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Gerard McCann

## With the Sikhs

14<sup>th</sup> January 2015

‘*Waheguru ji ka Khalsa, waheguru ji ki fateh!*’ It’s a comforting exhortation. The sung greeting, chanted by officiants and congregations in Sikh temples around the world, celebrates the divine and the bonds of historic brotherhood that bind this global community of faith. I’ve heard it a thousand times, initially as a curiosity but, with repetition, it’s sometimes been more reassuring too. During academic sojourns around various sites of the Sikh diaspora – in Delhi, Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, Singapore, Penang, Shepherd’s Bush – the timbre, the beauty, the explicit sense of community represented in the music has simultaneously soothed and excited. It’s been a cipher for stimulating things to come: old friendships, new acquaintances, fresh bowls of *daal* (my particular weakness), didactic hagiography, warm hospitality that verges on the punishing due to the sheer volume of chai and whisky involved.

Above all, the verse has been shorthand for fascination – not that of some orientalisising grubber (at least I hope not), rather something shimmering through a portal from a vibrant world, far-removed from home. The emotional resonance of that Sikh song is, however, in motion again. From being something of a constant during my mobile studies – something fixed and known in strange surroundings – it’s started to become more personally unsettling of late. I’ve long suspected my travels as a historian around the Sikh diaspora are, in part, more introverted journeys.

I’ve never felt more privileged to hear those words than in the home of my friends in Faridabad, an austere industrial satellite town of New Delhi. The kindly patriarch of the family, Iqbal, takes my wife and me to the inner sanctum of his capacious house, the repository of the holy book, the *Guru Granth Sahib*. A decade earlier that generous family took me to Amritsar to witness the sung recitation of the book in the amazing Golden Temple, Sikhism’s holiest site, from which I have just returned nostalgic. The wonder of the temple complex, dripping with its histories of Sikh valour and comradeship, seems removed from this unremarkable room 300 miles away in Haryana, and seemingly a million miles from the quiet Lincolnshire market town where I grew up, nevermind the Mayo fields of my father’s family.

The music seems, however, to be forging surprising mental connections across this space and time. Amid the set mantras of the text, Iqbal prays for me, for my wife, for the Sikh Gurus and for his family in England, the very people who first introduced me to Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh, founders both of the Sikh faith, in the 16th and 18th centuries respectively. I'm moved as I think of his family's forced migration during Partition in the 1940s – from Lahore, in what would soon be Pakistan, to Indian Punjab, and later, with so many displaced Sikhs, to the economic frontiers of Delhi. I reflect on the peripatetic lives of those friends remembered so gracefully here in Faridabad. From Jullundur to Moshi to Croydon via Tehran, theirs are the diasporic lives I study, the stories I gather as a professional historian. But the distinction between profession and person begins to dissolve here. The commonalities between his family's diasporan experience and my own is drawn out in my mind by Iqbal's worship. I am unwillingly transported to Swinford, Kilburn and Glasgow, sites of my parents' own wandering lives as migrants or refugees of various kinds. It's a hackneyed, banal, egocentric development – maybe inevitable as the grey hairs proliferate and frequency of family funerals increases – but my experiences with the Sikh diaspora help me think about a more personal identity, real and/or imagined.

The parallels between Iqbal's family saga and my own are in some ways striking. Yet I'm reluctant to engage in a comparative exercise. Such endeavours can become trite and trivialising. Academic debates about the nature of 'indigenous knowledge' versus 'colonial agency' in the creation of modern Sikhism spring to mind in this cross-cultural milieu. As new print cultures and colonial censuses in the late 19th century started to codify North Indian peoples and ossify the discursive boundaries between Sikhism, Hinduism and Islam, British scholar-administrators misguidedly attempted to explain the departure of the Sikh faith from Hinduism as cognate to Protestant disavowal of Roman Catholic idolatry during the Reformation and beyond.

Such points of recognition were, famously, used to extend Sikh patronage in the Indian Army, proximity that conditioned the solidification of modern Sikh identity in India and the world. However, such assertions misunderstood the complex enchanted worlds of Punjabi villages and the peculiarities of Sikhism as changing belief structure. They misplaced local intellectual and spiritual agency. It's a critique Iqbal's flagged himself as we've discussed imperial history and the lives of the Gurus over the years. My schooling and my conversations with Iqbal fuel a more totalising caution that holds me back from my reveries. I am eager to avoid tired generalisation. But the waves of music soon erode this timidity and a flood of comparison inundates me for better or worse.

The maintenance of Sikh identity and separateness has, like that of so many highly diasporic peoples, often been underpinned by narratives of oppression and gallant resistance in a 'homeland'. From the formative centuries under the 10 Sikh Gurus through to the tumultuous challenges of post-colonial Indian pluralism, the image of the *shahid* (martyr) has been a vital trope

to the coalescence of Sikh self-identification. The execution of the ninth Sikh Guru, Tegh Bahadur, by the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb in 1675 is one such mythic cornerstone in the creation of Sikhism as a community of feeling. The heroic resistance of his warrior son Guru Gobind Singh, (himself killed by Mughal allies) in the early 18th century is even more powerful. A gathering in 1699 at which Guru Gobind Singh formed the *Khalsa* (sovereign brotherhood) in the context of this oppression is perhaps the key moment in Sikh history.

In 1984 the mythic force of these events was renewed when Sikh separatists, angry at marginalisation within the Indian state, occupied the Golden Temple, provoking Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to attack the complex. Hundreds were killed in the shelling. Gandhi's subsequent assassination at the hands of her Sikh bodyguards and the resultant anti-Sikh pogroms that ensued over North India cut a wound in the body of the nation that has never fully healed. Crucially, anti-Sikh violence in India buttressed militant Sikh ethnonationalism as well as more guarded forms of bitterness elsewhere, especially in North American and British Sikh communities.

It is not hard to draw broad parallels to the Irish question that enveloped my own family's lives, though the two circumstances aren't exactly equivalent. Cromwell and the Anglo-Irish lords, the modern republican struggle (itself with numerous sympathisers in the US) and quotidian sectarian violence, these were the tales whispered after family meals by paternal Irish relations. Perhaps more notable history lessons came from my stoical and mild Glaswegian mother, a suffering Catholic in a Protestant-majority neighbourhood. Her ancestors had populated the boats crossing the Irish Sea into Scotland during the Great Famine of the 1840s.

Sitting with Iqbal, recounting his story and thinking to my own father's kin, I start to go beyond these narrow conceptualisations of diaspora. ('Diaspora with a capital D', if you like.) The diasporic lot of the Singhs and the McCanns was not really about this sort of loss, although no doubt there was suffering and sacrifice. (In old age my father rarely spoke of his London years except to confirm that the 'No blacks, No dogs, No Irish' signs were quite real.) The minutiae of Iqbal's and my father's experiences stand up to some comparative examination at this introspective moment in Iqbal's house. Following their forced passage into the newly defined state of India in 1947, the Singhs moved again, this time voluntarily, to the outskirts of Delhi and in 1967 established a factory that manufactured small parts for light machinery. It took off. There are now three factories in Faridabad with hundreds of employees making components for global conglomerates instead of the small tractor parts they used to produce for the local market.

So, while Iqbal's subsequent economic success outstripped that of my father, it was at almost exactly the same time as his economic migrancy that my dad and all five of his siblings, along with thousands of rural Irish, headed overseas to work on the building sites of London and the former industrial north. In northwest London, theirs was a life of Irish social clubs and pints by the dozen, wage remittance and the social introversion common in so many economic migrant

groups. There was vague, largely unspoken sympathy for Irish republicanism and certainly, songs sung late into the night about the romance of the old country.

But like Iqbal, who was committed to a united India despite his outrage at recent Sikh injustices, most of my father's siblings committed to a new homeland in England in imaginative ways. My aunt, the only sister, went into service with an aristocratic household in East Anglia. During our annual Christmas holidays to her cook's cottage, the exuberance of childhood stood compulsorily on hold for the long minutes of the Queen's speech as we looked on at well-thumbed coffee table editions of the *Daily Mail*. Two paternal uncles drilled into us the progression of the Plantagenet and Stuart houses. Their minds were trained to the Irish land, but they also became oddly estranged from it somehow, distant from its rhythms, less interested in its politics and removed from those brothers who did return to Ireland. The gulf widened down a generation. Like Iqbal's nephews and nieces, my friends, we 'English relations' grew yet more distant from our natal Irishness or Sikhness and its culture. I shed my Catholicism at university, one of the first family members to leave the former and go to the latter. I support England in the Six Nations. Trips 'home' became more infrequent, even if I may have boasted some sort of heritage when drunk in an English pub on St. Patrick's Day.

This is a common enough tale. But my youthful ambivalence about those diasporic ties and their part in my own development is exposed here in India. There is capital, and nourishment, to be gained from looking across and back. The comparisons unleashed by Iqbal's singing (however apt) force me to reflect on the nature of my own diasporan condition and diasporas at large. Diasporas are about the bonds of exile, loss and cultural fluidity, yes, but they are also about distance and fission both at the level of culture and in more intimate, personal ways. Diasporas can be, indeed perhaps must become, sets of *imaginative archipelagos* – political, economic, social, generational – where different strands separate as well as intertwine over time. They disaggregate along familial and ideological lines, but opportunities for rapprochement remain. They're in flux.

I live on one of the outlying islands of my diasporic archipelago, aloof from the mainland. But I'm somehow tenuously attached. Age and travel has been a trigger to think about hopping back to the centre, at least briefly, to build bridges across generation and space. There is something of use there, however conceptually ill-defined at present. My South Asian-origin friends, detached by decades from their own stories, feel the same I think. The scholar in me doesn't want to become a plastic paddy, sat enthusiastic in some mofussil Irish pub yearning for the craic and narrative morsels of agricultural progenitors.

But no doubt my time with Iqbal has forced some personal reassessment, if only briefly. For what use, I don't know yet. Maybe the diasporic continuum of my work and heritage will clog up into some intellectual paralysis. Maybe it's a natural part of growing older to yearn for the past, as risible as that may appear in the detached chic and itinerancy of Islington. I decide there's not

much point tying myself up in knots now. Diasporas breed both transnational conviviality and fragmentation. I'll have to amble round the routes and roots of that diasporic archipelago at my leisure to work it out. It's only a thought. For now, I'm assuaged and also disorientated, for the better probably, by Iqbal's sonorous last '*waheguru ji ka Khalsa, waheguru ji ki fateh*' in that small room in Haryana.

[@gezmccann52](#)



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## More from Issue Thirteen

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Riaz Dharamshi

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My mum used to run the Darby and Joan in the village where I grew up. It was a social club for local pensioners. Once a fortnight, she would drive round the village to pick up the members, and take th...

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