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The changing nature of activism among Sikhs in the UK today

Commission for Countering Extremism

Dr Jagbir Jhutti-Johal and Sunny Hundal

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UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

The changing nature of activism amongst Sikhs in the UK today

Dr Jagbir Jhutti-Johal¹ and Sunny Hundal²

ABSTRACT

The changing nature of activism among Sikhs in the UK, in particular a perceived increase in religiosity among second and third generation Sikhs, is perceived by some as 'extremism', especially in foreign media. How much truth is there in such accusations? We provide an analysis of four key issues giving rise to Sikh activism, thus offering a new insight on a demographic becoming of interest to policymakers and academics globally and nationally.

INTRODUCTION

The Sikh Dharam (more recently also known by the term, "Sikhi") is one of the world's youngest religions. It originated on the Indian subcontinent in the fifteenth century. In the Sikh tradition, the term *dharam* (this is the Punjabi vernacular rendering of the term, but in the Gurumukhi it is spelled as *dharma*) has various meanings, including religion, righteousness, duty, virtue, merit, honesty, sect, justice, and faith.¹ Sikh Dharam was founded by Guru Nanak, a charismatic leader considered a messenger of God, who was born in 1469 CE in the region of Punjab (literally "a land of five rivers"). This region is located in western India in what is now part of Pakistan. The Sikh Dharam has grown into a religion of around twenty million people. In their short and turbulent history, the Sikh people have been key players in many of the major events of Indian history, including the fall of the Mughal Empire, the rise of the Sikh Empire under Ranjit Singh in Punjab, the rise and fall of the British Empire, and the Indian struggle for independence. Over the past century, Sikhs have migrated all over the world in substantial numbers. As a result of this diaspora, Sikhs are to be found in many countries outside India, primarily in the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, East Africa, and Malaysia (Jhutti-Johal 2017).

Migration to the UK can be traced back to 1854, when Maharaja Duleep Singh, was brought to England after the annexation of the Punjab. Having played a significant role in supporting the allied war effort in both world wars, after the Second World War Sikhs, alongside other South Asians were invited to satisfy the British demand for labour in the late 1940s to assist in the reconstruction efforts after the Second World War, and post-war economic expansion. Some of the migration around this time was also in response to the 1947 Partition of India.

¹ Senior Lecturer in Sikh Studies, Department of Theology and Religion, University of Birmingham.

² Journalist and writer.

The majority of Sikhs were from rural Punjab and had traditionally practised agriculture and petty trading. After British immigration laws were tightened in the 1960s, the male Sikhs were joined by their wives, children, parents and other relatives. The presence of the Sikh family in Britain encouraged the purchase of homes, and eventually resulted in the demise of the 'myth of return' (Jhutti-Johal 2017). Today, according to the 2011 Census, there are 432,429 Sikhs throughout the United Kingdom, with the vast majority of them in England alone (England: 420,196, Wales: 2,962, Scotland: 9,055, NI: 216). The highest number of Sikhs can be found in the West Midlands in Birmingham, Sandwell and Wolverhampton, with a slightly smaller number in Coventry and Walsall. They can also be found in large numbers in outer London in Ealing, Hounslow and Hillingdon.³

We write this paper at a critical moment for the western Sikh diaspora. As the small Sikh community (*Panth*) has grown in maturity, stature and political power, it faces internal conflict and external pressure. In the UK, Sikhs are becoming more assertive about their faith identity while playing a bigger role in wider society. Some say Sikhs are becoming more religious, others maintain there is growing extremism, while many think the community is losing its identity and norms.

Regardless of where Sikhs are headed, there are signs of growing tensions. Multiple disruptions of inter-faith marriages at gurdwaras in recent years have been one high-profile example of modernity clashing with a desire for puritanism. Some feel there are growing calls for an independent Sikh homeland, a source of pride for Sikh activists but fear for the government of India, which could lead to Sikh-Hindu tensions at home. Meanwhile, claims of sexual grooming of Sikh girls could spark tensions with British Muslims too.

Among Sikhs, there are vast differences over migration journey, origins, educational and social class status, and a diversity in opinions about issues confronting the community. It is this diversity in opinion we will focus on when exploring the following four issues:

1. Growing religiosity?
2. Are there legitimate concerns over around conversion and sexual grooming?
3. British Sikh groups and the far-right: how close?
4. The rise of Hindu nationalism in India and its impact on Sikhs in Britain.

³ For more detail see 'ONS 2011 Census: Key Statistics for England and Wales, March 2011: The defining characteristics of the population: who we are, how we live and what we do'. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/2011censuskeystatisticsforenglandandwales/2012-12-11#religion>. Information on religion is provided in tables [KS209EW \(269.5 Kb Excel sheet\)](#) and [QS210EW \(628.5 Kb Excel sheet\)](#).

We believe this paper covers new ground in raising issues that rarely arise in the media or policy papers. By limiting the scope to these four issues, we were able to explore them in-depth with a range of Sikh perspectives. We also hope it gives non-Sikh readers a better insight into community dynamics.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative rather than quantitative paper. To address the research questions we employed a multifaceted approach. We conducted a review of relevant published literature on the Sikh community to understand the usefulness and applicability of terms such as 'extremism' and 'fundamentalism' to certain activity that is taking place within the community in the UK. An analysis of social media⁴ was undertaken to see how certain activism is articulated on this platform, but most importantly interviews with grass root activists and members of the community who dedicate a significant amount of time on these issues, to understand how they perceived nature of activism. We did not interview political or community leaders, as their voices are already well represented in the political arena and media.

There was no way to cover the full spectrum of opinion amongst Sikhs and some well-known activists who were approached declined to speak to us due to fear of a backlash. In total, our sample included twelve respondents, which consisted of five male and seven female British-Sikhs from a range of economic and social backgrounds. We were able to conduct nine interviews in person, three via Skype. We also approached three academics. One academic was interviewed via Skype and the other two submitted responses via email. Participants could express their views anonymously, partly or fully on the record⁵ (for more information see Appendix 1).

⁴ References to social media have been hyperlinked into the article.

⁵ Respondents who wished to remain anonymous are referred to as Kaur 1, 2 or Singh 1, 2 etc. 'Kaur' is a Sikh surname for a female and 'Singh' is a Sikh surname for a male.

1. GROWING RELIGIOSITY?

Recently there has been a growing trend of using the internet to propagate the message of Sikhism, not with a view to conversion but to aid understanding of the Sikh faith. One of the most prominent organisations in this field is 'Basics of Sikhi', whose founder Jagraj Singh, brother of report author Sunny Hundal, had become the most popular teacher of Sikhi in Britain by the time he died from cancer in 2017. He was also a rare Sikh evangelist who was comfortable explaining the religion to people outside the religion, with many videos attracting hundreds of thousands of viewers. Through his charisma and unique style of delivery, Singh was successful in stimulating religiosity amongst younger Sikhs in the UK and abroad.

The example of Singh and his popularity amongst younger Sikhs illustrates a growing trend amongst this demographic of becoming more religiously observant. We explored a number of questions with our respondents to ascertain whether increased religiosity creates tensions with less-observant Sikhs and examine the relationship between growing religiosity and the demand for an independent homeland for Sikhs?

We elicited a diversity of views and opinions, most likely due to the non-homogeneous nature of the Sikh community. Sikhs, like other religious groups, have followers with varying degrees of religious observance. Today, the level of observance has resulted in the creation of "rankings" or "categories" of Sikhs: those who are principally *Khalsa* or *Amritdhari* Sikhs (initiated)⁶, *Keshdhari* Sikhs (not initiated), but keep their hair unshorn and wear some of the outward symbols of the Sikh faith (i.e., the turban and *Kara*), and *Sehajdhari/Mona* (it is important to note that *Mona* is a recent term). They cut their hair, but retain an affiliation to the *Khalsa* and may choose to wear only one of the Five Ks, which is the *Kara* (steel bangle). Despite the diversity due to observance, there is no separate denomination based on observance, because all, to the most part follow the same edicts and practices.

Whilst there is little hard data on the religiosity of Sikhs, most of our respondents felt an increasing number of young Sikhs were becoming more religious and vocal in their religious identity. However, there were mixed views about how deep that religious understanding and commitment went and that worried some.⁷

⁶ Initiated Sikhs are required to adopt the *panj kakar* (Five Ks). These are five articles of faith whose name in Punjabi begins with a "K": *kesh* (unshorn hair), *kangha* (a wooden comb), *kara* (a simple steel bracelet), *kachera* (special cotton underwear) and *kirpan* (a short sword). These articles of faith are symbols of commitment to both spirituality and the defense of justice. Furthermore, to emphasize equality *Khalsa* Sikhs were required to use a caste-neutral last name: Singh (Lion) for men and Kaur (Princess) for women.

⁷ There is a contested picture of growing religiosity within the Sikh community and there is no real hard data on how many Sikhs are initiated or not. The 2011 UK Census reported 432,429 British Sikhs, and even this number is contested, with some Sikhs claiming that this is an undercount of the Sikh population in the UK. Surveys such as the British Sikh Report do try and collect data on Sikhs but do not offer us a clear enough picture due to the small sample size (2487 respondents in 2019).

Kaur 1 is one such example. She grew up in a relatively non-religious household, but is now an *Amritdhari* (initiated) Sikh who wears a *dastaar* (turban). “I wasn’t lacking in freedom, but there was a thirst and desire for a more spiritual connection,” she says, which in turn drove her to get involved in community activism.

Kaur 1 felt there were more yearning for their religious identity because British Sikhs finally had better access to their heritage in English. However, like many Sikhs we spoke to she was worried about the future. Her concern was that many were introduced into Sikh activism through negative campaigns rather than a broad understanding of the faith.

Dr Gurnam Singh, a principal lecturer in social work at Coventry University and a regular presenter on Akaal channel, a Sikh satellite TV station, said that if defined in spiritual terms Sikhs were becoming less religious not more.

“Many are adopting this very religious identity which is very outward in form, but less based on a deep understanding of the faith.”

Kaur 2, a professional from the Midlands noted how she was worried there was a widening gulf between initiated and non-initiated Sikhs like herself, especially in provision of services such as Sikh free schools, which she felt discriminated against the non-initiated.

Another respondent, **Kaur 3**, felt some Sikhs had become alienated from gurdwaras over incidents such as lack of disability support and disruption of interfaith marriages. She felt this alienation of liberal-minded Sikhs was allowing more space to religious conservatives and that would push the community in a more conservative direction:

“There are some pockets of the community which are becoming very religious and their interpretation and practice is becoming very puritanical and conservative. The majority of the Sikhs I feel are not religious.”

Jasvir Singh, co-chair of City Sikhs, said it is not that Sikhs are becoming more religious, but that the second and third generation had a “certain level of confidence” in the UK their parents did not have. He felt there was a growing appetite among Sikhs to explore their heritage and identity, culturally and religiously.

“It’s happened almost as a reaction to the rise of confidence and religiosity among Muslims. Sikhs are playing catch-up and in some cases using their playbook, i.e. those that shout the loudest get listened to.”

While many Sikhs felt a more puritanical form of Sikh identity and activism was in resurgence, some were comfortable with it and felt liberated by it, others were concerned that Sikhs were headed for more intra-community tensions.

Sikh activists also told us it was not easy to put these changes into easy categories.

Kaur 4 felt judged as an ‘extremist’ even by people in her family, just because she wore a turban (*dastaar*). She also felt people who were less religious were judged as immoral, but at the same time it was these Sikhs who could be very conservative in their views: :

“What I identify as extreme [behaviour], I wouldn’t say it’s ‘*Amritdhari*’ (initiated Sikhs) doing that. A lot of people doing or saying extreme things are ‘*moneh*’ (without turbans).”

“I don’t think it’s as simple as saying people becoming more devout... is leading them to extremism.”

She said the fact that feminist Sikh women were pushing for greater equality and participation in religious activity, such as women being represented among the ‘*panj pyare*’ (five beloved ones, at Sikh events), showed being religious did not mean being more conservative.

There is also a common concern that some Sikhs were adopting a religious identity through activism rather than learning more broadly about the faith. This was especially evident around campaigns on sexual grooming and against inter-faith marriages. Attacks on interfaith marriages seek to draw symbolic boundaries between religious values and mainstream values of individualism and materialism. However, they also raise questions about gender equality since some are concerned with the reestablishment of a moral order that places a strong emphasis on the position and role of women within the community (Thandi 2018, Jhutti-Johal 2017).

A Sikh homeland?

Partly due to increased religiosity and partly through activism, voices who want an independent homeland for Sikhs in Punjab, *Khalistan*, also seem to be getting louder. The Indian government certainly says so. Traditionally, the demand for a separate homeland has

been seen by the Indian government through the lens of terrorism and extremism. This, however, is an oversimplification and requires a more balanced analysis.

A significant portion of Sikhs came to Britain and Canada in the 80s to escape Indian government persecution and are attracted to this idea of ethno-nationalism (Juergensmeyer 1989, 1993). It is hard to say how many Sikhs in Britain want an independent homeland, as there is little solid polling on the question, but it is certainly true that the events of 1984 in Amritsar and New Delhi, and subsequent events over the years have super-charged demands for Khalistan. Supporters say calls for 'Khalistan Zindabad' (long live Khalistan) which are regular and popular at community events including Vaisakhi processions, highlight demand. Opponents, on the other hand argue that sloganeering does not mean Sikhs concretely and practically support the idea. **Journalist Amardeep Bassey**, who has reported on the Sikh community for over 20 years, said: "I don't see many groups, other than a few, focus on these issues. Most are concerned with bread-and-butter issues."

One initiated activist, **Singh 2**, who is very active at his local gurdwara, believed there was a correlation between whether individuals believed in the call and their relationship to the state:

"British Sikhs who are strongly assimilated into British society and have lower religious affiliation have less support of Khalistan. While British Sikhs who are politically and economically disenfranchised by British society but have a stronger religious affiliation are more strongly embedded in their support for Khalistan."

Respondent **Jasmine Kaur** highlighted:

"I cannot identify as a Sikh without also calling myself a Khalistani and wanting to achieve a sovereign homeland for my people. Khalistan is our birthright; the foundations for Khalistan were laid by the Gurus themselves and there is supporting evidence written in gurbani too. Also the injustices Sikhs have faced under the oppressive regime of the Indian government have made it clear that that the only way Sikhs will exist with their own civil rights is if we have our own homeland."

Kaur 2 summed up a popular view when asked why so many Sikhs still wanted Khalistan (she did not):

"Because of the injustices Sikhs are facing in India. Sikhs are saying that if we are not going to get justice in India, we can seek justice in our own land and we can live our

lives as how we want to live as Sikhs. I share that view about Khalistan because Sikhs have been asking for justice for so long, they don't seem to be getting anywhere."

The theme of injustice was a common thread in responses. Many of our respondents said most Sikhs saw Khalistan as an abstract concept; a proxy for anger over events from 1984 and the treatment of Sikhs in India as second-class citizens. Some respondents who did not support Khalistan said the idea also remained popular because of the actions of the Indian government towards diaspora Sikhs. In recent years, the Indian government has repeatedly accused diaspora Sikhs of turning towards extremism and funding terrorism in India (see section 4).

There are concerns, however, among some the community that impressionable young Sikhs could be led astray, something **Kaur 3** was concerned about:

"I know some Sikhs, particularly young men, use imagery of weapons and songs to advocate taking up arms for Khalistan etc., but they will *never* go through with it. Some of this talk is a kind of belligerent bravado to show off particularly on social media, but what these people don't realise is such dangerous narrative attracts unnecessary attention, but also can also lead some astray."

In summary

While Sikhs were concerned about the community's future direction, most rejected claims by the Indian government of extremism and the funding of terrorism. Many felt Sikh-on-Sikh violence, usually between rival groups over religious practices or over control of gurdwaras was more of a concern than violent extremism.

2. ARE THERE LEGITIMATE CONCERNS OVER AROUND CONVERSION AND SEXUAL GROOMING?

There is little doubt that British Sikhs are increasingly integrating into mainstream society. Nevertheless, the adoption of more secular and liberal social values, coupled with the rising numbers of interfaith relationships, has awakened a fear among some conservatives. Seeing themselves as defenders of the faith and the community, they are engaged in a struggle against more liberal values (which they see as too corrupting), as well as mainstream Sikh groups (which they accuse of being too accommodating), against supposed enemies from other religions. A key element to this fear is the claim that Sikh women are being ‘targeted’ by Muslim men.

During the 80s and 90s, some Asian gangs were divided along religious lines and frequently clashed over interfaith relationships. The ‘Chalvey Boys’ in Slough and ‘Aston Panthers’ in Birmingham were mostly Muslim, the ‘Shere Panjab’ in West London and parts of Birmingham were mostly made up of Sikh men. At university, Sikh-Muslim couples kept their relationships quiet out of fear of being targeted.

Amardeep Bassey said:

“Shere Panjab members openly said they were there to protect Sikh girls from Muslim boys. The gang-violence was always over girls.”

Around this time, some of the tension arose from claims that Muslim men were ‘forcibly converting’ Sikh women. Most of these rumours originated from an anonymous leaflet that circulated in Luton during the 1990s and was covered in the local newspaper. We suspect it originated with the extremist group Hizb-ut Tahrir and called on Muslim boys to seduce Sikh girls into Islam.

In a half-hour documentary broadcast in October 2007, the BBC Asian Network asked Sikh and Hindu groups, as well as police forces around the country, for evidence of such claims. It could not find any such victims.

Dr Gurnam Singh commented that these narratives “resonate” among Sikhs because they conjure up a fear that went back to 1947, the Partition of Punjab, when women were raped and murdered by gangs of men to attack the *izzat* (honour) of other faith groups. These claims play into those long-standing fears and must be seen through that context, he says. Though **Kaur 4** disagreed, saying that this applied more to the older than the younger generation of Sikhs.

Respondent **Singh 3** highlighted how:

“Some of the concerns people have are about consensual relationships between a Sikh woman and a Muslim man. They just don’t like the idea of it happening.”

Singh 4 said:

“It's interesting how men are speaking about women’s sexuality, protecting their sisters/daughters as if it they are some kind of property. They belittle women, and rather than talking with our women, in essence they are talking at them.”

By the mid-2000s, claims of forced conversions had evolved into claims of grooming as the latter issue became more prominent in the media. In September 2013, BBC One broadcast a half-hour news report on claims that British Sikh girls were being targeted for abuse by gangs of men, primarily of Pakistani heritage. It was the first time the mainstream media had backed a claim made by some Sikh groups and featured several victims who told horrifying stories. That film still is circulated on social media as evidence of this phenomenon. Most recently, 20th February 2019, BBC Inside Out West Midlands broadcast a show about the targeting Sikh girls to groom and sexually abuse. The reporter, Suzanne Virdee interviewed Sikh Youth UK.

Concerns

Almost every respondent we spoke to said they had little doubt some Sikh girls were being groomed or targeted by gangs of Muslim men. However almost all respondents also felt that the numbers were being exaggerated and a “moral panic” (**Dr Gurnam Singh**) was being whipped up to serve other agendas, and that real concerns of abuse were being ignored (Sian 2011 and 2013; Tufail, W. and Poynting, S., 2016).

Sikh women we spoke to, many of whom had experience in helping victims of sexual abuse, raised several concerns.

Firstly, that men led the main groups campaigning on the issue of sexual grooming. Moreover, they said men were invited to speak and raise funds at gurdwaras far more than women-led groups who were side-lined in this discussion.

Kaur 1 said:

“First of all, the men just need to sit down and let women have a voice around the table because at the moment we don’t even have that. In our community, here in this country, the female voice has been shut down by the community.”

Secondly, some of the female respondents felt that the current debate misled Sikhs about the problem, and that the real issue was not being addressed. They said Sikh women were far more likely to be abused by family members or relatives, as with women of all backgrounds, however such abuse remained hidden.

Kaur 1 said:

“We do not have conversations [about abuse from family members] within our families. And when a girl does finally pluck up the courage to say something has happened, the generic response seems to be ‘*kush kaina ni*’ (don’t say anything). I do think we are moving away from that, but not fast enough.”

Kaur 2 reiterated this:

“90% of grooming happens within a family structure, or close circle of friends. Only 10% of grooming cases by perpetrators by gangs. The majority of these grooming gangs’ cases we are talking about fall into that 10% category.”

“There are cases we dealt with of Sikh men being violent to Sikh women - these groups [who claim to tackle grooming] don’t want to know anything about it. But the moment there is a Muslim in the equation, they jump on the bandwagon.”

Kaur 1, however, noted that whilst a few progressive gurdwaras had made an effort to reach out to women, and women led groups to start these conversations about abuse within the community.

It was also noted by a number of respondents that Sikh organisations do not know how to address internal issues. **Kaur 1** said:

“It is public knowledge that Sikh Council UK actively brushed under the carpet any accusations of sexual abuse within the community, because they do not have the structures, the people or the inclination to find resolutions for it.”

Thirdly, many of our respondents, especially **Kaur 2**, worried about the professionalism and training of these male led groups.

“Are these volunteers [to tackle grooming] DBS checked? They are telling young, vulnerable boys how the grooming process happens. Some of these boys, who are easily influenced, are then using those processes to groom and abuse our own girls. We are currently dealing with a case of our own.”

Fourthly, most of our respondents, male and female, were concerned that the issue was being used for other agendas.

Sikh activist **Jasmine Kaur** said:

“These groups use the experiences of women to prop up their personal anti-Muslim agenda. These groups do not give a damn about the vulnerable women, they just want to take the experiences of these women, exaggerate them and then publicise how they have supposedly 'helped' these women.”

Kaur 4 said:

“There are plenty of people who genuinely believe this is happening and are genuinely concerned about it. So I don't think *everyone* who is jumping on the grooming bandwagon has an ulterior motive. But I don't know if the main organisers in the main organisations (campaigning on this) have legitimate concerns. But I do know it's being used to stoke up Islamophobia. That I can 100% say. There are people in those organisations who just really hate Muslims. They'll conflate issues on a regular basis.”

Kaur 3 added:

“I’ve always been left asking whether there really is a problem or have some members of the community just taken an issue that other groups have hijacked and are doing the same. The way they’re operating is dangerous and can have an impact on community relations if tensions boil over.”

Singh 1 said:

“It's a good money making machine as well. These people go around gurdwaras showing videos of grooming cases, and then the *sangat* (congregation) says ‘ok protect our girls, and here’s the money’. It's a racket. Just like godmen play to people’s vulnerabilities, these people are playing to people’s vulnerabilities.”

Kaur 1 said:

“We look for an enemy, the enemy is identified, give these people money and that will fix the problem. But they’re not even fixing the problem. “

Kaur 6 said:

“Yes it's creating inter-community tensions, because you are only talking about Muslim men targeting Sikh girls, and the issue is much broader than that.”

Claims vs evidence

Whilst there are a lot of allegations of sexual grooming of Sikh girls the evidence is lacking. However, there have been attempts by the community to gather such evidence, but the reliability of that data is questionable. In 2016, Sikh Network published a survey noting:

“More than 1-in-7 of Sikh women indicate being targeted by grooming gangs” (p.5)

The actual question was: “Have you or a friend / relative been a victim or a target for sexual grooming?” Therefore, the answer would be more accurate as:

“One in 7 Sikh women knew someone who had been targeted by grooming gangs”

The question includes no mention of ‘gangs’, so it is inappropriate to include that in the conclusion.

We asked **Dr Ella Cockbain**, a lecturer in Security and Crime Science at UCL, to comment on a report on grooming by the Quilliam Foundation, which some Sikh groups have used to support their claims.

“The Quilliam report is both inflammatory and enormously misleading. Although presented as ‘academic’ research, it is in fact a case study in bad science: highly selective, non-transparent and riddled with errors, unacknowledged biases and unsubstantiated claims. To tackle the horrors of child sexual abuse, we need honest, rigorous, reliable research and responses, not propaganda.”

We also asked her opinion on the *Religiously Aggravated Sexual Exploitation of Young Sikh Women Across the UK* Report (hereinafter RASE) produced by the Sikh Mediation and Rehabilitation Team ([S.M.A.R.T](#)), an independent organisation, in conjunction with Sikh Youth UK (hereinafter SYUK):

“The RASE report lacks solid data, methodological transparency and rigour. It is filled instead with sweeping generalisations and poorly substantiated claims around the nature and scale of abuse of Sikh girls and causal factors driving it. It appealed heavily to historical tensions between Sikhs and Muslims and narratives of honour in a way that seemed designed to whip up fear and hate.”

She said CSE does happen on a large scale but the story we are being sold is “very narrow and misleading”.

Dr Gurnam Singh, while questioning some of their aggressive tactics and dubious data, said at least Sikh Youth UK were conducting their activism in the public eye.

In summary

What needs to change? From our respondents it is clear that there is a need for more research on the issue of sexual grooming, but also that internally the community needs to address the abuse that is happening within. Sikh women told us girls and women need better access to safe spaces where they can about their experiences, but also where they can report issues without judgement or threats. They also said more Sikh parents needed to take an active role by having conversations with their children, especially daughters about sexual abuse because the protection of Sikh women is too important to be left to self-appointed vigilante groups.

3. BRITISH SIKH GROUPS AND THE FAR-RIGHT: HOW CLOSE?

The vast majority of British Sikhs have been utterly repulsed by far-right groups such as the BNP and EDL. However, far-right activists have long desired a broad alliance against Muslims, which they now see as a bigger threat than multiculturalism itself.

Shortly after 9/11, the BNP issued a recording titled 'Islam: A Threat to Us All: Joint Statement by the British National Party, Sikhs and Hindus' - which sought to exploit inter-community tensions (Allen 2011: 288). At the time, some fringe Sikh groups also lobbied media groups such as Sunrise Radio to stop using the word 'Asian'.

In 2005, Rajinder Singh made history by being the first non-white to feature in an election broadcast by the British National Party. As the BNP started faltering from 2008, the rise of the English Defence League was similarly characterised by an outreach towards Sikhs and Hindus (Meadowcroft, J. and Morrow, E.A., 2017: 375). Amardeep Bassey said the far-right saw Hindus and Sikhs as convenient allies against Muslims.

In 2010, an EDL rally featured a Sikh speaker called Guramit Singh, who ran its Sikh Division until he was arrested for religiously aggravated harm and later jailed for robbery. In 2011 British Sikh groups released a statement condemning any association with the EDL but some ignored it. In 2012, when tensions had flared up in Luton at the rumour that a Muslim man had abused a Sikh girl, newspapers [revealed](#) a secret meeting took place between some Sikhs and EDL leaders to discuss "acts of vigilantism". However, nothing came from it.

In 2017, *The Independent* reported on SYUK and its 'associations' with the far-right. "We are very alarmed," Balwinder Rana of Sikhs Against the EDL told [The Independent](#). "By associating with the ex-leader of the EDL who is also a former member of the BNP, SYUK is going totally in the wrong direction."

Sikh Youth UK issued the following response to the article: "To be clear, SYUK are not in regular contact with Tommy Robinson and have no connection with any right-wing group."

However, it is evident that SYUK has met with Tommy Robinson at least twice to discuss the issue of sexual grooming and other issues of mutual interest.⁸ There was mutual support too, with SYUK [thanking him](#) several times on social media for his support and Tommy Robinson retweeting them repeatedly in kind before Tommy Robinson's ban from social media.

Does it matter?

Do the actions of a small minority of Sikhs matter in the wider context? Yes, there is potential for such activism to heighten tensions between British Sikhs and Muslims, as they have done in the past.

Recognising the potential danger, **Kaur 4** said:

"A majority of Sikhs are a bit apathetic. So when Sikh Youth UK, a minority, kind of glues with Tommy Robinson, most Sikhs don't care enough about the fact that he's far-right, or don't even know he's far-right. All they see is that he's talking about grooming, we care about this, we want to protect our girls. So they let it happen. The more activist type, in the circles I'm in, we vocally speak out against it."

Kaur 4 also commented that many Sikhs were bullied into silence if they spoke out against such associations and were branded '*anti-Panthic*' (anti-community):

"Your community will turn on you. But also, Sikh Youth UK are thugs. They have been beating people up. I don't know if this common knowledge or not but they will target you, if you're male. I don't know if they'd hit you if you were female."

⁸ For example, Tommy Robinson was invited to the screening of SYUK's film 'Misused Trust' (Lusher 2017). In response to Lusher's article Sikh Youth UK issued a statement via the Sikh Press Association in which they outlined that they had met Tommy Robinson on a number of occasions and outlined what they had done with him <https://www.sikhpa.com/responses-to-independent-sikh-youth-uk-article/>. For more evidence of this association see <https://resistinghate.org/sikh-youth-uk/> and the Rebel media Youtube video of Tommy Robinson's visit to a [Gurdwara](#) in Birmingham after the Manchester bombings in 2017.

She also said the Sikh Awareness Society (SAS), which also campaigns on grooming, had “screwed themselves over” in the eyes of many Sikh activists by doing a friendly interview with Katie Hopkins.

Many of our female respondents said when they had questioned such tactics or associations with the far-right, they had been attacked as being ‘enemies’, ‘betrayers’ or ‘anti-panthic’.

Gurinder Josan⁹, a board member for Hope Not Hate (HNN), recognising a potential problem within the community, recently wrote:

“Behaviour that seeks to demonise whole communities or demographics in response to the actions of a few is extremist. Behaviour that is intolerant of difference and different viewpoints is extremist. Activism that promotes or encompasses violence and aggression is extremist.” (2019: 11)

In Summary

As more Sikh activists begin to speak out and question certain alliances, we feel the danger of alliances with the far-right are lower than they have been. However, it is also important to note that the behaviour and language of some of these groups echoes far-right anti-Muslim views, which is concerning and is something that the wider Sikh community needs to tackle.

4. THE RISE OF HINDU NATIONALISM IN INDIA AND ITS IMPACT ON SIKHS IN BRITAIN.

Among some Sikhs, there is a simmering discontent towards India, which culminates from events post-partition, the 1984 attack on the Golden Temple and the subsequent killing and lack of justice for the thousands of Sikhs killed in New Delhi following Indira Gandhi’s assassination. The current rise of Hindu nationalism is also stoking tensions. (Tatla 2006).

Attitudes towards India had improved while Manmohan Singh, a turban-wearing Sikh, was Prime Minister of India from 2004 - 2014. However, in 2014, the relationship began to change again with the election of Narendra Modi as Prime Minister, and the growing nationalist agenda in India. When India's Narendra Modi first came to Britain as PM in November 2015,

⁹ Recently, Gurinder Josan’s home was [attacked](#) because he had organised an interfaith event on Vaisakhi at Birmingham Central Mosque which had to be cancelled. It was alleged that the attack was carried out by [SYUK](#), [but SYUK deny this](#).

relations with British Sikhs were strained but cordial. He held a small private meeting with some members of the Sikh Council UK. Some Sikhs held a small protest but it did not make much noise.

They deteriorated sharply from November 2017 when Indian police arrested and detained British Sikh activist Jagtar Singh Johal. Johal has alleged torture and remains to be fully charged or put on trial. A highly vocal campaign in his support in Britain has also highlighted other cases of Sikh activists being detained without charge in India.

In early 2018, nearly 200 gurdwaras in Canada, the [US](#) and the UK announced a ban on working with Indian government officials. They cited Indian interference in Sikh affairs and Johal's arrest.

When Prime Minister Modi returned to the UK in April 2018 he got a very different reception. Sikh protesters tore down the Indian flag in London's Parliament Square and posted the videos to social media. The incident sparked outrage among British-Indian groups and the Indian media, with some calling for legal action against protesters.

Tensions escalated towards the Indian state further in September 2018 when British counter-terror police raided six Sikh households in the West Midlands and London, for "suspected terrorist offences in the UK relating to activity in India," according to the WMP. Indian police officials [bragged](#) to Indian journalists that they had pressured British officials into the raids. So far none of those raided have been charged.

For many diaspora Sikh activists there are two primary reasons for the recent tension. They see the rise in Hindu Nationalism ('Hindutva' - see Rieffer, 2003) as a direct threat to Sikh interests in India and some Sikhs claim they are raising concerns that Sikhs in India cannot do due to censorship and criminalisation. Secondly, the Indian governments interference and repeated accusations that Sikhs abroad, particularly the UK and Canada are funding terrorist activity in India with little public proof to back those claims. As a result, of such accusations last year Canadian security agencies listed 'Sikh (Khalistani) extremism' as one of the five threats the country faced, citing events from over 30 years ago. Four months later the government removed the reference after a severe backlash.

Sikh extremism?

How credible are claims of Sikh violent extremism and funding of extremism? Previously, Loveleen Kaur has noted "the use of 'extremist' as a tool for domination and silencing through different points in Canadian history, specifically that of the early 1900s and the experiences of the Ghadar Party in Canada" (2010: 70).

Among our respondents, several were ambivalent or hostile towards the idea of Khalistan, a Sikh state, and we heard plenty of criticism of pro-Khalistani voices.

Singh 3 said:

“The events of 1984 are misappropriated by people who wish to establish Khalistan. And they’re playing with people’s sentiments and emotions for their own agenda.”

However, even these respondents felt the Indian government and media were deliberately trying to raise the temperature for political gain. Allegations surrounding the ‘Referendum 2020’ campaign highlight this point. Late last year, the New York-based group Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) mobilised between ten 10 to 30 thousand Sikhs around Trafalgar Square to promote a Referendum on Punjab’s independence in 2020. [Indian officials](#) claimed the group were a [Pakistani plot](#), but its members have denied such claims.

We believe India’s claim that diaspora Sikhs are funding terrorism in India deserves more questioning and public evidence. In a report published in 2017, **Dr Jasjit Singh** concluded that Sikhs in Britain did not pose a security threat to western countries, and the information on British Sikhs funding terror groups in India remained “unclear”. He told us:

“Regarding ‘extremism’ and ‘radicalisation’, in my CREST research I found little evidence of radicalisation to terrorism among British Sikhs. It is important to note that definitions of extremism around the world differ, and that in India for example, those discussing ideas around secession (including the idea of Khalistan) are defined as terrorists according to Indian legislation.”

Dr Gurnam Singh said:

“There is a fear in the community that we have a problem with a small bands of well organised religious fanatics. That is an internal problem and there is no suggestion that they are fighting a war, or procuring weapons against India. There’s no evidence for that. The best they’ve got are *kirpans* [Sikh mini-swords] to threaten those who disagree with their politics [at home].”

Kaur 1, who is indifferent to calls for Khalistan, felt the detainment of Sikh youths in India was having a radicalising effect on Sikhs in Britain.

“People in Punjab ask Sikhs in the UK to raise their voice on their behalf. Social media is being used to mobilize activism and dissent.”

Singh 3 also said:

“There are some Indian news outlets who will only publish news about Sikhs if they can present them in a bad light. It creates a vicious cycle: Sikhs behave in more extreme ways because of their treatment in the Indian media, and then the Indian media treat Sikhs worse because of what they see as extreme behaviour.”

Impact at home

There are good reasons to be concerned that events in India will have an impact in Britain too. India’s PM Narendra Modi has cultivated strong links with British Hindu groups, many of whom are Gujarati-dominated (Mr Modi also hails from Gujarati). That in turn has led to frosty relations between Sikh and Hindu groups at an institutional level.

Jasvir Singh, who is very involved in inter-faith campaigning, said the impact was clear:

“Due to the rise of Modi-inspired nationalism, any protests against the Indian state are now being taken as an attack on Hindu identity. Relationship between Hindu and Sikh groups have been strained since last year.”

Singh 4 said:

“India media focuses on Sikhs being trained, funded and armed by Pakistan, ISIL. They (the media) should be stopped from fuelling the conflict from the sidelines. I have never seen evidence of this, but what is clear is that this is creating tensions between Sikhs and the Indian State, but also with some Hindu groups. And this is becoming evident in the UK when Sikhs protest against the Indian State and Hindus turn out to counter the demonstrations.”

Journalist **Amardeep Bassey** felt there was little tension between most British Sikhs and Hindus at ground level. However, some respondents did feel that with the growth of Hindu nationalism in the UK could worsen relations between British Sikhs and Hindus. Several Sikhs said criticism of India was now being perceived as either anti-Hindu or on behalf of Pakistan.

One respondent even went as far as accusing British Hindu groups of being complacent and allowing inter-community relations to become damaged. It is also important to note that while relations between non-activist British Hindus and Sikhs have long been friendly, there is potential for increased polarisation through flashpoints.

Conclusion

Each of the four areas we covered could have been the topic of a paper themselves, and there is much we left out due to constraints. However, two areas require further comment and they are grooming and calls for an autonomous Sikh state of Khalistan.

Co-existence in a pluralistic society can sometimes create fears of losing one's identity and spark a conservative backlash. However, becoming more religious does not necessarily drive extreme behaviour. Our research highlights that perceptions of a threat from outside the community, such as sexual grooming, is driven by culture and patriarchy rather than religion. There is a strong fear in some Sikh groups that due to assimilation and integration the Sikh identity and way of life is being lost and needs to be regained and one way of doing this is through controlling and monitoring the behaviour of Sikh women.

There is some evidence that Sikh women have been victims of sexual grooming by gangs of men, some of primarily Pakistani-heritage. However, most of our respondents felt these claims are being exaggerated to serve other agendas.

In 2017, Amardeep Bassey reported that a film by SYUK was being investigated by Ofcom after being shown on Sikh Channel for 'encouraging victims of grooming to take vigilante action' because they felt that the police were not taking the issue seriously.¹⁰ We found no evidence to support claims by SYUK that police have "ignored"¹¹ the problem of Sikh girls being groomed for 40 years, and are concerned at the encouragement of vigilante action.

¹⁰ The UK media regulator Ofcom received a complaint about the film *Misused Trust*, which was aired on Sikh Channel on the 20th May 2017. The complaint was that it was encouraging Sikh victims of grooming to take vigilante action instead of reporting it to the police. The complaint was investigated between the 2nd and 15th October after a complaint had been put in. However, it was dismissed and Ofcom ruled that it met 'generally accepted standards' [Broadcast and On Demand Bulletin Issue number 339 - Ofcom \[online\] Available at <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/.../Issue-339-of-Ofcoms-Broadcast-and-On-D...>](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/.../Issue-339-of-Ofcoms-Broadcast-and-On-D...) Also see Tennet, James. (2017). 'Ofcom accuses Sikh channel of encouraging grooming victims to take vigilante action: The Sikh channel has been given a warning by the broadcasting watchdog'. *International Business Times*. [online] Available at <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/ofcom-accuses-sikh-channel-encouraging-grooming-victims-take-vigilante-action-1634842> [Accessed 10th June 2019]; *Telegraph, The*. (2017). 'Cable TV channel accused of encouraging grooming victims to take vigilante action'. [online] Available at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/08/13/cable-tv-channel-accused-encouraging-grooming-victims-take-vigilante/> [Accessed 9th March 2019]

¹¹ There has been a longstanding claim that police have ignored the problem. For example it was highlighted in a *Birmingham Mail* article Layton, Josh. (2018). 'Sikh girls 'abused by grooming gangs for decades' says shock

Allegations on such a serious issue need to be supported by robust evidence, and we find it worrying that groups such as **Sikh Federation UK**, and its umbrella group Sikh Network, have been promoting the work of SYUK , especially the RASE Report¹², despite the unverified claims.

From our interviews we found evidence of intimidation by particular groups, designed “to scare people into silence” if individuals raised questions about particular types of activism. This intimidation was particularly evident with women. There are numerous documented examples of violence between Sikhs over religious practices, some of which are examples of intimidation (Dr Jasjit Singh 2017). Reports by the [BBC](#) have also found examples of physical and verbal intimidation over the [interfaith marriage controversy](#).

Sikh activism for the ‘movement for an autonomous Sikh state (Khalistan)’ has often been referred to as ‘extreme’ or ‘extremist’ (Nayar 2008, Tatla 1999), but can also be described as legitimate activism rooted in grievances arising due to structural inequalities and alienation from power structures.

It is important Sikhs be allowed to debate the merits of a Sikh homeland without such conversations being reflexively labelled as ‘extremist’ or ‘terrorism’. The UK government should avoid criminalising such views as many accuse the Indian government of doing. Shutting down these debates would only drive them underground or create a backlash.

As **Kaur 1** put it: “You cannot say that by becoming more religious, by becoming more conservative, that ultimately means you are becoming more Khalistani or extremist.”

Most of our respondents felt the narrative of the Indian government and Indian media was also strengthening the hand of advocates of separatism. Despite some evidence of bravado, violent imagery and strong criticism of the Indian state by British Sikh activists - we found little evidence to back claims for example of strong support for Referendum 2020, or terrorism funding made by the Indian government. Instead, from our respondents it was clear that some Khalistani activism was censoring debate and creating tension among Sikhs themselves.

new report’. *Birmingham Mail* [online] Available at <https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/sikh-girls-abused-grooming-gangs-15492360> [Accessed 10th June 2019]

¹² At the launch of the RASE report on 3rd December Sikh Network spoke. See <https://twitter.com/TheSikhNet/status/1069650470048858117> and <https://www.facebook.com/681116285277939/posts/2102152179841002/> In a Sikh Network newsletter they write how they facilitated a meeting with the Home Office for SYUK – post from 12th December 2018 <https://twitter.com/TheSikhNet/status/1072564978853527555>

There were also concerns that some British Hindu groups have firmly tied themselves to the BJP-Hindutva project, which has the potential to worsen Sikh - Hindu relations. We would advocate further inter-community dialogue to ease tensions.

In conclusion, extremism comes in many forms, and it is clear the current 'one size fits all' approach taken by government to counter issues of 'fundamentalism' and 'extremism' fails to sufficiently understand nuances within various communities. Our study shows that there is a knowledge and evidence gap in government pertaining to issues such as sexual grooming, Khalistan and the effect of Hindu Nationalism on the Sikh psyche. It is essential that government addresses this gap through consultation with a diverse pool of Sikhs and Sikh organisations rather than listening to the views of a few voices that claim to represent an entire community. It is also essential that they independently assess claims that are either presented by members of the community, or are levelled against the community to ensure a robust evidence based approach to decision making.

APPENDIX 1

Methodology

We undertook interviews, and given the aims for this research and limited time, we decided to utilise our own networks and contacts. This method allowed us to gain access to people whom we needed to speak, and who could recommend others that we should speak to in order to make sure that the sample was as diverse as possible.

We recognize that the small sample size and the results are not generalizable, however, they do provide crucial insights into what is happening within the Sikh community, and the differences in opinion on very sensitive issues. As the responses are discussed, it will become clear that even though there was some consensus with respect to certain answers given by the respondents, there was also a great divergence in others. As Bogdan and Taylor suggest, “[O]ne person may describe an experience in one way and another person may describe the same experience in quite another way. Yet both may be ‘telling the truth’ according to their own perspectives: their own interpretations, rationalisations, fabrications, prejudices, and exaggerations” (Bogdan and Taylor 1975: 9). It was also clear that the responses varied according to a number of factors, including age, gender, location, economic status, educational background, and, degree of religious belief.

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