

Article

# Narratives in Action: Modelling the Types and Drivers of Sikh Activism in Diaspora

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**Abstract:** Using data gathered for an investigation of “Sikh radicalisation in Britain”, in this article I develop a typology of different types of activism among Sikhs in diaspora based on an analysis of historic and contemporary media sources (newspapers, radio, television, online), academic literature, ethnographic fieldwork and a series of semi-structured interviews with self-identifying Sikh activists. I assess the reasons behind a variety of different incidents involving Sikh activists, how Sikh activists view the drivers of their activism and to what extent this activism can be regarded as being “religiously motivated”. I critique existing typologies of “religious activism” by developing a typology of Sikh activism which challenges the distinction often made between “religious” and “political” action. I argue that “religiously motivated actions” must be understood in conjunction with narratives, incidents and issues specific to particular religious traditions and that generic motivations for these actions cannot be applied across all religious traditions.

**Keywords:** Sikh; diaspora; activism; radicalism; Sikhism

## 1. Introduction

Recent years have seen regular media reports about the activities of Sikhs in diaspora, ranging from concerns about “Sikh radicalisation” (Singh 2015b) and “Sikh extremism”, particularly in Britain and Canada (Majumdar 2018), to the role played by Sikh aid organisations around the world (Dalton 2020). Using data gathered for a research project examining “Sikh radicalisation in Britain” (Singh 2017),<sup>1</sup> in this article I develop a typology of different types of activism among Sikhs in diaspora<sup>2</sup> by examining the incidents, narratives and issues which drive Sikhs to participate in this activism. I use the term “activism” with reference to the work of Moskalenko and McCauley (2009, p. 240), who distinguish between radicalism, which indicates a “readiness to engage in illegal and violent political action”, and activism, which is a “readiness to engage in legal and non-violent political action”.

<sup>1</sup> This article further develops my analysis of the types and drivers of Sikh activism in Diaspora as contained in my 2017 CREST research report (Singh 2017).

<sup>2</sup> I am avoiding using the umbrella term ‘Sikh diaspora’ following Dusenbery (1995), who argues that there is a danger that this term treats Sikhs as a homogeneous group. Instead, I will refer to “Sikhs in diaspora” and “Sikh activism in diaspora” following Grossman, who argues that characteristics of members of a diaspora are that they are “outside the homeland due to dispersal or immigration. Group identity is among the things that render them a community. Their homeland orientation involves transnational exchange” (Grossman 2019, p. 1269).

Data were gathered from historic and contemporary media sources (newspapers, radio, television)<sup>3</sup>, online media sources (social media, internet discussion forums), the academic literature, ethnographic field visits and a series of semi-structured interviews with self-identifying Sikh activists. Media evidence was gathered from English language open source materials using bibliographical and electronic searches. In total, 20 interviews were conducted with a range of respondents who were selected due to their currently being or having previously been involved in (a) the management of Sikh organisations or gurdwaras and/or (b) incidents reported in mainstream media involving Sikhs and/or (c) organizing, promoting and participating in events and protests relating to Sikh issues. Respondents were recruited via social media or email based on their involvement in Sikh activism. In order to ensure the anonymity of the participants, which was a condition of their participation, interviewees will be referred to as Respondent 1, Respondent 2, etc., with no details of their location or role in the Sikh community being disclosed. As the protection of the respondents is paramount, the only quotations used will be those from which there is no risk of identifying respondents. In addition, although field visits were made to gurdwaras and events, these will not be named in order to maintain anonymity. Any events and incidents named are readily available in the public domain.

### *Religiously Motivated Action*

To date, scholars have examined “religiously-motivated action” from a variety of different standpoints including through studies of “religious activism”, “faith-based activism” and “religious terrorism”, although it is important to recognise that the meaning of these terms varies by context. Although Smilde (1998, p. 290) defines “religiously-motivated action” as “secular action that is inspired by religious beliefs”, the linking of actions with specifically “religious” motivations has been challenged by some, including by Gunning and Jackson (2011), who argue, for example, that although “religious terrorism” is often shorthand for “violence perpetrated in the name of religion by religiously motivated militants” (Gunning and Jackson 2011, p. 369), this is based on a particular historical understanding of “religion”, which assumes that religion is “clearly definable and distinguishable from the secular and political realms” (Gunning and Jackson 2011, p. 374). In summary, scholarly examinations of “religiously-motivated actions” make clear distinctions between “religious” and “secular” motivations, and highlight several possible characteristics of “religiously-motivated actions”, including:

- (a) A focus on “transcendent, utopian or religious goals” (Gunning and Jackson 2011, p. 371) with causes aligned “with the ultimacy and sacredness associated with God’s will” (Smith 1996, p. 9).
- (b) A desire to return society to an idealised version of the past, through a set of anti-modern, anti-democratic and anti-progressive goals (Gunning and Jackson 2011, p. 371).
- (c) The utilization of a type of violence which consists of “symbolic sacrificial or devotional acts inspired by God” (Gunning and Jackson 2011, p. 372).
- (d) An ability to evoke “total commitment and fanaticism from their members—in contrast to the supposedly more measured attitudes of secular groups” (Gunning and Jackson 2011, p. 372).
- (e) Instructions on “how people must live, how the world ought to operate . . . [through] some system of moral imperatives and values that compels the allegiance of the faithful” (Smith 1996, p. 10).

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<sup>3</sup> This analysis examined English language historical and contemporary newspapers, television reports and radio programmes. Television programmes were located using Box of Broadcasts (<https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand>), the ITN archive (<http://www.itnsource.com/en/>) and online video hosting websites. Similarly, radio programmes were located through Box of Broadcasts, BBC iPlayer and online searches. For all of the media analysis listed above, the following search terms were used to find data and examples of relevant incidents, Sikh extremist(s), Sikh extremism, Sikh fanatic(s), Sikh fanaticism, Sikh radical(s), Sikh radicalism, Sikh radicalisation, Sikh fundamentalist(s), Sikh fundamentalism, Sikh terrorist(s), Sikh terrorism, Sikh militant(s), Sikh militancy, Sikh separatist(s), Sikh separatism, Sikh protester(s), Sikh protests, Sikh activist(s), and Sikh activism.

- (f) A strong identification through religious “symbols, rituals, icons, narratives, songs, testimonies, and oratory ... to lend these sacred, expressive practices to the cause of political activism” (Smith 1996, p. 11).
- (g) An established support network through trained and experienced leadership, congregations, communication channels, authority structures and financial and office resources (Smith 1996, pp. 14–15).
- (h) A shared religious identity which acts as a valuable resource for collective identity construction, providing a “basis upon which strangers can work together with relative ease in common purpose” (Smith 1996, p. 18).

To date, there has been little examination of activism among Sikhs in diaspora, beyond Takhar’s (2018) exploration of social and political activism amongst British Sikhs in relation to the impact of caste legislation and revelations about Britain’s involvement in the events of 1984 (Doward 2017), Mooney’s (2018) study of Sikh millennial environmental activism, and Luthra’s (2018) analysis of Sikh activism and institution building in the US, in response to 9/11 and the murder of seven Sikhs in a gurdwara attack by a white supremacist in Oak Creek in August 2012 (Curry et al. 2012). Although these studies highlight that narratives from the Sikh tradition play an important role, they also raise a number of questions, with Takhar observing that “there is a need for further research into the current British Sikh political activist environment in order to be able to gather and analyse why young millennial British Sikhs become involved in political activism” (Takhar 2018, p. 312). In this article, I analyse my previously gathered empirical data to explore the ideas, narratives and drivers behind Sikh activism in diaspora, examining the extent to which these drivers can be viewed as being “religious” and/or “political” in nature.

## 2. The Continuing Impact of 1984

As Singh and Tatla (2006, p. 127) observe, “wherever Sikhs have settled in large numbers, sooner or later one demand always comes to the fore: the right to wear a turban”. Mobilisations around turban wearing among Sikhs in diaspora began in the 1960s, as Sikhs in Britain campaigned for the right to wear turbans in the workplace and on motorcycles (Singh and Tatla 2006, pp. 127–35). Mandair argues that these campaigns were regarded by the state as being “religiously-motivated”, as were other campaigns including, for example, the Multani case in Canada, where the kirpan was defined primarily as a “religious symbol” (Mandair 2015, p. 135).

Activism among Sikhs in diaspora changed significantly following the storming of Harmandir Sahib by the Indian army in June 1984 (for a concise account of the leadup to these events see Mandair 2015) during Operation Blue Star. Sikhs around the world “reacted with extreme anger and sadness to the Indian army’s action in the Golden Temple” (Tatla 1999, p. 113), with many viewing this event “as an act of sacrilege, a premediated brutality, a gesture of contempt, the beginning of a process to destroy Sikh traditions” (Tatla 1999, p. 92). Sikhs immediately took to the streets in Vancouver, New York, Edmonton, Calgary, Toronto, San Francisco, Los Angeles and in Hyde Park, London, to protest (Tatla 1999).

For Tatla, Operation Blue Star ignited support among Sikhs in diaspora for a separate Sikh state, Khalistan, as until this incident “the theme of a Sikh homeland attracted no more than a fringe audience and only the Indian state’s blunder in ordering armies into the Golden Temple forced the issue into ordinary Sikhs’ homes and minds” (Tatla 2012, p. 71). The authorities in Canada were clearly unprepared for the emotional impact of Operation Blue Star on Canadian Sikhs with Bob Burgoyne, who worked for the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) at the time, noting how “it was our lack of understanding of Sikhs and how very emotional ... [they were] and how this single issue is what propelled us into what was a very tumultuous year” (Brennan 2007). The emotional impact of Operation Blue Star was echoed by respondents, with Respondent 3 reflecting on the attack as being

“a life changing moment, you know, certain triggers in your life when you look back and they still stand out, and an attack on the Sikhs’ most holy shrine looked like a personal attack on Sikhs themselves”

Interviewees expressed a sense of humiliation after the attack, with Respondent 3 explaining how “it feels like the Indian government at that time wanted to teach the Sikhs a lesson”. The need for Sikhs in diaspora to “do something” in response to Blue Star led many to re-engage with the Sikh tradition, with Respondent 7 remembering how “after 84 [there] was a big influx into the Sikh faith. I saw people who were drinking in pubs one night, and then becoming Amritdhari [initiated] the next day.” Four narratives around the events of Operation Blue Star emerged from the interviews:

- (1) The deliberate targeting by the Indian army of innocent victims on an important commemoration anniversary.
- (2) The desecration of Harmandir Sahib and other important shrines including the Akal Takht and the Sikh reference library.
- (3) The deliberate humiliation of the Sikh psyche by the Indian government.
- (4) A lack of awareness among non-Sikhs about the events of June 1984.

It is clear that even Sikhs with no direct familial link to the Punjab continue to be emotionally impacted by the events of June 1984, with Respondent 1 explaining how he would “always have that connection to Punjab, because our Harmandir Sahib [Golden Temple] is in our Punjab”, while Respondent 18 described how “rather than Punjab as a whole, it is the historical gurdwaras that most feel like home”.

Sikh outrage about Operation Blue Star led to the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards in October 1984, which was “followed closely by violence against Sikhs in Delhi and other parts of north India on the evening of 31 October 1984 lasting through 4 November, 1984” (Devgan 2013, p. 207). Respondents highlighted how the lack of recourse for this anti-Sikh violence (Saluja 2015, p. 344) was another issue in their continuing activism, with Respondent 3 reflecting how “it’s been 33 years and still no justice for all the Sikhs that lost their lives, innocent Sikhs who had nothing to do with what happened in Delhi”. Indeed, despite an extensive body of academic literature and numerous reports which have examined the November 1984 violence against Sikhs, including Grewal (2007) and Mitta and Phoolka (2008), for Ahluwalia, “there remains a deep scepticism amongst Sikhs in both India and the diaspora about real justice and adequate reparations” (Ahluwalia 2010, p. 108). As a Sikh female who interviewed victims of the November 1984 violence for her undergraduate dissertation explained,

I was only perhaps 20, 21 when I became fully aware of what had happened in 1984. It wasn’t something that was discussed in my household ... [and] I have to say ... it shapes me personally, academically and professionally ... [as] there isn’t anything positive I can really say when I hear the eyewitness accounts.

(BBC Asian Network 2012)

Respondent 3 highlighted how November 1984 was “very hard, very traumatic ... my in-laws live in Delhi, so we were trying to contact them, and all phone lines were dead ... they’re memories that are, they’re still in your head.” The main narratives which emerged from respondents in relation to the events of November 1984 were

- (1) Sikhs as the victims of state sanctioned violence.
- (2) A lack of justice for these victims with perpetrators often gaining important positions in the Indian government.
- (3) A lack of awareness of the events of November 1984 among non-Sikhs.
- (4) The continued framing of the events of November 1984 as “riots”, implying that Sikhs had an equal role in causing the violence which occurred.

The post-1984 period saw clashes between Sikhs in diaspora based on their support of, or opposition to, Khalistan. As reported in the Times of London on 20 March, 1989, “at least seven Sikhs living in Britain, all moderates opposed to the violence of the Khalistan separatist movement, have been shot in past three years, four fatally” (Sapsted 1989), including the murder of Darshan Das in 1987 (Tatla 1999, p. 135). The post-1984 period also saw Sikhs, particularly in the UK and Canada, being accused of plotting against visiting Indian state officials, especially those officials implicated as being involved in orchestrating the anti-Sikh violence in November 1984 including Kamal Nath, Sajjan Kumar and Jagdish Tytler, all three of whom were named in the “Who are the Guilty?” report (Kothari 1984) published by the People’s Union For Civil Liberties. In October 1985, four members of the International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF) were arrested for plotting to murder Rajiv Gandhi, the Indian Prime Minister at the time (Tatla 1999, p. 123). Sikh activists also protested Kamal Nath’s visit to Toronto in March 2010 (Aulakh 2010) and New York in April 2010 (PTI 2010). The most recent incident against an Indian state official was the attack on General K.S. Brar in London on 30th September 2012 (CPS 2013).

As in Britain, the aftermath of 1984 saw a number of peaceful protests across Canada, while some acts of violence also occurred related to Khalistan issues, including the 1985 attack on former B.C. premier Ujjal Dosanjh (CBC n.d.) and the murder of Canadian journalist Tara Singh Hayer (Matas 2012). There were also various plots and protests against Indian state officials, including the 1986 assassination attempt on Malkiat Singh Sidhu (CBC News 2019). The bombing of Air India Flight 182 in 1985, Canada’s worst mass murder to date, led to the banning of two Sikh organisations, the International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF) and Babbar Khalsa International (BKI), who remain on the current list of Terrorist Entities in Canada (Public Safety Canada 2019). Although it is beyond the scope of this article to examine this deplorable act, which was widely condemned by Sikhs at the time (Auerbach 1985), a wealth of analysis about the bombing is readily available in the literature.

Sikh activists have also focused on the plight of Sikh political prisoners in India, in particular those imprisoned under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA) an anti-terrorism act enforced between 1985 and 1995 and more recently the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) (Singh 2019a). The scheduled execution set for 31 March, 2012, of Balwant Singh Rajoana, who openly confessed to being an accomplice in the assassination of Beant Singh, the Chief Minister of Punjab in the early 1990s, led to the emergence of a worldwide #IPledgeOrange movement, with the corresponding grassroots “Kesri Lehar” campaign maintaining a presence outside 10 Downing Street, the residence of the British Prime Minister, for six months from April 2013. Following this, high profile hunger strikes by Gurbaksh Singh and Surat Singh have sought to further raise the profile of Sikh political prisoners in India.

The shooting in October 2015 by the Punjab police of Sikhs protesting against beadbi (desecrations) of the Guru Granth Sahib (BBC News 2015a) led to a number of protests including a televised protest by Jagmeet Singh who was appearing as a guest on the live BBC “Sunday” programme (BBC News 2015b) and also to a large demonstration outside the Indian High Commission in London in the same month (Gander 2015). At the time of writing, a Scottish-born Sikh, Jagtar Singh Johal, has been held in India for over 1000 days without charge over his alleged involvement in a series of murders in 2016 and 2017 (Paterson 2020). In response, a #FreeJaggiNow campaign has been running since Johal’s arrest in November 2017 and is continuing to mobilise Sikh activists in diaspora around the issue. It is clear, therefore, that the events of 1984, and concerns among Sikh activists about the treatment of Sikhs in India, continue to have an important impact, with Respondent 10 explaining how he saw his main role as an activist being to “work towards highlighting the injustices”.

### 3. Narratives from the Sikh Tradition

Beyond 1984, various incidents have occurred involving Sikhs, relating to gurdwara governance, the contested nature of religious authority and local factional politics (Singh and Tatla 2006, p. 83). I now analyse which narratives from the Sikh tradition were most frequently cited by respondents and highlighted in the media as contributing to Sikh involvement in these incidents. It is important to state

that these narratives do not drive particular types of Sikh activism in themselves, or guarantee that an individual will participate in activism, but that the highlighted narratives frequently appeared in interviews, media analyses and the literature.

### 3.1. *Beadbi (Disrespect)*

One of the most high-profile incidents involving Sikhs in Britain occurred on Saturday 18th December, 2004, in Birmingham, United Kingdom, when over 400 Sikhs protested at the Birmingham Repertory (REP) theatre against the staging of a play, *Behzti*, and its depiction of rape and murder in a gurdwara. In the days leading up to Saturday 18 December, Sikhs protested peacefully; however, the weekend protest turned violent leading the REP to cancel all performances of the play. Speaking about the protest during an ITN report broadcast on 19th Dec, 2004, (ITN Source 2004), Mohan Singh highlighted the importance to Sikhs of ensuring the respect of the Guru Granth Sahib and of counteracting any incidents of *beadbi* (disrespect):

by setting the play inside the gurdwara it was actually not just tarnishing a person but was tarnishing the whole religion ... we treat the holy scriptures as our living, breathing Guru ... we never asked for it [the play] to be stopped—all we've asked is take it outside the gurdwara, set it in a community hall, put it in a park, put it in a school whatever you feel like.

Though the REP claimed that they had consulted with Sikh community leaders who had requested that the play be altered to change the setting of controversial scenes from a gurdwara to a community centre (O'Neill and Woolcock 2004), this consultation was somewhat limited in scope; as the theatre director Stuart Rogers explained, the consultation "wasn't about how would you like us to change the play because we made it clear also that we'd never change the play ... it was about how can we work together to minimise any offense this might cause to some members of your community" (Channel 4 2005). Although media reports focused on the violence that occurred, as Gurharpal Singh notes, "these simplistic characterisations overlooked the range of responses from Sikhs themselves, some of which, incidentally, were opposed to the cancellation" (Singh 2005, p. 169).

Analyses of the *Behzti* affair have tended to disregard the impact of the concept of *beadbi* (disrespect) in the Sikh tradition. More than simply a "Holy Book", the Guru Granth Sahib is seen by Sikhs to contain the *jot* (light) of the 10 Gurus in a scriptural body and is respected and treated accordingly. The pages of the single continuous volume are often referred to as *angs* (limbs) further highlighting how many Sikhs regard the Guru Granth Sahib as a living Guru who should be treated as such. Various "Maryadas" or codes of conduct place a responsibility on Sikhs to ensure that the Guru Granth Sahib is treated respectfully. The Sikh *Rehit Maryada* (SRM) for example states that "No book should be installed like and at par with the Guru Granth. Worship of any idol or any ritual or activity should not be allowed to be conducted inside the gurdwara. Nor should the festival of any other faith be allowed to be celebrated inside the gurdwara." (Sikh *Rehat Maryada*, Chapter IV, Article V, Section e). Several recent incidents and campaigns have centred on the importance of maintaining the sanctity and respect of the Guru Granth Sahib and of counteracting any incidents of *beadbi* (disrespect) (e.g., Singh 2009), with examples being

1. Pages from the Guru Granth Sahib (*Gurbani*) being treated disrespectfully, e.g., being thrown in dustbins, being burnt or torn, being used in "inappropriate" contexts (see Goyal 2015).
2. The Guru Granth Sahib being taken to or installed in "inappropriate" locations, e.g., where meat and alcohol are served or near idols going against the Sikh *Rehat Maryada* (see BBC News 2006).
3. Individuals being promoted as the "living Guru" in place of the Guru Granth Sahib.

To date, there has been little examination of the impact of the narrative of *beadbi* in analyses of instances of Sikh activism. The strength of feeling towards the Guru Granth Sahib was regularly highlighted in interviews, with Respondent 1 stating that:

we will die for our guru. If you're putting our guru in any disrespect, you might as well chop off our arm. We're not going to do nothing ... you're taking a part of us. The guru's light is shining into us, and we'll do anything for the guru.

Varying notions of what is and is not "inappropriate" and "disrespectful" have led to several recent incidents and campaigns. In June 2010, the Satkaar ("respect") campaign emerged in the UK in response to the gurdwara in Grays, Essex, allowing alcohol, meat and tobacco to be served in a hall owned by and located next to the gurdwara. This led to a demonstration on 16 October, 2010, against a party due to be held in the hall. Since the incident in Grays, the Satkaar campaign has campaigned against the serving of meat and alcohol in halls owned by various gurdwaras in Britain (Satkaar 2011) following on from the earlier R4G (Respect for Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji) campaign of 2005, during which Sikhs demonstrated against the practice of taking the Guru Granth Sahib to party halls or hotels for wedding ceremonies (Booth 2005). Operation Blue Star was also regarded as an act of *beadbi* by many respondents, as the Harimandir Sahib Gurdwara and Guru Granth Sahib were seen to have been desecrated.

In participating in the *beadbi* campaigns, Respondent 8 found "elders questioning 'why are you doing this?' and I was thinking 'we're only doing what you told us to do, respect Guru Granth Sahib Ji' ... you were telling us to do this, now we're doing it, you're telling us what we're doing is wrong." Although many respondents clearly respected the first generation of Sikh migrants for establishing gurdwaras and organisations, Respondent 8 "felt that complacency had kicked in and it was almost like shaking the system a bit ... you can use the word "extremist" or whatever but I call it duty bound."

### 3.2. Diversity: Doctrinal and Factional

As per the incident in Grays, doctrinal and factional disputes have led to several incidents where Sikhs have protested at Sikh institutions. One of the main issues relates to the status of the Akal Takht, the headquarters of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandak Committee (SGPC), or "Central Gurdwara Management Committee", located inside the Harimandir Sahib complex in Amritsar. The Akal Takht is often described as the "Parliament of the Sikhs", which acts as "a forum to legislate on all issues concerning the community" (Shani 2008, p. 317). The status of the Akal Takht as the temporal throne of the Sikh tradition further explains why its destruction by the Indian Army in 1984 led many Sikhs to regard this as a challenge to Sikh sovereignty.

Having been established by the sixth Guru, the Akal Takht is important because of the status of its Jathedar (head) who is often described as the "Pope" of the Sikhs, despite the fact that the Jathedar is answerable to the SGPC and is not seen to possess the gift of infallibility (Shani 2008, p. 317). The Jathedar regularly makes pronouncements which "although not binding, have a normative status within Sikhism" (Shani 2008, p. 317). For some Sikhs, however, as the Jathedar of the Akal Takht is appointed by the SGPC which is controlled by the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), a political party (Shani 2008, p. 37), there is a risk of these edicts being overly influenced by the political status quo. Additionally, as there is no clear process through which Sikhs are made aware of new edicts or amendments to previous edicts, edicts are not respected or adhered to by all Sikhs or followed in all Sikh institutions. Nevertheless, many recent campaigns have highlighted the wish for Sikh activists to uphold edicts issued by the Akal Takht Jathedar. A Sikh female from Birmingham, who participated in the protest at the Dudley Sikh Cultural Centre in May 2011, explained that she had protested to uphold the sanctity of the Akal Takht:

So, recently in 2006, Akal Takht actually made an order that there would be no meat, alcohol or tobacco in any gurdwara premises or any premises associated with a gurdwara ... so on a total faith level, to step above Akal Takht Sahib is to then take yourself out of the Sikh faith because there is no higher authority than that. (BBC Asian Network 2011)

Given the variety of models of gurdwara management (Singh 2014), not all gurdwaras necessarily follow Akal Takht edicts. This often brings them into conflict with Sikhs who regard Akal Takht

edicts as binding for all Sikhs, leading to incidents such as the Dudley protest above. Although many Sikhs do regard the Akal Takht as the supreme temporal authority for Sikhs, others may instead regard a Sant (“charismatic individual”) or a leader of a jathabandi (“ideological group”) as their main authority and may, therefore, not be concerned about Akal Takht edicts at all (Singh 2014). Linked to the Akal Takht is the Sikh Rahit Maryada (SRM), a document described as “the Official Sikh Code of Conduct and Conventions” was published by the SGPC in 1950. A poster published by the “Karaj Campaign”, a group of Sikh activists campaigning against interfaith Anand Karaj ceremonies in gurdwaras, highlights how Sikh activists often reference the Sikh literature to support their claims:<sup>4</sup>

“The Sikh Rehat Maryada Article XVIII clause k states that . . . persons professing faiths other than the Sikh faith cannot be joined in wedlock by the Anand Karaj ceremony. Also at XVIII clause b . . . meaning a Sikh’s daughter must be married to a Sikh. In the Sikh spirit of gender equality, it is implied that a Sikh’s son must also be married to a Sikh.”

“Guru Gobind Singh Maryada 38/52: The daughter/son of a Sikh should be given in marriage to a Sikh. Give their hand in a house where God’s Sikhi exists. Where the household is of a good nature, disciplined and knowledgeable.”

To date, I have found evidence of five protests taking place at gurdwaras in Britain against interfaith Anand Karaj<sup>5</sup>, although several related incidents of intimidation have also occurred.<sup>6</sup> Those protesting argue that the main focus was to uphold the edicts of the Akal Takht (Sawer 2015) with an ex-president of the gurdwara in Swindon, Mr. Mudhar explaining that “we are not militants, we are standing up for what was right and to uphold the law [of the Akal Takht]” (Swindon Advertiser 2012). However, commentators have observed that as protests have most often been targeted against Sikh women marrying non-Sikhs and rarely against Sikh men, protestors appear to be primarily concerned with controlling the behaviour of Sikh women (Hundal 2015; Dhaliwal 2016; Jhutti-Johal 2017).

### 3.3. *Miri/Piri*

Respondents also highlighted how their activism was driven by the concept of miri/piri through which “the role of the individual Sikh was transformed from a purely spiritual aspirant (piri) to that of a spiritual aspirant fully immersed in temporal affairs (miri/piri) . . . [through] the immersion of politics and spirituality (or rather, the resistance toward the separation of these two realms)” (Mandair 2011, p. 67). For Pashaura Singh, the concept of miri/piri “affirms that religion and politics are bound together, thereby allowing religious issues to be defended in the political arena and political activity to be conducted in accordance with the religious values of truth and social justice” (Singh 2019b, p. 296). Furthermore, Takhar found that the young British Sikh political activists she spoke to were “keen to mention that it is being Sikh which is an important contributing factor to their activities and support for campaigns for Justice” (Takhar 2018, p. 308).

The emergence of humanitarian charities, including Sikh foodbanks, where food is distributed free of charge to the homeless (Singh 2015a), can also be seen to be driven by miri/piri, and was highlighted by Respondent 6 as being driven by the importance of “getting involved in your local level, national or

<sup>4</sup> The leaflet is available to view on the Karaj Campaign Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/Karaj.Campaign/photos/a.1142415149109176/2198582750159072/> (accessed on 17 August 2020).

<sup>5</sup> The first protest occurred on 5 July, 2012, at a gurdwara in Swindon, when “protesters occupied the Kembrey Street temple and locked the gates to halt the marriage between a Sikh woman and a Christian man” (Swindon Advertiser 2012). The second protest took place in Bradford on 19 July, 2014, (Yorkshire Sikh News 2014) and received little coverage in mainstream media. The protests which took place in Southall on 11 August, 2015, (Dearden 2015) and in Birmingham on 18 August, 2015, (Fricker 2015) were widely reported in mainstream media, as was the Leamington protest which took place on 11 September, 2016, for which Sikh Youth UK claimed responsibility (Taylor 2016).

<sup>6</sup> These include an arson attack at the home of the president of the Ramgharia Sikh temple in Birmingham for allowing a mixed faith Anand Karaj to take place (Birmingham Post 2007) and an attack on the home of a Sikh family whose daughter was about to marry a man from a different religion (BBC News 2012).



international level in society and community . . . the main source of us doing this is sewa and miri/piri.” Respondents further highlighted how they gained inspiration from the lives of the Sikh Gurus, with Respondent 11 explaining how Sikh history included numerous examples of activism including “Guru Nanak Dev Ji standing up to the Mughal emperor Babar . . . [and] the Gurus . . . standing up to the governments of the time” (for a fuller discussion of this encounter, see Pashaura [Singh 2020](#)). Narratives from Sikh history were repeatedly emphasised as a key reason why Sikhs should challenge injustices; as Respondent 10 explained, “when you follow the history of our Sikhs throughout 300 years . . . they opposed the governments of the day, whether it be the Mughals, the British government or this government in India.” This highlights how, through the concept of miri/piri, for many Sikh activists there is little distinction between “religious” and “political” drivers for action.

### 3.4. Resistance and Violence: Morchas and Martyrdom

Sikhs have a long history of mobilising around single-issue campaigns, or morchas, from the Akali morchas in the 1920s to the turban campaigns in the 1960s to various campaigns post-1984 ([Singh and Tatla 2006](#), p. 95). Alongside these campaigns, respondents highlighted how shaheeds (martyrs) continued to inspire them, as demonstrated by Respondent 8:

I still really do draw inspiration from Sant Jarnail Singh, even as a child, although I didn’t understand what was going on, I think I was always mesmerised by his presence . . . I was always drawn to that and again, you look at the Shaheeds, whether of the past or the present, certainly ones that were willing to put their necks on the line and uphold what they felt was important, they’ll always be inspirational, whether latter or more ancient, they’re all important. But I do draw inspiration, I personally do anyway.

Although most frequently discussed in relation to Islam, Mahmood makes an important distinction between Islamic and Sikh notions of martyrdom, explaining that “though the concept of the righteous martyr (shaheed) is related to Islam, death in a holy war for Sikhs is not conceptualized as some kind of entry ticket to paradise” ([Mahmood 2002](#), p. 32). Martyrdom in the Sikh tradition is primarily an act of resistance where “resistance to injustice is an existential stance, as something one does as a mode of worship with no other necessary aim than the fact of resistance itself” ([Mahmood 2002](#), p. 48). Furthermore, in her discussion of the place of violence in the Sikh tradition, [Mahmood \(2013, p. 71\)](#) notes that “the Sikh stance of militancy evolved through the leadership of the ten gurus who originated and led the community; violence emerged as a last resort when all other means of maintaining Sikhi had failed.” Similarly, in his examination of Sikh militant movements, [Wallace \(2011\)](#) illustrates how these movements have in general been non-violent, where “militancy” relates to having “an aggressive and passionate stand for the cause of their religion and the Gurus” ([Singh 2019b](#), p. 296).

## 4. Societal and Cultural Issues

Some respondents stated that an important reason for their activism was to uphold the izzat (honour) of the Sikh community. Although honour and shame are universal terms that play a significant role in all societies, both concepts are culturally constructed and defined ([Lindisfarne 1998](#)), and act as a compelling influence on individuals’ behaviour. For British South Asians, [Toor \(2009, p. 244\)](#) notes how

The role of the community is paramount in affirming izzat as it provides a marker of one’s status within the cultural community, which is where traditions and morality—which are, in turn, governed and determined by izzat—are continually reinforced and sustained from generation to generation.

The documentaries “A Warrior’s Religion” ([Amar 2012](#)) and “Warrior Boyz” ([Sangra 2008](#)), both examining the Punjabi Sikh community in Canada, highlight how notions of izzat play out, often leading to “violent altercations in gurdwaras, instances of domestic violence and gang warfare

... [which] may or may not include violent action" (Jakobsh 2014, p. 171). Regardless of their own religiosity and identity practices, respondents highlighted the importance of defending the honour of the Sikh tradition. Respondent 1 explained how, although he did not maintain long hair, a beard and turban himself, he had the right to expect those that did to uphold the tradition:

it doesn't matter if we're mona [have a haircut] or anything, we will punish a guy with a turban because ... he belongs to the guru. You can judge me, I could be in the pub the next day, but I've not become a Khalsa [taken initiation] ... it's all about Pride and Honour and to be Defenders of the Faith.

With the attack on Harmandir Sahib in June 1984 and violence against Sikhs in November 1984, many respondents felt that the honour of the Sikh community had been tarnished, and that this was a wrong which needed to be addressed. Jakobsh (2014, p. 172) links *izzat* to hyper masculinity, explaining how "a commonly heard phrase used to describe powerful Punjabi Sikh males is "Sher-Punjabi" or "lions of the Punjab" with Punjabi males often encouraged to demonstrate their masculinity". For Respondent 4, "this is where the whole question of mixed marriages comes in, because mixed marriages themselves are seen as a threat to Sikh male masculinity, because the opposition to mixed marriage is always to do with a Sikh girl marrying a non-Sikh boy." Therefore, some male Sikh activists may be "performing" their masculinity in public, given the "historical representations of Sikh masculinities, in part informed through the colonial encounter, [which] have constructed a hyper-masculine, martial, Sikh warrior (often Jat) as the ideal and 'authentic' Sikh male" (Gill 2014, p. 336).

Linked to issues of honour are incidents, particularly in Britain, relating to Sikh–Muslim tensions. Sian (2011) notes that antagonism between Sikhs and Muslims in Britain is present in large sections of the Sikh community and is not exclusive to members of Sikh gangs and Sikh youth. An analysis of Sian's work in conjunction with the examination of Sikh–Muslim community relations (Moliner 2007) and issues in Britain (Singh 2010, pp. 34–38) highlights contemporary and historical reasons for tensions between the two communities in Britain:

- (1) Historical accounts in the Sikh tradition highlighting instances of Sikhs challenging the threat of Mughal "tyranny" combined with stories of violence between Sikhs and Muslims during the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947.
- (2) Sikh narratives of settlement in Britain presenting them as a "model minority" and the "favoured sons of the empire", a status which many seek to protect by disassociating themselves from Muslims.
- (3) The demographics of traditional areas of Sikh settlement changing in recent years due to new waves of immigration. For example, the "Little Punjabs" of Southall and Smethwick seeing increases in the size and settlement of Muslim communities, leading to competition over resources such as housing and education.
- (4) The profile of both Muslim and Sikh communities in the UK being very young, leading to intermingling between young members of these communities in certain locales.
- (5) The proselytising to Sikhs by Muslim students on University campuses.
- (6) The narrative of "forced" conversions being regularly expressed among Sikhs in Britain where it is widely circulated that "predatory" Muslim males attempt to "aggressively" target and convert "vulnerable" Sikh girls into Islam.
- (7) Following 9/11 and 7/7, turban-wearing Sikhs have become victims of hate crimes, as they were targeted by racists who made no distinction between Sikhs and Muslims.
- (8) Some Sikhs supporting far-right organisations including the British National Party (BNP) and English Defence League (EDL).

In recent years, the narrative around Muslims targeting Sikh girls for conversion (e.g., Birmingham Mail 2007) has evolved to also focus on "grooming", with Respondent 10 explaining that "grooming's been going on for years—Sikh girls being groomed, totally overlooked and

acknowledged.” Respondents frequently cited a BBC “Inside Out” documentary which aired in 2013 on the issue of Sikh girls being groomed by Muslim men (Adesina 2013) as evidence of the phenomenon. Although it is beyond the scope of this report to empirically examine the truth behind these claims, the narrative of Sikh girls being groomed by Muslim men has been a key factor in some of the recent incidents of Sikh–Muslim tensions, in particular the Mughal Darbar incident in Leicester in 2013 (BBC News 2013). Further research is required to understand why similar incidents between Sikhs and Muslims have not occurred in other parts of the world (the US and Canada, for example), although this may simply be a consequence of differences in patterns of settlement.

The interviews also highlighted differences in the types of activism undertaken by male and female activists. A female respondent highlighted that Sikh institutions and organisations remain highly patriarchal and that “the female is expected, even in today’s age, to go home and look after the kids whereas the men can basically step out and do other things.” Another explained that Sikh men are more likely to participate in activism as they have “more flexible and disposable time to do it in”. Respondent 4 noted how organisations being run by Sikh women have emerged “due to the utter denial of the gurdwaras to address questions of gender abuse and domestic violence” with these organisations highlighting issues including honour killings, domestic violence, sexual abuse and substance abuse. Indeed, in her examination of institution building among Sikh millennials in the US, Luthra (2018, p. 286) found one particular Sikh female “often being the only woman and only millennial in committee meetings . . . [and having] to rely on her father to get access to local leaders to arrange such visits”. These various exclusions have led Sikh youth to establish new spaces where “more than half of those involved in the new Sikh institutions are women” (Luthra 2018, p. 289).

## 5. Conclusions

In her analysis of different types of religious activism, Gregg (2016) argues that religious activists are either (i) involved in social movements which challenge social practices and government policies, (ii) fundamentalists who defend specific interpretations and practices of the faith, or (iii) apocalyptic warriors who look to hasten the apocalypse. However, like much of the scholarship on “religiously-motivated action”, this analysis has been framed through Abrahamic traditions, promoting a clear separation between the religious and the secular realms as pointed out by Gunning and Jackson (2011, p. 370), who highlight how the idea of “religious terrorism” can be traced back to an article by David Rapoport (1984). In his “Fear and trembling: terrorism in three religious traditions”, Rapoport (1984) analysed the use of terror in Christianity, Judaism and Islam, which then formed the basis of other scholarly work in this area including Juergensmeyer 2003; Ranstorp 1996; Laqueur 1999 and Stern 2003). Indeed, the continuing impact of the work of Rapoport (1984) is demonstrated in the analysis of religious activism presented by Gregg (2016, p. 357).

Building on the analyses of relevant incidents and narratives highlighted by Sikh activists, I am proposing a typology of six different types of publicly visible Sikh activism. It is important to note that these are not exclusive categories and that Sikh activists may engage in one or more of these categories at any time:

1. **Social Justice:** involves pursuing legal channels to investigate human rights abuses and standing in solidarity with others to challenge discrimination faced by minorities, for instance, by campaigning for Sikh articles (turban, 5Ks) to be worn in schools and workplaces. For Luthra, the emergence of Sikh organisations focused on social justice in the US, including Ensaaf, Surat Initiative, and the 1984 Living History Project can be linked to “the Indian government’s human rights violations against Indian Sikhs from 1984 and into the 1990s . . . [which] mobilized Sikhs in the diaspora to become politically engaged” (Luthra 2018, p. 289). Following the increase in hate crimes against Sikhs in the US post-9/11, in particular the attack at Oak Creek, Luthra observes that Sikhs are creating alliances with a variety of civil rights movements, “including LGBTQ rights, marriage equality, Black Lives Matter, and women’s rights . . . [as they] saw the fight for civil rights and social justice as consistent with Sikh values” (Luthra 2018, p. 289). This social justice activism

often highlights and addresses issues previously disregarded by Sikh organisations, including the tackling of domestic violence and mental health issues among Sikhs. The Sikh activism focused on the environment as highlighted by [Mooney \(2018\)](#) would also fall into this category.

2. Humanitarian: focuses on providing aid relief to the needy. This type of activism is most publicly prominent in diaspora in the form of Sikh charity organisations, including Khalsa Aid who provide aid relief during natural disasters (e.g., the 2016 flooding in the UK, see [Pidd and Halliday 2016](#)) and the various Sikh food initiatives which have been established in recent years ([Singh 2015a](#)) many of which provided relief during the COVID19 pandemic ([Reed 2020](#)). Respondents who participated in these initiatives highlighted how the concepts of sewa (selfless service) and langar (“community kitchen”) had inspired them to do so.
3. Religious Enforcement: manifests itself in the form of protests against gurdwaras and Sikh institutions which certain activists feel are not sufficiently following the Sikh Rehat Maryada and Akal Takht edicts or which are participating in acts of beadbi. Although there have been a number of such incidents in the UK including the protests in Grays and Dudley already discussed, the most common incidents of “religious enforcement” involving Sikhs in diaspora have taken the form of protests against Sikh preachers who have either been formally excommunicated by the Akal Takht or whose views or interpretations some sections or groups disagree with. These include an attack on Amrik Singh Chandigarh in 2018 ([Times of India 2018](#)), Inder Singh Ghagga in Malaysia in 2017 ([Asia Samachar 2017](#)) and Prof Darshan Singh in Canada in 2010 ([Brampton Guardian 2010](#)). Indeed, most incidents of violence involving Sikhs have occurred against other Sikhs for doctrinal, personal or political reasons, usually targeted towards specific individuals.
4. Diaspora Nationalism: publicly articulates the need for Khalistan as a sovereign Sikh state by raising awareness about the context and continuing impact of the events of June and November 1984. There are various reasons for those participating in diaspora nationalism to publicly articulate the idea of Khalistan. For some, this is primarily an act of resistance against India in response to the events of 1984. For others, particularly Sikhs in diaspora, “diasporic nationalism” can be viewed as a meaning-making practice and a form of self-articulation ([Nijhawan 2014](#)). This type of activism is most publicly prominent in the form of the rallies, protests and events relating to the events of 1984, often organised by young Sikhs in diaspora who are “adamantly expressing their views that Khalistan is the only solution to preserving Sikh Heritage” ([Takhar 2018](#), p. 307). For Shani, this “long-distance nationalism” ([Anderson 1998](#)) is mainly “concerned with instilling a sense of the global unity of all Sikhs through an involvement in the politics of the homeland” ([Shani 2002](#), p. 11).
5. Community Defence: is undertaken by individuals or organisations who present themselves as ‘defenders of the community’ against real or perceived external threats. These threats have included Muslim conversion and grooming gangs leading to the incidents relating to Sikh–Muslim tensions highlighted above and the threat of state interference in Sikh affairs, recently demonstrated through these type of activists protesting against the presence of West Midlands Police in Sikh institutions in the UK ([Basseyy 2018](#)).
6. Personal/Factional: usually focused around gaining control of gurdwaras and/or Sikh organisations and influencing direction and policy. Many of the internal Sikh incidents listed have been a consequence of these types of disputes and are most publicly visible in the form of incidents and disputes at gurdwaras (e.g., [Cranmer 2017](#)).

It is important to reiterate that the types of activism listed above are not discrete and do not always map directly to individual incidents. For instance, some participants in mixed faith Anand Karaj protests could be focusing on “religious enforcement” with the key driver being on maintaining the authenticity of the Anand Karaj (wedding) ceremony and upholding the Sikh Rehat Maryada, whereas others could be participating in “community defence” concerned with discouraging Sikhs, particularly women, from marrying out of the faith. Participants in 1984 rallies, for instance, could be participating for “social justice”, seeking justice for the victims of November 1984, in “diaspora

nationalism”, relating to the establishment of Khalistan, in “community defence” against the Indian state due to the desecration of Harmandir Sahib in June 1984, or as a combination of some or all three of these different types of activism. Indeed, as Nijhawan (2014, p. 214) found in his study of Sikh activists in Canada many Sikhs “resist being neatly packaged into the ideological clusters (“Khalistan supporters”) and identity categories (“orthodox” versus “secular” Sikhs) that are often projected from the outside”.

The categories above highlight how Sikh activists in diaspora have a number of different focuses and priorities, such that terms such as “orthodox”, “conservative”, “liberal”, “progressive”, “extremist”, “radical” and “fundamentalist” lose their meaning when they are used to generalise the activities of groups of people. My research led me to engage with progressive Amritdhari Sikhs, conservative non-practicing Sikhs and with individuals from a whole range of religious, political, social and cultural positions in between. Therefore, while some Sikh activists may be motivated by “transcendent, utopian or religious goals” (Gunning and Jackson 2011, p. 371), including the need to ensure that respect of the Guru Granth Sahib is maintained, others are driven to activism in response to specific events, particularly the events of 1984. Others are driven by instructions on “how people must live, how the world ought to operate” (Smith 1996, p. 10) and may see it as their duty to police the behaviour of individual Sikhs and the narratives disseminated by Sikh preachers. In addition, there is little evidence that Sikh activists are “supported by trained and experienced leadership, ready established congregations, communication channels, authority structures and financial and office resources” (Smith 1996, pp. 14–15) and, rather, are more likely to become activists with little involvement from official structures which leads to an increased likelihood of vigilante action. Indeed, although Sikh activists may have a shared religious identity which “provides a basis upon which strangers can work together with relative ease in common purpose” (Smith 1996, p. 18), having a shared religious identity does not necessarily equate to having a shared vision, as diversity within religious traditions often leads to serious disagreements between co-religionists, leading to some of the issues highlighted above. When analysing “religiously-motivated action”, therefore, it is necessary to be wary of applying models based on particular understandings of “religion” and to recognize that, while “religious narratives” play an important role, they are only one aspect of a suite of different and often equally important religious, political, social and cultural drivers of action.

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