

Sikhs in India Outside Punjab

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Abstract: The essay attempts to examine certain marginalised areas of Sikh Studies. It reviews the history of more than five hundred years of Sikh dispersion beyond Punjab in India that gave rise to a few endogamous Sikh groups, many of whom have never been to Punjab and do not know Punjabi. Their gurus initiated some of these journeys during the medieval days. Still, later on, their scope was widened to the distant locations of the country, including different Sikh castes and de-territorialised them. It raises the question of whether these Sikhs may be bracketed as Indian Sikhs and points to an internal diaspora outside Punjab in India.

Keywords: Migrant workers, Kerala, Language barriers, Living conditions, West Bengal

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Introduction

More than five decades ago, Gopal Krishan (1971) published a pioneering essay in the *Indian Geographical Journal*, 'Distribution of the Sikhs Outside Punjab (India)'. The scholar emphasised a few exciting features about Sikhs residing outside Punjab. He found that the most prominent Sikh population spreads in all six states having boundaries with Punjab. These are Delhi, Jammu & Kashmir, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh. He could trace that Punjabis/Sikhs have long traditions of internal dispersion. It was largely possible because colonial Punjab could effectively use unutilised river water going down the Indus River, harnessing these vast amounts of water to carry them over different *doabs* (tracts lying between rivers). As a result, the lands that have long been prairie waste were gradually transformed into a new healthy life. It made it possible to make the land of the five rivers into a food basket for the British Indian Empire.

Krishan (2004) also informed readers that hundreds of migrants reached the canal tracts from densely populated sub-montane and central districts like Gurdaspur, Hoshiarpur, Sialkot and Lahore. They travelled long distances on foot and participated in the newly developing British irrigational exteriors. It goes to their credit for making not only the land a model province of agrarian development in the eyes of the colonial bureaucrats but had enough potential for internal dispersal that reached a new height by the late 19th century and the early decades of the next century.

A distinct aspect of the enterprising landowners of Punjab was that they were not reluctant to serve the British-Indian Army, fought in different theatres of war beyond Punjab, and carried the message of their gurus to distant parts of the globe.

In the next five decades, Gopal Krishan engaged himself in a few allied domains, like the position of the Punjabi-speaking population's dispersion. He could establish that they were one most populous linguistic groups beyond Punjab, surpassing even the Marathis and Bengalis, who generally had better access to modern education and other opportunities (Krishan, 2020, pp.111-115).

The mobility of the Punjabi population continued to inspire other academicians in Punjab. It goes to the credit of Dutt et al. (1979), examining the different forms of Punjabi journeys in the post-Independent years. They published two articles in the *Geo-Journal* in the 1970s and emphasised that the Punjabi migrants' dispersion was so widespread that they could reach nearly all the six hundred districts of the country. Gill (1999) further examined the subject and underlined how the Sikhs' large-

scale dispersal from rural Punjab steadily transformed them into urban folk beyond the province. According to his estimate, these urban Sikhs constituted around 41.1 per cent in Delhi, Chandigarh and Mumbai.

These studies mentioned above were all undertaken by scholars of Population Studies, mostly of Punjabi background. A historian is generally conspicuous by his absence in the field—the present essay endeavours to fill in some of the existing gaps in the eyes of a historian. The study is divided into a few sections that would not only try to the historical roots of Sikh journeys with a few references to their sources.

I. Defining Indian Sikhs as perceived by a student of history: some essential features

As a result of numerous long-term urban pushes, Sikhs stood at a little over one-fifth of their population at the threshold of the 21st century (Banerjee, 2014, pp. 534-44). They are people of varied social compositions and economic backgrounds. Despite their linguistic, cultural, and territorial differences in their ranks, they have a deep commitment to the teachings of Sikh Gurus and their holy book (*Guru Granth Sahib*). Many scattered across the country beyond Punjab had never resided there but considered Amritsar the most sacred city. Again, some Sikhs were born and brought up in different western Punjab districts like Rawalpindi, Jhelum and Gujranwala but have never been longtime residents of the Indian Punjab created after the Partition of 1947. Without any appropriate term for delineating them, they may be bracketed as Indian Sikhs in the essay so that their varied links and differences with Punjab could be better understood. It is likely to facilitate their divisions into smaller groups and allows researchers to know their unique relationship with the members of the host society. Their perceptions of Sikhism were somewhat different from their counterparts living in Punjab on vital issues like *gurdwara* (Sikh sacred space), rituals like *aarti* (showing lamps before the holy texts) and the simultaneous *parkas* (opening) of the *Adi Granth* (Sikh holy text) and the *Dasam Granth* (claimed to have been composed by Guru Gobind Singh) before the *sangat* (congregation). These practices were in Punjab but were widely popular in two of the five Sikh sacred spaces. These differences point to how regional experiences played a crucial role in many Sikh rituals outside Punjab but had generally missed scholarly attention.

The study emphasises how the community's dispersal process to distant Indian locations has de-territorialised the community. It stimulates the redefinition of migrants' religious boundaries in new residential sites and prompts them to recreate home memories with simultaneous residence in two or more places. Interfacing with their descendants born in these locations away from Punjab suggests how their response to a few recent traumatic experiences of the 1980s, such as the Operation Blue Star (June 1984) and the Delhi Sikh Pogrom (October-November 1984), continue to differ, resulting in occasional sharp differences in their ranks.

Some of these issues invite interrogation regarding diaspora, inseparably associated with disparate forms of human displacement, migration, and settlement outside native places to scattered global locations. Accordingly, the essay accommodates any form of internal dispersion of a community beyond their native place in other provinces where migrants have adapted their home memory and identity (Gold, 2007, pp.171-90). Indian Sikh settlements may therefore be investigated concerning the debate and review of whether these Sikh dispersals underline the emergence of an internal Sikh diaspora beyond Punjab in India.

II. Materials for reconstructing the history of Indian Sikhs

The sources of their history are varied and scattered. Assessment of Punjabi sources, such as the *Janam-sakhis* (birth narratives), the *vars* (long poems) of Bhai Gurdas (c.1558-c.1637), the *hukamname* (orders of letters) of gurus, the numerous poetical works of Giani Gian Singh (1882-1921), and above all, Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha's (1861-1938) *magnum opus Mahankosh* are essential

starting points. These provide glimpses of medieval days' Sikh dispersal and the development of a few *Sangat's* (Sikh congregations) engaged in different activities outside Punjab.

Cautious handling of wide-ranging Persian manuscripts points to the community's scattered settlements from Pune (Maharashtra) to Patna (Bihar) and points to different categories of land grants to holy men (Metcalf, 1979, pp. 390-403; Ved Prakash, 1981, pp. 179-83; Jena, 1997, pp. 136-42). Among them who had business instincts utilised their offerings for running religious establishments, such as *akharas*, *deras*, *maths* and *dharamsalas*.

In the east, Sikhs are traced in busy urban centres, predominantly on the Yamuna and Ganga banks rivers. Their trade transactions were not unknown in the Deccan as far as Bidar (Karnataka). Appraisal of Jaipur sources emphasises that Sikhs were engaged in political negotiations and military interventions in mid-18th century Rajasthan. A few medieval Odia and Marathi materials underline the community's presence in coastal Odisha and Pune (Maharashtra), respectively (Behera, 1966; Gokhale, 1988).

Information regarding the colonial period is available primarily in census reports, district gazetteers, annual statistical abstracts, travel narratives, memoirs of British civilians and individual tourists, etc. These underline how Sikh journeys have widened their residential locations since the late 19th century. Compared to these printed materials, unpublished archival records would be less numerous, except for three decades following the beginning of World War I (1914) to the end of colonial rule (1947). As Sikhs grew politically crucial at the all-India level for the Akalis, the colonial bureaucracy became more concerned with recording their disparate activities outside Punjab.

The wide range of modern Indian vernacular sources emphasises how authors' perceptions were modified following the harrowing Punjab experiences of the 1980s, which profoundly impacted the rest of India. The vast number of creative materials in Hindi literary archives (Tiwary, 1987; Singh, 1994; Tejinder, 1990) surpasses them. Some of these materials portray how the Sikh-Hindu relationship became sensitive following the Delhi Sikh Pogrom. Non-Hindi vernaculars examine some of these issues (Goswami, 1994; Bhattacharya, 1999), but the numbers of such publications are comparatively few and far between.

Finally, Indian Sikhs' oral tradition merits attention. Despite its bias in memory use and emphasis on the subjective experiences of narrators, it represents an exciting signifier of the community's identity. These materials remain an essential mobilisation channel and introduce historians to refreshing field experiences.

III. Four-fold divisions of Indian Sikhs

Indian Sikhs' diverse ethnic backgrounds, different strategies of journeying from their native place to new home, other languages of communication, etc., result in categorisation under the following headings :

(i) Native Sikhs

Scholars of South Asian history, like Eaton (2003), point to a few widely used 'migration corridors' extending across the country. These busy communicational arteries underline a fair measure of flexibility in pre-colonial Indian society and provide glimpses of people's varied forms of connectivity and modes of circulation. Sikhism initially reached beyond Punjab through some of these channels. Sikh Gurus' interactive engagements brought their tenets within reach of commoners. In new sites, the holy men cum enterprising Khatri businesspeople, such as the Nanakpanthis and the Udasis, nurtured the embryonic faith. Small and scattered land grants cited earlier indicate how the functioning of these settlements depended upon the support of local men of different persuasions. They were predominantly non-Punjabis with roots firmly embedded in regional socio-cultural

settings. Their presence virtually dislodged the seemingly inviolable notions that early Sikhs were all Punjabis, and their journeys were often programmed in Punjab.

These Sikh passages stimulated adequate support at the local level. In different journeys across India, the early Sikhs encountered regional beliefs and practices and incorporated some of them into their local culture. They were accustomed to communicating in other languages cutting across social boundaries and carried some *padas* (couplets) of non-Sikh *bhagats* (holy men) to Punjab. Their incorporation in Sikh sacred text underlines early Sikhs' keenness to share India's other *bhakti* (devotional) traditions commensurate with the predominant thrust of Sikh scripture as enunciated by Sikh Gurus. It emphasises growing 'self-consciousness' among the Guru's Sikhs without rupturing the religious mosaic around them. Sikhs managed to replicate them in some places, while the option of other forms of redesigning in another location is not ruled out.

The centrality of the Khalsa in the mid-eighteenth century made possible the entry of soldiers and mercenaries into the Sikh fold and witnessed modifications in the transmission of Sikh heritage. They virtually ceased to be a community of mere peasants and traders. Still, acquiring wealth stimulated economic differentiation and intensified rivalry at different levels, occasionally climaxing among *misl* leaders at the apex. Udasis and Nanakpanthis joined other militarised Sikh groups. They felt no discord in combining trade and militarism in their distant journeys, allowing for a certain ambiguity about the nature and definition of the Khalsa order.

Their long settlement in scattered residential sites during pre-colonial times stimulated particular interest in some of these locations. A few emigrants preferred to reside there after marrying at the local level. Their wedlock facilitated the incorporation of the local language, food habits, dress, and other markers of regional culture. As new generations were born, they saw a burst of creativity unencumbered by doctrinal and organisation elaboration. They appreciated some of the distinctiveness of these places. It led to their participation in local celebrations and made them better prepared to share food, adopt the dress, and assimilate culture to make these a part of their everyday living. Sikhism became pluralistic with many overlapping identities. The emergence of several small indigenous Sikh groups scattered from Kashmir to Assam had their definite territorial locations. So far, five of them are traced in different parts of India: (a) Asomiya Sikhs, (b) Bihari Sikhs (also called Agraharis), (c) Odishan Sikhs, (d) Dakini Sikhs, and (e) Kashmiri Sikhs. They point out how pre-colonial Sikhs beyond Punjab in India continued to reinvent gurus' messages with interesting modifications after incorporating local experiences. Some of these indigenous groups of Sikhs were not reluctant to claim religious affiliation with their Hindu neighbours. At the same time, reports of sharp differences between them in other parts of the country are not unknown (Banerjee, 2017:430-46).

These pre-colonial endogamous groups grew from non-Punjabi ethnic folk in a regional socio-cultural montage that operated as a vital melting pot of 'local and all-India tradition' (Ecshmann et al., 1986, p. xvi). In these distant locations away from Punjab, they were engaged in dialogue with 'regional traditions', giving them the clout to 'polish' their religious beliefs and social practices. It stimulated internal pluralism and multiple discourses (Banerjee, 2007, pp. 218-56). The emergence of such minuscule Sikh clusters, with their distinct language and ritual, led to the blossoming of regional diversity in Sikhism and underlined Sikhism's growing strength and vitality while living away from it Punjab. In these locations, the message of Sikh Gurus did not survive as moribund faith, and its life was borrowed from Punjab. Still, it underlined how divergent strands of a lived religion managed to live in distant parts of India without demarcating conceptual abstractions of deviating traditions.

(ii) Punjabi Sikhs

They are the most numerous Indian Sikhs, communicate in Punjabi, their mother tongue, carry external markers of Sikhism and prefer to maintain their separate identity from that of Hindus. As peasants and militiamen, they were already scattered from Kashmir to Karnataka in medieval times,

while their skilled artisanal personnel were found busy in a few adjoining provinces of Punjab. The colonial rule opened fresh pasturages, and their early migrations began in the decades following the annexation of Punjab (1849) and the Great Uprising (1857-59). At the same time, colonial modernity stimulated conditions for large-scale internal migration of Sikhism to different canal colonies. The current military recruitment policy encouraged the emergence of a well-defined Sikh identity in Punjab and favoured their enrollment in armed and police forces. Others were called upon to lay railway lines, drive automobiles and participate in industrialisation. The unleashing of these forces generated employment opportunities among a section of rural Sikhs.

Khatri traders no longer dominated these journeys beginning in the late 19th century, but Jats flocked in large numbers and became their actual beneficiaries. Other non-Jat groups, standing at the lower rungs of Sikh social hierarchy, like Aroras and Ramgarhias, emulated Jat enterprise, though not uniformly reproducing it. Some of these developments introduced Sikhs to varied urban opportunities and exposed them to the complexities of contemporary politics at the all-India level. For example, it was not uncommon for a Jat landowner to transfer part of his ancestral holdings and use their asset for undertaking journeys beyond India (Banerjee, 1982). Such examples were not unknown among their relatives moving to distant Indian locations.

Since the late 19th century, small Sikh peasants were encouraged to migrate to some of the newly canal-irrigated central Punjab districts like Gujranwala, Lahore and Sheikhpura from the densely populated submontane districts like Sialkot, Hoshiarpur, and Gurdaspur. They flocked in thousands and stimulated a new form of internal mobility in rural society and healthy village settlements (Darling, 1925, pp. 111-132; Krishan, 2004). Later on, in the Ganganagar district (Rajasthan) in the 20th century, the same process was replicated when new agricultural settlements developed green wheat and sugar fields (Misra, 2014, pp.17-142). As the message for gurdwara reforms (the 1920s) reached Ganganagar, the local peasantry mobilised under caste leaders. Moreover, inadequate supply from the Gang Canal under the leadership of the Akalis provided a critical rallying point to forge intimate ties with a section of Sikh leadership in Punjab. Similarly, in the districts of Saharanpur, Meerut, Rohilkhand and Moradabad districts of Uttar Pradesh, the Akali struggle remained a powerful message and stimulated Jat peasant mobilisation.

In Kolkata, Sikhs were in the city during and after World War I when the city had emerged as an embarkation point for going to distant countries beyond India and witnessed the introduction of modern vehicular traffic. They found work as drivers, cleaners and conductors in private transport organisations. It would be unfair to bracket all immigrants to the city as illiterate subalterns. Contemporary British Intelligence Branch records refer to setting up a Punjabi press, bringing out daily newspapers and publishing literary magazines of different formats. Some of these creative initiatives came from Ramgarhias, adding a new cultural dimension to the city's Sikh mosaic.

Some of these creative activities owed to the beginning of the Akali struggle in Punjab. Immigrants joined the city's nationalist leadership and transformed their fight into a broad-based anti-imperial effort. Like Akalis of Punjab, Jat Sikhs, who generally supported different moves of local Congress leadership, led Kolkata's Sikh struggle. However, a few of them joined Marxist-led trade union movements. These made Punjabi Sikhs follow varied political strands but with a linked thrust of reforming *gurdwaras*. Bihari Sikhs of central Kolkata branded as untrue Sikhs faced its immediate brunt. An alarmed British administration intervened to defend Bihari Sikhs against the Akalis and turned it into an extended version of the contemporary *gurdwara* struggle. Punjabi Sikhs, however, failed to achieve their target so long as the colonial administration stood firmly behind Bihari Sikhs. Nevertheless, they captured some of the *gurdwaras* of Bihari Sikhs when colonial rule was on its way out.

The Akali struggle in its nationalist format was neither present everywhere nor received similar support in other parts of India. It did not evoke much enthusiasm in two central Indian states

(Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh) owing to the absence of a sizable number of Khalsa Sikhs. Besides, they were mostly Ramgarhias employed in different government institutions. In contrast, few others were descendants of old Nihang families with intimate links to regional culture established through the marriage of local women (Singh, 2009, pp. 38-9). Hence, the message of the *gurdwara* reforms did not appeal to them. Again, the presence of Akalis at Vaikom Satyagraha (March 1924-November 1925) in the native state of Travancore (Kerala) was viewed as a 'threat' to local peace and evoked denunciation in the local press.

In Cuttack (Odisha), its anti-colonial blueprint was modified. With the support of some loyal Sikhs and a handful of Odia Brahmos, local British officials emphasised how the Akali-led *gurdwara* struggle in Odisha could be appreciably diverted from its anti-British track record in Punjab (1935). Some of these incongruous experiences underlined that the Akali-led struggle outside Punjab had regional ramifications. As Sikh migration did not occur uniformly throughout India, it provided local British administration and nationalist leadership the opportunity to modify their pronounced anti or pro-Akali stand per local needs and circumstances.

The early twentieth-century Ramgarhia caste mobilisation in Assam provides another exciting illustration. Linked with technical jobs, Ramgarhias not only reached the industrial cities of Jamshedpur and Kolkata but also went to Assam for laying railway lines - an area missed by Jat migrants owing to a lack of surface traffic. In the absence of Jats, Ramgarhias slipped into their position and claimed the highest social ranking at the local level, which was inconceivable in contemporary Punjab. They also set up a few *gurdwaras*, bracketed these institutions with their caste name and exercised control through the celebration of *gurpurabs* (celebrations associated with their Gurus) and other festivities.

With firm loyalty to British rule and reluctance to support the Jat-dominated Akali struggle of the 1920s, a section of middle-class Ramgarhia leaders learnt the significance of the *gurdwara* platform in their caste mobilisation in Punjab. With its success in Punjab, some of its counterparts carried its message to Assam. As Ramgarhias were mobilised in Brahmaputra Valley through their caste-led *gurdwaras* (Sikh sacred space), it remained a sharp relief to what Jats had long been doing with the community's sacred space elsewhere in India (Banerjee, 2013, pp. 145-72).

The long process of Punjabi Sikh dispersions prompts historians to examine how these two important Sikh castes, namely, Jats and Ramgarhias, interfered with each other in new locations and struggled to define 'orthodoxy' against other Native Sikhs (Banerjee, 2013a, pp.163-92). The vast Indian space beyond Punjab evoked various competition and anxieties, often resulting in distance, heat, fragmentation, and hierarchy in their ranks. These struggles were not restricted to two Punjabi Sikh caste groups but affected their native counterparts from Assam to Maharashtra.

As immigrants increased in number and came from dissimilar backgrounds, tensions reached new heights under colonial rule, and the post-Independence decades point no exception to it. Contradictory assertions, such as Hindu-Sikhs, *Sanatani*-Sikhs, *packka* and *kachha* Sikhs, continued to worry them outside Punjab. This created a fissure and raised speculations about whether, like Punjab, the 'streamlining' Sikhism was similarly effective in distant Indian locations.

Some of these experiences embittered the relationship between native Sikhs and their Punjabi counterparts. It was nothing unknown under the colonial rule but took spiky turns during the post-Independence years. As there were fresh opportunities for journeys during these decades, Punjabi Sikhs moved to distant Indian districts outside Punjab and to areas where native Sikhs were still significant in numbers. It not only sharpened their conflict with Asomiya Sikhs in Brahmaputra Valley but prompted them to intervene in the management and control of two *takhats* (highest seats of Sikh temporal authority) situated in two distant parts (one in Patna and the other in Nanded in Maharashtra) of the country. After a long-protracted negotiation mixed with the show of muscle and

money power at Patna, Punjabi Sikhs could achieve success. However, at Nanded, where Dakini Sikhs are numerous, Punjabi Sikhs struggled with the recently reorganised Hazoor Sahib Management Board to administer the *Sachkhand Gurdwara*, Nanded. It evoked chain reactions, unsettled a section of Dakini Sikhs, irked Punjab's apex Sikh SGPC (The Tribune, 2015, May 19) and raised specific political questions skirting the usual Hindu-Sikh relationship in the politics of both communities.

Post-Independence decades they brought a few other changes. With improvements in the road network and changes in the means of transportation, Punjabi Sikhs reinforced their control in the domain of surface traffic at the all-India level. It opened the gates of all states beyond the Vindhyas in the south. They were not merely transporters but engaged them in different industrial enterprises, the sale of electronic equipment, electrical goods, hotel business and small-scale financial operations (The Maharashtra Sikh Directory, 2010; Singh Sabha Sahayak Society Twin Cities, 2012; Karnataka Sikh Directory, 2014).

The Punjab peasants similarly moved out of their native place. The high cost of cultivable land and its short supply carried them to rural areas of Rajasthan, western Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. Though there are no available official figures for peasant exodus, reports from these areas indicate that farmers around the sprawling cities of Amritsar, Jalandhar and Ludhiana were exploring options in Madhya Pradesh and western Uttar Pradesh. However, Bhatinda, Faridkot, and Ferozepur peasants preferred Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh (*The Indian Express*, November 12, 2006).

(iii) Refugee Sikhs

It refers to those Sikhs who were forced to leave earlier residential locations lying beyond the country's international boundaries and reached India on three different occasions. The process began in 1947 with the coming of Sikhs from western Punjab, who represent nearly 90.0 per cent of them. Like Sikh refugees from western Punjab, another group left Sindh almost during the same period and primarily settled in Gujarat and other adjoining states. Later, two more groups, one from Burma (1962) and the other from Afghanistan (1992), joined them. With their different residential locations and dissimilar socio-economic background, these Sikhs fall into two groups, viz. agriculturists and non-agriculturists.

According to one estimate, nearly 2.5 million Sikh refugees from different western districts of Pakistan were rehabilitated in the rest of India. They represented 40 per cent of the Sikh population before the 1947 partition (Dutt et al., 1979, p.85). It led to a profound change in the Sikh demographic profile at the all-India level. A sizeable number of them were enterprising peasants who were owners of big irrigated holdings in different canal colonies of west Punjab and small agriculturists known for their diligent farming. All could not be accommodated in Punjab (Haryana was still a part of it) on lands left behind by Muslim evacuees to Pakistan.

Refugees were resettled in provinces bordering Punjab, where Sikhs were already in significant numbers. An essential segment of these Sikhs were Jats rehabilitated in rural Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. While a section of them paved the way for the Green Revolution in Punjab, their counterparts residing in adjoining states had an equally impressive record. With their longtime expertise in modern cultivation techniques and productive use of canal water, they served as a model to other refugee farmers. They took up varied challenges of new settlements and struggled to change their fortune. Haryana and Rajasthan accommodated a little over forty per cent of the Sikh peasant population (2001) residing outside Punjab and shared much of the achievements of Punjab peasants.

Uttarakhand reverberated the message of the peasant's triumph. It was initially a territory afflicted with devastating malaria, unpredictable moods of nature and ravages of wild beasts over which the hill population had virtually no control. However, hard labour and improved framing

turned a significant area of the region into flourishing agricultural settlements of the country. Nevertheless, these agrarian changes had generally occurred at the cost of coercing native hill people, large-scale bio-degradation, ecological imbalance and ethnic divide. It precipitated debate regarding its long-term implications, but the success story of Sikh pioneer farmers who had taken the lead nearly seventy years ago and continued it in subsequent decades merits attention. Another narrative of peasant success came from Himachal Pradesh, mainly from three *tahsils* skirting Punjab, like Paonta Sahib. These were initially a part of Punjab's envisaged Garden Colony (the 1950s) and supplied fruits and other products to nearby factories in Uttar Pradesh.

Unlike peasant refugees of Punjab plains with broad affinities of caste and place of origin in their ranks, their counterparts in Jammu and Kashmir were men of diverse linguistic affiliations who traced their origin to scattered areas of western Punjab. They had also embraced Sikhism on diverse occasions (Singh, 1927; see Banerjee in Brill's Encyclopedia, 2017, pp. 430-33 and pp. 444-45). Some migrated from the Sialkot region (Dutt et al., 1979, pp.209; Singh et al., 2003, pp. 419) and settled in rural parts of Jammu. Others came from other bordering areas, such as Mirpur and Muzaffarabad of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.

The history of Sikh refugees would be incomplete without referring to urban professional groups settled in different parts of India. Many took the self-rehabilitation path in scattered urban centres and trading marts along the Yamuna-Ganga plains. However, in other cases, the government allotted houses, shops and industrial enterprises, which Muslim refugees left behind. Otherwise, they were offered vacant space at a nominal price or other financial assistance like a low rate of interest to set up shops and residential plots to build houses.

Some of these facilities allowed them to live together again with their relatives. The level of urbanisation (45.48 per cent) of these people was significantly higher than their counterparts living in Punjab (17.22 per cent). While rural Sikhs outside Punjab generally concentrate in areas bordering Punjab, urban Sikhs occupy nearly all-important cities across the country. According to census reports, more than half of the urban Sikh population inhabited big urban centres like Delhi, Mumbai, Kanpur, Jamshedpur, Kolkata, Lucknow, Thane, Pune, Jabalpur and Indore.

Of all these cities again, the rise of Delhi owed much to refugees from western Punjab. Incidentally, Delhi represents the largest urban concentration of Sikhs in the country. They brought their skills and initial capital to begin another chapter of life. With their Hindu counterparts, they had added a distinct lifestyle to modern Delhi, and their visible presence is traced throughout the city (Datta, 1993, pp. 287-305). In some important resettlement areas like Lodi Colony, Punjabi Bagh, Tilak Nagar and other Trans-Yamuna settlements, they made their presence felt to their non-Sikh neighbours. The Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee (DSGMC) exhibits a powerful Sikh presence. In 1971, legislation was passed to manage different *gurdwaras* and their properties in Delhi. With the city's historical *gurdwaras* under its management (Singh, 2003) and an annual budget of around fifty million rupees, the DSGMC used to maintain its distinct stand from the SGPC in the past. However, there have been significant changes in their relationship in recent years.

Like Delhi, important Maharashtrian urban centres such as Mumbai, Thane, Pune and Nagpur also witnessed a steady rise in the migration of Sikh refugees from 41436 (1941) to 161 184 (1991). In Mumbai, they are engaged in engineering works, electronic goods, the hotel industry, the transport sector, educational institutions and other professions. An outline of the Sikh refugee's success story is communicated through the community's numerous colourful publications, holding of *Nagar kirtans* and directories. In addition, the city had more than fifty *gurdwaras*, which made the Sikh presence colourful and enriched by making it aggressively cosmopolitan in cinema and fashion design.

While a section of Sikh refugees shared Delhi and Mumbai's spectacular urban growth, Kolkata's economy did not offer significant relief to the recent immigrants. A small number of them still settled but had to operate in a restricted market where competition was stiff, and the amount of profit was not lucrative. Moreover, the local administration's engagement with the manifold problems of millions of Hindu refugees from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) worsened matters. Amid such difficulties, a handful of refugees reached the city. They possibly looked forward to local Sikh transporters and traded in automobile parts. However, with better education and no permanent tie with Punjab, they remained like an endogamous group within the larger Kolkata Sikh space.

The arrival of many Sikh refugees in different urban locations stimulated new social equations with Sikhs from Indian Punjab who was already there. Without any early dialogue and exchange, a section of settlers from eastern Punjab preferred to maintain distance and continue reservations about their refugee counterparts. The latter were sometimes viewed with suspicion as undesirable outsiders (Chandra, 1976; Kaur, 2007). A few Sikh sacred spaces (*gurdwaras*) sprang up with various caste and territorial affiliations, which were consolidated as centres of different group activities, giving local Sikh space a distinctiveness and 'visibility' in the eyes of their host society (Jacobsen, ed., 2008). It created competition and intensified fragmentation and hierarchy in their ranks.

Compared to refugees from Pakistan, and Punjab, their counterparts from Burma and Afghanistan are insignificant. They were mostly traders who had migrated from those districts in western Punjab. After the nationalisation of trade in Myanmar (1962) and the dislodgment of the Najibullah government in Afghanistan (1992), they moved towards India. Of these two Sikh groups, those from Afghanistan were more numerous and mostly located in Delhi (Khurana, 2001). However, the displaced Sikhs from Myanmar initially stayed in Imphal and Moreh (Manipur) and from there, they continued old trade transactions. However, fresh ethnic violence along the Indo-Myanmar border (Banerjee, 2012) forced them to leave these places. Nevertheless, they carried some distinctive features of culture and festivities of these two faraway countries and preferred social networking with those who preferred to maintain similar memories of an old home lying beyond India's international boundaries.

These refugee groups had different perceptions of home. In the eyes of refugees from western Punjab, their native place (*Ghar*) was still located in those Punjab districts, which they had to leave behind following the partition of Punjab. Despite their unremitting Sikh identity, long residence in western Punjab districts made their language, dress, food consumption, culinary process, lifestyle, and celebrations significantly different from those of their eastern counterparts. The former would be feeling more comfortable in negotiating a marriage or sharing social anxieties with their refugee neighbours and friends residing in the same locality or other parts of the country than those Sikhs who were from eastern Punjab. Similarly, the Sikhs from Burma and Afghanistan had their slightly distinct lifestyle and festivities, which historians engaged in charting them in different parts of the country would not be missing.

(iv) Dalit Sikhs

Dalit Sikhs living outside Punjab in India may be divided into two groups and stand at the bottom of the Sikh social hierarchy. One of them is Mazbhis (sweepers) of rural Punjab who immigrated overwhelmingly towards north-east India. The other is Sikligars (polishers of weapons), who represent a segment of the larger nomadic tribes composed of Banjaras, Lubanas and others. Their oral traditions trace origin to blacksmiths of Chittor of medieval Rajasthan, and, like Mazbhis, they reside in secluded sites and share the stigma of untouchability. They journeyed beyond Punjab through several channels of their will though Mazhbi migration received enough British support (Banerjee, 2010, pp. 3-30).

Mazhbhis (Sikh untouchables) of Gurdaspur and Amritsar districts were encouraged to travel to Shillong, the capital of British Assam, by the end of the 19th century to keep the city's adjoining cantonment clean. Initially, it took nearly seven days to reach there. On the recommendation of local military officials, they were subsequently employed in large numbers by Shillong Municipal Board (1910) with an assured monthly salary. It stimulated more significant Mazbhi migrations from Punjab accommodated in two specific localities of Shillong. As the hill city witnessed expansion in the following decades of the century, the number of Sikh sweepers proliferated.

Other Sikh castes like Ramgarhias, Soniars (goldsmiths), and Chimbais (calico printers) also flocked there. It led to the foundation of a *gurdwara* (1922), but Mazhbhis were denied entry to its innermost precincts of untouchability. A decade later, Mazhbhis decided to have a sacred space recreating contemporary Punjab's caste scenario in faraway hills. However, there was very little change in their social position as they continued to perform traditional menial services in their new home.

As the years rolled on, the Sikh caste scenario in the hill city grew more competitive and complicated. The leadership of the community passed from the hands of Ramgarhias to Soniars in the second half of the 20th century, who seemed more obdurate in enforcing the Sikh code of conduct within the limits of the most important *gurdwara* situated at the heart of the city. Dalits were criticised not only for coming to Sikh sacred space in an inebriated condition but also for using filthy language there. It intensified distance not only among different Sikh castes but also among fragmented Masis (Dalits converted to Christianity). Soon they found among them a small number of 'Good Mazhbhis' who were ready to rally behind Soniar leadership, while those who had refused it was treated as 'Bad Mazhbhis' and denied financial support extended to their counterparts.

It underlined that, like Punjab, the Sikh space of the hill city was not only fractured but became hierarchical to redesign it by the dominant caste's notion of purity and pollution. The plight of Mazhbhis grew worse because they did not have any legal right over the small plot of land they had been residing in since their first coming to Shillong. Some who had retired from municipal services were deprived of pensions and other benefits of working in a civic body run with governmental support.

Their position seemed nothing better in Guwahati and Dishpur in the new province of Assam, which had emerged after the dismemberment of the old British Assam (1971). So, Mathis was encouraged to move there to take up the task of keeping the new Assam capital clean. Initially, they were welcomed to emigrate, but by the beginning of the new century, the local administration seemed unwilling to accommodate any more Mazhbhis within the city's limits. Besides, some of their settlement sites, which were earlier outside the city's boundary, were incorporated within the city limits and became locations of costly residential sites, bringing them face to face with the growing pressure of consumer-friendly urbanisation.

At the beginning of the new century, the civic body looked forward to removing these 'unclean' residential places and their inhabitants who earlier were welcomed to reside to keep the urban space clean. However, with eviction looming significantly in their residential areas, Mazhbhis could neither procure any alternative accommodation nor consider returning to Punjab. In the meantime, many significant changes have occurred since their predecessors left the place nearly a century ago.

Like Mazhbhis, Sikligars did not migrate in one direction but scattered from Maharashtra to Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh to Andhra Pradesh. There is no detailed record of their dispersion, but a few field investigations of the last few decades conducted by anthropologists, journalists and the National Commission for Minorities point to their scattered locations. In recent years, they have preferred to become sedentary, embracing occupations of jewellers, ironsmiths and construction workers. Economic differentiation among a section of Sikligars is visible in some parts

of Maharashtra. It led to their social differentiation, new group divisions and social hierarchy. They are also treated differently by the various state governments. Despite occasional economic success stories, they stand away from the larger sections of Sikh society and, like Mazhbis, carry their subordinate position in new residences away from Punjab.

IV. Indian Sikhs and Punjab tragedy

As Sikhs from Punjab continued their Indian journeys, they passed through decades of tumultuous Punjab experiences in the 1980s. These turned Punjab bloody, twisted the politics of the community, and forced a handful of the community to take up arms and become targets of attacks from different corners. Their tragedy was internationalised and stimulated a new Sikh identity which evoked complicated repercussions in Indian politics.

Of the four different Indian Sikh groups, the response of Punjabi Sikhs was the most forthwith, for many had intimate contact with rural Punjab in 1984. They made no secret of their pain and anguish regarding the military assault on the Golden Temple Complex. It marginalised them in Indian polity; the Sikh Pogrom (1984) widened the chasm and alienated many of them from the rest of the country. As a result, few went back to Punjab, wishing never to return to their old settlement sites located outside Punjab. Many openly talked of another partition of the country while others suffered long-term imprisonment and other forms of police harassment. These unfortunate developments gave rise to a new Sikh ethnicity in the country (Gupta, 1996).

Despite widespread sympathy and support, Indian Sikhs did not respond uniformly—many emphasised differences with those voicing the message of Khalistan in Punjab and overseas. Neither the majority of indigenous Sikhs nor their refugee counterparts nor those from Dalit groups were ready to bracket them with the politics of secession in Punjab. Besides, others were far from their native place or had never resided there. Even a significant section of Punjabi Sikhs, who were long residents in different Indian locations, were not unaware of the significance of their present residential sites. These were viewed as new homes, and they were hardly ready to exchange these places with the 'imagined notion of Khalistan', which was unclear to many.

A few interesting literary creations by Punjabi Sikhs and non-Sikh authors were brought out during these days. They outlined Indian Sikhs' complex mindset. Those Punjabi Sikhs who had written in Hindi underlined sympathy and solidarity with widespread Sikh victimhood. There were a few non-Sikh authors who graphically documented the sufferings of the Sikhs in other Indian languages. In their opinion, religious minorities like Sikhs, who had witnessed repeated evictions from their ancestral homes, would continue to suffer at the hands of the country's majority community. However, they were not reluctant to share the pain and anxiety of their Sikh neighbours. A few non-Sikh critics held militant Sikhs of Punjab primarily responsible for recent tragedies and found no reason to support the cause of Khalistan.

These different shades of modern Indian vernaculars had another distinguishing feature. Instead of highlighting the Sikh past of Punjab, long associated with the glories of Gurus, martyrs, military heroes and crown heads since the dawn of nationalist writings in the late 19th century (Banerjee, 2013b), this literature sought to evolve a new literary space for Indian Sikhs. Uninterrupted Sikh bleeding of these years made authors conscious of the presence of Indian Sikhs as neighbours, which had so far been ignored in literary archives. A few lively images of Sikh commoners with their everyday success and failure emerged out of these tragedies of Punjab and their fallout in the rest of India. The struggle for Khalistan had no doubt partially eroded post-colonial Indian plural polity, but some of these literary creations gave rise to fresh opportunities for dialogue and debate among cross-sections of Sikhs and non-Sikhs which had not been there before.

V. A Sikh diaspora within India

These Sikh settlements add a new territorial space in the community's life and point to the emergence of a Sikh diaspora in India. By the end of the last century, demographers (Singh, 1968, pp. 68-71;

Krishan, 1971, pp. 35-41) traced their overwhelming presence in all five states adjoining Punjab (Haryana, Rajasthan, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir) and Uttar Pradesh which had common boundaries with the province till the latter's trifurcation in 1966.

Their number significantly reduces as one moves away from Punjab to frontier locations in the extreme northeast or towards the far south. Their extended residence in remote places with slender Punjab links has stimulated the inclusion of many distinctive features of a new home and made them unique as Sikhs. These sites nowadays accommodate more Sikhs than their counterparts residing overseas, and unlike the latter, it is not a recent development but has grown over centuries since the days of Sikh Gurus in medieval times. Immigrant Sikhs carry home memories, viz. food, caste hierarchy, and gurdwara-centric religious life with factional politics, social celebrations, print culture and other things to new locations.

These locations, composed of different ethnic groups of mixed territorial backgrounds, challenge the notion of a static, fixed and monolithic Sikh identity and point to the community's enthusiasm to accommodate and assimilate diverse local social experiences and religious beliefs without rejecting the perception of remaining disciples of Sikh Gurus.

Like the SGPC, Indian Sikhs miss the advantage of having an apex body of their own. Instead, they have set up a few provincial-level Sikh bodies, which often communicate in sometimes contradictory languages and create differences in their ranks. However, it allows historians to examine the causes of their multi-vocalic message resonating from Manipur to Maharashtra.

Many Indian Sikhs in Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru and other places are adequately successful in finance and politics. However, they still lack adequate representation in the Sikh's apex agency, the SGPC. It has resulted in their silent cold war with the apex Sikh body on the nature and exercise of control over the two powerful *takhats* (seats of temporal power at Patna and Nanded) that stand outside Punjab. These unfortunate developments continued to rock the Indian Sikh space and turned it into a contested terrain (Indian Express, 2015, May 12). It sometimes flares up but mainly results in a whimper because none is hardly ready to ignore the other's overlapping relationship and overarching tie extended over centuries.

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Note: I am not unaware of the various constraints in the use of the word Indian Sikhs. However, without the other convenience, I had to leave it unchanged.

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