From Guru Nanak to New Zealand: Mobility in the Sikh Tradition and the History of the Sikh Community in New Zealand to 1947

Singh, Harpreet


Abstract:
Currently the research on Sikhs in New Zealand has been defined by W. H. McLeod’s Punjabis in New Zealand (published in the 1980s). The studies in this book revealed Sikh history in New Zealand through the lens of oral history by focussing on the memory of the original settlers and their descendants. However, the advancement of technology has facilitated access to digitised historical documents including newspapers and archives. This dissertation uses these extensive databases of digitised material (combined with non-digital sources) to recover an extensive, if fragmentary, history of South Asians and Sikhs in New Zealand.

This dissertation seeks to reconstruct mobility within Sikhism by analysing migration to New Zealand against the backdrop of the early period of Sikh history. Covering the period of the Sikh Gurus, the eighteenth century, the period of the Sikh Kingdom and the colonial era, the research establishes a pattern of mobility leading to migration to New Zealand. The pattern is established by utilising evidence from various aspects of the Sikh faith including Sikh institutions, scripture, literature, and other historical sources of each period to show how mobility was indigenous to the Sikh tradition. It also explores the relationship of Sikhs with the British, which was integral to the absorption of Sikhs into the Empire and continuity of mobile traditions that ultimately led them to New Zealand.

In New Zealand, the research begins with an analysis of the early South Asian history in the country. The analysis provides a context for the arrival of the Sikhs and also reveals new evidence of a non-Sikh Indian community previously unknown to scholars. This has placed South Asian settlement decades earlier than documented in the current research. The research also uncovers new evidence showing an earlier arrival date of the Sikhs in the 1880s, a wider geographic dispersal, the presence of greater numbers, and extensive integration into local society before the twentieth century.

Research on the first half of the twentieth century brings forth new evidence on Sikh life in New Zealand. The information provides a detailed account of life in the public sphere including religious and cultural life, interactions with colonial institutions, political activities, and a multitude of connections in local communities. It also highlights Sikh contributions to local communities in areas such as military service, sports and entertainment. The information details the shifting attitudes and perspectives about the Sikhs and also Sikh perspectives towards greater New Zealand society as they sought to define themselves and their position in local society.

Ultimately, the research in this dissertation provides new evidence on the Sikh community in New Zealand, reshaping our understanding of Sikh history in the country. Though Sikhs were a community of small numbers, but they were a distinct and significant part of New Zealand’s history.

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New Zealand troops fought overseas again in the Second World War in support of the UK. However, the fall of Singapore shook New Zealanders' confidence that Britain could guarantee the country's security. With the bulk of our forces effectively stranded in Egypt and the Middle East, it was the United States that protected New Zealand against Japan during the war in the Pacific. When Britain joined the European Economic Community in 1973, New Zealand had already begun diversifying its export trade. Losing such an important and assured market for our farm products was a blow. That event has encouraged New Zealand to widen its outlook. New Zealand History online provides more in-depth information on New Zealand's history. NZHistory Online.