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Tragic Violence, Hate Crimes and Grieving Within Sacred Geographies of Faith

Sikhs and the Oak Creek Gurdwara Shootings, 2012

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Abstract

Given the magnitude of the Page's killing spree on August 5, 2012, Sikhs have questioned their place within American society, more than any other time in recent Sikh American history. In seeking to understand the tragic event, the mainstream media in the USA immediately turned its attention toward Sikhs of America and beyond, attempting to come to an understanding of Sikhism's beliefs and practice. This paper will explore how notions of religious identities and spiritual meaning are constructed and negotiated. It will highlight the gurdwara as "Sikh space" and the salient tenets of the Sikh panth [path] that were relied upon by the grieving community for spiritual meaning-making through the tragic event. Critical reactions to traditional philosophical and ethical responses by the Sikh community to the shootings within the context of Sikhs in multicultural America will also be examined. So too will central religio-cultural characteristics associated with the Sikh *quam* [nation] as central to the meaning-making process of the Wisconsin shooting spree. Wider ramifications of the shootings, extending to the Sikh homeland in Punjab, India, and gendered responses to the events will also be explored.

Keywords: Sikhs, Oak Street Gurdwara Shootings, 9/11, Sikhs in the USA, diaspora, gurdwaras, Punjabi, *quam*, Sikh tenets, representation.

On August 5, 2012, white supremacist and army veteran Wade Page strode into the Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, opening fire on Sikhs who had gathered for worship. Page killed one woman and five men before turning his gun on himself. While the precise reasons for Page's targeting of the Sikhs was unclear, his supremacist leanings and affiliations to neo-Nazi music bands were known to authorities.¹

Given the immense cost in human life for American Sikhs, Sikhs have been fearful for their continued safety in the USA. Yet, the Sikh community's response has been remarkable on many levels. While deeply shaken by the extent of the violence, the Wisconsin Sikh community responded with astounding graciousness, stressing forgiveness for Page who had caused inexplicable sorrow and fear. Sikhs also invited the larger public to grieve with them and in doing so, upheld through faithful practice major tenets of the Sikh faith. Interfaith vigils honoring the victims were held across America and Sikhs appeared with t-shirts that used the slogan "We are all Sikhs. America Stands Together."² For some, Oak Creek served as a turning point in Sikh American relations with wider American society. According to one observer, "after the Wisconsin killings, the national response was dramatically swift and different. The news coverage was superbly awesome. News anchors visibly struggled to learn the distinct Sikh traditions so as not confuse them with Muslims or others. Fundamentals of the Sikh faith and a bit of their colorful history were on air almost 24/7 for several days."³

Quickly following the outpouring of support and interest in the Sikhs, attention turned to deeper rifts in American society; the shootings needed to be contextualized as yet another tragic example of the violence and hate crimes that minority religious groups have experienced since 9/11. While the literature on discriminatory attacks on religious and ethnic minorities in the post-9/11 era has focused, understandably, on the anti-Muslim backlash in the United States, Sikhs wearing the outward symbolism and garb of the *Khalsa* (known as the 5 ks) were affected by the events of that September morning in significant ways. Turban-wearing Sikhs were mis-identified as turban-wearing Muslims. The first post-9/11 victim in the USA was a Sikh, Balbir Singh Sodhi who was killed in Mesa, Arizona in a revenge shooting by a racist who wanted to kill "towel heads."⁴ After 9/11, Sikhs made great efforts to educate the American public on their tradition, as violence against minority religious groups spread throughout the USA and other parts of the Sikh diaspora. Turbaned Sikhs lived in fear of harassment, discrimination, and hate crimes, including vandalism of their sacred spaces.⁵ Wisconsin, as reported by a Sikh observer, was the "collateral damage" of al-Qaida and 9/11.⁶

However, Sikh-American fears about their safety did not begin and end with 9/11 and the Wisconsin shootings. Although having taken place over 30 years earlier, Sikhs worldwide were deeply affected by the events of

1984 in Punjab, known variously as Operation Bluestar, or, increasingly by Sikhs as the Sikh Genocide. It was one of the most painful episodes of modern Sikh history. On June 5, the Indian Army invaded the holiest of holies for Sikhs, the Golden Temple, to root out the leader of a militant group of Sikhs, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. Sikhs' sacred shrine became the site of a great deal of bloodshed and violence. Bhindranwale was killed, but so too were civilians. Moreover, rampages against the Sikhs continued throughout Punjab and Delhi, following the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her two Sikh bodyguards. Operation Blue Star provided a clarion call to many Sikhs that their sacred spaces, religious rights and ideals were being eroded by immoral and unjust power structures, personified by India's Central Government and the Indian Army. That this shocking event took place within the Golden Temple complex was a reminder for American Sikhs coming to terms with the Wisconsin gurdwara shootings.

Sikh-Americans are familiar with the excuse of collective responsibility for crimes by unrelated individuals. We weathered shootings and assaults for being visibly non-Christian or non-European following 9/11. And so many of us emigrated from India after the anti-Sikh pogroms of 1984 that killed 3,000 Sikhs ... But somehow we never expected a planned attack by someone who had not the flimsiest excuse.⁷

This "master-narrative"⁸ is further illuminated by what Joshi identifies as a "double-minority" mentality,⁹ a self-perception that Sikhs are either continuously under siege, or, potentially under siege from majority and dominant forces surrounding them.¹⁰ For one grieving Sikh, sadness extended beyond the loss of life or the violation of Sikh sacred space to a realization of the "undeniable continuity of trauma."¹¹ Sikhs "continue to be treated like second-class citizens and targeted in violence all over the globe, and for the past few decades the global Sikh experience has been viewed and narrated through the lens of victimhood."¹² Scholars analyzing the Wisconsin shootings also made crucial connections between 1984 and 9/11, particularly vis-à-vis the responses of diasporic Sikh youth in creating and negotiating meaning for themselves. "What the youth experienced post 9/11, their parents experienced post 1984 as well. Fathers, sons, mothers and daughters commiserated on their victimization."¹³ These events occupy central spaces in "diasporic Sikh social worlds and diasporic citizenship,"¹⁴

and served to deepen self-perceptions that the Sikhs are consistently under siege. 1984 heightened the conviction that India is not and can never be a Sikh homeland; 9/11 and the Wisconsin shootings are painful reminders that Sikhs are vulnerable *wherever* they reside. There are no truly “safe” spaces; not within the revered Golden Temple of the Sikhs, not within Sikh sacred spaces in the USA.

THE GURDWARA

While the terms “temple” and “*gurdwara*” are interchangeable for many—especially in light of the English terminology utilized in speaking of that holiest Sikh site, the Golden Temple—for Sikhs that space is more accurately understood as the principle *gurdwara* of the Sikhs, most commonly referred to as the Darbar Sahib or Harmandir Sahib. Many Sikh places of worship in the diaspora are also called temples, including the site of the Wisconsin tragedy. However, Sikhs most commonly call their places of worship *gurdwaras*, a sacred space wherein the Guru Granth Sahib - the confessional name for the sacred scripture for Sikhs - also known as Adi Granth, dwells. Sikh scripture calls us to an understanding of the sacredness of that space, for, “[W]herever my Guru goes and sits, that place is beautiful.”¹⁵ Yet, Sikhs are well aware that their scripture, the book made of paper and written in ink, is “not alive in any physical sense” but is treated as if it “possessed the social agency of a personal Guru who continues to communicate divine knowledge and mediates human relationships.”¹⁶ “The Guru” is the heart of every *gurdwara*, “sacred ground”, regardless of its size, grandeur, simplicity or location. Safeguarding the *gurdwara*’s honour and dignity from “humiliation, degradation and sacrilege” is mandatory. She takes this notion further, insisting that the *gurdwara* is a “repository and manifestation of values of the Sikh Dharam” [moral order/way of life] and... their protection is seen as the protection of the Sikh Dharam itself.”¹⁷

The need to protect even the *notion* of Sikh sacred space came to the fore in 2004, when protests organized by central British Sikh organizations erupted in the area surrounding the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in the UK, which was staging the play *Behzti*, written by Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, herself a Sikh. The central and contentious issue, according to protestors, was the depiction of a sexual assault, although fictitious, taking place within a *gurdwara*. When Bhatti’s play was cancelled by the theatre after Sikh protests became increasingly volatile, the mainstream media cried foul, seeing therein a direct example of the diminishing of freedom of expression. Bhatti’s supporters, including Salman Rushdie, expressed their uneasiness

with both the Sikh protesters and the theatre caving in to their demands, insisting that “it is the liberty of any artist to express their view of their own society and their own community”¹⁸ within British society. In a rebuttal to the barrage of criticism directed toward the Sikhs in the UK, the Sikh Human Rights Group argued that the issue at stake was not *criticism* of the Sikh community, but “the deliberate, sensational and offensive use of religious icons,” icons here referring to the *gurdwara* and the Guru Granth Sahib.¹⁹ As such, protestors had a right, and, indeed a need, to object to the play.

Gurdwaras, paradoxically, represent far more than “icons.” They function as meeting and educational spaces, communal kitchens and sports halls, among others, functioning, in many ways as Ray Oldenburg’s “third place.” The first two, according to Oldenburg, are the home and the workplace.²⁰ In fact, a son of the one of the Wisconsin victims told reporters that the *gurdwara* “was like a second home” to his father.²¹ Third places may include piazzas, cafés, teahouses, local parks, and, I would suggest, *gurdwaras*. They are spaces where people congregate, socialize and interact regularly. Beyond the “*diwan* hall” (worship hall) which houses the Guru Granth Sahib, *gurdwaras* may include Punjabi schools and social services facilities for the elderly and disabled. Some *gurdwaras* house Sikh museums, libraries, sports venues, music and dance clubs, yoga classes and marriage registry offices. Importantly, *gurdwaras* are by no means identical, with each reflecting the needs of its individual community.²² In line with the Sikhs’ “concern over socio-political matters in the secular sphere,” *gurdwaras* also function as centres for “mobilizing political power over issues pertaining to the homeland,” mainstream and local politics.²³ The varied usage of space represents a performance of “belonging,” and is, in many ways, an “everyday unremarkable site.”²⁴ A recent heading from Canada’s national newspaper exclaims, “the *gurdwara*’s got it all.”²⁵

The Wisconsin *gurdwara* shootings, thus contextualized, highlight Riis and Woodhead’s understanding that intensely personal losses but also deeply felt religious emotion moves beyond “social relations in the narrow ‘human’ sense.” These are instead “supersocial relations ... interactive, mutually shaping and often mutually constitutive.”²⁶ The notion of community and sacred space are inextricably intertwined for those “whose hopes and culture are orientated around the subjective inscrutability of sacred icons.”²⁷ In fact, “community itself is mapped onto this notion of the sacred.”²⁸

Beyond *gurdwara* mappings, individual identity is inseparable from identification with a range of overlapping identities, some of which are outside of Sikhism. As Butler so eloquently writes, grief, loss and dispossession are primarily about relational ties. When individuals undergo mourning, “something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us.”²⁹ While the six Sikh victims of the shootings that took place in that sleepy suburb of Oak Creek were obviously the source of trauma for Sikhs *and* other residents,³⁰ the focus almost immediately turned to conceptual issues: “who are the Sikhs?” and “who are American Sikhs”? The ramifications of this tragedy also extends far beyond American bounds, based on a central notion of the Sikh religious community as *panth* [path] in Punjabi, the tenets of the *panth*, and another deep-seated characteristics of Sikhs as a *qaum* [nation].

SIKH IDENTITY – SIKH AMERICANS: CENTRAL TENETS OF THE SIKH PANTH AND QUAM

SIKH AMERICANS

American Sikhs have made some strides in educating the wider public on Sikh identity since 9/11. Nonetheless, in the post 9/11 world, religion has become increasingly racialized, compounding perceived associations of Sikhs with terrorism.³¹ Sikhs have an “image problem” because turbaned Sikhs, alongside Muslims, have tested the “ambivalence” inherent in multiculturalism given their highly visible and “marked bodies.” At the same time, Sikhs have been characterized as a “model minority,” contributing positively to society socially and economically.³²

Given the conflicting responses to Sikhs by the American public, a National Sikh Campaign was launched at the beginning of 2015. The Campaign was built on past studies about the American Sikh experience, including “Turban Myths” conducted by the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund³³ and “Go Home, Terrorist” by the Sikh Coalition.³⁴ Hart Research Associates were engaged to conduct a comprehensive qualitative and quantitative study to understand more clearly what Americans thought of Sikhs, but ultimately, to help the Sikh American community communicate more effectively about Sikhism and Sikhs in the USA.³⁵ The study took great pains to show not only the salient features of the Sikh *panth*, but also aspects of Sikh history that correspond with American history and values.

Sikhs “embody the quintessential American story.”³⁶ They are patriotic and “have a long history of serving in the U.S. armed forces with honor, including World War I and II.”³⁷ Indeed, if the “American Revolution had started out as a spiritual movement instead of a political movement, it would look a lot like the Sikh religion.” Similar to the American Bill of Rights protecting the fundamental rights of all US citizens, Sikhs share a “core set of beliefs that focus on the rights of all people to ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’” Sikhs have fought, for hundreds of years “to protect the rights of others – including Hindus, Christians, and Muslims.”³⁸

In its conclusion and recommendation for Sikh organizations, *gurdwaras* and activists to reach out to the wider American public, the study noted: (1) recognize that most Americans know little to nothing about Sikhs, (2) tell the Sikh story in familiar and positive terms, (3) show that Sikh values are American values, (4) highlight the value of equality, (5) target the most receptive and open audiences in initial outreach, and (5) explain the meaning of the turban to receptive audiences.³⁹

The campaign’s dual intent was to highlight the Sikhs’ alignment with mainstream American values and to guide Sikhs in effective communication with the American public about the Sikh *panth*.

CHARDHI KALA, MARTYRDOM, SAHAJ AND SEVA/LANGAR

CHARDHI KALA

Beyond the message of Sikhs’ deep ties to the American spirit, some of the foundational Sikh philosophical tenets were emphasized as Sikhs both educated the American public and tended to their own trauma following the shootings. This included the notion of *chardhi kala*.⁴⁰ The term refers to an attitude of optimism, confidence in divine justice, and bravery rising above any form of defeat. Sikhs, it was reported, will recover; “central to this recovery is the practice of *charhdi kala*, or the resilient Sikh spirit.”⁴¹ According to a Huffington Post entry:

We witnessed this in person on Thursday morning when Sikhs were allowed to return to their *gurdwara* for the first time since the attack. They walked into a crime scene: there was still blood on the carpets and bullet holes in the walls. In an instant, the community burst into action: they ripped out and replaced carpets, scrubbed the

floors, painted over the bullet holes, and repaired broken windows. We literally watched a community rebuild itself before her eyes.⁴²

Chardhi kala became a term that was interchangeable, within the context of the American interfaith movement, with the indomitable “spirit of justice”⁴³ of the Sikhs in light of their remarkable response to the hatred directed toward them. The term is closely related to another central ideal within the *panth* – martyrdom.

MARTYRDOM

The ideal of the martyr is also integral to the Sikh grand narrative and refers to “bearing of witness” to a righteous cause. Sikh gurus who were gaining political power within their spiritual domains had begun to draw the attention and ire of the dominant political system of their time, the Mughals. Within the Sikh historical tradition, two of the ten Gurus were martyred for the cause of righteousness. As an ideal, martyrdom continues to inspire, fascinate and create meaning for Sikhs who believe that they are “heirs to a faith which exalts heroism and lauds the death of martyrs.”⁴⁴ Militant leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, at the centre of Operation Bluestar insisted that Sikhs were *best* understood as a race whose “history is written in the blood of martyrs.”⁴⁵

The six slain Sikhs were commemorated as martyrs as Sikhs gathered to hold vigils in communities across the USA.⁴⁶ In the Sikh “narrative of its martyrs,” the Wisconsin tragedy will be remembered as a “small price paid by Sikhs; a gigantic benefit to Sikhs worldwide and to American society.”⁴⁷

SAHAJ AND SANT-SIPAHI

Closely related to both *chardhi kala* and martyrdom is the concept of *sahaj*, denoting “a fine balance, the ideal balance”⁴⁸ to which the God-oriented individual aspires. The individual is compelled to maintain a balanced life that nourishes and cultivates both social and political activity. “Service is prayerful action; engaging in social justice is part and parcel of religiosity.”⁴⁹ Anthropologist Inga-Britt Krause’s work on psychological and physiological connections in cross-cultural patient care illustrates how Sikh patients firmly believe that in order to grow spiritually and to live a balanced life, self-willed impulses such as anger, worry, unhappiness and pride must be closely controlled and even subdued. Few, but the “very big men like saints,

who are very pure”⁵⁰ accomplish this. Thus closely aligned to *sahaj* is the ideal of the *sant-sipahi*, the saint-soldier or “warrior-saint” who lives in this fine balance, combining meditative and combative qualities, ready to spring to disciplined, courageous action in defense of righteousness and willing to combat oppression.⁵¹ Following the Oak Creek shootings, the Sikh “spirit of principled service and justice” continued to “pulse through the community’s veins.”⁵² In this same spirit, a reward of \$100,000 was presented to Lieutenant Brian Murphy, who was wounded in his efforts to stop Page’s shooting rampage.⁵³ *Sahaj* and the ideal of the *sant-sipahi* was embodied by mourners at a Boston *gurdwara* who asked for “mercy on the soul of Wade Michael Page, the perpetrator of the massacre.”⁵⁴

SEWA

Another central tenet of the Sikh tradition often invoked following the Wisconsin tragedy is *sewa*, most directly translated as “service” or “selfless service.” The notion of *sewa* for Sikhs is far-reaching. It includes service to God, fellow Sikhs and the wider community. *Sewa* may be rendered through monetary offerings, duties performed, either in the *gurdwara*—contributions of food or cooking for *langar* [community kitchen], cleaning the premises, reading of scripture—or beyond the *gurdwara* and community. During the time when anxious onlookers waited to find out what had transpired within the cordoned-off area surrounding the *gurdwara* after the attack, an empathetic non-Sikh from the Oak Creek community came to offer trauma counseling to those waiting. One of the grieving Sikhs responded that the “shooter ... should be invited to do *sewa*.” *Sewa* as community service is a “way to bring about restorative justice.”⁵⁵ Commemorating the August 2012 shooting, National Days of *Sewa* have been organized and coordinated on a yearly basis as a way to reach out to fellow Americans. These included a Habitat for Humanity project, library reading for children in California, and a nature trail clean up in Atlanta, Georgia. The Oak Creek temple hosted a Chardhi Kala 6K Memorial Walk and Run and a Chardhi Kala Memorial Blood Drive.⁵⁶

LANGAR

A central practice directly tied to the notion of *sewa* is *langar*, the free kitchen and dining hall located within all Sikh *gurdwaras*. *Langar* is integrally connected to the development of the Sikh tradition, put in place by the Sikh gurus as a way to counter the highly complex and hierarchical food practices connected with caste in South Asia.⁵⁷ *Langar* ensures that

all, regardless of caste or class, sit in status-free lines on the floor as food is being consumed. Today *langar* stands as the premier Sikh symbol of equality within Sikhism, particularly within the parlance of human rights. While caste continues to play a significant role in *gurdwara* politics, in India and within the Sikh diaspora, ideally understood *langar* is ortho-praxis of place and practice. This enacted practice serves to “establish a sense of belonging and community in a strange and often hostile newly encountered social landscape” while also tying the Sikh tradition to its past.⁵⁸

Preparations for *langar* were underway when Wade began his shooting spree. One important response, in light of these circumstances, is that Sikhs began inviting the interested public to join them in *langar* meals all over the country. And many did. Nonetheless, it was tragic “that it took a mass murder to bring the Sikh community and their plight into the national discussion.”⁵⁹ With some irony, one of the Wisconsin temple members observed that “offer *langar* every Sunday...But even the homeless don’t come.”⁶⁰

CRITICAL RESPONSES TO THE TEMPLE SHOOTINGS

In the aftermath of the Wisconsin tragedy, a gamut of responses focusing on education, obligation, activist imperative, advocating, and clarification strategies for misrepresentation and misrecognition of Sikhs came to the fore in a surge of public discourse and social mediation about the Sikhs.⁶¹ Events explaining and celebrating Sikh turban-wearing through turban tying events at universities were organized by Sikhs and attended by non-Sikhs. Nonetheless, these pro-Sikh events are “limited in scope if such activities are mediated only as solidarity driven, photo-op acts in the face of tragic incidents.”⁶² Jaideep Singh notes that Oak Creek, “the worst bigotry-fueled massacre in a sacred space in modern US history, was largely ignored by the national media and, consequently, most Americans.”⁶³ In essence, the Oak Creek tragedy was similar to the Sikh American experience after 9/11 and also generally erased.

The media has treated the shootings in Oak Creek very differently from those that happened just two weeks earlier in Aurora. Only one network sent an anchor to report live from Oak Creek, and none of the networks gave the murders in Wisconsin the kind of extensive coverage that the Colorado shootings received ... It is hard to escape the

conclusion that Oak Creek would have ... dominated the news cycle if the shooter had been Muslim and the victims had been white churchgoers.⁶⁴

While acknowledging the commendable efforts put in place by Sikh advocacy groups, others questioned whether it was the *Sikhs*' responsibility to educate the wider public about Sikh practices and Sikh identity during their time of grief following the shootings. Why did it take a "ruthless killing of six innocent Sikhs in a *gurdwara* by a white supremacist for mainstream Americans to think about 'who are the Sikhs'?"⁶⁵

Along with the multitude of responses to the *gurdwara* carnage came problematic, largely uncritical responses to issues, and for the most part unspoken by the mainstream media and the Sikh community. Calls were made for a more substantive analysis of deeply embedded cultural politics to be put at the forefront of the ensuing discourse in coming to terms with the Oak Creek tragedy. Reflection on the violence inflicted on Sikhs by a white supremacist needed to answer questions about "how race and religion combine in America to drive a powerful strand of America's majoritarian politics."⁶⁶ Racism and religious oppressions, accordingly, mutually reinforce one another—historically through the colonial project⁶⁷—but also through the continuing and systematic subordination of minority religious groups. These shootings must be understood as *ongoing* hate crimes in the defense of "the purity of white Christian society against the evils of multiculturalism."⁶⁸ Though varied, systematic subordination as *religious prejudice* includes individual actions against minority groups and *religious discrimination* through institutional policies and practices.⁶⁹

Highlighting examples of institutional religious discrimination, Singh points to the many and varied restrictions vis-à-vis zoning boards across the USA that Sikhs so often have to negotiate in the construction of new *gurdwaras*.⁷⁰ Does the "unease of white and Christian majority zoning boards spring from discomfort with Sikh theology? Or with the image of many brown-skinned, *dastaar* and *sari* and *kirpan* wearing people—a foreign 'other'—congregating and organizing? Do South Asian Sikhs trigger thoughts of terrorism in the same way that black populations trigger thoughts of crime?"⁷¹ Joshi responds in the affirmative, insisting that the major aggravating factor is race. Underlying issues of racism, majority versus minority politics and representation must be examined as

inextricably leading to the Wisconsin tragedy. The widely prevalent notion of Wade Michael Page acting alone as a mad, white supremacist, since “no sane American would commit such an act” needs to be challenged, “since his certification as ‘mad’” allows “both right conservatives and left liberals to distance themselves from him and to get on with business as usual.”⁷² Sikh advocacy groups have also been criticized, especially those claiming leadership positions who “ironically made Sikhs look genuinely palatable to American taste and sentiment—‘Sikhs are as American as apple pie.’” These spokespeople were chastised for furthering Sikh objectification as ‘different’ and marginalized as “the Other” and at the same time and were challenged to rethink their discursive focus.⁷³

Theological and ethical responses to the shootings by Sikhs were also questioned. It was reported that Sikhs recognize all things, even the murder of innocents, as the will of God. Anger is harmful and many Sikhs, especially the elderly, insist that they are not angry towards Page. What might *appear* to be anger is “more sorrow, more grief, a kind of helplessness.”⁷⁴ These interpretations are being challenged. Tenets that depict the Sikhs as fatalistic or as denying natural responses such as anger are in need of radical interpretation; there are limits to *chardhi kala* when understood primarily as an inward or spiritual response to oppression,⁷⁵ thus denying other responses and drives toward anger, revenge and victimhood. Rather than accepting oppressive situations as inevitable, *chardhi kala* must include a “critical consciousness,”⁷⁶ an awareness of the political and social patterns that create and enforce oppressions accompanied by an analysis of the patterns that sustain oppression.⁷⁷ Without a politicized understanding of *chardhi kala*, Sikhs may be precluded from a “unique and essential political voice in both South-Asian-American politics as well as a necessary national conversation on racial politics.”⁷⁸ Indeed, Sikhs who have presented themselves and their organizations as the “Voice of the Sikh People” were urged to embrace a more critical framework in Sikh identity politics and become “aware of their role in re-inscribing colonial frameworks” and their complicity in “mimicking the ‘voice of the State.’”⁷⁹ Deeply embedded within Sikh identity politics is the notion of the Sikh *quam*, or, the Sikh nation.⁸⁰ Krause has emphasized the need to understand the intricacies of cultural, regional, national, political as well as religious frameworks in deconstructing the manifold and interconnected aspects of Sikh identity.⁸¹ In the context of the Sikh *quam*, these include deeply valued notions of *Punjabi* and *izzat* or honour.

THE SIKH QUAM – PUNJABIAT AND IZZAT

Krause's ethnographic research on Sikhs in Bedford in the UK has identified a salient feature of Sikh society, namely, what many might identify as clearly personal or familial issues, instead being perceived as having far greater implications.⁸² To understand the interconnectedness of these issues, the notion of "*Punjabi*", literally, "Punjabiness", is useful. Punjabi is a far-reaching identification with Punjabi heritage and includes language, customs, attitudes—"pride of place"—pride of "being Punjabi." One of the most consistent aspects of this notion of Punjabi is that of honour, or, *izzat*. *Izzat* is multi-sited, including individual, familial and collective elements. Within families, *izzat* includes wealth, status and actions and is also affected by the behavior of kin.⁸³ Indeed, early British accounts of Punjabis point to honour as one of "Punjab's deepest feelings, and as such must be treated with great respect." Indeed, it is "[d]earer to him than life."⁸⁴ The moral affect of *izzat* is primarily a concern for the honour and reputation of the collective evaluation of the group, including one's lineage, caste, village and religious community.⁸⁵

Understanding that the *honour* of the Sikh *quam* unjustly and viciously threatened at Oak Creek helps to put some of the more violent responses by Sikhs in India into perspective, where Sikh demonstrators in Delhi shouted anti-US slogans and burned American flags.⁸⁶ According to Darling, there is a clear connection between honour and vendetta,⁸⁷ the "principle of equivalence in all things,"⁸⁸ or, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" as an integral aspect of Punjabi and *izzat* in particular. For the Sikh demonstrators in India, the honour of the Sikh *quam* was at stake following the shootings; the Sikh nation had suffered at the hands of the gunman in Wisconsin and the cost of retribution was burning the highest symbol of American honour, the American flag.

American Sikhs immediately condemned the actions of the few, aware of the symbolic consequences associated with flag burning in the USA, particularly in light of the goodwill that was flowing toward Sikhs after the Wisconsin shootings. The allegiance of Sikh Americans was *first* to the American flag. For the Chair of Sikh Council on Religion and Education, the response by Indians in drawing their swords and burning the flag "is totally opposite to what Sikhs stand for and the peaceful message the Sikh community is currently portraying."⁸⁹

There are substantive differences in terms of values and worldviews between Sikh diasporic communities and those in India. And yet, according to a member of the parliamentary body overseeing religious sites in Punjab, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), the Wisconsin shootings “have a big impact here [in India]. They give rise to a sense of insecurity within the community.”⁹⁰ The political, religious and social ramifications and consequences stemming from the Wisconsin shootings go far beyond the bounds of one particular *gurdwara*, one city and one country. Instead, this was an attack on the Sikhs as a whole, the *quam*. The question of Sikh representation is also central to the afore noted consequences.

SIKH REPRESENTATION: WHO SPEAKS FOR THE SIKHS?

The question “who speaks for Sikhs” has a long history since the inception of the Sikh tradition.⁹¹ Without a well-articulated “body of Sikh canon law, a set of precedents in Canadian and American courts are beginning to define the practice of Sikhism in North America.”⁹² In the heartland of Sikhism, the SGPC in Amritsar is largely responsible for *gurdwara* management. The Akal Takht is that authoritative centre associated with the Golden Temple and is responsible for all social and political concerns of the Sikhs, with the office of Jathedar, or, chief official, at the helm of these affairs though largely restricted to Punjab. Within the Sikh diaspora, *gurdwaras* are largely autonomous and run by an elected committee. However, many of these committees are faction-based and it may be “argued that the real authority lies in the capacity of a faction to muster large number of voters at the annual elections and the backing of a hard core of supporters.”⁹³

At times, Sikh officialdom, namely, the office of Jathedar, has attempted to speak for Sikhs worldwide with varied results. One such instance took place in 1998 when the Jathedar of the Akal Takht issued an edict for all Sikh *gurdwaras* in response to increasingly volatile relations between factions within *gurdwaras* in British Columbia, Canada over the issue of *langar* meals being eaten on the floor or from tables while sitting on chairs. For many Sikh diasporic institutions, these furnishings have long been in place in many *gurdwaras* in the Sikh diaspora since the early days of migration from Punjab—as long as no special seating arrangement have been made. Jathedar Ranjit Singh decreed that all chairs and tables be removed from Sikh *gurdwaras* in Canada. Many *gurdwaras* refused to comply with the edict, which led to an additional edict excommunicating six British Columbian Sikhs. Some Sikhs supported the Jathedar’s decisions, but even more dismissed them.⁹⁴

As there is no official administrative hierarchy of leadership within American Sikhism, various organizations, such as the World Sikh Organization, the Sikh Foundation, National Sikh Campaign and the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere have for some time presented themselves as championing, and in some cases, representing Sikhs in the USA. Some of these organizations have some affiliation with *gurdwaras* in the USA or have long been recognized as representing some American Sikhs. After 9/11, a number of new organizations were born: SALDEF (Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund), Sikh Coalition and UNITED SIKHS, among others. These organizations were led by the generation of Sikh Americans who had come of age since 9/11. As Valarie Kaur notes, after the Wisconsin shootings, Sikh Millennials began “stepping up into new leadership” for the Sikh community. Many are

using 21st century tools to organize, educate and serve. In the wake of this particular tragedy, you can find us shared in the same experiences of the our peers of other faiths—we grew up with video games, played sports, went to concerts, rebelled in high school...But we also faced relentless bullying for our turbans or long braids, our teachers couldn't pronounce our Punjabi names, and no one – really, pretty much no one – had even heard of our religion. That didn't seem to bother us too much—until September 11, 2001.⁹⁵

The question of “who speaks for Sikhs” comes to the fore for one commentator, clearly distinguishing between “old” and “new” authorities for Sikhs post 9/11. These new organizations:

are doing great things—from tracking the media, educating law enforcement, and influencing legislation to community outreach, disseminating information and preserving our heritage. Students, young professionals and technocrats started many of these organizations, separate from the Gurdwaras. Again, understandably so. The political problems at many of our Gurdwaras have put a stranglehold on our young people, a valuable resource of our community.⁹⁶

The mainstream media in the USA is clearly accepting the claims of these leaders, particularly if they have a solid and recurring media presence. The Huffington Post recently identified “12 Top Religious Leaders” in the USA and lists Valarie Kaur, a highly visible, media-savvy public face of Sikhs in the USA.⁹⁷ A “new” Sikh authority figure, Kaur has contributed to The Huffington Post, CNN, and MSNBC, among other mainstream media outlets. *Attn.:* adds Simran Jeet Singh to Kaur’s name, both presented as “rising religious leaders” in the USA, both of whom “significantly raise the profile of their community.”⁹⁸

There appears to be a clear jockeying for positions of “proper” spokespersons for Sikhs, pitting longer standing organizations against the newer, younger, techno savvy Sikh organizations and individuals. The mainstreaming of “who speaks for Sikhs” has also contributed to the complexity surrounding the question of leadership within American Sikhism. This conundrum quickly came to the fore following the Wisconsin shootings.

WHO SPEAKS FOR THE MOURNING SIKHS?

In the aftermath of the Oak Creek tragedy, reporters described how members of the congregation, the victims of the attack, quickly reorganized. A kitchen was set up and food and water were served to first-responders and the media. However, communication *about* the Sikhs was difficult to come by in the immediate hours following the shootings. According to one observer:

Disbelief gave rise to grief, followed by frustration. I watched news anchors struggle in trying to report on a religious community they did not know. I saw Sikhs, stunned in the shock of this crime, unable to properly express to news reporters who we were as a people. Every question became an opportunity to hurriedly explain in too many words that we are not the enemy. Language barriers and a sense of urgency left reporters more confused.⁹⁹

Questions were raised about who represented the best interests in representing American Sikhs immediately after the attack. Recognized Sikh organizations and representatives such as SALDEF, the Sikh Coalition and United Sikhs were suggested. “Proper” representation of Sikhs was essential because while Sikhs “around the world were staggering from the gradually unfolding news from Wisconsin, we were hit in the face with

a barrage of inane and inadequate statements being made.” This “badly-presented, garbled, inaccurate, convoluted and inarticulate information” that was “ladled out by a handful of self-appointed individuals” who had “shamelessly stepped before cameras and microphones, ostensibly as our spokespersons.” These included the Chair of one of the longest standing Sikh American groups, the Sikh Council on Religion and Education as well as representatives of the World Sikh Council, among others. These individuals and groups, the editorial continued, were “an embarrassment,” making “asinine statements about Sikh practices.” When the *appropriate* spokespersons finally were able to get airtime, the day after the shootings, “their initial hours, crucial hours and valuable air-time, were consumed in correcting and rectifying” the information “ladled” out the day before.¹⁰⁰ And who were the appropriate spokespersons? They were representatives of those “stalwart institutions – SALDEF, Sikh Coalition and United Sikhs – as well as a whole army of individuals scattered across the country,” who with “extraordinary aplomb and finesse, presented our emotions and reactions, our fears and concerns, our hopes and aspirations, our history and our philosophy to a world hungering to know more.”¹⁰¹ These institutions were led by precisely those identified by Valarie Kaur above, American-born Sikh Millennials, “stepping up into new leadership” for the Sikh community.¹⁰²

Following this editorial, sikhchic.com, moved beyond American Sikh representation to the “Sikh Council UK ... And to All Others Who Wish to Lead or Represent the Sikh Community.” Here too, British leaders were resoundingly chastised¹⁰³ despite the Council being a long-established bastion of authority that claimed to represent all Sikh-British organizations.¹⁰⁴ The Council was critiqued for a number of reasons, but, in line with similar censure meted out to the American Sikh community, British Sikh leadership too was called on to professionalize with offices “far from any *gurdwara* premises.”¹⁰⁵

The tragedy at Oak Creek revealed tensions within American Sikhism. Central to these tensions are questions of how “the Sikhs in America” and the Sikh *quam* worldwide were represented.

Sunday’s shooting begins a new era for the Sikh community...No longer can the community look to a dedicated few to toil on behalf on the whole. No longer

will it be sufficient for community members simply to work, attain professional or social status, and retire to their enclaves. Instead, all Sikhs will need to be actively involved in their neighborhoods and to serve as visible ambassadors of the Sikh faith and their identity.¹⁰⁶

Sidhu, in essence, was arguing for what Ahuja called a “less backward-looking approach.”¹⁰⁷ The role of gender, for instance, came to the fore in terms of Sikh representation. Gender plays an important role in understanding Sikh identity and positionality, particularly with regard to feminist geographies of religion and change.¹⁰⁸ I have written previously on Sikh women’s bodies and marginalization as well as Sikh women’s inclusion and exclusion in rituals.¹⁰⁹ A gendered lens offers another perspective into the multi-layered responses to the Wisconsin tragedy.

GENDER AND THE WISCONSIN SHOOTINGS

In an interview following the shootings, Harleen Kaur, a young Sikh woman who had close associations with the Oak Creek Sikh temple, spoke of her immediate response to the tragedy.¹¹⁰ Trained through the Sikh Coalition’s “Advocates Academy,” an organization whose objective is to “train and cultivate a corps of dedicated volunteers who will enhance the Sikh American community’s fight for civil rights both locally and nationally.”¹¹¹ In the midst of her own emotional response to the tragedy, Kaur realized that she was not counted as a grieving Sikh because, as a woman, she was not easily identifiable. “That’s when I decided to start wearing a turban.”¹¹²

As noted elsewhere, among a small group of mainstream Sikh women within the Sikh diaspora, the turban has become an important symbol of religious identity, belonging and equality.¹¹³ Historically, however, the turban has categorically been associated with male Sikhs. While the *kara*, the steel bracelet worn on the right wrist is the most common signifier for the majority of female and male Sikhs, it is not as discernible as the iconic turban. Like the Muslim hijab, for a largely young, diasporic subsection of Sikh women, the turban has become a “reconstructed emblem,”¹¹⁴ a means to forge novel associations and characteristics of Sikh identity in the process of “doing gender.”¹¹⁵ The turban is a means to overcome the “vexing phenomenon of the hyperinvisibility.”¹¹⁶

In the confusion and emotional chaos that reigned after the truly terrifying events in Wisconsin in 2012, the need for clarity and a sense of belonging was paramount. Kaur began donning the turban to legitimize her own “space” within Sikh institutions and to represent Sikhism, something she obviously felt she could not do wearing the traditional garb of Sikh Punjabi women. The notion of Sikh women having a “unique and separate public symbolic identity”¹¹⁷ appears to be an important component of some young Sikh women’s need to represent Sikhism on their own terms.

Clearly, the turban is a multifaceted symbol and there are also costs associated with choosing overtly distinctive religious garb for women. These are not only meted out from outside of the Sikh community, but also from within, given the religio-cultural linkages between the turban and Sikh manhood. Indeed, the tying of the turban (*Dastarbandi*) is a central rite of passage for Sikh males. Some families have great difficulty accepting their daughters’ decisions to don turbans, fearing for their “marriageability,” a central concern for family honour. Some turbaned Sikh females have also been stereotyped negatively within their communities as “either religious zealots or radical feminists.”¹¹⁸ Some women who don the turban perceive themselves as being judged by a higher standard in terms of behavior than their non-turbaned female and their turbaned male peers.¹¹⁹

The ramifications of Harleen Kaur’s decision to wear a turban went far beyond her own community as she began to experience discrimination and racial profiling at airports,¹²⁰ long suffered by Sikh males or turbaned Muslims. As tracked by the Sikh Coalition, since 9/11 turbaned Sikhs have been the brunt of hate crimes, workplace discrimination, and school bullying alongside religious and racial profiling.¹²¹ To return to the Wisconsin shootings, of Wade’s six victims, five were turbaned males.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, the consequences of the Wisconsin shootings extend beyond the immediate grief and loss of those who were congregated in the temple on that 5th of August 2012; Sikhs became more visibly involved in civic engagement and political processes. There is perhaps no better evidence than the remarkable examples of those closest to the slain victims. Harpreet Singh Saini, who lost his mother in the shooting rampage, moved beyond his personal loss and testified at the United States Senate one month after the Wisconsin tragedy, lobbying for the federal Department of Justice

to begin tracking crimes against Sikhs.¹²² In August 2013, US Attorney General Eric Holder announced that the FBI would expand its hate crime statistics program to include Sikhs.¹²³

Amardeep Kaleka, a son of the slain President of the Oak Creek Temple, was a candidate for the US House of Representatives against Paul Ryan,¹²⁴ “running on a platform exposing the broken system which created his father’s murderer.”¹²⁵ Another son, Pardeep Kaleka, along with Arno Michaelis, formerly a founding member of one of the largest skinhead organizations in the USA, began a campaign to work for youth empowerment against violence. Serve2Unite was a combined response in “utter defiance of fear, ignorance, and hatred, we cultivate courage, wisdom, love, and human kinship on our Earth.”¹²⁶

Since the Oak Creek shooting American Sikhs are “facing a critical choice,”¹²⁷ including shifts in traditional Sikh grand narratives. Sikh leaders are changing and moving beyond internal identity issues in broadening their connections to the American mainstream through effective communication of shared Sikh and American values. Much of this is taking place through mainstream media. They are also exemplifying central Sikh tenets through civic, social and public engagement in the USA and other diasporic locales.

Notes

1. Goode and Kovaleski, 2012.
2. See: Rootsgear, 2012.
3. Singh, I.J., 2012.
4. Basu, 2016.
5. McGreal, 2012a.
6. Baldwin, 2016, 55.
7. See: Lyotard, 1988.
8. Joshi 2006a, 4.
9. Baixas and Simon, 2008.
10. Chauhan, 2012, 326.
11. See: S.J Singh, 2015.
12. Verma, 2013, 65.
13. Nijhawan and Arora, 2013, 300.
14. AG, 450.
15. Myrvold, 2008, 142-143.
16. Riat, 2011, 117.
17. See: Glendinning, 2004.
18. See: Rai, 2005.
19. 1999.
20. See: Oldenburg, 1999.
21. Romell, 2012.
22. See: Sato, 2012.
23. Nayar, 2010, 55.
24. Watson, 2009, 318.
25. See: Bascaramurty, 2013.
26. Riis and Woodhead, 2010, 7-9.
27. See: Rai, 2005.
28. Gopal, 2013, 110.
29. Butler, 2004, 22.
30. See: McGreal, 2012b.
31. Joshi, 2006b, 211.
32. Puar and Rai, 2004, 81.
33. See: SALDEF, 2013.
34. See: Sikh Coalition, 2014.
35. National Sikh Campaign – Full Report, 2015, 3.
36. National Sikh Campaign – Full Report, 2015, 14.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. National Sikh Campaign – Full Report, 2015, 22-23.
40. See: Kaur and Singh, 2012.
41. Singh, B.K. , 2013, 254.
42. Kaur and Singh, 2012.
43. Horan, 2014.
44. McLeod, 1997, Pg. 238.
45. Das, 1992, Pg. 251.
46. See: Nolan, 2012.
47. I.J Singh, 2012.

48. Nesbitt, 2013, 33.
49. Singh, S.J. 2015, *08 April*.
50. Krause, 1989, 566-568.
51. Nesbitt, 2013.
52. Singh, S.J., 2015, *08 April*.
53. Singh, I.J., 2012.
54. Meuller, 2012.
55. Baldwin, 2012.
56. Wang, 2015.
57. Appadurai, 1981.
58. Watson, 2009, 319.
59. Singh, R.M., 2012.
60. Baldwin, 2012.
61. Mehta, 2013, 235.
62. Mehta, 2013, 240.
63. Singh, J., 2014.
64. Singh, N., 2012.
65. Mehta, 2013, 235.
66. Mandair, 2013, 199-200.
67. Adams and Joshi, 2016.
68. Juergensmeyer, 2012.
69. See: Joshi, 2006a (*italics mine*).
70. Singh, J., 2003.
71. Joshi, 2006b.
72. Mandair, 2013, 201.
73. Mandair, 2013, 199.
74. Johnson and Qidwae, 2012.
75. Singh, B.K., 2013, 256-257.
76. Freire, 1970.
77. Bell, 2016.
78. Singh, B.K., 2013, 256-257.
79. Mandair, 2013, 207.
80. See: Singh, I.J., 2012.
81. Krause, 1989, 565.
82. *Ibid.*
83. Singh and Tatla, 2006, 182.
84. Darling, 1934, 50.
85. See: Pattigrew, 1975.
86. See: Haniffa, 2012.
87. Darling, 1934, 50.
88. Pettigrew, 1975, 58-59.
89. Singh, I.P., 2012.
90. Burke, 2012.
91. Kalsi, 1995.
92. Johnston 2001, 359.
93. Kalsi, 1995.
94. Johnston, 2001, 356-359.
95. Kaur, V., 2012.
96. Kaur, A., 2002.

97. Kuruvilla, 2015.
98. Stanton, 2015.
99. Singh, R.M., 2012.
100. Singh, T.S., 2012, *13 August*.
101. *Ibid.*
102. See: Kaur, V. 2012.
103. Singh, T.S., 2012, *September 9*.
104. sikhcounciluk, n.d.
105. Singh, T.S., 2012, *September 9*.
106. Sidhu, 2012.
107. Ahuja, 2014.
108. See: Hopkins (2009) and Sharp (2009).
109. Jakobsh, 2006a, 2015.
110. Singh, S.J., 2013.
111. Sikh Advocate Academy n.d.
112. Singh, S.J., 2013.
113. See: Jakobsh, 2015, 2016.
114. Afshar, Aitken and Franks, 2005, 278.
115. See: West and Zimmerman, 1987.
116. Suh, 2015, 217.
117. Mahmood and Brady, 2000, 52.
118. Mahmood and Brady, 2000, 56.
119. See: Singh, J., 2010.
120. See: Singh, S.J., 2013.
121. Sikh Coalition, n.d.
122. See: Saini, 2012.
123. See: United States Department of Justice, 2015.
124. See: Camia, 2013.
125. Horan, 2014.
126. serve2unite.org, n.d.
127. Sidhu, 2012.

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