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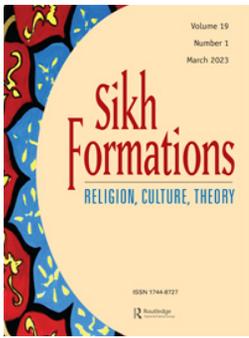
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Growing pains in the field of Sikh Studies in the Western Academy

Pashaura Singh

Department for the Study of Religion, University of California, Riverside, CA, USA

ABSTRACT

The field of Sikh Studies has arrived in the Western Academy along with a rich experience of growing pains during the last three decades. The vocal opposition of ultra-conservative fringe groups in the Sikh diaspora frequently managed to gain a dominant voice in community media effectively trolling, harassing, and marginalizing progressive scholarly voices. There is an urgent need to understand this phenomenon in the context of the Punjab crisis.

KEYWORDS

Endowed Chairs; ethno-nationalism; fundamentalism; Punjab crisis; Sikh diaspora; Sikh studies; Western academy

Introduction

In the last decade and a half, I had the privilege to chair three academic searches for endowed chairs in my own Department for the Study of Religion at the University of California, Riverside (UCR), namely an Endowed Chair in Jewish Studies, Holstein Community Endowed Chair, and an Endowed Chair in Jain Studies. During the search processes I learned firsthand the dynamics of endowed chairs supported by different religious communities whose members were fully involved in attending the job talks of various candidates. Here, I would like to share some important moments from that experience. For more than three decades of my academic career I have been observing the growth of the field of Sikh studies from its very inception in the North American context. Now I can look back with a critical eye at the external and internal forces that influenced its growth both positively and negatively. This understanding is essential to the further development of Sikh Studies in the academy. The 7th Dr. Jasbir Singh Saini Chair in Sikh Studies Conference at UCR in May 2021 was focused on ‘Sikh Studies in the Western Academy: Prospects and Challenges,’ and it was dedicated to the memory of the late Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany who was an avid supporter of establishing Endowed Chairs of Sikh studies at various campuses in the University of California system. This is fully depicted in the artwork of the conference flyer shown in [Figure 1](#). I intend to focus on certain episodes in which Dr. Kapany’s role was crucial in providing institutional support to promote the field of Sikh Studies. Let me now turn to the main points of my presentation on the ‘Growing Pains in the Field of Sikh Studies in the Western Academy.’



The flyer features a dark blue header with the UC logo on the left and a vertical line on the right. Below the header, the title "7th Dr. Jasbir Singh Saini Chair in Sikh Studies Conference" is written in white. The central section has a tan background and contains a portrait of Dr. Narinder S Kapany, a man with a beard and glasses wearing a turban. Above the portrait is the text "Dr. Narinder S Kapany 1926 - 2020" and below it is the cursive phrase "His Legacy Lives on...". Underneath the portrait is the text "In Memory of Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany (1926-2020)". The bottom section is dark blue with white text for the conference title, dates, contact information, and a registration link.

UC

**7th Dr. Jasbir Singh Saini Chair
in Sikh Studies Conference**

**Dr. Narinder S Kapany
1926 - 2020**

His Legacy Lives on...

In Memory of Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany (1926-2020)

**"Sikh Studies in the Western Academy:
Prospects and Challenges"**
May 7-8, 2021

For More Information: psingh@ucr.edu or tbain001@ucr.edu
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Figure 1. 7th Sikh Studies Conference Flyer, UCR. Artwork courtesy International Sikh Foundation, Palo Alto.

External interference in the establishment of a chair in Sikh studies

In North America the conversation about the Sikh tradition took place in 1976 when Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany and Professor Mark Juergensmyer jointly organized the first Sikh Studies conference at UC Berkeley. This was the beginning of scholarly attention to Sikhism which was largely treated as a ‘forgotten tradition’ in academic circles. Following this conference, the idea of establishing an endowed chair in Sikh Studies in any North American university was first conceived by the Sikh Society of Calgary in 1979 at the suggestion of the late Professor W.H. McLeod who was invited to inaugurate the newly built gurdwara at Guru Nanak Centre in Calgary on Baisakhi Day. The aim of the Sikh Society in inviting a Western scholar of Sikh Studies from New Zealand was to build a positive image of the Sikhs in the host society. Professor McLeod inspired the Sikh community to work for the establishment of a Chair of Sikh Studies at a Canadian university. He assured them that this kind of program would give academic respectability to the Sikh tradition within the academy and remove the prevailing ignorance about the Sikhs in a larger social context. The work in this direction had started in 1980, and I myself participated in the fundraising efforts with much enthusiasm. The Sikh Society handed this project over to the newly formed ‘Federation of Sikh Societies of Canada’ (FSSC) at the ‘All Canada Sikh Convention’ held at Calgary in 1981. The Federation made an appeal to the Sikh community in connection with their fund-raising efforts for the establishment of the Chair in Sikh Studies on 20 November 1983, much before the 1984 events. As a matter of fact, they had passed the resolution in this regard at the ‘All Canada Sikh Convention 1983’ held at Ottawa on 31 July 1983. They had already entered into negotiations with the Secretary of State, Multiculturalism of the Government of Canada, and the University of British Columbia (UBC) for the establishment of the ‘Program of Punjabi and Sikh Studies at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver’ (FSSC 1985). However, the formal agreement was signed on 16 March 1985, and the first occupant of the chair, Harjot Oberoi, was appointed in 1987, only after some severe challenges of external interference by the Government of India had to be dealt with by the Canadian Sikh community.

Let me briefly narrate the story, reported by Robert Matas in *The Globe and Mail* on 13 December 1986, with a caption: ‘External Affairs frowns on chair in Sikh studies.’ The Department of External Affairs intervened in an application, saying the support for an education program related to Canada’s Sikh community could harm bilateral relations with India. In particular, e.g. Drake, an assistant deputy minister in External Affairs wrote in his memo to a Secretary of State official: ‘While I fully understand that Canada’s multiculturalism policies will be guided primarily by Canadian domestic considerations, the implications in terms of foreign policy must also be considered. I hope, therefore, that the Indian Government’s likely reaction can be taken into account before any conclusion is reached ... Should federal financing materialize, it would likely be misunderstood by the Government of India and might well cause damage to our bilateral relations with India’ (Matas 1986). Under these circumstances, the approval of the federal grant of matching funds was withheld for almost a year because External Affairs was under constant pressure from the Indian Government.

A few months later, the first and the largest academic gathering in Canada on 'Sikh History and Religion in the Twentieth Century' took place on 13–15 February 1987, at the University of Toronto, in which more than two dozen of scholars and experts participated. As a prospective graduate student, I also attended this conference, and I joined the Centre for the Study of Religion in its doctoral program in the Fall of that year. In one of the evenings, the conference organizers had invited Honorable Joe Clark, the Foreign Minister of Canada, to have conversation with the scholars and the members of the Sikh community. In his opening remarks the Minister told the gathering how wonderful it was that Canada was home to so many Sikhs and lauded the century of Sikh presence in the land. He told the audience of all the wonderful things his party and his government had done for all people. When he finished his speech, there was muted applause. Professor Milton Israel, the chief organizer of the conference, stepped up and said: 'The Minister has graciously agreed to answer any questions.' At this point, Gurcharan Singh, the secretary of the Federation of Sikh Societies of Canada, raised the first question: 'How come the Government of Canada had not honored its promise to match the funds (\$300,000) collected by the community in order to set up a Sikh Chair in the University of British Columbia?' The Minister responded that it was not under the jurisdiction of his ministry, but he nodded at his staff to make a note of it and assured the audience that it would be looked into to see what the bottleneck was. Then, the audience raised the question of Bilateral Treaty with India. In particular, the question about Sikh pogroms in New Delhi and other parts of India after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984 raised by T. Sher Singh stunned the External Affairs Minister who did not respond to it. It created an uncomfortable situation for him to continue in the discussion by saying: 'I thought this was an academic conference.' The moderator, Professor Milton Israel, tried to intervene by calling 'Sher! Sher!' to calm him down but T. Sher Singh was insistent on getting the answer from the Minister why Canadian Government did not speak on the issue of Sikh pogroms and human rights violations. The meeting ended abruptly, but its significant impact was that the federal grant for the Chair in Sikh Studies was approved by the Secretary of State, Multiculturalism, and the search process for the candidate started at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver. I have related this episode because I was sitting in the audience to make sense of external interference in the establishment of a Chair in Sikh Studies in an academic institution.

Internal dynamics within the Sikh community

There is an urgent need to understand the internal dynamics as well as external factors for comprehending the processes of change visible within the Sikh community as a result of the tragic events of 1984, incidents that include both Operation Blue Star in June when the Indian army assaulted the Golden Temple Complex in Amritsar and 36 other historical Gurdwaras in Punjab and the genocide of Sikhs nationwide in November after the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Unsurprisingly, the year 1984 became the turning point in the history of the Sikhs in the post-colonial and post-modern world. Some scholars have overemphasized, if not exaggerated, the impact of 1984 events, on the different arenas of Sikh Studies. They maintain that 1984 did act as a catalyst or an overriding factor in Sikh Studies both in India and abroad. For instance, Karl L. Hutterer, Director of the Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of

Michigan, Ann Arbor, presented a position paper in 1986 on ‘Why Sikh Studies at the University of Michigan?’, underlining the fact that events since the army attack on the Golden Temple Complex in 1984 have shown that ‘Americans almost without exception are utterly uneducated about the nature of Sikh religion and culture.’ He made the case that the University of Michigan should be ‘among the pioneers to include Sikh Studies in its curriculum’ (Hutterer 1986, 5–6). As a result, the Sikh Studies Association of Michigan signed a formal agreement with the University of Michigan on 23 July 1986 to establish a Sikh Endowment Fund to ‘support a position in Sikh Studies in the College of Literature, Science and the Arts of the University, including any chair in Sikh Studies into which it may subsequently be converted’ (Singh and Barrier 1999, 18–19).

While appreciating the impact of 1984 on Sikh Studies, we need to be sure of other issues contributing to its recent growth in the West. The growth of Sikh Studies in the course of the last thirty years needs to be seen also in the context of emerging fields such as Cultural Studies / Area Studies pursued in different Western universities. However, I may add here that it appears similar to what had happened in the US after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001. It is well known that 9/11 stimulated the large expansion of studies that deal with Islam or Muslim societies residing in different parts of the world. Thus, one cannot rule out the significance of such incidents in history, and the impact of Oak Creek Gurdwara massacre may have provided new impetus for the development of Sikh Studies in North America. Since the early Sikh Studies programs did originate in the context of the post-1984 events in the Punjab, the initial community response towards these projects was over-whelming. Through these programs, Sikhs of North America had expected to provide their youth with university-level instruction in their religious and cultural tradition, and to make that tradition accessible to the wider non-Sikh community.

Meanwhile, a small group of Sikh scholars, nurtured in the more traditional Singh Sabha mode of doctrinal interpretation, became busy in the process of scrutinizing all research in the area of Sikh Studies. Any kind of scholarly ideas and interpretations that did not appear to pass the litmus test of the ‘authentic representation of tradition’ became the target of their polemical attacks. This organized group was able to exercise considerable control over the Sikh press and mobilize public opinion against scholars who were holding Sikh Studies positions (Singh 2011, 4). My unpublished doctoral dissertation (‘The Text and Meaning of the Adi Granth – 1991’) filed at the University of Toronto library, was illegally copied without my knowledge or authorization, and circulated throughout the Sikh world. I was completely unaware of what was going on behind the scenes and came to know only when the first negative critique of my thesis appeared on 2 October 1992, in the *World Sikh News* in North America and *Punjabi Tribune* and other newspapers in India. This led to a series of denunciations in letters and reviews in Sikh community newspapers, accusing me of committing blasphemy. When the controversy began, I decided I would assist in the calm conclusion of the matter by saying nothing. Most of the people who had started the debate were not following academic norms. Some of the reviews were extremely hostile, violating the spirit of reasoned debate and civility, and some were simply personal attacks. In view of this stressful situation, I somehow managed to stay calm.

Harjot Oberoi has recently argued that traditional societies used instruments like inquisition and vocabularies made up of such terms as blasphemy and censorship to

contain new thought (Oberoi 2023, 40). In addition to polemical attacks on my work, a deputation of Ontario Sikh Council led by Manohar Singh Bal met with the Vice-Provost of the University of Toronto in July 1993, demanding that my PhD degree be revoked. This meeting was also attended by the Director of the South Asian Centre at the University. The Vice-Provost David Cook rejected the request by asserting that ‘Pashaura Singh’s doctorate was awarded following the University’s rules which we have a legal obligation to honour’ (Cook 1994), but the threatening response of the deputation to the rejection prompted the Director to phone the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, immediately. An emergency meeting was immediately called by the Chair of Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Michigan and the decision was taken to provide me with protection. For the next six months a police car of public safety Department at the University accompanied me whenever I moved about the campus. This lasted until I myself asked for the protection to be removed (McLeod 1999, 381–389 and 2007, 161).

The Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC, ‘Chief Administrative Body of Sikh Shrines’) had shown an ambivalent attitude towards textual scholarship. On the one hand, it sponsored the publication of a work in 1977 that records all the text-variants of the various recensions of the *Adi Granth* based on the examination of old manuscripts. This Punjabi work was published under the title *Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib Jī dīān Santhiā Sañchīān ate Hath Likhāt Bīrān de Paraspar Pāṭh Bhedān dī Sūchī*, ‘List of the Variant Readings of the Text of Sri Guru Granth Sahib on the basis of old Manuscripts’ (Singh et al. 1977). This work was, in fact, prepared by the SGPC’s own fact-finding team. On the other hand, it formed sub-committees to evaluate controversial scholarly writings in textual studies. On its recommendations, the Acting-Jathedar (‘Commander’) of the Akal Takhat (‘Throne of the Eternal One’) summoned three scholars – Piar Singh, Amarjit Singh Grewal and Pashaura Singh – to appear before the ‘Cherished Five’ (*pañj piāre*) and explain the results of their research. Two of these scholars agreed to undergo religious penance (*tanakhāh*), without compromising their academic integrity. The third scholar, Amarjit Singh Grewal, had the political support of both pro-establishment and leftist scholars who manipulated the proceedings of the ‘open debate’ at Bhai Gurdas Hall in Amritsar in his favor (Singh 1998, 422).

As a devout Sikh, I appeared before the Akal Takhat on 25 June 1994. Accepting its verdict wholeheartedly, I bowed to the feelings of the Sikh Panth and willingly undertook *sevā* (‘service’) which involved two days of service at the Golden Temple on 27th and 28th June 1994 and five Sundays at my hometown gurdwara in Detroit, USA, doing such things as listening to devotional singing (*shabad kīrtan*), reciting *gurbānī*, and assisting in the washing of the Harimandir *parikarmā* (‘a walkaway around the Golden Temple’). For me, it was the greatest privilege to have the opportunity to do *sevā* at the behest of the Akal Takhat, and I showed this ritual gesture to assuage the feelings of the Sikh community. Moreover, I had the prior understanding with the Acting-Jathedar, Manjit Singh, that I would be appearing at the Akal Takhat as a devout Sikh, not as a scholar. As for the academic side of the debate, I agreed to consider five points which were lodged as objections to my thesis and to make appropriate changes if any of them appeared sound at the time of the publication of my book. The right to accept or refute them would be mine and mine alone, and in my presentation before the

Akal Takhat, I made it quite explicit that none of my critics has any right to abridge my academic freedom (Singh 1998, 422–423).

The Acting-Jathedar, Manjit Singh, agreed to certain points of my explanation at the time of my first appearance before the ‘Cherished Five’ (*pañj sīngḥ sāhibān*) alone in a special room. In our closed-door meeting, for instance, he remarked: ‘It is not a matter of words or letters, rather the *bāṇī* (‘divine Word’) is divinely inspired’ (*akharāṅ dī gal nahīn bāṇī tāṅ dhur kī hai*). He accepted that the change in language did not create any problem with respect to the status of revealed nature of the *bāṇī* (‘sacred utterance’). It is, however, an entirely different matter that he totally changed his stance later on and aligned himself with the Chandigarh-group of scholars (who had raised the storm over my doctoral thesis) in the so-called ‘open debate’ at the Akal Takhat Office. The way in which the Akal Takhat acting-Jathedar got involved in the debate without maintaining his neutrality was a register of contemporary Sikh politics and the growing manipulation of that important institution. At that point it became quite evident that the Jathedar’s role is not independent at all. In fact, I had walked out of the debate five times in protest because I was frequently shouted down by my critics while I was trying to explain my position. This was no scholarly discussion (Singh 1998, 423).

Frequently, some of my colleagues have asked me why I went to the Akal Takhat in the first place. There were some immediate reasons that compelled me to honor the summons issued from the Akal Takhat. First, four active members of the Sikh Studies Association of Michigan (the late Dr. Satnam Singh Bhugra, Dr. Jaswant Singh, Baldev Singh Dhaliwal, and Dr. Trilochan Singh) held three emergency meetings with me and told me that their fund raising for the Sikh Studies Endowment for the University of Michigan was in jeopardy. They pressed the issue to resolve the controversy by going to the Akal Takhat. As a matter of fact, Dr. Jaswant Singh accompanied me to the Akal Takhat along with my daughter and son. Second, the late Gurcharan Singh Tohra, President of the SGPC, had assured me through his emissary that I should not worry about my appearance at the Akal Takhat because they would quickly diffuse the controversy (*ṭhayiā ṭhappā kar ke masalā khatam kar diāṅge*). Third, the late Principal Satbir Singh, Chairman of the Dharam Parchar Committee of the SGPC, gave me assurance through personal telephone call that the issue would be resolved amicably. I had great regard for the principal who was my mentor at Gurmat College, Patiala. Fourth, Professor Nicholas Dirks, the Director of South and Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Michigan had already written a letter to the President of the SGPC, informing him of academic norms that were being followed in the study of different religious traditions at the University of Michigan (Dirks 1992). He impressed upon me to resolve the controversy to protect the community support for the Sikh Studies Program. Finally, it was agreed upon in a conference-call with the Acting-Jathedar on 11 November 1993, that I would appear before the Akal Takhat as a devout Sikh, not as a scholar. Bhai Manjit Singh, who was at Takhat Sri Kesgarh Sahib at that time, even took the responsibility of my security during an hour-long conversation in the conference call (Singh 2009).

On the whole, the experience was not in any way pleasant, although I gained a much better perspective on the role of the Akal Takhat in resolving religious and political controversies. Traditionally, the Akal Takhat is referred to as the ‘Supreme Court’ (*sarab uch adālat*) of the Sikh Panth. Much to my own surprise, I found out that the institution of

the Akal Takhat cannot be compared with any quasi-judicial system. Rather, it is essentially a religious institution that reflects the political balance within the Sikh community. To break an impasse within the Panth in a particular situation, it may function in its own unique way without following set procedures. The institution of the Akal Takhat is still in the process of evolving. This understanding was, indeed, the most significant achievement that I gained as a willing participant in the Akal Takhat proceedings. The detailed account of my story will appear in another work in which I will provide a lengthy treatment of the complex situation that led me to be called to the Akal Takhat (Singh 1998, 423–424).

In 1994 Harjot Oberoi's book, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*, was published by the Oxford University Press and the University of Chicago Press simultaneously, and it won the most prestigious American Academy of Religion Award for the 'First Book' by the author (Oberoi 1994). This was the study of the dispute between the two wings of the Singh Sabha movement and the ultimate victory of the one known as the Tat Khalsa ('Pure Khalsa'). The fundamentalist group of Sikh critics had been waiting for the book to be published, convinced that it would be wholly erroneous and damaging to the Sikh faith. Both the President of the University of British Columbia and the Chair of Oberoi's department had received letters protesting at his research and demanding that it should be stopped. The Jathedar of Takhat Sri Kesgarh Sahib, Anandpur Sahib, issued a proclamation asking the Sikh congregations to withhold all support from Oberoi and McLeod. At a conference at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, organized by me in February 1994, a crowd of Sikh demonstrators had placards directed against both Oberoi and me. The usual flurry of articles followed against Oberoi's book, which were compiled into a book (Mann et al. 1995), plus litigation to have him dismissed from the Sikh Studies Chair at the University of British Columbia. The uproar caused by these attacks and personal threats to his family was so intense that eventually Harjot Oberoi resigned as Chair of Punjabi and Sikh Studies at UBC in 1997 and shifted his focus to Asian Studies instead (McLeod 1999 and 2007, 163–164.)

Under those circumstances the community support to the fledgling programs of Sikh Studies at the University of Toronto and the Columbia University in New York came to an end, resulting in the termination of these programs. We were able to save the Michigan program, but we had to face tremendous opposition from various quarters. I have already mentioned that it was Karl L. Hutterer, Director of the Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Michigan, who vehemently supported the idea of Sikh Studies in 1986. However, one decade later when the Sikh community had collected almost 1.2 million dollars for Sikh Studies Program, the Director of the Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies was a person of Indian origin, Hemlata Dandekar, who bluntly told me: 'We are not in favor of a Sikh Studies Chair. We will support any chair of Indian studies.' The university administration was constantly fed with misinformation that the community effort was closely linked with the movement of Sikh ethno-nationalism in the diaspora. This was quite evident from the memorandum of Luis O. Gomez, the Acting-Chair of the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures, who wrote to the Dean of College of Literature, Science and Arts (LSA) and College Executive Committee, on 29 September 2003, asserting that 'a strong secessionist movement among the Sikhs of Punjab dominated the scene during the last decade of the 20th

century, and that ‘the secessionist movement in Indian Punjab had strong moral and financial support from the Sikh communities of the diaspora, including the affluent professional migrant[s] in Canada and the US’ (Gomez 2003). These two assertions were based upon the writings of mostly Indian scholars who had cultivated a particularly prejudiced and stereotyped image of the Sikh community as a whole. As a result, Sikhs in general were increasingly portrayed as ‘communalists’ and ‘secessionists’ who were bent upon disintegrating the country into another partition. This state sponsored propaganda found its allies in concerned Indian intellectuals in the diaspora. Making the usually false dichotomy between moderates and fundamentalists, these scholars tried to deflect and belittle the Sikhs’ hurt, due to the desecration of their most sacred shrine, the Golden Temple of Amritsar, and their genocide in post-1984 events. Under pressure from the donors the representatives of Sikh Studies Association of Michigan – Dr. Virinder Singh Grewal, Dr. Satnam Singh Bhugra, Dr. Jaswant Singh, Baldev Singh Dhaliwal, and Raman Kaur – were doing their best to remove such misgivings during their conversations with UM administration.

The most provocative question raised in the conference theme was related to the vocal opposition of ultra-conservative fringe groups in the Sikh diaspora that managed to gain a dominant voice in community media effectively trolling, harassing, and marginalizing progressive scholarly voices. We need to understand the origins of these fringe groups in the context of Punjab crisis. Undoubtedly, the censure of scholarly research was intimately linked with the complex political situation of the Punjab. As a result of Operation Blue Star of 1984 and the rise of militancy in the Punjab, the role of Akali leadership was marginalized within the Sikh community to a large extent. But in the early 1990s the Congress-led government in the Punjab crushed the movement of a separate state of Khalistan. The suppression of militancy created a vacuum in Sikh politics that provided an opportunity for the Akalis, particularly the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, to stage a political revival. The scholarly controversy provided a handy tool for the SGPC leadership to assert its authority. Thus, they used the very powerful rhetoric of ‘Granth in Danger’ (in contrast to the famous slogan of ‘Panth in Danger’) to regain their lost credibility. Both the external and internal forces within the Panth have used the scholarly controversy to mobilize public opinion. As Verne Dusenbery has highlighted that in the context of insecurities about their place in India and the uncertain future of their youth growing up in the diaspora, attacking non-conformist scholars fills a convenient ideological space, demonstrating the solidarity of Punjab-based scholars and diaspora professionals with contemporary projects of nation building and religious revival (Dusenbery 1995, 11).

Notably, the first frankly polemical work directed against W.H. McLeod’s scholarship appeared in the form of an edited volume, *Perspectives on the Sikh Tradition* (1986), in which the editor, Justice Gurdev Singh, attributed ‘extra-academic motives’ to McLeod on the assumption that Christian missionaries were out to undermine non-Christian traditions. J.S. Grewal painstakingly points out that Justice Gurdev Singh’s charge that McLeod presented Sikhism as ‘only a rehash of an effete Hindu creed’ is not justified, since ‘it ignores McLeod’s positive exposition of Guru Nanak’s teachings which in 1968 was perhaps the most thorough exposition of the theme in English’ (Grewal 1998, 300). Further, Gurdev Singh’s work also ignored McLeod’s appreciation of Sikhism as ‘a religion of refined and noble quality’ (Grewal 1998, 300). It is instructive

to note that the appearance of this work after post-1984 events is quite revealing. Not surprisingly, the picture on the dust jacket of J.S. Grewal's *Contesting Interpretations of the Sikh Tradition*, showing the destruction of the Akal Takhat in 1984 by the Indian army, rightly links the 'extension of the controversy' with the agony through which the Sikh community passed in the last two decades of twentieth century. This was the time when the number of Sikh critics of McLeod's scholarship increased with the inclusion of 'retired judges, civil servants, army officers, former ministers, chief ministers, and Vice Chancellors' who had access to the President of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (Grewal 1998, 227). McLeod was seen as serving the interests of those forces, which were inimical to the Sikh tradition and hostile to Sikh aspirations. Ironically, these Sikh critics successfully diverted the Sikh outrage against the Indian government for attacking the Golden Temple Complex in 1984 towards a western scholar and his associates. The actual aim of their polemics, as Oberoi argues, was not so much McLeod but what was broadly classified as Western scholarship, a brand of scholarship which was 'characterized as Eurocentric, Darwinian, blasphemous, ill-informed, methodologically unsound, prejudiced, clique-based and disrespectful' (Giani 1994; Mann et al. 1995; Oberoi 2023, 43; Singh 1986).

The political situation in the Punjab, however, must be placed in the larger context of what is happening in India in recent times. There has been a growing – and scary – tendency in India to try to convert religious commitment into political discipline. This is happening not only within the Sikh community, but also among Muslims and Hindus. One manifestation of such a tendency would be the enforcement of overt orthodoxy, whether in the wearing of symbols of commitment or very literal readings of sacred texts, or even fiercely protesting against the sacrilege of the scriptural text in recent times. Depth of religious commitment, it should be emphasized, may have very little to do with such matters. What is important is the number of potential supporters that one political block can show to another, all marching in lock step and willing to vote or protest together. It is no wonder that in such circumstances non-conformist scholars become the soft target of reactionary forces.

In fine, the kind of socio-religious controversy surrounding the works of the scholars of the Sikh tradition is not something new. It is surprisingly a frequent phenomenon and happens most of the time in homogenous traditional societies. Thus, it is structural / political and is similar to the experiences of scholars working in comparable contexts such as the battles fought in the nineteenth century in Jewish and Christian Studies, when the historicity of both the Jewish scriptures and the Christian Gospels were questioned. The issues pertaining to South Asian modernization and diaspora provide the key to understand the true nature of such controversies. There are many conservative followers of Western traditions, too, who do not like much of the academic discourse about their traditions. They have, nevertheless, adapted to the existence of that discourse. Although they may ignore academic discourse as trivial in its disregard of real religious truth, they frequently glean insights from it despite perceived distortions. In the classroom, we frequently observe that analytic understandings help many contemporary students come to terms with their own traditions and appreciate them all the more in their intellectual development. In the West, Sikh Studies is a new field, and much of the reaction to scholars' work reflects the Sikh community's relative lack of experience with the analytic understanding of their tradition. As that experience grows, Sikhs are likely to make

adaptations and discoveries similar to those of their counterparts from other religious traditions – often ignoring analytic works as not serious, sometimes appreciating them in part (Singh 2011, 4–5).

UCR administration and the role of Sikh community representatives

Let me now turn to some episodes related to the efforts of establishing a Sikh Studies Chair at the University of California at Riverside campus. Although I competed for the position of an endowed chair in April 2005 but due to resistance of the Sikh community of Southern California the establishment of the Chair was postponed, even though I was appointed as a Full Professor in the Department for the Study of Religion to teach South Asian religions, including Sikhism and methodological courses. I received the letter of my appointment from the Chancellor France A. Cordova dated 22 August 2005, and I formally sent the fax of my acceptance of this appointment on 1 September 2005. Thereafter, Dr. Ellen A. Wartella, Executive Vice Chancellor, and Provost, wrote letters on 8 September 2005, to community members about my appointment, explaining that ‘the appointment of Dr. Singh comes after extensive review by the department, the Academic Senate, and a special ad hoc committee charged with examining his academic credentials’ (Wartella 2005).

After the public announcement of my appointment, Dr. Baljeet Sahi gave a press release on behalf of the ‘Sikhs for Preservation of Sikhism and Sikh Heritage’ published in *India Journal* on 21 October 2005, under the caption: ‘Repeated Pleas of Sikhs to the UCR Chancellor Fail’ (Sahi 2005, A6). In response to this negative reaction, Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany had asked four prominent academicians from North America and the UK – namely Professor Emeritus Raghbir Singh Basi, a former Provost and Glen and Eva Olds Professor of International Understanding at Alaska Pacific University; Professor I.J. Singh, Professor and Coordinator of Anatomical Sciences at New York University; Professor Harbans Lal, Professor Emeritus of Pharmacology and Neuroscience at University of North Texas Health Science Center; and Lord Indarjit Singh, Editor of *Sikh Messenger* and Director of Network of Sikh Organizations in the UK – to educate the general Sikh public about the significance of endowed chairs of Sikh Studies at Western universities. In an article published in *India-West* on 25 November 2005, these authors made the case for supporting the initiatives of endowed chairs in the field of Sikh Studies under the caption ‘What Sikh Chairs Mean for the Community,’ stressing the point that ‘in general, an endowed chair at a university is an excellent and also the least expensive way to have a place on the table in the hallowed halls of academia’ (Basi et al 2005, A4 & A6).

In the Fall of 2006 Stephen Cullenberg became the new Dean of the College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (CHASS) at UCR. He took fresh initiatives to address the unresolved issue of Sikh Studies Chair. By that time the Sikh Studies endowment had about \$38,000 left to be contributed by three donors over the period of two years. There was also a concern that at least one of the donors have held off his pledge. Also, the administration was seriously considering two ideas: one was to use this money on Sikh conferences and other scholarly activities without the establishment of a Chair, and other was to establish the Chair as named in the Memorandum of Agreement. In a meeting with the Dean along with the Chair of the Department for the Study of

Religion on 16 November 2006, I did my best to resist the first option in order to protect the establishment of the Chair. In the following year Dean Cullenberg invited the community representatives – namely Dr. Jasbir Singh Mann, Dr. Baljeet Sahi, Ajit Singh Randhawa, Raminderjit Singh Sekhon and Dr. Harkeerat Singh Dhillon – to the Dean’s VIP Luncheon on Friday, 11 May 2007, followed by a *tabla* performance by Abhiman Kaushal and *sitar* performance by UCLA student Miles Shrewsbury. Professor Walter Clark, Chair of Music Department made the case for UCR’s vision of establishing ‘Tabla & Sitar Music Lectureships’ before the audience, asking them ‘to join us in promoting this sublime art form by making possible the endowment of Abhiman’s position as a lecturer in Indian music.’ After this program Dr. Gurinder Singh Mann, Director of Center for Sikh and Punjab Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara, delivered a talk on ‘Sikh Immigration to the U.S.: Challenges and Opportunities.’ This special Friday event was primarily organized to create a goodwill among the Sikhs of Southern California and to seek their support in establishing lectureships in the field of *tabla* and *sitar* performances.

Despite the administration’s best efforts and intentions, lobbying activities, both inside and outside the university, continued to the ongoing resistance to the establishment of Sikh Studies Chair. On 5 June 2007, Mrs. Saranjit Kaur Saini, the principal donor for the endowed chair, wrote a letter to Chancellor France A. Cordova, appealing to her not to ‘offer the Chair to Dr. Pashaura Singh through any stipulation’ and pleading further that ‘the entire Saini family and I will be greatly pleased if the University of California will give an invitation to proficient Sikh scholars at the international level to head the Dr. Jasbir Singh Saini Endowed Chair in Sikh and Punjabi Studies at Riverside’ (Saini 2007). The UC administration became most concerned after receiving this letter, and they started giving thought to returning the money to the Sikh Foundation. On 22 August 2007, Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany expressed sadness that the University has not made the appointment to the Sikh Studies Chair and that a small group of people have so much voice in this process. He reiterated that the silent majority wants this Chair and other university chairs to be implemented: ‘It would be a real shame to return the money to the Sikh Foundation. As a leader of that Foundation, he and others will support the University’s appointment’ (Personal Communication). In a similar vein, our Department Chair, Professor June O’Connor expressed her deep concern to the Dean of the College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences that the Sikh resistance community needs some real leadership from people like Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany who might talk sense into them about the long-range picture: ‘They are sabotaging themselves.’ The Administration response was straightforward in Dean Cullenberg’s words: ‘The decision has been made to not appoint a Sikh Studies Chair at UCR. OP (Office of the President) is looking into the procedure of how to return the funding ... I think you should let Pashaura know the status of this decision’ (Personal Communication).

The role of academics in the field of Sikh studies

The scholars working in the field of Sikh Studies discussed this matter seriously at the annual American Academy of Religion (AAR) meeting held on 18 November 2007 at San Diego. Professor Louis E. Fenech took initiative to write a strong letter on behalf

of other concerned scholars of Sikh Studies to UC Administration, including the Office of the President (OP) at Oakland, on 30 November 2007. He signed the letter on behalf of Dr. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, Dr. Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, Dr. Robin Rinehart, Dr. Balbinder Singh Bhogal, Dr. Doris R. Jakobsh, Dr. Michael Hawley, Dr. Susan Prill and Dr. Pashaura Singh. The text of the letter begins with a ‘deep concern and dismay at UCR’s decision to no longer appoint a Sikh Studies Chair’ and maintains that ‘UCR by so doing may have appeared to succumb to the pressure offered by a very small though vocal minority who had in the early 1990s successfully bullied the University of Toronto to abolish its own nascent Sikh Studies program to the great detriment of students and scholars of the Sikh Tradition.’

The third paragraph of the letter reads: ‘As the academic study of the Sikh tradition is relatively new, the Sikh community has had little experience in dealing with the academic study of their tradition. What in other religious traditions is seen as serious academic scholarship is, when directed towards Sikhism, often misinterpreted particularly by the vocal group mentioned above as an attack on the Sikh religion itself and subsequently an attack on the Sikh people and that which they hold most dear. Unfortunately, this situation has led to their taking a hasty stance against the proposed UCR chair which is definitely not in their long-term interests nor in the continuing interests of the Sikh community, a community besieged since the horrific events of 9/11. Indeed, such activities could well jeopardize the future of Sikh chairs throughout the collective academy itself.’

Hoping that this ‘Sikh Foundation promise might still be realized at UC Riverside’ the letter ends with the plea: ‘We the undersigned would greatly appreciate if UCR would reconsider this decision as it adversely affects all of us, professors, students, and those of us deeply concerned with the future of Sikh Studies’ (Fenech et al. 2007). The letter certainly had a positive impact on the thinking of the administration. On 24 December 2007, the University administration had a conference call with Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany who ‘roared like a lion’ during the call and impressed upon them to establish the Sikh Studies Chair at University of California Riverside. Most importantly, on 8 January 2008, Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor Ellen A. Wartella responded to Professor Louis E. Fenech’s Letter: ‘We are in agreement that we will move forward in establishing the Sikh Studies Chair at UCR’ (Wartella 2008). This personal communication was copied to all the signatories of the original letter, revealing the power of academics when they work in unison to achieve their goal even under dire circumstances. Later, Dean Cullenberg complimented me personally for this strategic move to write to UC administration.

Sikh foundation endows chair at UCR

On 14 May 2008, the Executive Vice Chancellor (EVC) and Provost Ellen A. Wartella formally appointed me ‘as the Jasbir Singh Saini Endowed Chair in Sikh and Punjabi Studies at the Riverside Campus of the University of California, effective 1 April 2008.’ This appointment was in addition to my professorial appointment in the College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences: ‘An endowed chair is one of the most important gifts to higher education, it is an honor that fosters academic excellence and recognizes superior faculty.’ It provides invaluable financial support above and beyond salary that the chair-holder uses in research, teaching, or service activities. It

dramatically increases our capacity for organizing international conferences, seminars, and outreach activities.

Bettye Miller ran the story in *UC Riverside Newsroom* on 5 June 2008 under the title: 'Sikh Foundation Endows Chair at UCR: Pashaura Singh is appointed to the Dr. Jasbir Singh Saini Chair in Sikh and Punjabi Studies.' The chair honors the memory of the late Dr. Jasbir Singh Saini, who was known for his expertise in treating heart-rhythm problems and served as chief of the cardiology department at Thunderbird Samaritan Hospital in Phoenix, Arizona. It will go a long way to make Sikhs more familiar to members of the university community and will help break down barriers that exist between Sikhs and other people who perceive them in a stereotypical manner. It will help through its academic activities to erode the ignorance that now exists. It will bring academic respectability to the field of Sikh Studies. Indeed, teaching about Sikh religion and culture will reach far beyond the boundaries of the campus and will play a significant role in addressing urgent community concerns. Professor June O'Connor remarked that 'this chair is important to our campus because it provides in perpetuity the opportunity for students of every worldview and every region to become knowledgeable about history, literature, music, art, religious beliefs and practices, and debates characteristic of the Sikh tradition, in its homeland of Punjab in India and throughout diaspora' (Miller 2008).

It is no wonder that the special interest group was able to mobilize the Sikh community of Southern California to organize a protest against my appointment to the endowed chair at the UCR campus on 26 September 2008 (Figure 2). Following the protest, a delegation of five Sikhs – namely Dr. Jasbir Singh Mann of Anaheim, Professor Gurdev Singh Sandhu of Fontana, Dr. Dhanwant Singh Gill of Riverside, Dr. Baljeet Sahi of La Canada, and Raminderjit Singh Sekhon of Corona – met with Chancellor Timothy P. White. They presented a memorandum of their objections. The chancellor assured them that if they could provide him with a concise statement of their objections



Figure 2. Protest by the Sikh community of Southern California at the University of California, Riverside. Photo courtesy University photographer James Lin.

against Dr. Singh's research, he would be willing to examine those allegations per University of California Riverside (UCR) Policy & Procedures for Responding to Allegations of Research Misconduct (UCR Policy 529-900). This policy directs the UCR Vice Chancellor for Research, Dr. Charles Louis, to review the allegations in his capacity as the Research Integrity Officer for UC Riverside. As such, he is charged with coordinating all procedures related to allegations of research misconduct by anyone performing research, broadly defined, under the campus' sponsorship. During the investigation he normally hands over the case to an ad hoc committee of experts in the related field to make specific recommendations on the academic issue at hand.

As the spokesperson of Coalition of Gurdwaras of California, Raminderjit Singh Sekhon wrote the letter on 7 November 2008, to the chancellor, along with associated documents regarding my academic scholarship, in which he asserted that 'Dr. Singh has published derogatory Sikh literature under the guise of academic research.' The allegations were evaluated in detail by applying standard tests by Dr. Charles Louis and his team of experts. He concluded his findings in the following paragraph: 'The University's policies promote the toleration of ideas. University policies do not provide a framework for assigning guilt for 'wrong' ideas, nor procedures for apologizing to people whose authority has been 'defied.' The focus of this complaint is on limiting toleration of ideas, and the remedies requested are not within the authority of the University.' In closing his response to Raminderjit Singh Sekhon's letter, Chancellor Timothy P. White explicitly stated: 'After careful review, I concur with Dr. Louis that the allegations asserted by the Coalition fail to fall within the definition of research misconduct established by UCR policy, and that these allegations are not sufficiently credible and specific to warrant further investigation' (White 2009). The representatives of the self-made Coalition of Gurdwaras of California approached the Chancellor for reconsideration of their appeal, but the Chancellor refused to discuss the matter further, urging them to inform the police officials of the Public Safety Department of the University beforehand if they ever want to organize a campus protest.

In 2013 I extended a personal invitation to the members of the Sikh community, particularly Sikh organizations of California, including my Sikh critics, to work together in the discipline-based training of a new generation of promising young scholars in the area of Sikh Studies. I explained to them that this cooperation would open up a wide range of academic appointment options for the young students contemplating commitment to a lifetime of scholarship in the field. I sincerely urged them to set aside confrontation in pursuit of a win-win strategy that would help usher in a new era of cooperation and understanding. My appeal did not go in vain and in response Dr. Jasbir Singh Mann accepted my invitation and promised to collaborate with me in inviting some scholars from India. On 10–12 May 2013, over thirty scholars from three continents participated in the 3rd Sikh Studies conference, titled *Dialogues with (in) Sikh Studies: Texts, Practices, and Performances*. This conference differed from the first two by opening its doors to the Sikh community to engage with the assembled scholars in the field of Sikh Studies not simply as audience members, but as participating members of the conference panels. Dr. Jasbir Singh Mann, Dr. Balwant Singh Dhillon, Dr. Kashmir Singh, and Dr. Kulwinder Singh Bajwa presented their papers in the conference (see [Figure 3](#)).



Figure 3. Photograph of some participants in the 3rd Sikh Studies conference in 2013. Photo courtesy University of California, Riverside.

Learning from the experience of other minority communities

The important question raised in the theme of the Sikh Studies conference in 2021 was about non-Sikh communities how they have managed to negotiate similar dilemmas and problems, especially in the contemporary context when there is so much targeting of minorities, liberals, and dissent. Here, I would like to offer a comparison with Jewish community. It is instructive to note that there are more Sikhs in the world than there are Jews. There are about 27 million Sikhs in the world. By contrast, Jewish population is around 15 million that makes about 0.2 per cent of world's roughly seven billion people. About forty percent (six million) Jews live in the United States, forty percent live in Israel, ten percent live in Europe (1.5 million), and ten percent live elsewhere (Hahn Tapper 2016). It is, however, extraordinary that Jews have played such significant roles in shaping human development. For instance, when we look at the number of Sikh scholars or non-Sikhs working in the field of Sikh Studies, and compare it with those in Jewish Studies, we become uncomfortably aware that Sikhs receive nothing like the attention, which they deserve. How do we explain this wide gap between the two comparable minority communities? To answer this question, we must acknowledge some interesting facts. First, Jews are highly urbanized, and they have an extensive interest in things cultural. Second, they have a recent past, which includes the Holocaust and the creation of the first Jewish-majority modern nation-state in history, the state of Israel. But then the Sikhs have a recent past, which includes the Partition of India in 1947 and the genocide of

1984, neither of which has aroused worldwide interest on anything like the scale of the Jewish events. The difference lies chiefly in who constitutes the Sikh Panth. Notably, the overwhelming majority of the Sikhs live off the land in the Punjab, pursuing objectives, which do not rate scholarly research very high (McLeod 2004, 30).

Most instructively, in American higher education, some estimate the proportion of Jewish students in the top twenty schools, including those in the Ivy Leagues, to be as high as twenty-five percent. Similarly, the proportion of Jewish faculty in American colleges and universities has been estimated thirty-three percent in 2013. In terms of representation in the United States government Jews accounted for six percent of the House of Representatives and twelve percent of the Senate in 2010. As of 2013, three of the nine justices of the Supreme Court are Jews. Jews appear in far greater numbers than in the overall population. They have access to the hallways of power. The President of the United States meets regularly with Jewish leadership. Most instructively, from World War II onward, Jews have steadily achieved more power than ever before in terms of both self-determination and cultural capital (Hahn Tapper 2016). They have empowered their community through education. Almost all the major universities in the United States have endowed chairs or centers of Judaic studies. In fact, there are now about 300 endowed chairs in Jewish Studies in the American academy alone.

Michael Scott Alexander's opening keynote speech in the Sikh Studies conference expertly highlighted the growth of Jewish studies in the US under the heading: 'No Gold Standard: Jewish Studies on the American Campus.' According to him, the Association for Jewish Studies (AJS) conducted a survey in 2014, locating approximately three-thousand current members out of which 30% of academic members held endowed chairs, indicating approximately 630 endowed chairs worldwide. I want to narrate an episode of the search for a candidate for the Jewish Studies at the University of California, Riverside. Being the chair of the search committee, I was carefully observing the enthusiasm of the local Jewish community. One day after the job-talk of a candidate a lady came to my office and said: 'Thank you Dr. Singh for conducting this search for us.' I welcomed her and enquired if she had any question about the search process, to which she promptly replied: 'We do not interfere in the University process. We will be happy for the one who will be selected. We are just excited that soon we will have a scholar in Jewish Studies.' I was inspired with awe with her professional response. This was indeed a moment of reflection for me when I remembered what some vocal Sikhs of Southern California did to me when I gave my job talk on 19 April 2005. The moment I finished my talk there were number of raised hands simultaneously for asking questions. The moderator allowed each one to ask any question related to my talk. But soon they became abusive in attacking my scholarship and questioning my ability to hold a Sikh Studies Chair. I was extremely careful not to lose my temper. I kept my cool and responded to their questions in a very positive tone. Then the search committee members came to my defense and the moderator even tried to explain the difference between the 'pulpit' and 'podium' through which a religious tradition is studied through 'confessional' and 'academic' approaches respectively. Even a senior colleague questioned the members of the Sikh community whether they would like to see more ignorance among Americans about the Sikhs and their traditions by blocking the establishment of Sikh Studies Chair at UC Riverside (Singh 2014, 138). Next morning, I flew back to Detroit and when I opened my computer in Ann Arbor, I saw a message from a senior colleague: 'I want to express my personal

admiration for your bravery and class during what must have been, at times, an ordeal here at UCR. Whatever becomes of this search, you have our respect for the way you handled yourself. Let us hope for the best. My sense is that it was a minority who were so abusive. Many members of the community approached me after your talk, telling me how much they liked what I said. I think that signaled a lot of support for you' (Ivan Strenski 2005).

Let me now turn to the story of establishing an endowed chair in Jain Studies at UC Riverside. I was involved in the negotiations with the Jain community right from the beginning, and I was also the chair of the search committee for selecting a candidate for the endowed chair. The signing of Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the donors of the Jain community (Dr. Rushabh Modi, Mr. and Mrs. Mahesh and Usha Wadher), the UC Riverside Foundation and the Regents of the University of California, took place in a colorful function at UCR Alumni & Visitors Center on 17 February 2018, attended by Chancellor Kim Wilcox, College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Dean Milagros 'Milly' Peña, faculty members of the Department for the Study of Religion and the members of Jain community (Figure 4). The excitement of the Jain community was acknowledged by one and all at the ceremony. Since that beginning at UCR, they have established chairs in Jain Studies at various campuses in California, namely UC Davis, UC Irvine, UC Santa Barbara and the California State University campuses of Northridge and Long Beach, including Loyola Marymount University at Los Angeles. In 2010, the Jain donors established the first endowed professorship of Jain studies at Florida International University. Since then, they cultivated partnerships with more universities. An estimated 5 million to 10 million followers of Jainism in the world think academia is the best place to spread its teachings of nonviolence (*ahimsa*) and acceptance of multiple viewpoints



Figure 4. The ceremony of signing of MoU between the UCR and the Jain community. Photo courtesy Dharmesh from the Jain community.

especially at a time of increasing calls to move away from Eurocentric perspectives in education: ‘Those are really the fundamental building blocks of modern society and a democracy, which kind of fits into our centuries-old teachings,’ said Dr. Jaswant Modi who has committed nearly \$13 million to establishing Jain studies in higher education, including at several universities in Southern California (Agarwal 2021).

Creative phase and the concluding summary

In the last two decades there has been a steady growth of scholarly literature on Sikhism. The first endowed chair in the University of California system was established at UC Santa Barbara. This resulted from Dr. Mark Juegensmeyer’s unflinching support for this idea and the generous donation of Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany to establish Kundan Kaur Kapany Chair to celebrate the memory of his mother. The Riverside endowed Chair was the next occurrence. The increasing scholarly attention that Sikhs and Sikhism have been beginning to receive is a new phenomenon in the academy. Indeed, Sikh Studies is no longer ‘the forgotten tradition’ of the late seventies and is becoming increasingly recognized in undergraduate programs, as well as being the benefactor of a growing number of endowed Chairs in universities across North America. There are now nine Sikh Studies Programs established in North America and the UK with the active financial support of the Sikh community. The new Chairs of ‘Sikh Studies’ have been part of different university academic units such as the ‘Department for the Study of Religion’ and ‘Religion & Philosophy’ (University of California at Riverside and Hofstra University at Long Island, New York), ‘Global Studies’ (University of California at Santa Barbara), ‘Literature’ (University of California, Santa Cruz), ‘Anthropology’ (University of California, Irvine), ‘Asian Languages and Cultures’ (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor and University of British Columbia, Vancouver), ‘Music’ (Hofstra University at Long Island, New York), and ‘Centre for Sikh and Punjabi Studies’ at the University of Wolverhampton in the United Kingdom. In addition, fresh initiatives are underway to establish programs in Sikh studies and Punjabi language at the University of Calgary in Canada and the University of California, Berkeley. Most of these programs have been funded by wealthy Sikhs and the Sikh community in the diaspora. However, the current efforts to establish an Endowed Chair in Sikh Studies at the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom is supported by the government of India to celebrate the 550th Birth Anniversary of Guru Nanak (Singh and Mandair 2023, 567).

In addition, there are a growing number of scholars in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Europe whose teaching and research interests are related in some way to Sikh Studies. In the beginning of twenty-first century, therefore, ‘Sikh Studies’ has emerged as a distinct area of scholarship in some of the North American universities. The chairholders initially focused on issues of Sikh religion, philosophy, and history. However, over the years, they have also begun to explore more contentious and contemporary issues of Sikh identity, culture, and social relations. This expansion of the sub-discipline beyond the study of text and ideology, also points towards a growing confidence of the scholars, the institutionalization of Sikh Studies and acceptance of Sikhs as an important religious community at the global level. The most pragmatic question related to the practical steps that scholars in Sikh Studies can take to ensure that their work reaches a wider audience in the Sikh and Punjabi community. Recently, universities

in the West have adopted the policy of ‘Open Access’ to scholarly works produced by the faculty. Technology has made it possible to make those works available to everyone. The important point is that we need to remove much of academic jargon by writing in accessible language. For this purpose, we need to become public intellectuals. In the face of scholarly controversies, we need to avoid a situation becoming a contest for primacy in the academic field within the Panth. Because of the domineering approach of some individuals the field of Sikh Studies has lost some brilliant scholars. Ours is a very small field that has yet to make its mark in the academy. To serve the field we must stand by our colleagues against the onslaught of anti-intellectualism.

Finally, I would like to draw attention to the proactive role of community representatives and organizations in the process of town-gown cooperation. The members of the Sikh community should always use circumspection in their approach without interfering in the academic programs of the university. If that happens, it will seriously damage the legitimacy of the Program of Sikh Studies itself. The public university welcomes any community to the public lectures and even provides a forum for extended conversation with the candidates in the search process. However, the community members must realize that although they have been given voice in a spirit of neighborliness, they do not have a vote on university appointments. From the University’s perspective, any area studies or special chair has to be evaluated in terms of the institution’s resources and academic focus. The Sikh community must share a commitment to the full institutionalization of the Sikh Studies Program, including regular liaison and the maintenance of a core curriculum involving Sikh studies, Punjabi language, and culture. From my three decades of teaching career at Toronto, Michigan, and Riverside, I can say this with pride that Sikh Studies Association of Michigan and active supporters of Sikh Chair at Riverside had never interfered with my academic freedom. We have worked together to promote the mission of the Sikh Studies Program.

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