalp was cut away to prevent his hair from growing back. This was not the first or the last time that a Sikh chose to remain firm and die for their beliefs rather than choose the “safer” option, but it serves as a turning point in identifying more examples of this steadfastness. The findings illustrate that these moments are found across the Sikh faith, with this resilience existing within six-year-old children to individuals over eighty years old.

Based on the events and stories mentioned in this paper, it would be hopeful but misguided to believe that the aforementioned six-year-old children went through a more peaceful test of faith. Their story is one of courage and resolve, demonstrating how ingrained the teachings of Sikhi are within even their youngest followers. This event refers to the two younger
sons of Guru Gobind Singh Ji, Baba Zorawar Singh, and Baba Fateh Singh, age nine and six respectively, alongside their grandmother, Mata Gujar Kaur Ji. After being separated from their father following the Battle of Chamkaur, a historic fight between forty Sikh soldiers and a considerably larger Mughal army, the two sons were captured and presented to the Mughal court. Once here, they were put on trial for no actual crime other than being the sons of the man that had been actively fighting against the Mughal regime. This was noticed by the populace, who chastised the Mughal leader, Wazir Khan, for putting innocent children in such a position. The offer given to the kids was essentially this: convert to Islam and have a chance to live a life of paradise or be executed. At such a tender age, it was a shock to everyone the resolve of the two children, choosing to sacrifice themselves instead of a more comfortable option, even going as far as to mock the court who were expecting the kids to beg for their lives.

The children performed what is known as the supreme sacrifice, laying down their lives but not their faith. Wazir Khan ordered them bricked alive and watched with frustration as they remained unphased in the face of evil. Throughout the process, Khan attempted to pressure them to change their minds, with the two boys always refusing and demonstrating wisdom beyond their years. As quoted from *Supreme Sacrifice of Young Souls*:

They are putting us to test. They do not know that the Sikhs of Guru Nanak are fearless. Our Fifth Guru Arjun Dev faced martyrdom cheerfully on burning iron pans. Whereas he guided humanity to the path of a truthful and noble life, he also set an example of facing death boldly and with full faith in God.

As they succumbed to the walls closing in around them, their bodies were pulled out so that the executioner could finish the job - officially marking their martyrdom.
Guru Gobind Singh Ji used this event and the coinciding Battle of Chamkaur to rebuke Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, for failing to deliver on promises of peace and safe passage, even going as far as to call him out for breaking his oath to the Quran. These judgments were delivered in the form of a spiritual victory letter, written in Persian verse, titled Zafarnama, which translates to “Declaration of Victory”. In this letter, the Guru describes that his followers had remained firm in their faith despite the emperor's betrayal and deception. As he writes in the Zafarnama, the personal blows inflicted upon the Guru were not enough to squash his unwavering determination and willpower:

What happened that you have killed four children (my sons), the coiled snake (in the form of my Khalsa) still remains.

What manliness you have shown by extinguishing a few sparks. You have made the conflagration brighter and more furious. (78-80)

This letter signaled the beginning of the end of the Mughal empire. Although the Sikhs had already been engaging with the Mughals prior to these events, the execution of the young Sikh children served as a turning point to inspire the Sikhs even further in their quest to put an end to the ongoing oppression. After countless battles, and further struggle, the end finally came for the Mughal empire, with the Sikhs establishing their control over Northern Panjab.

NAVIGATING THE WINDS OF CHANGE

As it has been over the course of history, the end of one empire marks the beginning of another. In this case, the demise of the Mughals was the transition to the start of the Sikh empire. It was a period of great prosperity, especially under the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the man who originally united the different Sikh Misls into one empire. He was a powerful ruler but his inability to find a worthy successor during his lifetime led to turmoil after his death, with the
confusion and disorientation serving as the precursor to the Anglo-Sikh Wars. Although the Sikhs demonstrated courage and resolve, it was not enough this time, with the losses on the battlefield and inner-circle betrayals taking their toll on the empire. These failures resulted in the end of the Sikh Empire, becoming the last kingdom within India to concede to the British.

Despite the empire being consolidated into the British Raj (rule), the Sikh faith was not vanquished, a testament to its consistent unyielding resilience in the face of change. The British themselves recognized this, especially since they had long been keeping track of the battle prowess and tactics of the Sikhs. In his book, *The Victories of the Sutlej*, British military observer H.F. Brooks recounts the Sikhs in a battle against the British:

See the Akalees fiercely are raging in fight.

See them bathing in red blood their scimitars bright.

See them hurl from their finger the murderous ring.

Surpassing in swiftness the proud eagle’s wing.

This poem describes a battle in which the Sikhs held a losing position but continued to fight to the best of their abilities. The British ensured the continuance of the Sikh military tradition with the formation of the army’s Sikh regiments and infantry units. The Sikhs continued to demonstrate their fortitude, the most famous example being what historians call one of history’s greatest last stands: The Battle of Saragarhi, in which twenty-one soldiers of the 36th Sikh regiment went up against over ten thousand Pashtun tribesmen in 1897. The regiment looked to defend the outpost of Saragarhi, a strategic position, which had been surrounded by the Pashtun tribesmen. As poet A.E. Housman writes about the battle:

Here dead lie because we did not choose,

To live and shame the land from which we sprung.
Life, to be sure, is nothing much to lose,

But young men think it is, and we were young.

Instead of surrendering, the soldiers chose to fight till their last breath, repeatedly yelling the Sikh battle cry even when faced with death.

It is clear that by this point (nineteenth-twentieth century) the Sikh identity was cemented in the minds of its constituents. The behavior described above was reminiscent of countless similar stories throughout the Sikh timeline. With this in mind, there was not necessarily any significant identity formation during this time period, especially in comparison to the defining events in early Sikh history. There are still examples, however, during this time period, such as Shaheed-e Azam Bhagat Singh, who gave up his life fighting for Indian independence, or Shaheed Udham Singh, who assassinated General Michael O’Dwyer, the man behind the Jallianwala Bagh massacre that saw the deaths of over three hundred unarmed civilians who were participating in peaceful protest. A crucial moment in the history of the Sikh community and a defining period for the formation of the modern Sikh identity came in the year 1984, a time of civil unrest and violence, but also a time of courage and determination.

The early 1980s saw the rise of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a religious leader who garnered heavy influence amongst Sikh youth in Panjab during this time period. He advocated for the creation of a separate Sikh state, known as Khalistan, that would create a break from India. His defense of traditional Sikh interests and vocal opposition to the government for not preserving those interests was instrumental in expanding his popularity. As Khushwant Singh writes:

Within a short period of becoming head of the Taksaal, Jarnail Singh came to be recognized as the most effective instrument of the renaissance of Sikh fundamentalism.
He toured villages exhorting Sikh youth to return to the spartan ways of the Khalsa started by Guru Gobind Singh…

In a “modern” state, however, these Sikh ideas had to be stifled, especially in a government that was spearheaded by Hindus. The demand for a separate state was a direct challenge to the Indian state. However, instead of addressing their concerns, the Indian government only added fuel to the fire by responding with aggression towards the Sikh community (which only furthered their desire for Khalistan). This culminated in the 1982 massacre of Sikh pilgrims at Sri Harmandir Sahib, where the Indian army, by order of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, entered the gurudwara to fight militants who had taken refuge there. This invasion led to clashes with Bhindranwale, who led the militants, but it also resulted in the deaths of innocent Sikhs visiting the gurudwara at the time. This incident caused widespread anger amongst the Sikh community, but it was not the beginning or the end of the strained relationship between the Indian government and the Sikhs.

Tensions came to a head in June 1984 when Bhindranwale and his followers once again took refuge in Sri Harmandir Sahib, prompting the Indian government to launch “Operation Blue Star”, a military operation to remove them from the gurudwara. The operation led to the death of Bhindranwale and many Sikhs, along with major damage to the buildings within the complex. It was met with further outrage and protests from the Sikh community around the world, especially since the Indian army had once again violated the sanctity of the holiest site within their religion. In the aftermath of this operation, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards in retaliation for her crimes against the Sikh faith. This led to widespread anti-Sikh violence, resulting in a gruesome time period that saw the genocide of Sikhs across Panjab:
In the days that followed, Sikhs, for the first time in independent India, felt like Jews in Nazi Germany, as mobs of Hindus ran riot, setting upon Sikhs, who, by their distinctive turbans and beards, were easy targets. They were beaten and then burnt alive. Whole communities were wiped out. (Singh 2)

To be labeled as the “Sikh’s Kristallnacht” is a bold statement, but the violence that occurred against Sikhs was demonstrative of the evils of the past, which is why the comparison can be drawn to the treatment of Jews in Nazi Germany. However, it indicated to Sikhs that they are not safe in their own homelands, deepening the need for a separate state. While there are Sikhs that are resistant to Khalistan, the year 1984 serves as a reminder of the violence that can be orchestrated against them by the Indian government and why they can never become complacent in such a society.

THE MODERN-DAY SIKH

To reiterate, 1984 was a turning point not just in how it shaped Sikh identity, but how it affected Sikh migration patterns to countries around the world. With Sikhs feeling displaced and oppressed in their homelands, they sought new opportunities in outside lands. This has led to sizable Sikh populations in countries around the world, crafting a diaspora that carries a deep connection to its cultural roots back home. This diaspora has been crucial in preserving Sikh culture, traditions, and values, especially as they establish institutions in foreign lands. Nevertheless, Sikhs have been able to adapt and modernize, transforming churches into gurudwaras and making them their own (Tanabe 13). They carry forward the traditions from their motherland and pass on these teachings to younger generations, using many of the stories that are mentioned throughout this paper.
The diaspora has also been instrumental in mobilizing the global Sikh population by facilitating exchange and using different means of communication, as a way to form international organizations or networks for the greater Sikh community. Modern technology has transformed and sped up the efficiency in which these processes are completed, something which the younger generation has taken advantage of. This was seen at the height of the 2020 farmers’ protests, which saw the widespread use of music and social media platforms in order to create awareness for the farmers’ movement and spread the message of democracy. While music has been used extensively within Sikh revolutions in the past, the use of social media such as Twitter or Instagram ushers in a new age of activism that allows for the preservation of Sikh history, highlight broader Sikh topics, and provides a platform for individuals to discuss Sikh issues or concerns.

Tweets can be used to express an individual’s immediate thoughts, which is why the platform demonstrates the identity of modern Sikhs. Since tweets are limited to a certain amount of characters, content is easily digestible and makes it easier to disperse information:

“Bands of Sikh horsemen were to be seen riding at full gallop towards Amritsar, running the gauntlet of Mohammad troops. The message would be sent around the distant villages, ‘who will ride tonight?’ Death was a martyr’s crown on such occasions.”

The above tweet was accompanied by an illustration of Sikh soldiers on horseback engaged in war, presumably fighting against a Mughal army. The tweet is a quote describing Sikh rebels avenging Sri Harmandir Sahib being attacked and is used to evoke a sense of emotion within the reader. Another tweet shows a quote that addresses a Sikh’s relationship with God:

“Oh Master, I, your servant only have one tongue, saying your names how can I reach your limits? For this reason I am in your protection, forgive my faults.
Tweets such as this are not only critical in providing a primary source of Sikh history, but they are relevant in mobilizing and inspiring the younger generations to get a sense of their identity.

While there is a shared identity within the diaspora (and even in the homeland), modern times have given rise to subsets within the Sikh community who hold different views regarding their identity. Sikh sees a trend of constituents along different spectrums of their religious journey, similar to other major religions. This is a very contested topic that sees a lot of discussion on platforms such as Twitter, with both sides debating the attachment to religion:

Would it be wrong to say that Sikhi has a lot of ‘casual’ followers than other faiths? Zero interest in furthering their understanding of, or love for, Sikhi, throw on a Kara and call it a day, Sikh because I’m born in a family that say they’re Sikh.

Tweets such as this spark a lot of conversation regarding the Sikh identity, with those on the opposite side feeling that the discussion lacks nuance involving those who have grown up in the diaspora. Nevertheless, while these debates can be frustrating for all those involved, they demonstrate that there is an interest amongst the modern Sikh population to facilitate and lead discussions regarding their faith.

While not the same format as tweets, music has been an important tool to inspire and impact society, even beyond its use in Sikh issues. Panjabi artists used music extensively during the 2020 farmers’ protests, preserving their message for future generations and highlighting important moments within the Sikh timeline. The following song (transcribed in English) Panjab Bolda by Ranjit Bawa serves as an example of the modern Sikh mindset and how the farmers’ protests were an extension of their identity:
Thank you for spraying us with water, it was an act of kindness since we were looking to shower anyways. And the barricades placed to block the path (to Delhi) were used to make roti …. Sohan Singh Bhakna and (Baba) Kharak Singh were left in Lahore, but that is our blood too.

The lyrics describe the consistent optimistic mentality of Sikhs, as Bawa’s use of sarcasm offers a delicate way to discuss the state’s vehement tactics to discuss the state’s capital (Bainiwal 2022). It also makes references to Sikh freedom fighters and critical moments in Sikh history, highlighted when he discusses the Sikhs’ countless battles against oppression. The title, which means “Panjab speaks”, serves as an extension of the people of Panjab that were speaking out against the state and fighting for their rights. While Bawa’s song can be considered a passive warning to the government, other artists were more blatant in their message, giving threats on what the consequences are for opposing the Sikh people:

You will not be able to forcefully suppress the people of Punjab, unlike Kashmir.

The people of Punjab do not hesitate to get revenge … Be careful Delhi, you can ask (Ahmad Shah) Abdali about us … Delhi placed orders against me, but don’t forget that Delhi borders with Punjab.

In comparison to the previous song lyrics, the artist, Side Moosewala, threatens direct action against the Indian government and reminds them of the group whose rights they are trying to stifle. More specifically, Moosewala sets himself apart from artists as he utilizes clips in which the protesters are directly responding to state violence with violence and connects it to the broader history of issues between Panjab and oppressive regimes in Delhi (Bainiwal 2022). Moosewala was unique in that his music utilized a mixture of modern beats combined with lyrics
that were readily absorbed by a wider audience. His music is a part of a new generation of Panjabi artists that look to raise awareness for their people and ensure their history is preserved.
CONCLUSIONS

Collective action is crucial in order to rise up and fight against those who attempt to stifle your rights. The Sikh religion is representative of this concept, with many examples appearing across its timeline. A very small number of these examples have been identified within this paper, but even this small number can be used to demonstrate the importance of a shared identity. In a world still dealing with human rights violations, it is crucial to know how to stand up against oppressive institutions. Instructions on standing up to these institutions can be gleaned from the stories described here, showing what it takes to be able to resist the evil that manifests within society. To be able to utilize the determination and mental fortitude that is a part of the Sikh identity is something that would be helpful to all those looking to take action to protect their rights and freedoms.

The Sikh identity is one that has been forged through hundreds of years of martyrdom, perseverance, and sacrifice. This showcases why the Sikh community had such a strong presence at an event such as the farmers’ protests of 2020 - they had done it all before, at times at an even greater scale. Sikh stories illustrate why its constituents feel so strongly about their religion, as they belong to a rich history of warriors and individuals who are willing to die for their beliefs. That is why the title of this paper, Raj Karega Khalsa, rings within the hearts of the Sikh community — it is not just a slogan for Sikhs, it is something they can achieve, just as they have done in the past.
FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research on this topic would include a more in-depth look at individual perspectives on the Sikh identity. This paper compiles a collection of stories from the Sikh timeline that are impactful in helping to create this personality, but it does not provide first-hand narratives regarding how one feels about their identification. The best way to achieve this would be to interview individuals within different age groups and make sure they are in different parts of the diaspora or homeland. This would be beneficial to get a varied number of responses that provide insight into how different groups of Sikhs feel about their identity. Furthermore, it would be helpful to interview non-Sikh people that have interactions with Sikhs, in order to get a sense of how others perceive Sikhs in the present day and see if they have similar beliefs on the Sikh identity.
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