



SIKH ACTIVISM IN BRITAIN: NARRATIVES AND ISSUES

A guide to the narratives and issues which lead Sikhs in Britain to participate in publicly visible activism.



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KEY POINTS

- Sikh activism in Britain fundamentally changed in 1984 following the storming of *Harmandir Sahib* (often referred to as the Golden Temple) during Operation Bluestar in June 1984 and the violence that took place against Sikhs across India in November 1984 following the assassination of the Indian Prime Minister by her Sikh bodyguards. Before this time Sikh activism in Britain mainly focused on campaigning for the right to wear articles of faith in the workplace.
- The most frequently reported incidents involving Sikhs in Britain have taken place against other Sikhs. Recent incidents have been related to doctrinal disputes and/or the governance of *gurdwaras* (lit. house of the Guru, which refers to a Sikh institution where the *Guru Granth Sahib Ji* is present).
- The Babbar Khalsa International (BKI) is currently the only Sikh group proscribed as a terrorist organisation by the UK government, proscribed for being ‘a Sikh movement that aims to establish an independent Khalistan within the Punjab region of India.’
- The narrative of Muslim grooming gangs targeting Sikh girls for grooming / conversion and these cases not being sufficiently dealt with by the authorities is long established among Sikhs in Britain, feeding on historical narratives as well as local Sikh/Muslim issues.
- The different types of publicly visible Sikh activism in Britain can be categorised as focusing on a) social justice and humanitarian relief; b) diasporic nationalism around Khalistan; c) ‘enforcing’ Sikh practices so they are carried out according to established codes of conduct; d) propagating the need to

'defend/police' the Sikh community against a variety of perceived 'external threats' and e) personal / factional disputes leading to 'Sikh on Sikh' incidents in *gurdwaras*.

- There is no threat to the British state or to the wider British public from Sikh activism as there is no conflict with 'the West' or with Britain. There has been no targeting of British state officials following the 2014 revelations that the British government advised the Indian government in their planning for Operation Bluestar as most Sikhs simply wish to fully understand the level of involvement of Britain at the time
- Much Sikh activism in Britain contributes positively to the integration agenda, particularly in the form of humanitarian relief provided during disasters (Somerset/Hebden Bridge floods, Grenfell) and incidents where the public require support (street food banks).

WHAT ARE THE MAIN NARRATIVES THAT LEAD TO SIKH ACTIVISM?

The various narratives listed below emerged from a series of interviews and a literature review as part of a research project on 'Sikh radicalisation in Britain'. The full report and executive summary, which provide further detail and evidence, are available at:

www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/sikh-radicalisation-britain/.

POLITICAL NARRATIVES

The storming of *Harmandir Sahib* in 1984 changed the nature of Sikh activism in Britain and in its aftermath led to increased support for Khalistan in the Sikh diaspora. Before 1984, most Sikhs in Britain generally supported India.

The events of 1984 impacted on how Sikhs in Britain felt about India because of the status of *Harmandir Sahib* as the principal institution of the Sikhs. Key narratives emerging from the interviews and literature highlighted the impact of:

- a. June 1984 – the events around Operation Bluestar particularly the storming of the *Harmandir Sahib* complex and the destruction of key Sikh shrines.
- b. November 1984 – the violence that took place against Sikhs in Delhi and across India
- c. Post 1984 – the violent quelling of the Sikh insurgency movement in the years that followed.

JUNE 1984

The Indian army's attack on *Harmandir Sahib* in June 1984 led by General K.S. Brar constituted one of the most traumatic experiences for the Sikh community worldwide. Many Sikhs now refer to the invasion of *Harmandir Sahib* in 1984 as the third 'Ghallughara' or holocaust, a term not lightly used in Sikh historical discourse (see Tatla, Read More section). For many Sikhs the Indian government's action broke a bond of trust that had existed between Sikhs and the Indian government since the formation of the State (see Devinderjit Singh, Read More section).

The events of June 1984 caused some Sikhs in diaspora to rethink their relationship with the Indian state. The need for Sikhs in Britain to 'do something' led many to protest about the events of June 1984 and to re-engage with the Sikh tradition. Four narratives around June 1984 emerged:

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 state.
4. A lack of awareness among non-Sikhs about the events of June 1984.

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NOVEMBER 1984

In addition to the attack on *Harmandir Sahib* in June 1984, the violence that took place against Sikhs across India in November 1984 following the assassination of the Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, by her Sikh bodyguards was also a continuing issue. Despite the appointment of ten commissions and committees to investigate and inquire into the events of the first week of November 1984, many Sikhs feel that the organisers and perpetrators of the violence have gone unpunished (see Kaur, in Read More section). Regular candlelight vigils are now held across the UK to remember those who lost their lives in the violence of November 1984. The main narratives which emerged in relation to the events of November 1984 were:

- a. Sikhs as the victims of state sanctioned violence.
- b. A lack of justice for these victims with perpetrators often gaining important positions in government.
- c. A lack of awareness of the events of November 1984 among non-Sikhs.
- d. The continued framing of the events of November 1984 as ‘riots’ indicating that Sikhs had an equal role in causing the violence which occurred.

THE POST 1984 PERIOD

Recent years have seen an increased focus by Sikh activists in Britain on the plight of Sikh prisoners. A recent trigger was the scheduled execution set

for 31st March 2012 of Balwant Singh Rajoana. Rajoana had confessed to being an accomplice in the assassination of Beant Singh, the Chief Minister of Punjab in the early 1990s who was accused of a number of human rights abuses while quelling the Sikh insurgency movement of the time (see Kaur, in Read More section). Rajoana’s scheduled execution led to the emergence of a worldwide #IPledgeOrange protest movement against the plight of Sikh political prisoners in India, with the corresponding grassroots ‘Kesri Lehar’ campaign maintaining a presence outside Number 10 Downing Street for six months from April 2013.

The October 2015 shooting by the Punjab police of Sikhs protesting against *beadbi* (desecrations) of the *Guru Granth Sahib Ji* led to the emergence of the #SikhLivesMatter movement. This included a protest on the BBC ‘Sunday’ programme in October 2015 and outside the Indian High Commission in London in the same month. Many activists highlighted how reports of injustices against Sikhs in Punjab drove their involvement.



Although there have been no recent incidents of Sikh political violence in the diaspora, it is clear that 1984 remains the main political issue for many Sikhs worldwide. It is also important to recognise that for Sikhs, '1984' can refer to the events of either June and/or November and that activism around the events of 1984 does not automatically indicate support for the idea of Khalistan.

RELIGIOUS NARRATIVES

It is clear that there is no link between external religious adherence and Sikh activism. In this regard, terms such as 'orthodox', 'conservative', 'liberal', 'progressive', 'extremist', 'moderate', 'radical' and 'fundamentalist' lose their meaning when used to generalise about the activities of large groups of people. It is possible for religious Sikhs to be liberal and progressive, for non-religious Sikhs to be conservative and for individuals to take a whole range of religious, political, social and cultural positions in between. Nevertheless, a number of specific narratives from within the Sikh tradition were found to contribute to Sikh activism:

RESPECT: 'BEADBI' OF THE GURU GRANTH SAHIB

More than simply a 'Holy Book', the Guru Granth Sahib is seen by Sikhs to contain the *jot* (light) of the ten 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.

Many of the campaigns which have taken place in Britain have centred on the importance of maintaining the sanctity and respect of the Guru Granth Sahib and of counteracting any incidents of *beadbi* (disrespect) to the Guru. Instances of *beadbi* taking place in Punjab and around the world are regularly highlighted in Sikh print, broadcast and online media, with examples being:

1. The writings contained in the Guru Granth Sahib (*Gurbani*) being treated disrespectfully (e.g., being

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thrown in dustbins, being burnt or torn, being used in 'inappropriate' contexts).

2. The Guru Granth Sahib not being treated with the same level of respect as a human guru/leader would be.
3. 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* - rules for codes of conduct and practice).
4. Individuals being promoted as the 'living Guru' in place of the Guru Granth Sahib.

The *Satkaar* ('respect') campaign for instance emerged in June 2010 in response to the Grays gurdwara in Essex allowing alcohol, meat and tobacco to be served in a hall owned by and located next to the *gurdwara*. Things came to a head on 16th October 2010 when a demonstration was organised to protest against a party due to be held in the hall. After the committee in Grays had disallowed the use of meat and alcohol on their premises, those at the protest formalised the *Satkaar* movement.

The *Satkaar* campaign followed 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.

RELIGIOUS NARRATIVES

Recent mobilisations including the #SikhLivesMatter movement of October 2015 have also been concerned with desecrations of the Guru Granth Sahib.

DIVERSITY: DOCTRINAL AND FACTIONAL

The majority of incidents involving Sikhs in Britain have taken place against other Sikhs, primarily as a consequence of doctrinal and factional disputes. One of the main issues relates to the status of the *Jathedar* (head) of the Akal Takht, the headquarters of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) located inside the *Harmandir Sahib* complex in Amritsar. The SGPC is often described as the Parliament of the Sikhs and legislates on issues concerning the worldwide Sikh community.

The *Jathedar* regularly makes pronouncements which, whilst not binding do have a normative status for Sikhs. For some Sikhs however, these edicts are often seen as being influenced by the political status quo rather than being in the best interests of the Sikhs. This is because the *Jathedar* of the Akal Takht is appointed by the organisation responsible for gurdwaras in the Punjab (the SGPC), which is itself controlled by the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), a political party.

In addition, there does not appear to be a clear process through which members of the Sikh diaspora are made aware of new edicts or amendments to previous edicts. For these various reasons, edicts are not respected or adhered to by all Sikhs or followed in all Sikh institutions.

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In a number of the protests involving Sikhs in Britain, the challenging of the authority of the *Akal Takht* was highlighted by the protesters as one of the main reasons for the protest. However, a number of commentators have noted that protests are most often targeted against Sikh women marrying non-Sikhs and rarely against Sikh men (see Jhutti-Johal, in Read More section).

Beyond the mixed faith *Anand Karaj* protests, a number of the 'Sikh on Sikh' incidents relate to factional disputes and differences of opinion regarding Sikh doctrine. These protests often involve members of particular *jathabandis* (ideological groups) protesting against those who challenge the authority of these groups either by promoting different interpretations of Sikh doctrine or by directly challenging the authority of the leaders of these groups.



SERVICE TO SOCIETY: 'MIRI/PIRI' & 'SEWA'

Another frequently mentioned driver for Sikh activism was the concept of *miri/piri*, best symbolised by the two swords first worn by the sixth Guru, Guru Hargobind, with *pri* signifying spiritual engagement and *miri* signifying societal engagement. The recent emergence of Sikh humanitarian charities, including foodbanks where food is prepared in gurdwaras to be distributed to the homeless (see Jasjit Singh, in Read More section), can also be regarded as a consequence of *sewa* (selfless service) and *miri/piri* (spiritual/societal engagement).

Some of those involved in humanitarian activism are also involved in some of the other types of Sikh campaigns. This highlights that Sikh activists can often participate in a range of different types of activism.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ISSUES

This section discusses some of the social and cultural issues which have contributed to some of the incidents involving Sikhs in Britain.

HONOUR, MASCULINITY AND VULNERABILITY

A number of respondents stated that an important reason for their activism was to uphold the *izzat* (honour) of the Sikh community. 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. *Izzat* plays an important role in Sikh activism in a number of different ways:

1. The need for, usually male, Sikh activists to protect the *izzat* of 'Sikh females'. It has been highlighted that some Sikhs tend to focus on policing the behaviours of Sikh women, for instance at inter faith wedding protests. The concept of *sharam* (shame) can be seen to play an important role in maintaining the traditional patriarchal framework of Punjabi society.

2. Individuals with personal issues (e.g., substance addiction / mental health problems / victims of sexual abuse) not seeking sufficient medical / psychological attention, so that the *izzat* of their families can be maintained in the community.
3. The need for activists to continually maintain their *izzat* among activist circles by regularly attending and participating in activist events.

Related to *izzat* is the idea of hyper-masculinity as some Sikh males participate in Sikh activism to demonstrate their masculinity to others particularly given the historical representations of Sikhs as a 'martial race', constructed in particular during the colonial encounter (see Gill, in Read More section).



MUSLIMS AND THE FAR RIGHT

Numerous reports since the 1980s have highlighted clashes between Sikhs and Muslims in Britain, particularly in the form of gang violence.

However, this antagonism is present in large sections of the Sikh community and is not exclusive to members of Sikh gangs and Sikh youth. Research has suggested that there are a number of contemporary and historical reasons for tensions between the two communities in Britain (see Gurharpal Singh (2010), Moliner (2007) and Sian (2010) in Read more section):

1. Historical accounts in the Sikh tradition highlighting instances of Sikhs having to deal with the threat of Mughal 'tyranny' combined with stories of violence during the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947.
2. Sikh narratives of settlement in Britain regularly speaking of them being 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. Consequently, the 'Little Punjabs' of Southall and Smethwick for instance 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 mixing within both communities in certain locales.
5. The proselytism of Sikhs by Muslim students on University campuses.
6. The narrative of 'forced' conversions being regularly expressed in the British Sikh diaspora where it is widely circulated that 'predatory' Muslim males are attempting to 'aggressively' target and convert 'vulnerable' Sikh girls into Islam.

7. Following 9/11 and 7/7 many turban-wearing Sikhs becoming victims of anti-Muslim hate crime as they were targeted by racists who made no distinction between Sikhs and Muslims.
8. Some Sikhs supporting far right organisations including the BNP and EDL.

In recent years, the narrative around 'conversion' has evolved to focus on the 'grooming' of Sikh girls by Muslim men informed by the narrative that a disproportionate number of individuals from Pakistani backgrounds have been involved in street grooming gangs in cities across the UK.

Sikh engagement with the far right most often occurs on a local level between individuals rather than organisations primarily around the issue of grooming. Purely based on online evidence it appears that Sikh engagement with the far right is both supported and opposed by Sikhs in Britain and that Sikh links with the far right are neither wide spread nor non-existent.

A full report and executive summary on *The idea, context, framing and realities of 'Sikh Radicalisation' in Britain*, by Dr Jasjit Singh, is available here:

- Full Report: <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/sikh-radicalisation-full-report/>
- Executive Summary: <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/sikh-radicalisation-executive-summary/>

You can also read more about the project at <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/sikh-radicalisation-britain/> or watch Dr Singh talk about his research at <https://youtu.be/caAPIBuS5W4>



READ MORE

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