

**Manpreet J. Singh, *The Sikh Next Door: An Identity in Transition*, Bloomsbury India: New Delhi: 2020, pp.228  
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The professed intention of the book is to break out of the familiar stereotypes of the Sikhs. They are often depicted as a heroic people always becoming martyrs for the cause of their religion, as provided in stories woven around the lives of their Gurus and their steadfast and sacrificing followers. Sikhs are also viewed as terrorists outright ever since the Operation Bluestar, the murder of Indira Gandhi (1917-84) in 1984, and the movement for Khalistan continuing for some time afterwards with the putative encouragement from Pakistan. Manpreet Singh's aim was to come out of these two familiar images and view

the Sikhs as they are, as ordinary human beings, living along others in everyday joys and sorrows.

Sikhs fanned out of Punjab along with the *udasis*<sup>1</sup> of their first Guru Nanak (1469-1539) and began to settle in Benares, Bihar, Bengal, Puri, and Assam. Guru Teg Bahadur (1621-75) also visited Patna and Assam and planted colonies of Sikhs there. He left his wife in Bihar, to give birth to the tenth Guru Gobind Rai (1666-1708), who gave the Sikh their distinct identity by defining the *Khalsa* way of life and making the *Panj Kakke* (the five K's compulsory for all *amritdhari* [baptised] Sikhs). Later he went to the Deccan with a huge train of followers on the invitation of the Mughal Prince, Muhammad Mu'azzam (1643-1712) who later became Emperor Bahadur Shah I (r. 1707-1712). He settled in Nanded and colonies of Sikhs sprang up in the Deccan. The Nizam of Hyderabad invited more Sikhs for defending his kingdom in 1829 from Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839) and they established new colonies of Sikhs.

The breakup of the Nizam's State dispersed these Sikhs into Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra. Some of them became traders and shopkeepers and integrated with the local people, eating their food, speaking their language and marrying into the local families, while continuing their religious and community life in Gurdwaras. In Bihar, many Biharis were converted to Sikhism before the advent of the *Khalsa*. The expansion of trade with Northern India during the Mughals had taken them to Bihar. These trading classes did not observe the *Panj Kakke* and continued their earlier Hindu way of life and were called *Agraharis*. Later arrivals of Sikhs from Punjab did not view the *Agraharis* as ones of their own and excluded them from their community life.

The British took more Sikhs to Bihar and Assam for menial jobs. Initially, they were spurned as *mazhabis* by the Sikh trading classes and were not allowed to share in *sangat* (religious meets) or *langar* (eating together); but when the Asomiyas started the *Bhatia kebda* (get rid of all outsiders) movement, the Punjabi traders coalesced with the *mazhabis* to resist the latter's eviction from Assam. Local Asomiya Sikhs, converted during Guru Teg Bahadur, had a distinct status. They became assimilated into the mainstream because of their common linguistic and cultural identity except for their faith in the Gurus.

Sikhs became ubiquitous with their acceptance of service in the British police and army. The poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) had been appalled by the ruthlessness of the colonial Sikh police in the coast of China in course of his itineraries. They thus spread to all British colonies in the South East. Australia and New Zealand were also soon populated by the Sikhs. Their duties in Hong Kong familiarised them with the demand for cheap labour in the newly opened-up colonies of the British in Canada and the U.S. and they could start

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<sup>1</sup> Literally it means journeys (travels).

off from these embarkation points for exploring the El Dorado. The First World War took them to Africa and the Arab world. And the Second World War opened up the U.K. and Europe to Sikh soldiers employed by the British to fight side by side. Later they stayed back in those places as cab drivers, tailors or textile merchants.

White colonists often lost out to the tenacity and strength of the Sikhs and resented the competition in the labour market, bringing down their wages. Their clashes culminated in the much vaunted *Komagata Maru* incident of 1914, when a chartered ship carrying Sikh labourers from Hong Kong was turned back to Calcutta. British colonial authorities made them alight from their ships in Calcutta and tried to pack them off to Punjab in a special train starting from Budge Budge, West Bengal. The Sikhs too became suspicious as trains for Punjab usually started from Howrah. They resisted the authorities and a scuffle ensued injuring many. Migration continued even afterwards, turning the trickle into a torrent. The Sikhs became an articulate constituency in most advanced countries of the world. Beginning as ordinary labourers they accumulated riches through honest labour and integrated themselves into the upper crust of the mainstream.

Their affluence, however, could not bring progress in their social psyche. In spite of Manpreet Singh's sincere efforts to whitewash her community from the sin of discrimination against women by invoking the liberal injunctions of the Gurus regarding the participation of women in *sangat* and *langar*, which conferred a sort of equality on them, some of the remnants from their Hindu pasts continued to haunt Sikh women. Doris Jacobsh's work on diaspora Sikh women has shown the persistence of dowry. As a corollary the birth of girl children was not welcomed and secret sex determination tests of the foetus with an intention to carry on female foeticide is still rampant among diaspora Sikhs.

*The Sikh Next Door* succeeds in its overall effort to bring out the human quality of the Sikhs instead of keeping them removed from the mainstream as gawky characters needed to provide comic relief in cinemas or as military heroes, always sacrificing their lives on the frontier in the tradition of their Gurus. They become palpable everyday characters with their ambitions and difficulties just like other ordinary human beings. Manpreet's endeavour allows us a peep into the human qualities of all Sikhs behind their turbans and *kirpans*.

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