

Sikh and Punjab Studies at the UC Santa Barbara (1999-2014)



Gurinder Singh Mann

In the mid-1990s, the newly created Global and International Studies Program at UCSB, directed by Mark Juergensmeyer, requested the allocation of a position in Sikh and Punjab Studies. At the same time, he was able to persuade Narinder Singh Kapany, Chairperson of the Sikh Foundation, Palo Alto, to attach an endowment (\$350,000) that would provide funds for development of this position. His efforts eventually resulted in the creation of the Kundan Kaur Kapany Professorship in Sikh Studies, and after a national search for candidates, I had the good fortune to be invited to be the first occupant of the position to be based jointly in Global and International Studies Program and the Department of Religious Studies.

I began my work in Fall 1999 with two goals in mind: to initiate teaching and research in Sikh and Punjab Studies at UCSB and to work toward establishing it as the leading center in this area of study in North America. The brief statement below comes from a deep sense of gratitude for cooperation of students, colleagues, departmental chairs, and deans of the faculties of humanities and social sciences at UCSB; the advice of friends around the globe; the goodwill of the Sikh community; and the confidence of the Kapany family in my work.

Before my arrival, the Sikhs and the Punjab appeared in the **teaching** of Mark Juergensmeyer ("Global Religions;" "Religious Nationalism"), and it was not difficult to expand on his offerings. I began with an upper-division course entitled "Sikhism" (RS 162C), and this continues to constitute the center of my undergraduate teaching. In Fall 1999, 22 students were enrolled in the first class on this subject and it is gratifying to report that the numbers have increased over time with 287 students registered for the class in Fall 2013.



Chancellor Henry Yang, Narinder Singh Kapany, and Mark Juergensmeyer

I also developed "Indian Civilization" (RS 20), an entry-level course for those interested in the subcontinent, and "Global Diasporas and Cultural Change," (GS 104) an upper-division course focusing on migration and subsequent experiences of different religious groups including a segment on the Sikhs. In 2013-2014, these two classes had an enrollment of 122 and 154 students, respectively. In addition, we started the teaching of Punjabi language at elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels. This year's Punjabi class comprised 29 (Fall), 22 (Winter), and 28 (Spring) students. The course evaluations of the past years indicate that students are largely pleased with my approach to teaching, please see <http://ratemyprofessors.com/ShowRatings.jsp?tid=597238&all=1>.



Early Sikh Texts (RS 213), Spring 2011



Punjabi (RS60A), Fall 1999

Sikhism (RS 162C), Fall 2013

At the graduate level, I taught a set of seminars to meet the needs of students working in the area. "Religion and Society in the Punjab" (RS 213A) dealt with the cultural history of the region; "Issues in Sikh Studies" (RS 213B) focused on significant landmarks in Sikh history; "The Guru Granth and the Sikh Tradition" (RS 213C) examined the making of its text, the rise of its status, and its current role in Sikh life; "The Major Texts of the Sikh Tradition (RS 213D)" dealt with the manuscripts and the editions of the key Sikh texts; and "The Sikhs: From Regional to a Global Community" mapped the migration and settlement experiences of Sikhs in different parts of the world and the opportunities and challenges that confronted them there. In addition to our own students, graduate students from Columbia and UCLA took some of these seminars.

Since 1999, six students have completed their **doctoral dissertations** relating to Sikh and Punjab Studies. Anna B. Bigelow wrote on the religious life in Malerkotla (2004) and presently teaches at North Carolina State University; Daniel M. Michon wrote on the early historic Punjab (2007) and teaches at Claremont McKenna College; Rahuldeep Singh Gill examined the writings of Bhai Gurdas (2009) and teaches at California Lutheran University; Gibb Schreffler wrote on the role of Dhol in Punjabi culture (2010) and teaches at Pomona College; Ami P. Shah worked on Sainapati's *Sri Gur Sobha* (2010) and is currently preparing a set of translations of early Sikh texts; and Chloe Martinez wrote on the genre of autobiography in pre-colonial South Asian literature with a segment on the writings on Guru Gobind Singh (2013) and teaches at Haverford College. Three students are currently working on their projects. These include John Warneke (Sikh educational heritage), Philip Deslippe (Sikh immigrants and the history of yoga in the United States), and Elizabeth Weigler is ready to launch her work on the history of the Sikh community in England in the coming Summer.

Six scholars registered at other universities also made use of our resources in their pre- and post-doctoral research projects. Kristina Myrvold of Lund University, Sweden, joined us as a Fulbright scholar for a year and wrote her doctoral thesis on the Sikhs of Banaras (2007); Laura Hirvi of University of Jyväskylä, Finland, also came as a Fulbright scholar and did her doctoral research pertaining to the Sikhs of California (2009); Natasha Behl was affiliated with our program while working for her dissertation on the caste and gender among the Sikhs at UCLA (2010); Harpreet Singh of University of Otago, New Zealand, completed his masters at UCSB and in the process prepared the ground for his doctoral research on the Sikhs of New Zealand (2011); and Simran Jeet Singh, a doctoral candidate at Columbia University is currently affiliated with our program. Asma Qadri of Punjab University, Lahore, pursued her post-doctoral research on Sufi poetry during her visit to UCSB in 2013. In addition, I served as the external examiner for three Ph.D. theses written at Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar. These included "Understanding Sikh Architecture" by Karamjit Singh, "Giani Dit Singh: Life and Writings" by Inderjit Singh, and "A Study of the Sikh World-View in the Context of Indian Tradition" by Sukhwinder Singh is expected to arrive in the coming weeks. Our program has thus been closely associated with **eighteen research projects** in the past years. For details, see <http://www.global.ucsb.edu/punjab/dissertations.html>

Mark Juergensmeyer's **publications** on religious violence and globalization of religious communities deal with contemporary Sikh history, and my writings have expanded the scope further. My *Making of Sikh Scripture* (New York: OUP, 2001) traces the history of the Guru Granth and it became the first book in Sikh Studies to be turned into an Internet edition in 2006. Additionally, OUP New Delhi has released four editions of this book for sale in India (hardbound, 2002; paperback, 2003, 2006, and 2009). *Sikhism* (Prentice Hall, 2004), a short introduction to the Sikh tradition, has had several reprints and its translated versions in Japanese and Spanish were released in 2007. *Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs in America* (New York: OUP, 2001), which I co-authored with P. D. Numrich and R. Williams, addresses the history of the Sikhs in the U.S. It was turned into a paperback edition in 2007.

The themes of the articles that I wrote during this period ranged from "Making Home Abroad: Sikhs in the United States" (*Nation of Religions* edited by Steven Prothero, 2006) to "Sources for the Study of Guru Gobind Singh's Life and Times" (*Journal of Punjab Studies*, 2008), "Becoming a Sikh: An Essay on Conversion" (*Oxford Handbook on Religious Conversion* edited by Lewis Rambo et al and Charles Farhadian, 2013), and "The Sikhs" (*Religion in the Modern World* edited by Linda Woodhead et al, 2014). "Sources for the Study of Guru Gobind Singh's Life and Times" has received special attention, and is said to "revolutionize our understanding about Guru Gobind Singh. The best work on him since 1967, and cannot be surpassed for decades (J.S. Grewal)."

In addition, we produced *Introduction to Punjabi: Grammar, Conversations, and Literature*, which was published by Punjabi University Press, Patiala in 2011. The writing of this book has been a journey of learning, teaching, and writing that spanned over fourteen years involving Gurdit Singh, Ami P. Shah and Gibb Schreffler, and myself. The teaching of Punjabi as a foreign language is an entirely new area of research, and *An Introduction to Punjabi* is beginning to be recognized as a foundational text that will be used by foreign learners of Punjabi all over the world and is also expected to serve as a reference work for teachers in the Punjab.

The first of the three special issues of the *Journal of Punjab Studies* (2006: Vol. 13; 2008: Vol. 15; 2010: Vol. 17) I edited focused on the twentieth century Punjabi poetry. Its primary contents emerged from "Advanced Punjabi" (RS 292), a seminar we held in 2005, and includes translations of fifty Punjabi poems completed by Randi Clary, Gibb Schreffler, and Ami P. Shah. The project provided these three scholars with the opportunity to translate Punjabi, an exercise that helped the progression of their doctoral research as well as build their publication portfolios. The second issue was dedicated to Guru Gobind Singh (1661-1708). Mohinder Singh, a New Delhi based scholar, thought this effort to be "the only meaningful academic tribute on the third death centennial of the Guru." The third issue included reflections on the contribution of W.H. McLeod by his students and colleagues in the field.

With the consent of Eleanor Nesbitt (Warwick University) and Shinder Singh Thandi (Coventry University), two founder editors of the *Journal of Punjab Studies*, we were able to bring it to UCSB in 2004. Now in its twenty-first year of publication, the JPS has helped bring the UCSB Sikh and Punjab Studies program to the center of research in the field. Its special issues on agriculture, culture, economy, geography, literature and music of Punjab are now being used as standard teaching materials on these important themes, and we expect it to continue to play a key role in setting the parameters of research in the years ahead. ā

The **Summer Program** in Chandigarh, Punjab hills, which I directed from 1997 to 2009, provided us a unique opportunity to assist and mentor young scholars interested in Sikh and Punjab Studies from all over the world. The program included classes in Punjabi at the elementary and intermediate levels; lectures by invited academic experts in history, art, and culture; and week-end field trips to major religious, historical and educational sites in the Punjab plains and hills. During its operation, 182 scholars from 71 universities in 10 countries participated. As a sample, the 2009 group of sixteen participants included, one university professor, three schoolteachers, five doctoral candidates, three holding masters degrees, three undergraduates, and one with a degree in nursing. The universities they were affiliated with included Columbia, Coventry, London, Lund, Harvard, Montreal, New York, Rochester, Temple, Toronto, British Columbia, UC San Francisco, and UC Santa Barbara, and their areas of research ranged from art, economics, education, history, literature, medical sciences to religion. For details, please see <http://www.global.ucsb.edu/projects/punjab/home.htm/>. I was grateful that the external review of the Department of Religious Studies (2004) described the service rendered by the Summer Program as "truly exceptional," and its contribution to the field was recognized at a conference held at University of California, Santa Cruz, in 2013.



In 1999

In addition, we arranged eight **conferences** on the themes that ranged from Guru Gobind Singh (1999), Sikh Diaspora (2001), Punjabi Culture (2003) and other developments in Sikh Studies (2009 and 2014). We also co-sponsored conferences that were held at Lund University (2004), Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar (2009), and the Center for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (2010). For details, please see

<http://www.global.ucsb.edu/punjab/conferences.html>.

Scholars who visited UCSB to participate in our programs included leading figures in South Asian Studies: A. Behl (U. Penn), J. Brown (Oxford), A.T. Embree (Columbia), J.S. Hawley (Columbia), B.D. Metcalf (Michigan), T.R. Metcalf (UCB), L.I. Rudolph (Chicago), S.H. Rudolph (Chicago), C. Smith (San Diego Museum), and S. Stronge



In 2001.

(Victoria and Albert Museum). Others in Sikh Studies included I. Banga (GNDU), B.N. Goswamy (Panjab University), J.S. Grewal (GNDU), W.H. McLeod (Otago, New Zealand), and C. Shackle (London). Punjabi poets: Amarjit Chandan (London), Surjit Patar (Punjab), Ahmad Salim (West Punjab), and Ajmer Rode (Vancouver), and other artists: Gharib Das (Chandigarh), Baldeep Singh (Punjab), and the Singh Twins (London) also visited UCSB to interact with our students.

Over the years, I have also been invited to lecture at different universities in the USA and abroad. Between January 2012 and December 2013, I spoke on Sikh related topics at the following institutions: Museum of Art, San Diego; Columbia University; Rutgers University; Yale University; Cal State University, Northridge; Stanford University; University of California, Davis; University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee; UC Berkeley; UC Santa Cruz; UC Riverside; University of Lund (Sweden); Claremont Lutheran University; Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar. Five of these lectures were delivered in the aftermath of the tragic events at the Oak Creek gurdwara, Wisconsin. I have also been involved with the Sikh Heritage Project at Smithsonian Museums, Washington D.C. (2002-07), and worked with the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History for their successful exhibition on Sikh heritage (Spring 2009). For details, please see <http://www.global.ucsb.edu/punjab/otheractivities.html>

To sum up, the past fifteen years have seen us develop a set of core courses around Punjabi, the history of the Sikhs, and the region of Punjab. In 2013-2014, the number of students who took these courses crossed 640. Reception of these courses has exceeded my expectations and I am grateful for the warm response of students. The teaching component of our program is now beginning to reach beyond UCSB and I am honored to report that Kristina Myrvold was the first scholar ever to teach a course on the Sikhs in a European University (Lund University in 2006-2007), and since then she has raised over one million

U.S. dollars from Nordic and Swedish governmental and private foundations for research on Sikh studies in Europe. Rahuldeep Singh Gill now regularly teaches "Sikhism" at California Lutheran University; and Ami P. Shah was invited to teach a course on the Sikh tradition at Rutgers University in Fall 2012 and give a public lecture on the Sikhs at Princeton University in 2013.

Our publications, conferences, my lectures at various campuses etc., have brought our Program to the attention of scholars working around the globe, and UCSB is increasingly recognized as a leading center for teaching and research in Sikh and Punjab Studies. This is reflected in the fact that scholars from Sweden (2007), Finland (2009), New Zealand (2011), and Pakistan (2013) came to pursue their research projects at our campus.

UCSB was the sixth university in North America to begin Sikh and Punjab Studies, and I am grateful to report that we now hold the distinction of being the first one to complete fifteen years of its existence without a break. This detail comes to focus in the light of the fact that the programs created at the University of Toronto (1986-1992) and Columbia University (1988-1999) could not attain permanence, the position established at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee (1998-2003) had to be dissolved, and the programs at the Universities of British Columbia and Michigan, which started in 1987 and 1992, respectively, had to undergo extended periods of suspension resulting from the tensions between the donors, the occupants of these positions, and the university authorities.



Conference participants in 2004.



Conference participants in 2009.

We are grateful to be able to state that we have in place a foundation for a sound academic program as well as a reservoir of goodwill within the Sikh community. While the number of students in the classes have increased over the years, the rigor of our Punjabi teaching program brought us the Federal Government's Title Six grant (\$286,000) to develop materials for online delivery. Our work with the community translated into donations (\$250,000+) to help fund the activities at UCSB

(www.global.ucsb.edu/punjab/patrons.html), the participation of the community members in our events, and warm welcome to our students on their field trips to the local *gurdwaras* (*Santa Barbara Independent*, May 24, 2009, www.global.ucsb.edu/punjab/articles.html).

The parents of a student in Sikhism class in Fall 2013 got in touch to express their gratitude for the opportunity our program created for their child to learn about her religion, sent a check of \$25,000 to be used toward our future publication plans, and made a specific request that the donation be kept anonymous. It was also deeply moving to receive the information from an attorney's office to the effect that our Center appears as a beneficiary in the will drawn by a Sikh family that has closely watched the program develop over the years.

In the years ahead, one can continue to build on these existing strengths. This expansion would involve reaching students at other UC campuses. The online materials for teaching of Punjabi are ready and when the right opportunity arrives these will be made available to those who are interested in learning Punjabi but do not have access to it at their home campuses. Once this initiative is in place, there is a possibility to develop an online version of Sikhism (RS 162C) and also make it available to students at other UC campuses.

I believe that the work of the past years has advanced scholarly understanding of the Sikh community, the region of the Punjab, and the teaching of Punjabi as a foreign language, to a new phase of development and has simultaneously secured the UCSB program a landmark spot in the history of Sikh and Punjab Studies in North America I only hope that these activities meet the expectations of the creators of the position at UCSB as well as the Sikh and Punjabi community in general, which, in my view, is the primary beneficiary of this effort!



Global Diaspora class (GS 104), Winter 2014, Visiting the gurdwara in Ventura (photo: A. Chandan)



Global Diaspora students during their visit.