Keeping the Faith:
The Transmission of Sikhism among young British Sikhs (18-30)

A Question of Religion: Young People and Identity in Multi-Faith Britain,
Brunel University, 12th April 2013

Dr Jasjit Singh, University of Leeds

Web: www.leeds.ac.uk/sikhs, Email: j.s.singh@leeds.ac.uk
Twitter: @DrJasjitSingh
• Young Sikhs often accused of not being interested in Sikhism and in Sikh Identity

Not found to be the case when researching “Young British Sikhs, Hair and the Turban” (Singh 2010)

• Many events organised by and for 18-30 year olds – in English
• Generally run outside *gurdwaras* by young Sikhs themselves
Relevance

• The British Sikh population is currently skewed towards youth. Singh and Tatla (2006: 57) note that of the 336,179 British Sikhs, 56.1 percent are British born, with 59.4 percent of the total population being below the age of 34 (2006: 59).

• “Sikh youth today clearly continue to identify with the religious tradition, but this identification is far more complex and ambiguous than hitherto ... In the absence of more detailed, systematic and comprehensive research in this extremely important area, all conclusions must remain tentative. The culture of young British Sikhs today remains an area of darkness for the community and a testing ground for its uncertain futures.” (Singh G. & Tatla D.S., Sikhs in Britain, 2006: 207)
Keeping the Faith:
The Transmission of Sikhism among young British Sikhs (18-30)

1. How do young British Sikhs learn about Sikhism and what role is played by traditional sources of authority including gurdwara functionaries, parents and schools?

2. Why are young British Sikhs organising events to teach Sikhism, what sorts of events are being organised, and why are these generally held outside gurdwaras?

3. How are new technologies including translation software and the Internet impacting on the transmission of Sikhism, and on young Sikhs’ ideas of tradition and religious authority?

4. What is the relationship between the various arenas of transmission? Do they support or challenge one another, and if so what are the consequences of this?
Interviews with young British Sikhs
First ever large scale online survey of young British Sikhs (600+ responses)
Focus Groups with Sikh students
Participant Observation at Sikh Youth Events
Phone-in shows on a Panjabi radio station
Analysis of Lectures and Websites
Speaking at events run for young Sikhs

Research Methods
How do 18-30 year old British Sikhs learn about Sikhism?

- Sikh Camps / Retreats
- University Sikh Societies
- The Internet

- Families / Schools / Peers
- Religious Institutions (Gurdwaras)
Sikh Families
Sikh Families
Nurture in Sikh Families

• **STRUCTURE** – “Not all Sikh families are alike … [they] may all share some elements in common … but many have their own unique way of expressing and practicing Sikh *dharma*, influenced by their experiences of migration, caste, allegiance, political affiliation, economic status and not least, the extent to which they are committed to Sikh faith.” (Hadwen 1995:72)

• **IMPACT OF FAMILY MEMBERS** – “it is clear that parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles contributed to the nurturing of young Sikhs in their faith tradition. In different families subjects attributed their grounding in the tradition to different relatives.” (Nesbitt 2000:52)

• **FORMS OF WORSHIP** - “Many of the young people referred to hearing an older relative ‘doing a prayer’ or ‘doing path’” (Nesbitt 2000: 69)

• **ICONOGRAPHY** – “Pictures of the Gurus, and of events in their lives and places associated with them, decorate the walls of nearly all Sikh homes ... they are a distinctive feature of the home environment of Sikh children – they must be important elements in their developing imagination, and the stories they illustrate ... are factors in their early emotional and social growth” (James 1974: 31)
Nurture in Sikh Families

- **FOOD** – “young children were accustomed to receiving, distributing and eating food in culturally acceptable ways which were distinct from those current in the surrounding western society (Nesbitt 2000: 55)

- **LANGUAGE** “The Panjabi language and Punjab - a place to visit and a homeland, spiritual and cultural - are integral to Sikh children's nurturing in the *Panth.*” (Nesbitt 2000: 242)

- **KNOWLEDGE ABOUT SIKHISM** – “a number of the teenagers and young adult Sikhs … while praising their parents for their love, concern and guidance, claimed that their parents’ knowledge of Sikh religious beliefs and practices was sometimes limited” (Hadwen 1995:75)
Gurdwaras
Gurdwaras

- Sikhs’ principal religious institutions – main functions held in Punjabi
- Foundations of community building and forums for collective worship (Singh and Tatla 2006: 69)
- Few young Sikhs involved in Gurdwara management
- Some beginning to organise and host events for young Sikhs
- Either managed by committee or by charismatic individual (Sant)
Some Gurdwaras making efforts to attract young Sikhs by installing projector screens and using *Sikhitothemax*
### Gurdwaras

- Survey question asked

40. I MAINLY go to Gurdwara

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Total Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>to learn about Sikhism</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to meet friends / relatives</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to eat langar</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>because of habit</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>because my parents are going</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to attend family functions</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to do sewa</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>38.4%</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Gurdwaras

Other (please specify)
Gurdwaras

• “Only place I feel I can go with no worries and just sit and appreciate my religion”

• “to feel part of a community”

• “to reconnect! I live very far from my early youthful days in Southall”

• “To listen to prayers and feel calm if i'm stressed. I also take my small son so that he is 'blessed' and protected”

• “to see my guru”

• “To pray and feel at peace”
University Sikh Societies
University Sikh Societies

• Main growth occurred in the early 1990s – break from ‘Asian’ societies into more faith based societies

• Very diverse collectives – dependent on committee members and type of HEI institution

• Speakers invited dependent on personal contacts

• Very transitory in nature – only active for 6 months / year

• Usually more attendance at social events than lectures on Sikhism
The Internet

GRANDPA’S SO HOOKED TO HIS NEW iPHONE. HE’S BEEN AT IT SINCE THE MORNING.

WHERE’S THE DAMN KEYBOARD?
Young British Sikhs Online

1. The evolution of Sikhism online

2. How young Sikhs engage with Sikhism online

3. The impact of the online environment on religious authority in the Sikh community
Sikhism Online 1.0

Mid 1990s to the early 2000s sees Sikhism online in the form of websites and discussion forums.

Most of the scholarly analysis of the interaction between the internet and religion has focused on these particular technologies.
Sikhism Online 2.0

- Wikipedia launches in 2001
- Sikhiwiki arrives online in 2005 currently with 5821 articles
- Youtube appears online in 2005
- The relative ease of the process of uploading videos online has led to a variety of Sikhism related videos now being available

- Blogging arrives in the late 1990s (Campbell 2010: 24) allowing individuals to write about their own personal religious journeys.
- Website based discussion forums precede the appearance of website free discussion groups such as Yahoo groups (1998) and Google groups (2001).
- Groups include those with an International focus (e.g. ‘Gurmat Learning Zone’), organisations (e.g. BOSS) and those with a local focus (e.g. leeds-bradfordsikhs)
- Sept 2006 - Facebook opens to those aged 13+ with a valid email address
- January 2011 - Facebook passes Google to become the most popular website in the world
- April 2012 – Facebook tops 900m users
- Many Gurdwaras / Sikh orgs now have Facebook accounts


- September 2006 - Facebook opens to those aged 13+ with a valid email address
- January 2011 - Facebook passes Google to become the most popular website in the world
- April 2012 - Facebook tops 900m users
- Many Gurdwaras / Sikh orgs now have Facebook accounts

- Website based discussion forums precede the appearance of website free discussion groups such as Yahoo groups (1998) and Google groups (2001).
- Groups include those with an International focus (e.g. ‘Gurmat Learning Zone’), organisations (e.g. BOSS) and those with a local focus (e.g. leeds-bradfordsikhs)
Young British Sikhs Online

Q. Do you ever use the Internet to learn about Sikhism? Yes / No

a) Which websites / forums do you visit most to explore and learn about Sikhism?

b) Of these, which ONE website do you visit the most?

c) How has the Internet helped you (or not) learn about Sikhism?

d) What kinds of questions about Sikhism have you asked online?

e) Are you a member of any online Sikh communities?
Young British Sikhs Online
Young British Sikhs Online
Young British Sikhs Online

• Why Sikhnet?
• Offers a wide number of online tools
• Is constantly providing innovative applications via its dedicated online team.
• As Bunt (2009:196) explains, “fast-loading, high-quality, easy-to-navigate sites with attractive graphics and easy-to-read content ... will possibly have the ascendency on more difficult-to-read, technical and/or poorly designed material.”
Young British Sikhs Online

Survey responses reveal that young Sikhs go online to:

1. Discuss taboo subjects
2. Answer their questions about the Sikh tradition
3. Explore differing practices within the Sikh tradition
4. Access repositories of religious materials
5. Examine English Translations of Sikh scriptures
6. Obtain daily guidance from the Guru Granth Sahib
7. Find out about Sikh events
8. Access event archives and recordings
9. Purchase Sikh resources
10. Understand the legal position of Sikh articles of faith

Some Conclusions

• Family environment determines many religious engagement choices going forward

• Spiritual Mentors offer the most stable form of religious transmission

• Gurdwaras often act as ‘safe spaces’ for young Sikhs offering different facilities for learning and levels of stability for young Sikhs

• University Sikh societies tend to act as social organisations as opposed to places of learning. Institutional affiliation is often as important as locality

• The Internet is used in a number of ways, but given its scope and choices available is often used to reinforce previously held beliefs rather than challenge them.
Publications


• 2011: Sikh-ing Beliefs: British Sikh Camps in the UK in ‘Sikhs in Europe: Migration, Identities and Representation’ by Knut A. Jacobsen and Kristina Myrvold (eds.) Ashgate

• 2010: British Sikhs, Hair and the Turban in ’Religion and Youth’ by Sylvie Collins-Mayo and Ben P. Dandelion (eds.) Ashgate

Keeping the Faith: The Transmission of Sikhism among young British Sikhs (18-30)

A Question of Religion: Young People and Identity in Multi-Faith Britain, Brunel University, 12th April 2013
Dr Jasjit Singh, University of Leeds

Web: www.leeds.ac.uk/sikhs, Email: j.s.singh@leeds.ac.uk
Twitter: @DrJasjitSingh