

# Shifting U.S. Racial and Ethnic Identities and Sikh American Activism



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*This article brings a historical and transnational perspective to the changing identities of immigrants and their census categorization, and emphasizes the role of immigrant political activism in identity change. The focus is on Sikh Americans, the oldest South Asian group in the United States, and on three periods when Sikh Americans rallied to change their identity. Early in the twentieth century, Sikhs mounted legal and political campaigns to obtain U.S. citizenship by claiming Aryan roots. Subsequently, attacks against Sikhs in India beginning in 1984 led to a movement to disavow an Indian identity. Finally, a post-9/11 backlash against men with turbans and beards sparked a campaign to be recognized as an American religious group as well as an ethnic group distinct from Indian Americans.*

**Keywords:** Sikh Americans, religion, majority and minority status, race and ethnic identity, South Asians, citizenship

Michael Omi and Howard Winant point out that racial classification in the United States has been, from its inception, an inherently political project (2015). Race and ethnicity categories in the census are part of the “nation-making process” in which the state delineates the groups that belong to the national community (Jung 2015). The literature on racial and ethnic categorization in the United States examines the meanings associated with what has been called “corporeal distinction,” or with national ancestry and cultural heritage (Omi and

Winant 2015, 107). It focuses on the ways these factors are shaped by individual or group-level circumstances intersecting with state structures and civil society. In other words, this literature concentrates almost entirely on conditions within the United States: on the U.S. racial system or structure (Jung 2015), how immigrants undergo the process of “racial acculturation” to this structure (Roth 2012), and on the micro-level racial fluidity that some individuals can achieve within this system (Saperstein and Penner 2012).

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The introduction of the *transnational turn* in U.S. immigration studies, however, cautions us about the danger of methodological nationalism, or the assumption that key social and political forces are contained or confined by the nation-state (Basch et al. 1994; Wimmer and Schiller 2002). In the case of immigrant identities in the United States, homeland or other international factors can play an important role in how groups are categorized. Sociopolitical developments between majority and minority groups in host countries due to global events can bring about shifts in group identification. In other words, the process of immigrant identity change may not simply be a result of individual immigrants assimilating to, or struggling with, the domestic racial system. It is often an outcome of group-based political mobilization shaped by transnational factors. Finally, the two processes—transnationalism and immigrant political mobilization—can intersect and interact. A change in the relationship between majority and minority groups in the country of origin may lead groups classified under the same ethnoracial category in the host country to self-identify and mobilize in different ways. These changes, as well as other global events, can affect groups differently within the United States, resulting in new patterns of activism around identity and categorization.

This article develops these theoretical arguments by focusing on Sikhs, an ethnoreligious group originating in the Punjab region of South Asia, which has been very active in the U.S. public sphere around racial, ethnic, and religious rights over the past hundred years. (Punjab was partitioned between India and Pakistan in 1947.) South Asians have been classified in a number of ways in the U.S. Census from 1910 to 1980 (Das Gupta 2006, 32–33; Haney López 1996). Sikhs are the earliest group of South Asian migrants to North America and dominated the migration from British India at the turn of the twentieth century. This migration was concentrated on the west coasts of Canada and the United States.

Because the census does not have a religion category, we do not have an accurate estimate of how many Sikhs live in the United States at the current time. According to Pew Research Center estimates, at least two hundred thousand Sikhs lived in the United States in 2012. This compares with around 1.6 million Hindus, who make up 51 percent of the Indian American population (Pew Research Center 2015). However, Sikh groups argue that the more accurate number of Sikhs in the country is between five hundred thousand to one million.<sup>1</sup> In the post-colonial period, Sikhs in South Asia have been largely concentrated in the state of Punjab in northwest India and made up only 1.7 percent of the Indian population as a whole in 2011; Hindus were 79.8 percent of the Indian population in the same period. Many observant Sikh men, and some women, maintain their unshorn hair in a turban (men also maintain unshorn beards and mustaches) and carry a ceremonial dagger (usually hidden under clothing), as these are articles of faith in the Sikh tradition. These visible symbols of religion have made Sikhs particularly vulnerable to discrimination and racial attacks, one reason for Sikh American activism. But this does not explain why Sikhs have redefined their racial and ethnic identities several times over the past hundred years, which is the focus of this article.

This article demonstrates the impact of global and transnational factors on the identities of immigrants and even the American-born generation. It also showcases the active role of racial and ethnic groups in contesting and trying to change imposed identity categories. Specifically, it traces the shifting racial and ethnic identities of Sikh Americans, focusing on three periods when they rallied to change their racial-ethnic identities. The first period of activism was in the early decades of the twentieth century when Sikhs mobilized as Indians with Aryan roots to gain access to U.S. citizenship. They also began to link their racial discrimination in North America to their status as British colonial subjects. Consequently, they rallied as

1. Part of this argument rests on the fact that Sikhs are greatly overrepresented in the diaspora and comprised 34 percent of the Indian population in Canada in 2001, more than the Hindu population from India which was 27 percent (Lindsay 2001). In England and Wales, Sikhs are almost as many as Hindus (732,429 versus 817,000 in the 2011 census).

Indian patriots around a militant Indian nationalist movement. Discrimination against Sikhs in India during and after Indian independence in 1947, and attacks against Sikhs in India beginning in 1984, however, led to the rise of a Sikh separatist movement. This in turn led to a campaign by many Sikh Americans, in the second period of activism, to disavow an Indian identity and mobilize as Sikh nationalists. The third period came in the wake of September 11, 2001. A post-9/11 backlash against men with turbans and beards sparked a movement to be recognized as an American religious group deserving of accommodations for its articles of faith, as well as an ethnic group distinct from Indian Americans in the U.S. census.

### FACTORS SPURRING MOBILIZATION AROUND RACE AND ETHNICITY

Racial and ethnic categories in the U.S. census were developed in the late 1700s because race and color were the basis for citizenship and legal status (Anderson 2002, 269–71). Two hundred years later, after civil rights laws were passed, the census became a tool to measure racial disparities and allocate funds to reduce these disparities as well as for election redistricting in the wake of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. A federal measure, Directive 15, adopted in 1977, led to the adoption of the ethnoracial pentagon of five categories—white, black, Hispanic, Asian or Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaskan Native—still used today with some modifications. Although the state obviously plays an important role in racially and ethnically classifying groups, we should also examine how and why immigrants challenge census categories, and the role that developments in the home countries can play in promoting these campaigns.

In their seminal book, *Nations Unbound*, Linda Basch and her coauthors argue that many immigrants are “transmigrants,” individuals who “take actions, make decisions, and develop subjectivities and identities embedded

in networks of relationships that connect them simultaneously to two or more nation-states” (1994, 7). Other researchers have also demonstrated that in the contemporary period, many countries, parties, and groups have begun to recognize the value of harnessing the political capital of their diasporas to advance particular domestic and international agendas (Lyons and Mandaville 2012; Varadarajan 2010). This type of work has challenged the container model of the nation-state, and shown that we cannot understand the experiences and activism of ethnic groups by solely focusing on national processes. Most literature on transnationalism argues that it wanes over generations (Levitt and Waters 2002). This perspective, however, has also been recently challenged by research showing that the second and later generations can continue to maintain special ties with the ancestral homeland (Azuma 2017).

Paul Schor presents an interesting discussion of several mobilizations around American census categories by immigrants that were impacted by developments in their home countries (2005). For instance, the Mexican government and Mexican American organizations mobilized to challenge the new category “Mexican race” introduced in the 1930 Census—until then, Mexicans had been classified as white (Schor 2005, 92–93).<sup>2</sup> Another example is the case of immigrant organizations representing national minorities in central and eastern Europe who mobilized, due to the rise of nationalist sentiments in Europe, to have their mother tongue used to classify their populations in the 1910 census instead of birthplace. Some Jewish groups attempted to have Jews classified as Hebrews in the same census to distinguish them from other central and eastern European immigrants (Schor 2005, 94–95).<sup>3</sup>

Although ethnicity is usually understood as referring to national background, majority and minority status within the country of origin can profoundly affect the attitude of immigrant groups toward their homeland state and con-

2. The Census Bureau backed down at this time but later disagreements about the “race” of Mexicans led to the mobilization of Latinos around a separate census category that defined them on the basis of language and ethnicity, rather than race (Prewitt 2013, 76).

3. Although this attempt was not successful, Jews came to be distinguished from other Europeans as Yiddish speakers when the mother tongue question was introduced in 1910 (Schor 2005, 94).

sequently ethnic identity and political activism in host countries. Majority and minority groups usually have very different histories, political interests, and social concerns in their homelands given that the culture of the dominant group often tends to be institutionalized as the national culture, marginalizing minority groups (Gurr 2000; Wimmer 1997). In an earlier research project, I found that Hindu and Muslim Indian immigrants in the United States had very different conceptions of Indianness tied to their majority and minority positions in India, and were mobilizing to influence American and Indian politics in line with their respective definitions of national identity (Kurien 2001). Traumatic events in the homeland affecting minority groups may be memorialized within communities and can lead to ethnic solidarity and mobilization in host countries. For instance, the Armenian genocide in Turkey in 1915 became the catalyst for Armenian Americans to lobby Congress to obtain official commemoration of the event and to demand cuts in aid to Turkey (Paul 2000, 31). Likewise, Sarah Wayland discusses the activism of Sri Lankan Tamil Canadians against the atrocities committed on the Tamils—a minority group in Sri Lanka—by the Sri Lankan state, for recognition as a distinct group, and in support of a separate Tamil Eelam state (2004).

Discrimination against minority groups in host countries can result in the development of what has been called “reactive ethnicity” (Portes and Rumbaut 2001, 284) or “rejection-identification” (Branscombe, Schmitt, and Harvey 1999)—in other words, stronger ethnic identification as a self-defense mechanism against marginalization, and attempts to separate from the majority group. In their study of Christian and Muslim Arab Americans in the Detroit region in the post-September 11 period, Kristine Ajrouch and Amaney Jamal find that Arab Christians were more likely to identify as white when compared with Arab Muslims (2007). Arab Muslims, they argued, demonstrated a greater tendency to distance themselves “from the mainstream,” perhaps due to experiences of being “othered” and discriminated against (2007, 873). Rejection-identification can also lead to group-based activism. Fiona Barlow and her co-authors find that Māori respondents

who perceived race-based rejection in Australia were motivated to increase their support for political action for Māori rights (Barlow et al. 2012).

## METHODS

This article draws on material from two larger projects. The first examined the activism of a variety of national Indian American advocacy organizations, and a second, ongoing project, focuses on South Asian community formation and mobilization in some regions of the United States and Canada (the larger New York City, San Francisco, Vancouver, and Toronto areas). Both projects used a variety of methods of data collection: interviews with leaders, activists and lay community members, some participant observation, and an examination of archival material, internet websites, YouTube videos of talks and conferences, e-newsletters of organizations, and a variety of secondary sources such as newspaper, magazine, and internet articles. Sikhs are one of the most active groups that I studied in both projects. In this article, I draw on interviews with twenty-four Sikh American leaders, activists, and community members, both first and second generation, out of a total of fifty-four interviews with Sikh Americans for both projects together, conducted between 2007 and 2017. Any names of individuals, when used, have been changed to protect their identity. The names of the organizations have been retained.

## EARLY SOUTH ASIAN MIGRATION TO NORTH AMERICA

Sikhs from rural Punjab were the dominant group of immigrants from British India to North America in the early decades of the twentieth century for three reasons. First, economic conditions in the Punjab had worsened under British colonial land policies (Oldenburg 2002). The region also experienced droughts, famines, and epidemics during this period, triggering an outmigration in search of work (Jensen 1988, 24). Second, many Sikh men were in the British army. The British took over the Punjab region after a long and bitter struggle with Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the founder of the Sikh Empire (Gould 2006, 77–78). They were so impressed with the military skills of the Maharaja’s Sikh

warriors that they designated Sikhs a “martial race” and heavily recruited them into the British army (Dirks 2001, 178–80).<sup>4</sup> The British encouraged Sikh orthodoxy. Separate Khalsa Sikh, initiated Sikhs who maintain articles of faith, regiments were formed and the leaders of these regiments were rewarded by the British with honorary titles and material rewards to ensure their loyalty (Sohi 2014, 18). Sikhs were strong supporters of the British Empire in the nineteenth century: Sikh regiments were considered to be an elite unit of the British army and served around the world. A Sikh representative in Ottawa in 1908, protesting a discriminatory travel ban on the group, described Sikhs in the following way: “We are British subjects, of proven loyalty . . . With the name Sikh is linked up fidelity and loyalty to the Empire . . . The Sikh has always been ready in the past to give willing service to the Empire” (quoted in Gill 2014, 24).

The roots of the Sikh settlement in North America can be traced to the celebration of Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897, when a Sikh regiment based in India was sent to London to attend the rituals. In returning to India via Canada, they learned about the work opportunities on the Pacific coasts of Canada and the United States and some returned seeking work (McMahon 2001, 9). The final factor that gave Sikhs an advantage over men of other religions from Punjab were their religious networks. Sikhs had *gurdwaras* (temples) all along the long route from Punjab to North America, including in Hong Kong, where migrants had to break journey, often for weeks. The *gurdwaras* provided free lodging and one free meal a day, which was useful for wayfarers (Jensen 1988, 27).

A second, smaller group of migrants from India in the early decades of the twentieth century was made up of educated anticolonial leaders, both Sikh and non-Sikh, from urban areas, who left India to escape British surveillance and to find safer bases from which to organize a nascent independence movement. Many of them came as students to the United States to enroll in universities and learn about the U.S. political system (Sohi 2014, 21–22). The

University of California in Berkeley was an important hub because the tuition was low and finding work nearby was possible (McMahon 2001, 29). But Indian students were also to be found in many other universities around the country.

#### EARLY SIKHS ON THE PACIFIC WEST COAST: FROM SUPPORTERS OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE TO ANTICOLONIAL INDIAN NATIONALISTS

Between 1901 and 1910, 5,762 immigrants, mostly Sikh, from Punjab in British colonial India arrived in Northern California (Gould 2006, 90). About an equal number arrived in British Columbia in Canada over the same period. Sikhs faced a variety of citizenship restrictions and exclusion acts in North America and mobilized against them. This mobilization became intertwined with a militant *Ghadar* (mutiny) Indian nationalist movement as they realized that the British, instead of providing support to its citizens, had condoned and supported the exclusion acts.

Punjabi communities in the United States and Canada were close-knit and movement across the border was relatively easy at the time. After the Continuous Journey Regulation of 1908 in Canada (requiring migrants to arrive in Canada through a direct ship voyage that in practice targeted Indians and prevented their migration) several thousand moved down to the Pacific West coast of the United States (Johnston 2014, 18). Around 85 to 90 percent of the Punjabi immigrants in the first decade of the twentieth century were Sikh, even though Sikhs made up only around 13 percent of the population of Punjab (McMahon 2001, 10; Sohi 2014, 8). Punjabi Muslims were the second largest religious group among the early West Coast immigrants, followed by Punjabi Hindus. But they were all identified in the United States as Hindoos or Hindus, the term then used for inhabitants of India, which was also called Hindustan, or the land of the Hindus. The early immigrants worked in lumber mills, railroad construction, and later in agriculture (McMahon 2001, 19).

4. In fact, the British were able to defeat the first major anticolonial rebellion in India in 1857, primarily because of the support of Sikh regiments (Jensen 1988, 6).

Sikh immigrant workers faced anti-Asian mobilization in both Canada and the United States. A Japanese and Korean Exclusion League formed in 1905 in both San Francisco and Vancouver by white labor union leaders was renamed the Asiatic Exclusion League by 1907 to include Indians among the groups that it opposed (Jensen 1988, 44). In 1907, a series of race riots directed against Indian immigrants by white workers took place along the North American West Coast. The first took place in Bellingham, Washington, soon to be followed by others in Seattle, Everett, Vancouver, and parts of California. The 1908 Canadian law banning Indian migrants emboldened officials in the United States to take their own measures against the “Hindu invasion” of Northern California (107). Immigration officials in San Francisco used a “likely to become a public charge” clause beginning in 1909 to exclude a large number of Indians seeking entry into the United States, leading to a steep decline in the number of Indian immigrants in the United States, from 1,710 in 1908, down to 377 in 1909 (111). Despite these small numbers, in 1910, a U.S. immigration commission issued a report on Indian immigrants, describing them as “the least desirable race of immigrants thus far admitted to the United States” and as “unassimilable” (cited, 141). In 1912, American immigration officials were also able to pressure steamship companies to stop selling tickets to Indian laborers intending to travel to the American West Coast (147).

As Indians became aware that the discriminatory laws against them in Canada and the United States had been passed with the approval and support of the British, they realized that they could not turn to their British-ruled home country for support against discrimination in North America (Sohi 2014, 27). Anticolonialists started to link the discrimination that Indians were facing in North America with their colonial status in India. One older male Sikh interviewee in Northern California, Dilraj Singh, a descendant of an early Sikh anticolonial leader, talked about how the white mobs attacking Indians in Bellingham had called

them slaves and coolies. According to Dilraj, Indian immigrants were “discriminated as slave Indians since they were not from an independent, free country. They were from a country . . . under British rule.” Anticolonial leaders began to mobilize Indians in North America against British rule, calling for a revolution in India like the American Revolution (Sohi 2014, 66). They warned the British colonialists that racial discrimination experienced by Indians within the territories of the British Empire—referring to Canada—could foment revolution in India (Sohi 2014, 34). They started several anticolonial periodicals that they sent to India and to Indian communities around the world. One of the important goals of these publications was to turn Sikhs in India against the British by telling them about the Canadian exclusion acts targeting them (Johnston 2014, 24; Sohi 2014, 53).

A group of nationalistic Indian students formed the Hindustan Association of the United States in Oregon in May 1913 (Jensen 1988, 173, 179–80). Later that year, they established the Hindustan Ghadar Party for Indian independence in Oregon, with its headquarters in San Francisco (Sohi 2014, 57). Although the Ghadar movement was active in both Canada and the United States, it was based in the United States, in part because of America’s history of fighting a war against Britain and gaining independence, a link that Ghadar leaders also emphasized in their speeches to members of the wider American society (Sohi 2014, 66–68; Jensen 1988, 94–95). The party aimed to get its message out through the publication and dissemination of a weekly newspaper, the *Ghadar*, and a volume of poetry composed and written by Sikh workers, *Ghadar-di-gunj*, Echoes of Mutiny (Sohi 2014, 59–60). Both were mailed (or sent through individual travelers) to South Asian communities in North America and other countries, and to India.<sup>5</sup> In 1914, the 376 Punjabi (mostly Sikh) passengers of a ship, the *Komagata Maru*, sailing directly from India to Canada (to challenge the Continuous Journey Regulation) were not even allowed to disembark in Vancouver and were sent back to India,

5. The newspaper periodically carried the following advertisement: “Wanted – Brave soldiers to stir up Ghadar in India / Pay – Death / Prize – Martyrdom / Pension – Liberty / Field of battle – India” (Jensen 1988, 183).

many to face death or imprisonment. This incident angered Sikhs on the North American Pacific Coast and led to several thousand Ghadar supporters leaving North America for India to launch an Indian independence movement. By mid-1915, the British had managed to crush the movement and put India under martial law. Some Ghadarites were sentenced to death and others were imprisoned or confined to their home villages (Buchignani, Indra, and Srivastava 1985, 64; Sohi 2014, 163–64).

#### **U.S. RACIAL STATUS: FROM HINDU CAUCASIANS TO NONWHITE ALIENS**

In the United States, the racial status of early Indian migrants, and consequently, their eligibility for citizenship (then conferred only on “free white persons” and people of African descent), was not settled until 1923. Drawing on colonial scholarship that classified upper-caste Indians as Aryans, part of the Indo-European people originating from the Caucasus who had migrated to India several thousand years earlier (Trautmann 1997), Indian immigrants in the United States, (mostly Sikhs at the time) argued that as upper-caste Indians, they were Aryans and therefore Caucasians, and consequently eligible for citizenship. Between 1908 and 1922, around sixty-nine Indians received citizenship in various states in the United States. In California alone, at least seventeen Indian men were granted citizenship during this period (Jensen 1988, 255).

Bhagat Singh Thind, whose name is associated with a famous legal case that denied him—and subsequently other Indians—citizenship, was a turban-wearing Sikh who had come to the United States in 1913 for higher education. He was active in the Ghadar movement (Coulson 2015, 15–22). In the middle of his studies at the University of California, Berkeley, he joined the U.S. army to fight in World War I (the first turbaned Sikh to serve in the U.S. army) and was honorably discharged in 1918 when the war ended. He initially re-

ceived U.S. citizenship, but it was revoked a few months later. In 1919, Thind filed a court case to challenge the revocation. Following on the Ozawa case, in which a Japanese American plaintiff had been denied citizenship on the grounds that although he might be white, he was not Caucasian, Thind’s lawyers argued that as a high-caste Hindu of the Aryan race from north India, Thind was of Caucasian descent and therefore eligible for U.S. citizenship. They made the case that the caste system in India prevented interracial marriages in India, like the racial system did in the United States, ensuring the Aryan racial purity of upper-caste Indians (Haney López 1996, 149; Coulson 2015, 26). In 1923, British-born Justice George Sutherland delivered the unanimous Supreme Court decision that though Thind might be Caucasian, he was not white as commonly understood in the United States and western Europe, and was therefore not eligible for citizenship. Doug Coulson argues that the U.S. Supreme Court denied Thind citizenship under pressure from the British government because of Thind’s involvement in the Ghadar movement (2015).<sup>6</sup> Many Indians in the United States were stripped of their citizenship after this ruling. Because a 1913 California Alien Land Law prohibited “aliens ineligible for citizenship” from owning or holding long-term leases on agricultural land, Asian exclusionists in California also took the opportunity to deprive Indians of the land they owned (Jensen 1988, 265).

#### **FROM NONWHITE ALIENS TO SUCCESSFUL LOBBYISTS FOR CITIZENSHIP AND INDIAN INDEPENDENCE**

These restrictions stimulated and reinforced Sikh involvement in Indian nationalist activism. Dalip Singh Saund, who eventually became the first Asian American in Congress (1957–63), was an early Sikh immigrant to California who came in 1920 to study at the University of California, Berkeley. In his autobiogra-

6. In 1917, exclusionists in the United States were successful in getting the U.S. government to pass an Immigration Act that included a literacy test and the demarcation of an Asiatic Barred Zone. As a result, the legal immigration of most Asians, including Sikhs, into the United States was prohibited. However, students were still permitted into the country and others were able to enter illegally through Mexico (McMahon 2001, 15). The Immigration Act of 1924 finally excluded all Asians from immigrating into the United States.

phy he wrote of that time, “All of us were ardent nationalists and we never passed up an opportunity to expound on India’s rights” (Saund 1960, 38). Seeking allies in the U.S. Congress, Indian leaders in the United States were able to convince important Americans that the support of the people of India for America was “key to victory over Japan” in World War II (Gould 2006, 334), leading the Roosevelt administration to establish an India section of the Office of Strategic Services (predecessor to the Central Intelligence Agency) in 1943 to forge alliances with anticolonial leaders in India (Gould 2006, 377). Two organizations—the Indian League, and the National Committee for Indian Freedom—were active in Washington, D.C., in the 1930s and 1940s, supported financially by the Sikh-based organization on the West Coast, the Indian National Congress Association of India established by Dalip Singh Saund (Jacoby 2007, 251). A Sikh, J. J. Singh based in New York, elected president of the Indian League in 1939, played a leadership role in the mobilization of American support for India’s independence and citizenship rights for Indians in the United States. Through J. J. Singh’s close connection with Representatives Clare Booth Luce of Connecticut and Emanuel Celler of New York (Gould 2006, 394), he was able to influence them to introduce the Luce-Celler Act in 1946 in Congress which granted citizenship to Indians, restored the citizenship rights for those who had obtained it prior to the *Thind* case, and permitted a quota of one hundred immigrants from India to the United States every year.

#### POST-1965 SIKH IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES: FROM OTHER RACE TO ASIAN INDIAN

Most contemporary Sikh Americans are post-1965 immigrants. After the passage of the 1965 Immigration act, Sikhs in the United States were able to sponsor their relatives from India. Others arrived in the United States for higher education or for work in professional fields. After the independence of India in 1947, the U.S. Census classified all people of Indian background, including Sikhs, in the Other Race category in 1950 and 1960 and identified them as Asiatic Indian or Hindu. In 1970, however, the

U.S. census reclassified people “having origins in the Indian subcontinent” as white. By this time, the civil rights laws had come into effect and census data were used to measure and track discrimination against groups. A 1975 report by the Ad Hoc Committee on Racial and Ethnic Definitions of the Federal Interagency Committee on Education, describes how people from the Indian subcontinent presented a problem to the committee as it deliberated about how to classify groups for the 1970 census.

The question at issue was whether to include them in the minority category Asian because they came from Asia and some are victims of discrimination in this country, or to include them in this category [Caucasian-white] because they are Caucasians, though frequently of darker skin than other Caucasians. The final decision favored the latter. (Trotter and Michael 1975, 4–5)

On learning of this decision, an Indian American organization, the Association of Indians in America (AIA), formed in 1967, mobilized, starting from the mid-1970s to make the argument that Indians in the United States should be included under the category of “Asian” as they had been in the 1917 Asiatic Exclusion Act, and that they experienced discrimination. Through their efforts, AIA leaders introduced a new census category, Asian Indian, for the census of 1980, and obtained minority status for Indian Americans (and consequently Sikhs) as Asians from 1980 on (Dutta 1982).

Although Sikhs self-identified as Indians at this time, an early Sikh immigrant who came to the United States to study in the 1960s described how the turban worn by many Sikh men made them stand out. “When we came here, we were out and out Indians, you know. The identity of the Sikh was forced upon us when the local people looked on us turbaned people as different. So, we were Indians at heart, and Sikhs by our looks.” Because of the turban, other interviewees told me that Sikh American men faced some “hostility and backlash” during the 1979–1980 Iranian hostage crisis “because people associated Sikhs with Ayatollah Khomeini, because he wore a turban.” Issues



connected with the turban and beard led Sikh Americans to form an organization—the Sikh Council of North America—in 1979 to unite at the national level to combat discrimination.

#### **SIKHS IN INDEPENDENT INDIA: FROM PARTITION TO 1984**

For someone to understand the shift in Sikh attitudes toward the Indian state and an Indian identity between the 1940s and the 1980s, some background on developments in India is necessary. The partition of India in 1947 into India and Pakistan came as a major blow to Indian nationalists in the United States who had mobilized for an undivided India. Sikhs were particularly badly affected because Punjab was divided between India and Pakistan, Pakistan getting a much bigger portion than India. Several sacred sites and sites important to Sikh history remained in Pakistan and Sikhs living in the Punjab region of Pakistan had to move to Indian Punjab.

Toward the end of the colonial period, Sikh leaders in India mobilized for a separate state for Sikhs called Khalistan because they realized that the Muslim demand for a separate state was being seriously considered. To pacify Sikhs, Indian nationalist leaders promised them special consideration. In 1946, Nehru was quoted as saying, “The brave Sikhs of Punjab are entitled to special consideration [and] I see nothing wrong in an area and a set up in the north wherein the Sikhs can also experience the glow of freedom” (K. Singh 2005, 291). Gandhi and Nehru are also said to have assured Sikhs that the Indian constitution would be framed in such a way that minority communities like Sikhs would be provided adequate protection. However, the final constitution document created a strongly centralized political structure, which the two Sikh representatives strongly opposed (S. H. Singh 1949). Again, Article 25 classified Sikhs—as well as Jains and Buddhists—as Hindus and refused to acknowledge that theirs was a separate religion. Consequently, the two Sikh representatives in the Constituent Assembly refused to ratify and sign the Indian constitution (P. Singh 2005, 914), a fact that Khalistan activists in the contemporary period have seized upon.

In the 1950s, Indian states were carved out

based on language but the Indian government was initially reluctant to grant a separate Punjabi language state for Sikhs given concerns about creating a state based on religion. In 1966, after a victory for India in the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War, due in good part to the support of Sikhs, however, the Indian Punjab region was divided into three states—Punjab, Haryana, and Himachel Pradesh—and a Punjabi-majority state was created. However some of the specific ways that the division took place were not to the liking of Sikhs. Tension also arose about the division of the river water running through the region, with Sikhs arguing that the Hindu states of Himachal Pradesh and Haryana were favored over Sikh-dominated Punjab. These issues led to Sikh mobilization and a demand for “an autonomous region” within India where Sikhs and Sikhism could flourish. When the central government, by this time with Indira Gandhi as prime minister, proved intransigent on all of these demands, a secessionist Khalistan movement developed for a separate homeland for Sikhs free of Indian control. In the early 1980s, some Khalistan leaders turned to violence and militancy.

Sikh discontent regarding discrimination against them and the Punjab region by the Indian central government came to a head on June 5, 1984, when Indira Gandhi ordered troops into their sacred Golden Temple (the center of Sikh spiritual and political authority) in the northern Indian city of Amritsar to rout out militants. Several thousand Sikh pilgrims were in the temple because it was the day of an important Sikh religious festival. Several hundreds, possibly thousands, of pilgrims were trapped in the complex and killed in the attack. A few months later, on October 31, 1984, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by two of her Sikh bodyguards in Delhi, setting off anti-Sikh violence in Delhi and other cities in north India. Several thousand Sikhs were killed. Allegations circulated that key figures of the ruling Congress Party had been involved in the massacres and that the attacks were well organized, but no action was taken against the perpetrators. Political repression against Sikhs in Punjab suspected of being supporters of Khalistan continued for another decade, leading to the detention, torture, and disappearance of tens of

thousands of Sikh men (Chima 2010, 3; Human Rights Watch 2007).

### THE IMPACT OF 1984 ON SIKH AMERICANS

Although Sikh Americans were classified and identified as Indian after Indian independence, the described developments in India led Sikhs to believe that they were being systematically marginalized and treated as second-class citizens. The events of 1984 stunned the Sikh community around the world and proved a watershed moment, bringing together even those who had until then not been involved with the Sikh community. As one of my interviewees poignantly narrated, “We never thought, I never thought that a massacre would happen in India . . . we were part of India, we defended India, we spilt our blood in India for India, you know.” North American Sikhs held a large convention in Madison Square Garden in New York City on July 28, 1984—this was after the invasion of the Golden Temple but before the large-scale anti-Sikh attacks in north India. An estimated 2,500 attended and formed a World Sikh Organization to represent Sikhs in Canada, the United States, and Britain; at present the organization survives only in Canada. The leaders called for Sikhs supporting the Indian government “to disassociate themselves from that regime” (Howe 1984). There were many calls for Khalistan at the convention but the final resolution defined it broadly as a place where Sikhs could “enjoy the ‘glow of freedom’” that Nehru had promised.

Sikhs in Canada and the United States mobilized to monitor events in India and to organize marches and protests in front of the Indian consulates and the United Nations in New York City. The Sikh Foundation, founded in the San Francisco Bay area in 1967, hired a public relations team and prepared a full-page advertisement for newspapers in New York City, Wash-

ington, D.C., San Francisco, and Los Angeles.<sup>7</sup> Through the help of the public relations team, Sikh commentators appeared on many radio and television shows and programs and also went to Washington, D.C., to educate Congress “about the civil war against Sikhs happening in India” in the words of one of my interviewees. Sikhs were successful in obtaining support from some Republicans in Congress, including Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) and U.S. Representative Dan Burton (R-IN, founding member and co-chair of the Pakistani Caucus) who spoke about human rights violations in India in the Congress on a regular basis. In the post-1984 period, a variety of Khalistani organizations were formed in the United States, including the Council of Khalistan (founded in 1986) and a Khalistan Affairs Center (founded in 1991), both with offices in Washington, D.C. In New York City, most Sikhs stopped attending the annual India Day Parade after 1984 and from 1986 on organized a separate Sikh Day Parade.

In the meantime, the Indian government undertook its own propaganda campaign. A book written by two well-known Toronto-based Canadian journalists makes the claim, based on reports from the reputed *India Today* magazine, that India had posted a number of “intelligence operatives” in North America from 1982 onward “to hijack” or discredit the Sikh separatist movement.<sup>8</sup> Several older Sikh American men I interviewed seemed to be aware of this given that they talked about “plants” by the Indian government being placed in Sikh communities. As one elderly man explained, “The thing is that, even before ’84, I think, because of the Ghadar movement from USA, Sikhs have always been considered radicals by the Indian government.” After the attack on the Golden Temple, the Indian government produced a video defending the raid and minimizing the damage on the temple and the casualties from the attack, as well as a glossy magazine prais-

7. See Sikh Foundation International, “The Sikhs of India are much like the American colonists of 1776,” July 2011, [http://www.sikhfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Preserving\\_Lives\\_1984/1984\\_Full\\_Page\\_advertisement.pdf](http://www.sikhfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Preserving_Lives_1984/1984_Full_Page_advertisement.pdf), accessed January 23, 2018. The ad was discussed in an interview with Sarinder Singh Kapany about the 1984 attacks (see 1984 Living History, “Narinder Singh Kapany,” February 28, <http://www.1984livinghistory.org/2014/02/28/narinder-singh-kapany>, accessed January 23, 2018).

8. The book focused on the investigation into the 1985 Air India disaster, when a plane originating in Canada was blown up, allegedly by Sikh Canadian Khalistan supporters, killing all on board.

ing the contributions of Sikhs to India and denouncing Sikh separatists, both of which were sent to Sikh communities in North America and to key American and Canadian Hindus (Kashmeri and McAndrew 2005, 45, 49). These efforts further enraged Sikhs in North America.

Several interviewees mentioned that the events of 1984 also created tensions with Hindus with whom, until that time, they had had fairly close and cordial relations. An older Sikh man from California told me, "I actually had a lot of Hindu friends . . . what happened in 1984 definitely created a wedge between the two communities . . . it took a long time to heal." Another issue that a large number of interviewees mentioned was that many Sikhs stopped identifying as Indian after the events of 1984. A second-generation man in his thirties said, "I was raised in a context, and this was part of my training earlier as a teen, where I was taught, we are Sikhs, we are Punjabis, we are not Indians, the Indian state has suppressed our community, and we ought to reject that identity." Similarly, another young Sikh man remarked,

I mean essentially . . . what's clear among most Americans [Sikhs] with whom I interact is that Indian identity is just not part of the equation . . . strangers come up to us in the streets all the time, especially with the turban and the beard, and they'll ask, you know, where are you from? Sometimes they'll say oh, are you from India? And I know many people including people in my own family who would say no, I'm not from India, I'm from Punjab. You know, just refuse to be identified with the Indian state.

A young woman emphasized,

For me, it was about my identity being primarily Sikh, and not Indian. I mean, I just always saw myself as Sikh . . . I was well educated at a young age about the events of '84, and feel quite strongly about that to this day. I've always identified as Sikh, and as American. I have not identified with the Indian state.

As the anti-Sikh violence abated in India in the mid-1990s, support for an armed Khalistani

movement among immigrant Sikhs in North America gradually dwindled, though some pockets of support remain. Consequently, scholars like Giorgio Shani refer to Khalistan in the contemporary period as a "*detrterritorialized* imagined community" or, like Cynthia Mahmood, as "political critique" (Shani 2008, 143 [emphasis in the original]; Mahmood 2014). Some of my respondents seemed to agree with this characterization. An older Sikh man described it this way: "this demand for Khalistan and our disowning India, it's, it's really a form of protest." However, from my interviews it seemed that Khalistan meant different things to different people. Here is a Sikh American graduate student articulating what he thinks Khalistan means for the U.S. Sikh community today:

I think a better way to think about the Khalistani movement is that . . . most Sikhs think that they got dicked over when partition happened and that Sikhs didn't get their fair share. And I think in general they would like to see a space in which Sikhism would be able to flourish in India. I don't think people are super crazy about wanting their own nation-state, but they understand that because of the historical processes around post-colonialism, that Sikhism has been corrupted. And the Punjab is not a place in which Sikhism is allowed to flourish and spread its wings as far as it can go. So in that sense most Sikhs are Khalistani in that they wish for a space in which Sikhism can flourish. And they all hate the Indian government: everybody hates the Indian government.

Many interviewees who talked about Khalistan (the issue did not come up in all the interviews) did seem to see it as a protest movement against the Indian state that emphasized Sikh self-determination rather than an actual separatist movement. These individuals, mostly second-generation Sikh Americans, pointed to the variety of ways that organizations formed by individuals of their generation had been mobilizing around discrimination against Sikhs by the Indian state, without mentioning the issue of Khalistan.

For instance, an organization, Ensaaf, formed in 2004 by second-generation Sikh

Americans in the Bay area, has been working in Punjab to “end impunity and achieve justice for mass state crimes . . . by documenting abuses, bringing perpetrators to justice, and organizing survivors.”<sup>9</sup> The organization’s oral history and video testimonies project has collected two hundred oral histories about disappearances and extrajudicial killings in Punjab between 1984 and 1995. A variety of Sikh American organizations formed by second-generation Sikh Americans mobilized around the thirtieth anniversary of the events of 1984. An organization called Saanjh in the San Francisco Bay Area came up with the idea of creating a video archive of interviews with Sikhs around the world about their memories and experiences of 1984.<sup>10</sup> Another organization, The Surat Initiative, collaborated with Ensaaf to create a 2014 Remembrance Project, posting a historical item linked to 1984 every day through the whole of 2014.<sup>11</sup> In September 2014, when the newly elected Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi, was visiting the United States, Sikh Coalition—yet another organization formed by second-generation Sikh Americans—and Ensaaf organized a congressional hearing focusing on the alleged collusion of Indian politicians from the Congress Party in the 1984 anti-Sikh violence and the lack of indictments against the perpetrators of that violence. All of these organizations have kept the issue of anti-Sikh violence and discrimination alive, educating the younger generations and some members of the wider society about these issues, and seeking justice for the victims.

In contrast to the quoted interviewees, others felt the Khalistan movement continued to be about establishing a Sikh political territory. One graduate student who had read Shani’s 2008 book on Sikh nationalism, for example, said it was “absurd” to argue that Sikh nationalism is no longer tied to territory. “Because how could people be shouting these slogans [for Khalistan] at the Sikh Day Parade, and then not pointing to Punjab?” He felt that Khalistan was still a simmering issue within the Sikh

American community, although not a focus of many Sikh American organizations in the post-September 11 period. The young man however, pointed me to a Sikh American organization, Sikhs for Justice, that was working with the United Nations for Khalistan.

Sikhs for Justice was formed in 2009 in New York City largely by immigrant Sikh lawyers in response to the lack of justice for the “genocide” of Sikhs in India after the death of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The organization, which now has representatives in Canada as well, gained publicity within the Indian American community by filing human rights violations lawsuits under the Alien Tort Claims Act, eventually dismissed by U.S. courts, against two prominent Indian Congress leaders alleged to have been involved in the anti-Sikh attacks of 1984 who were visiting the United States.

In 2015, influenced by the Scottish independence referendum of the previous year, the organization launched a Referendum 2020 movement, seeking to build support from Sikhs around the world for “India-occupied Punjab” to become an independent country (Nibber 2015). The goal is to hold an unofficial referendum in 2020 among Sikh communities in India and around the world to find out the level of support for Khalistan. If the majority supports Khalistan, the organization plans to work with the United Nations to hold an official referendum and, the group hopes, to achieve independence. In a YouTube video of a 2015 Sikh community event held in Toronto on April 9 to educate people about the referendum, a second-generation activist for Sikhs for Justice from Toronto speaking in English and some Punjabi (most speeches were by immigrants and were in Punjabi), addressed the “youth,” explaining the goals and rationale of the referendum:

Sikhs for Justice’s goal is an independent Punjab, whether it is called Khalistan, whether it is given any other name, we want a state that is based on Sikh principles that looks out for

9. “A Mission to End Impunity,” *Ensaaf*, <http://www.ensaaf.org>, accessed January 24, 2018.

10. The 1984 Living History Project, <http://www.1984livinghistory.org>, accessed January 24, 2018.

11. “The 1984 Remembrance Project,” *The Surat Initiative*, <http://www.thesuratinitiative.com/social-justice-project/1984-remembrance-project>, accessed January 24, 2018.

Sikh issues, and Sikh people. We want our home and we want our home back, which we chose to give to the Indians in 1947.<sup>12</sup>

Describing India as “the occupying power,” he argued that every year, Indians “steal 80 billion dollars from Punjab [referring to the river waters], I want to make it clear, steal \$80 billion every year from *your* pocket.” At the end of his speech, he introduced Karen Parker, a U.S.-based attorney specializing in human rights law, as a person who had liaised with the United Nations to help a variety of groups achieve independence, and who had “single-handedly, brought the world’s most oppressive regimes to their knees.” In her presentation, Parker outlined the five principles of self-determination of the United Nations, advised her audience on how Sikhs could make a case under each of the five principles, and promised her support to Sikhs for their self-determination movement.<sup>13</sup> A similar event with many of the same speakers (including Karen Parker) was held in California on August 17, 2015.<sup>14</sup>

### THE IMPACT OF 9/11: MOBILIZING AS AN AMERICAN RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC MINORITY

A second watershed moment for American Sikhs came on September 11, 2001, when they became the targets of hate crimes in the United States. This also coincided with the coming-of-age of the second generation, who took the lead in forming organizations to obtain public recognition and civil rights for Sikh Americans as a distinct American religious minority. Turban-wearing Sikhs became particularly vulnerable to hate crimes after September 11 because they have been often mistaken for Osama bin Laden followers. The first fatality of the 9/11 backlash in the United States was a Sikh, Balbir Singh Sodhi of Arizona, who was killed on September 15, 2011, by a man who thought Sodhi was a Muslim. In describing how Sikhs were affected

immediately after 9/11, a young activist from the Richmond Hill area of Queens (a neighborhood with a large Sikh settlement) spoke of a Sikh man walking down the street who was beaten by baseball bats by a bunch of young white men. “So that was a shocker to everybody. We thought we were safe in Richmond Hill after India [referring to the anti-Sikh violence in north India] and now this was happening to us.” Another young man told me of hearing about “someone getting shot on 57th Street because of their turban and the police not registering a case. And the community was not taken seriously by law enforcement and also the media and politicians.” The “horrible, burning platform of 9/11” led to the formation of new Sikh advocacy organizations in the United States and the refocusing of others. The Sikh Coalition, one of the major U.S. Sikh advocacy organizations, was formed in the weeks after 9/11. Discussing its founding, Amrita Kaur argued that the need had been urgent:

Because it was such a big tragedy that occurred. And Sikhs were being impacted and targeted so, so deeply and so violently, that, you know, people took six months off work, and . . . stopped going to school . . . they spent a lot of time addressing these issues because they just felt like they couldn’t do any other work.

A Sikh organization, SMART (Sikh Mediawatch and Resource Taskforce), formed in 1996 to represent Sikhs in the media, changed its focus to civil rights issues after 9/11 and renamed itself SALDEF (Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund) in 2004. Yet another Sikh American organization, United Sikhs, originally created in 1999 to help the underprivileged in New York City’s borough of Queens, also changed its mission after 9/11 to focus on international issues of concern to the Sikh diaspora.

12. Elsewhere he refers to the fact that because the Sikh representatives did not sign the Indian constitution, Punjab was never really legally a part of India.

13. TAG TV Community Roundup, “‘2020 Referendum Conference’ by Sikhs for Justice,” April 9, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbXQr3lx\\_cl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbXQr3lx_cl), accessed January 24, 2018.

14. Sikhs for Justice Channel, “Watch ‘Referendum 2020’—Conference Live Broadcast from California,” August 16, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44TIVVcSJyU>, accessed January 24, 2018.

The activities of the national Sikh American advocacy organizations have focused on educating the wider public about Sikhs, mobilizing around their civil and religious rights, and drawing attention to hate crimes. SALDEF developed programs to, among other things, educate and train law enforcement personnel about the cultural and religious heritage of Sikh communities. Sikh Coalition and SALDEF also worked on educating the Transportation Security Administration at airports about the rights of Sikhs around their symbols of faith, the Sikh turban and *kirpan* (ceremonial dagger), to ensure that Sikh air travelers were not harassed.

Given the lack of knowledge about Sikhism in the United States, an important task facing Sikh American organizations has been to educate Americans about the Sikh religion. The Sikh Coalition and SALDEF now have short presentations on Sikhs and Sikhism on their websites, have organized Sikh awareness presentations in schools and educational institutions around the country, and have funded public service media messages to demystify the Sikh turban and beard. These organizations have also been very active in the educational arena to influence the way their religious histories and traditions are presented in U.S. school textbooks—and, indeed, to have these histories and traditions presented in the first place. They have been able to get Sikh content included in the curriculum in Texas, California, New York, New Jersey, and Idaho. A 2014 study by the Sikh Coalition found that Sikh children disproportionately experienced bullying in schools around the country.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, working with schools to combat negative stereotypes and address bullying has been an important task of the Sikh Coalition.

Sikh advocacy organizations have been particularly active around religious accommodation rights. Although turbaned Sikhs have been banned from joining the U.S. armed forces since the 1980s, due to the activism of second-generation Sikh leaders, individual exceptions were made in 2009 for three Sikhs who were

allowed to join the army and maintain their beards, turbans, and *kirpans*. Four other Sikh men were granted religious accommodations in 2016 and allowed to serve with their articles of faith. In early 2017, the U.S. army made it easier for religious accommodations to be provided for new recruits by allowing them to be approved at the brigade level. Sikh activists have also mobilized around the right of Sikhs to maintain their symbols of faith in the workplace and have been successful in getting Workplace Religious Freedom Acts introduced in New York City and California. Finally, Sikh American groups successfully mobilized to sponsor a float at the New Year's Rose Bowl Parade every year since 2014.

Hate crimes against turban-wearing Sikhs are an ongoing problem. The 2012 shooting attack on a Sikh temple in Wisconsin by a white supremacist killed five Sikhs and wounded many others. More recently, Sikh activists told me that hate crimes in the United States against Sikhs had escalated after the Paris and San Bernardino terrorist attacks. Sikh American advocacy organizations have mobilized to bring attacks against Sikhs to the attention of authorities, and in 2013 the FBI agreed to track those against Sikhs as well as Hindus and Arabs.

The events of 1984 and 2001 also led to a movement by Sikh American organizations to have Sikhs classified as a separate ethnic group, distinct from Indian Americans, in the 2010 U.S. census. In Britain, the House of Lords ruled in 1983 that Sikhs were an ethnic group and could therefore receive legal protection against discrimination for their articles of faith under the Race Relations Act of 1976 (Singh and Tatla 2006, 133). Using that precedent, United Sikhs, with the support of SALDEF, the Sikh Coalition, and other Sikh organizations, petitioned the Census Bureau to create a separate Sikh category in the census and to count them as an ethnicity, challenging the Census Bureau practice of counting Sikhs as Asian Indians even if they marked the Other Race category and wrote in Sikh on the census form. The Sikh organiza-

15. More than 50 percent of Sikh children (versus 32 percent of all American schoolchildren) reported being bullied. The figure for turbaned Sikhs was even higher, 67 percent. Many indicated that they were attacked because they were labeled as terrorists.

tions argued that this change was important because American Sikhs fit the classification of a minority under international law, that the U.S. category of race should also include ethnicity and the right to self-define that ethnicity, that the U.S. Sikh population remains invisible and undercounted because of the lack of a separate census category, and finally, that Sikhs have been victims of hate crimes and discrimination particularly after 9/11 but that these issues cannot be properly documented or prosecuted unless Sikhs are recognized as a separate ethnic group.<sup>16</sup> This campaign was not successful, but United Sikhs urged Sikhs in the United States not to check Asian Indian but to write in Sikh under the Other Race category (not the Other Asian category) for the 2010 census arguing that it was still important to do this because the Census Bureau reviews the write-in forms, and that a large number of write-ins may ultimately result in the bureau being more receptive to the demand in the future.<sup>17</sup>

## CONCLUSION

An examination of Sikh American activism over more than one hundred years demonstrates how and why racial and ethnic classifications, as well as identifications, can change due to the interaction between international events (including developments in the home countries) and those in host countries, and the role of religion, particularly religious minority status in this process.

The three-way relationship between the United States, Canada, and Britain played an important role in the development of discriminatory policies against people from the Indian subcontinent in North America and helped shape how Sikhs in the United States identified themselves and mobilized to further their interests. The 1908 Canadian act banning further Indian immigration was passed with the approval of American and British authorities (Jacoby 2007, 91; Sohi 2014, 27). Anti-immigrant groups in the United States used the 1908 Ca-

nadian law to develop similar policies in Northern California. For their part, Indian nationalist leaders moving across the Canadian and U.S. borders worked to link the degrading treatment of Sikhs in North America to their status as the colonial subjects of the British Empire. Leaders of the movement for citizenship rights in the United States—such as Bhagat Singh Thind, Dalip Singh Saund, and J. J. Singh—were strong Indian patriots, also working for Indian independence from the United States. Early Sikh immigrants used Western ideas about an Aryan homeland in the Caucasus (from which originated a migration to Europe and India) to argue that they were racially related to white Europeans and therefore deserving of citizenship. However British worries about the development of the Ghadar movement in the United States shaped the U.S. Supreme Court's *Thind* decision, leading Indians to be reclassified from white to nonwhite alien, which meant that they lost their citizenship rights and their land holdings. The argument that Indians were Caucasians was resuscitated by a census agency after the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s to argue that Indian Americans should not be brought under the protection of this legislation and should be classified as white. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the entry of the United States into World War II helped change the position of Indian immigrants in this country. Needing Indian support for the war against Japan, the American administration and the Congress became more sympathetic to the cause of Indian independence and the demand for citizenship for Indians in the United States.

Later developments in India as well as in the United States led the group to stress their identity as Sikhs rather than Indians. Although Sikhs were officially classified as Asian Indians by the U.S. government, discrimination against them in India led many Sikh Americans to dissociate from an Indian identity after the events of 1984. Tensions with Middle Eastern coun-

16. Minority Rights Group International, "Memorandum Regarding the Tabulation of Sikh Ethnicity in the United States Census," accessed January 24, 2018, <http://www.unitedsikhs.org/petitions/Memo%20re%20Sikh%20Ethnicity.pdf>.

17. United Sikhs, "Census 2010 Sikh American Census Campaign FAQ," [http://www.unitedsikhs.org/PressReleases/census\\_FAQ\\_final\\_2\\_3.10.10.pdf](http://www.unitedsikhs.org/PressReleases/census_FAQ_final_2_3.10.10.pdf), accessed January 24, 2018.

tries, culminating in the attacks of September 11, 2001, gave rise to hate crimes against Sikh American men with turbans and beards, continuing to the present, resulting in mobilizations led by second-generation Sikh Americans to obtain recognition and rights as an American religious minority. Making claims based on the 1983 ruling by the House of Lords in Britain identifying Sikhs as an ethnic group entitled to receive protection against discrimination, some Sikh American organizations have been trying to get Sikhs defined as an ethnic group in the U.S. census distinct from Asian Indians.

Minority status in the home and host country has been an important factor in the construction and changes in Sikh American identity. In India, Sikhs went from being a privileged minority under the British to a discriminated-against minority after the end of colonial rule. In the United States, race and the presence and visibility of external articles of faith such as the turban and unshorn beard have led to the intertwining of racial and religious discrimination against Sikhs. In the United States, despite the official disestablishment of religion, Protestant Christianity long dominated the public square and the nation is now commonly conceived of as Judeo Christian (Torpey 2010). Consequently, minority religious groups are motivated to mobilize to educate the wider society about their religion, challenge stereotypes, and obtain recognition and rights for their beliefs and practices.

Rejection-identification, or the embrace of a strong Sikh identity in response to discrimination, has been another factor shaping Sikh activism. The collective memory of the traumatic 1984 attacks against Sikhs in India provided a rallying point for diasporic Sikh mobilization, followed by the post-9/11 attacks in the United States. The second generation has been organizing by welding together Sikhi (Sikh theology) and their knowledge of the American system. Many of the activists are lawyers, having gone to law school to pursue social justice activism. Consequently, they were well positioned to take leadership of Sikh advocacy after the events of September 11, 2001.

What lessons does the Sikh American experience have for theories of immigration and

identity? The analysis of Sikh American identity and activism brings out the importance of examining how international events and connections between countries, as well as the transnational links that immigrant groups forge or maintain, can play a role in the development of American racial and ethnic identities. It shows the need to adopt a historical perspective to understand identity, demonstrating the significance of the colonialism project and its legacies for the development of racial categories. We also see that often changes in identity come about as a result of immigrant political activism. Consequently, it is essential that we do not overlook immigrant agency in this process. Finally, this study makes clear that racial and ethnic classification and self-identification may be much more dynamic than we have previously understood.

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