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POLICY BRIEF

PUNJAB: IN THE BAY AND BEYOND

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HISTORY

Sikhism was founded in the Punjab region in the late 15th century¹. Sikhism is the 5th largest, monotheistic religion in the world, with over 25 million worldwide adherents. Sikh core values are reflected in its cultural traditions and practices, including social justice, human rights, and care for the collective. Sikhism refutes caste and other oppressive practices, emphasizing liberation and equality for all through practices like langar and seva. Despite its rich, diverse history, Sikhs don a distinctive physical identity — 99% of turban wearing people in the United States are Sikh.²

Further, a historically critical part of Sikh history is the warrior identity. From India to the U.S., Sikhs served in World Wars I and II alongside the Allied powers, as well as other historic battles during and prior to the 20th century. This warrior identity, worldly experience through the military, and courageous thirst for adventure and economic opportunity in a new frontier, is thought to have contributed at least in part to Punjabi Sikhs' later status as one of the first South Asians to immigrate outside of South Asia.

Punjab is often revered as the breadbasket of India, producing 20% of India's wheat³. As such, the Punjabi Sikhs that live in Punjab have historically made their earnings through farming in one capacity or another. Thus, a common driver in early migration to the United States was proximity to fertile farmland, and therefore, Northern California became a hub for migration.



An Akali Nihang Soldier in 1865.
Sourced via BBC

¹ "Sikhism." Encyclopædia Britannica, 2 May 2023, www.britannica.com/topic/Sikhism.

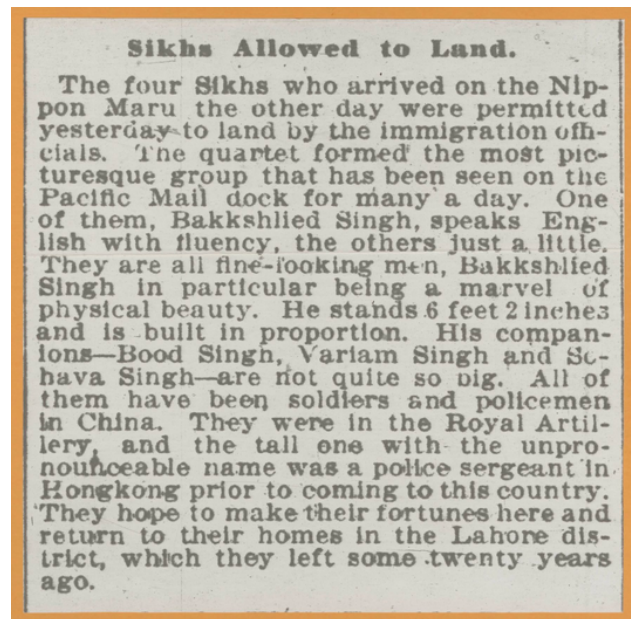
² "Sikh FAQ." Sikh Coalition, 5 Sept. 2019, www.sikhcoalition.org/about-sikhs/faq/#:~:text=Every%20Sikh%20ties%20his%20Fher,a%20mandatory%20article%20of%20faith.

³ Lambrecht, Catherine, and Catherine Lambrecht. "Punjab: India's Breadbasket Naan and Beyond." Culinary Historians of Chicago, 12 Oct. 2016, culinaryhistorians.org/punjab-indias-breadbasket-naan-and-beyond/.

MIGRATION

Over the last few centuries, Punjab has seen changes in rule and in borders, and thus, differing drivers in migration. Yet, to date, the majority of the world's Sikhs live in Punjab. Although 90% of the world's Sikhs live in Punjab, Sikhs have migrated all over the world, and can be found on every continent.⁴ The United States is the third largest home to Sikhs in the world, after India and Canada. According to the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund, roughly 700,000 Sikhs are in the United States, and a substantial number of these members are concentrated in California and in the Bay Area.⁵ California played a historic role in American Sikh migration because "the similarity of the California landscape to Punjab gave a sense of homeland to this unfamiliar world".⁶ The first Sikh immigrants to the United States arrived to escape the poor economic conditions they faced in British India, in which poverty was rampant amongst the population due to high taxation, debt, and inability to purchase land.⁷ Further, many Sikhs, due to their warrior abilities, were recruited by the British for military and police, and as such, had interactions with the world beyond Punjab much earlier than most other South Asians.

Early on, many left Punjab with the intent to simply make enough money to clear debt or purchase land, and then return. However, immigration policy and newfound economic opportunity in the United States meant that most did not, in fact, return home. On April 6, 1899, the San Francisco Chronicle announced the arrival of one of the first Sikhs allowed to enter the United States, via San Francisco. This was the beginning of a long journey of Punjabi Sikh migration to the United States, characterized by racial violence and discriminatory legislation, but also by courageous acts of community and togetherness.



April 6, 1899: San Francisco Chronicle. Sourced via South Asians in North America Collection, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley

⁴Biswas, Soutik. "Pew Study: Little Change in India's Religious Make-up in 70 Years." BBC News, 21 Sept. 2021, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-58595040.

⁵"About Sikhs." SALDEF, 10 Nov. 2022, saldef.org/about-sikhs/.

⁶"Library Guides: Echoes of Freedom: South Asian Pioneers in California, 1899-1965: 6. at the University." 6. At the University - Echoes of Freedom: South Asian Pioneers in California, 1899-1965 - Library Guides at UC Berkeley, guides.lib.berkeley.edu/echoes-of-freedom/university.

⁷Naujoks, Daniel. "Emigration, Immigration, and Diaspora Relations in India." Migrationpolicy.Org, 21 Oct. 2020, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/emigration-immigration-and-diaspora-relations-india.



Sikh workers on the Pacific Eastern Railroads, 1909. Photo courtesy of Southern Oregon Historical Society, Medford, Oregon.

Punjabi Sikh immigration spiked in the early 1900s, and consisted of a diverse array of people— many were semi-literate farmers, others had a military background, and even others were students who arrived to attend universities such as the University of California, Berkeley. Upon arrival, these immigrants worked in railroads, lumber mills, iron foundries, and agriculture. In fact, Sikhs were instrumental in the building of critical railroads in the Pacific, as well as other industries, but often without recognition and with less pay than fellow white laborers.

In response, many restrictive laws were passed to limit not only Punjabi migration, but also land ownership. All over California, Sikhs implemented their farming knowledge from Punjab to find great success in farming. The 1913 California Alien Land Law Act barred those ineligible for citizenship from

owning agricultural land, and further limited leases of land to only three years. The Immigration Act of 1917 mandated that Indian laborers were no longer able to enter the United States. This, in tandem with the California Alien Land Law, eventually led to the 1923 Supreme Court case, *United States v. Bhagat Thind*, in which a Punjabi Sikh applied to be naturalized as a citizen, the United States Supreme Court ruled that Thind, and thus, other Punjabi Sikhs, were ineligible for American citizenship. During the 1917 to 1946 period, although direct immigration from India was cut off, some Sikhs made their way to the US through Canada and Mexico. While California Sikhs suffered under discriminatory legislation and racism, they found ways to continue their living— often by entering informal farming agreements with white landowners until they could legally own land again in the 1940s.

In addition to being charged higher rent than whites for substandard housing, the lives of Sikhs during this period were also characterized by race riots and intense racial discrimination. After 23 years of advocacy, in conjunction with hard-earned civil rights victories won by Black Americans, the 1964 Civil Rights Act banned discrimination on grounds of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. One year later, Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act, barring discrimination in these arenas.⁸ The 1965 Immigration Act acted as a “reconstitution” of Sikh society, and thereafter, Sikh migration increased dramatically, and gurdwaras expanded

⁸ USCIS, www.uscis.gov/. Accessed 29 May 2023.

across the country. By the mid 1960s, California Sikhs were bringing their families in earnest, settling in the Bay Area, Central Valley, and Inland Empire.

TABLE 2
EAST INDIAN IMMIGRATION TO NORTH AMERICA: 1899-1920

| Year | Canada | United States |
|------|--------|---------------|
| 1899 | na | 15 |
| 1900 | na | 9 |
| 1901 | na | 20 |
| 1902 | na | 84 |
| 1903 | na | 83 |
| 1904 | na | 258 |
| 1905 | 45 | 145 |
| 1906 | 387 | 271 |
| 1907 | 2124 | 1072 |
| 1908 | 2623 | 1710 |
| 1909 | 6 | 337 |
| 1910 | 10 | 1782 |
| 1911 | 5 | 517 |
| 1912 | 3 | 165 |
| 1913 | 5 | 188 |
| 1914 | 88 | 172 |
| 1915 | 0 | 82 |
| 1916 | 1 | 80 |
| 1917 | 0 | 69 |
| 1918 | 0 | 61 |
| 1919 | 0 | 68 |
| 1920 | 0 | 160 |
| | 5,297 | 7,348 |

(Des. 1923: 4-5, 10-11)

TABLE 12
INDIAN IMMIGRATION: 1948-1965

| Year | Immigrants |
|------|------------|
| 1948 | 263 |
| 1949 | 175 |
| 1950 | 121 |
| 1951 | 109 |
| 1952 | 123 |
| 1953 | 104 |
| 1954 | 144 |
| 1955 | 194 |
| 1956 | 185 |
| 1957 | 196 |
| 1958 | 323 |
| 1959 | 351 |
| 1960 | 244 |
| 1961 | 292 |
| 1962 | 390 |
| 1963 | 965 |
| 1964 | 488 |
| 1965 | 467 |

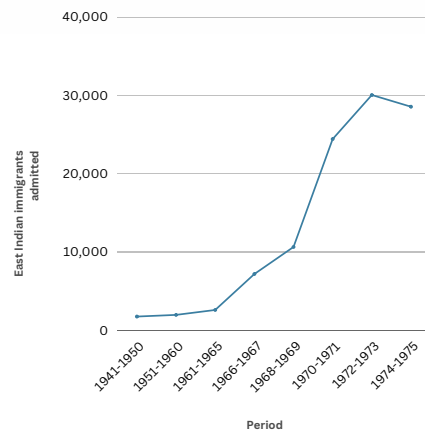
(adapted from: U. S. Bureau of the Census. Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970. Bicentennial Edition, Part 2. Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, p. 107)

Indian Immigration prior to the 1965 Immigration Act— sourced via "The Sikhs of Northern California" by Bruce Wilfred La Brack

While the primary drivers from 1899-1947 were poor economic conditions in British India, 1947 and 1984 marked changes in Punjab political conditions that brought forth a new wave of immigration. Following the June 1984 Massacre of Sikhs at their holiest spiritual center, and continued tortures, killings, and disappearances of Sikhs in India for years thereafter, many Sikhs sought immigration to the United States under political asylum, often under the 1980 Refugee Act.

TABLE 16
EFFECT OF OCTOBER 3RD, 1965 ACT ON EAST INDIAN POPULATION GROWTH IN THE UNITED STATES TO 1975

| Period | Immigrant Admitted |
|-----------|--------------------|
| 1941-1950 | 1,761 |
| 1951-1960 | 1,973 |
| 1961-1965 | 2,602 |
| 1966 | 2,458 |
| 1967 | 4,642 |
| 1968 | 4,682 |
| 1969 | 5,963 |
| 1970 | 10,114 |
| 1971 | 14,310 |
| 1972 | 16,926 |
| 1973 | 13,124 |
| 1974 | 12,779 |
| 1975 | 15,773 |



Effect of October 3rd, 1965 Act on East Indian Population Growth in the United States to 1975, sourced via "The Sikhs of Northern California" by Bruce Wilfred La Brack



Arenas of employment have also shifted for Punjabi Sikh migrants over time. Prior to 1965, Punjabi Sikh migrants primarily worked in agricultural or other labor fields, but after 1965, many more professional and technical workers flowed into the United States. The more recent wave of working class Punjabi Sikh migrants are often employed as truck drivers, gas station owners, or taxi drivers; but contemporary Sikhs can be found in almost every arena— as innovators, as artists, as academics, and as politicians.

It is critical to note that Sikh migration did not occur in a vacuum. Even in cases where those that left Punjab did not return, they remained connected with their homes and villages. In “The Sikhs of Northern California”, Bruce LaBrack discusses how it is erroneous to refer to Sikhs as rugged, individualistic pioneers— rather, they sought community, connection, and solidarity.⁹

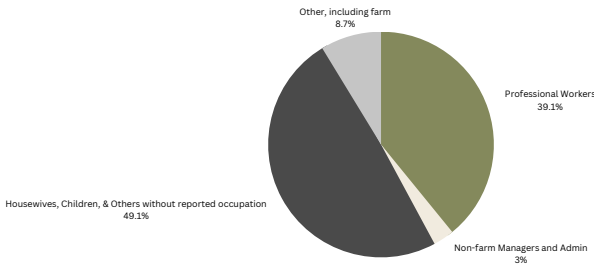


TABLE 17
OCCUPATIONAL STATUS OF ARRIVING EAST INDIAN MIGRANTS
(JUNE 1974-JUNE 1975)

| | |
|---|---------------|
| <u>Total</u> | <u>15,773</u> |
| Professional, Technical & Kindred Workers | 6,156 (39%) |
| Managers and Administrators, except farm | 481 (3%) |
| Housewives, Children & others with no occupation reported | 7,763 (49%) |
| Other categories* | 1,373 (8.7%) |

* including some 150 farm-related occupational declarations

(adapted from Table 34, "Immigrants Admitted by Country or Region of Birth and Major Occupational Group," U. S. Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service, *Annual Report, 1975*. Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1975:44).

Even in cases where those that left Punjab did not return, they remained connected with their homes and villages... it is erroneous to refer to Sikhs as rugged, individualistic pioneers — rather, they sought community, connection, and solidarity.

Occupational Status of Arriving East Indian Migrants (June 1974-1975) sourced via “The Sikhs of Northern California” by Bruce Wilfred La Brack

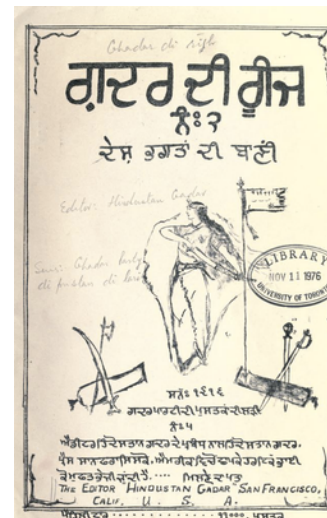
⁹ Brack, Bruce Wilfred La. “The Sikhs of Northern California: A Socio-Historical Study.” SURFACE at Syracuse University, surface.syr.edu/socsci_etd/120/. Accessed 29 May 2023.

HISTORICAL HIGHLIGHTS

San Francisco, Berkeley, and the wider Bay Area were critical sites of both early and contemporary Punjabi Sikh migration. In 1912, just one hour away from the Bay, Stockton, California became home to the first Sikh gurdwara. The gurdwara not only served as a Sikh meeting place, but also as a place for community and political activity for all ostracized Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims during this time. The political reach of the Stockton Gurdwara and its members was far reaching, becoming a key site for political, social, and economic fervor. For example, the first ever Asian member of the House of Representatives was Dalip Singh Saund, elected in 1956, after he served as Secretary of the Stockton Gurdwara.¹⁰ The Stockton Gurdwara was home to the Ghadar party, one of the first diasporic Indian movements pushing for an end to British rule in India.

The Ghadar party thrived in the San Francisco Bay Area, where it was founded, and also on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley. Many Punjabi Sikh students chose to attend UC Berkeley not only because tuition and living expenses were affordable, but because students also had options to make a living as agricultural laborers,

or by selling Indian products. These students were supported by Sikh community groups like the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan, who allowed Indian students to reside at their Allston Way residence for free, or the Guru Govind Singh Sahib Educational Scholarship, in which recipient students would receive free board, lodging, expenses covered, and some pocket money for three years. Berkeleyans like Kartar Singh Sarabha, who operated the Ghadar party's printing operations, and wrote powerful pieces and poetry pushing for Indian independence, played a key role the eventual liberation of India for British rule— although many, like Sarabha, paid the price for their revolutionary action with their lives. UC Berkeley and the Bay Area continues to be a thriving hub of Sikh and Sikh student life, undoubtedly informed by a rich history of Sikh student activism in the area.



1916, San Francisco, CA: Ghadar Di Gunj (Echoes of Munity), Sourced from South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA)

¹⁰ "History: Stockton Gurdwara Sahib." San Joaquin Magazine, sanjoaquinmagazine.com/2014/02/history-stockton-gurdwara-sahib/.

¹¹ Singh, Sirdar Jawala. "The Guru Govind Singh Sahib Educational Scholarships (1912)." South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), 27 Aug. 2013, www.saada.org/item/20111025-425.

TODAY

A paramount part of the Sikh identity post 9/11 has been characterized by hate crimes. Following 9/11, many Sikhs were mischaracterized as Arab or Muslim and as such, victims of hate crimes. In fact, the first person to be killed in a post 9/11 hate crime was a Punjabi Sikh by the name of Balbir Singh Sodhi, in Mesa, Arizona. A 2006 survey by Harvard University revealed that 83 percent of Sikh respondents either personally experienced, or knew a victim of hate crime on the basis of religion. Other hate crimes have shook the American Sikh community since—including the 2012 shooting in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. Further, according to a 2014 report from the Sikh Coalition, 47% of Sikh youth, and 69% of turbaned Sikh boys in the San Francisco Bay Area suffer bias-based bullying and harassment.¹²

Despite these tragedies, Punjabi Sikhs have become a core part of California and Bay Area culture and traditions. The aforementioned Stockton gurdwara has evolved into a thriving museum and center of Sikh immigration history. Various gurdwaras have been built in the Bay Area since 1912— including in El Sobrante, Fremont, and San Jose. Each of these gurdwaras are home to community

events, Sunday school, and Punjabi class, serving as not only a spiritual center, but also as a meeting space to strengthen community action and togetherness.

Punjabi Sikhs have also brought much of their rich culture to their areas of residence in the Bay Area and California more broadly. Teeyan, a Punjabi festival celebrated during the monsoon season, in which women celebrate with traditional singing and dancing, is celebrated with great excitement each year in places like Sacramento and San Jose. At these festivals, one can find henna being done, kulfi being made, Punjabi jewelry being sold, all set to the rhythmic beats of traditional Punjabi giddha dancing.

November 8th marks the birthday of the first Sikh guru, and as such, since 1980, Sikhs have gathered in Yuba City, California to celebrate. Over the last 42 years, the Yuba City Nagar Kirtan has grown to attract an astounding 100,000¹³ attendants. This 4.5 mile parade route is complete with floats, Sikh martial arts, and an abundance of free meals for all.



Yuba City Nagar Kirtan 2010. Photo by Jasbir Singh Kang. Sourced via Pioneering Punjabis Digital Archive

¹² *A Report on Bullying against - Sikh Coalition*, www.sikhcoalition.org/documents/pdf/go-home-terrorist.pdf

¹³ "Digital Archive." *Pioneering Punjabis Digital Archive*, pioneeringpunjabis.ucdavis.edu/.

In Elk Grove, California, the same site where in March 2011, two elderly Sikh men were murdered on an evening walk, a new park commemorating their lives opened in April of 2021. "Singh and Kaur" park celebrates Punjabi Sikh heritage by incorporating elements of both the Sikh religion, and Punjabi heritage. On each side of the park are steel sculptures of the steel bracelet that Sikhs wear, and the seating areas in the park mimic those of the traditional Punjabi village areas where elders can be found exchanging stories, drinking tea, and playing card games. Singh and Kaur Park reflects a wonderful instance of solidarity amongst communities, the ongoing challenge of using education as a tool in the face of hatred, and the opportunity to organize as a community for shared goals.



Singh and Kaur Park in Elk Grove, CA.
Photo by Mehnaz Grewal

CONCLUSION

When driving up and down the I-80 freeway connecting from the Bay Area to Sacramento, one can not miss the various freeway signs describing Sikh-sponsored highway cleanup, Sikh realtors, or Punjabi restaurants. Sikh identity is undeniably pervasive and identifiable all over California. Over the last century and a half, the American Sikh identity has molded and changed in response to politics and conflict. Yet, at its core, Sikh identity has also remained consistent and paramount — courage, a fervor for equality, and a commitment to preserving a rich history, culture, and tradition.

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About the Author

Mehnaz Grewal is a BIMI Undergraduate Research Fellow studying Political Science and Public Policy at UC Berkeley. She is from Elk Grove, California, where she developed a profound appreciation for the rich culture of the Punjabi migrant community in Northern California, the same topic on which her research is focused.