

## In Remembrance

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### Professor Norman Gerald Barrier

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The obituaries of Professor Norman Gerald Barrier (1940-2010), popularly called Jerry, bring out his many-faceted personality and work. He is known to be a fine human being with wit and humour; a warm hearted friend and a mentor and supporter of young scholars; a man of unparalleled energy, tenacity and activity; a great collector of archival and tract literature; a good businessman and a great source of books on South Asia in the West; a well regarded colleague and an enthusiastic teacher; and above all, a socially aware and active scholar. However, not much appeared in these obituaries by way of an assessment of Professor Barrier's academic contribution. He was active in Punjab and Sikh studies for nearly five decades. An assessment of his work, therefore, is called for.

Professor Barrier's publications fall into three major categories: source materials; editing of collections of articles; and articles on Indian, Punjab and Sikh history. The focus of all his publications is mainly on the half century from about 1870 to 1920. All his works are not available to us but most of them are. Since there is considerable overlapping in what he has published we have enough material to form a fair idea of his contribution to historical studies.

#### I

Publications on source materials form a major chunk of Professor Barrier's work. In his "Introduction" to *The Census in British India* (1981), he emphasizes both the importance and limitations of census reports. The censuses were not consistent over time. Concepts and ideas among officials produced categories that took on life, fostered new conceptualizations of community, and led to formal definitions of caste, religion, and primary relationships. British perceptions and shifting views of Indian society reflect colonial politics and perspectives. Barrier concludes that census reports have statistics and narrative, fact and fancy, and correlations that may or may not stand up to scrutiny.

The report of a committee appointed by the Indian National Congress on the Cawnpore riots of 1931 was edited by Barrier and published as the *Roots of Communal Politics* (1976). In his view, it was an important historical document, reinterpreting the evolution of communalism and marking an important phase in nationalist historiography. In this report a “mentality” arising from a “perverted view” of the history of Hindu-Muslim relations in India was presented as the primary cause of the riots. Communal consciousness was seen as developing after 1857 due primarily to the disruptive tactics of the British. The committee came to the conclusion that while communal attitudes set the stage for conflict, it was intensified to the point of conflagration by British machinations and inaction at critical points. Incidentally, Barrier regarded the official report on the riots as more balanced. The committee made rather radical recommendations for the restoration of harmony between Hindus and Muslims, suggesting what they should and should not do. Barrier thinks that the split in the committee over the remedies recommended was symptomatic of the difficulties in turning the tide of separation.

The “Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi, tracts on Nineteenth Century Punjab” (1970) are presented by Barrier as valuable sources on the changing social consciousness and inter and intra-community differences among Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs of the Punjab. He points out that before the end of the nineteenth century their political activity came to be based on class or religious interests. It was a phase of transition. Each community was undergoing a process of self-examination, recasting history, and strengthening communal identity. Barrier gives the “Story of the Congress” by Mohammad Shams-ud-Din Sadiq in an appendix to indicate the nature of relationship between religious communities. It is a satire on the aspiration of the Hindus for self rule.

As an extension of his interest in communal politics, Barrier’s “The British and Controversial Publications in Punjab” (1974) was published as a major source on religious and political problems in the Punjab. He points out that communal literature predominates in the proscribed collections, which was symptomatic of the growing tension between, and within, religious communities: between Hindus and Muslims, Aryas and Sanatanists, Sunnis and Shias, and between the Ahmadiyahs and others. Very few banned Sikh works, however, could be classified as anti-Muslim.

For Sikh history, Barrier refers to two significant turning points which had been ignored by the Sikhs and students of Sikh history: the eighteenth century “when Sikh ideas on religion, society and politics crystallized”, and the period of colonial rule when the Sikhs moved from defeat towards a new awareness and militancy. These gaps in historical writing on the Sikhs were often explained in terms of lack of fresh materials for research. But this was “not true of the Sikh resurgence in the late nineteenth century”. In *The Sikhs and Their Literature* (1970)

Barrier lists 1240 publications produced by the Sikhs and on the Sikhs from 1849 to 1919 in Punjabi and English. His "Introduction" provides the context in which this literature was produced.

## II

In his essay on "The Punjab Government and Communal Politics, 1870-1908" (1968), he maintains that the British only "unintentionally" contributed to rivalry among Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs "by adopting programs and transferring institutions which created new arenas of competition and conflict". Their policies generally were calculated to diminish conflict and eventually to improve communal relations. Barrier's assumption that the British were merely "responding to an existing gulf" among the newly educated Punjabis is questionable. It overlooks the role and impact of the officially backed Christian missionaries in the early decades of colonial rule in channeling cultural reorientation among the Punjabis along communal lines. In his "Muslim Politics in the Punjab, 1870-1890" (1971) Barrier gives translation of two Urdu political tracts, written during the anti-Congress movement in 1888, to illumine Hindu-Muslim relations and shifting ideologies within the Muslim community. Barrier suggests that opposition to the Congress and the cooperation with the British went together. He is inclined to think that Hindu-Muslim antagonism in the 1920s, the resurgence of Muslim political associations in the 1930s, and even the movement for the creation of Pakistan had their roots in the turbulent history of Bengal and the Punjab prior to 1900.

In "The Formation and Enactment of the Punjab Alienation of Land Bill" (1979), Barrier proceeds on the erroneous assumption that "private ownership of land did not exist" until the advent of their rule in the Punjab. Taking the government records at their face value he refers to the "lightness" of the revenue demand under the British. Therefore, he does not hold the government "directly responsible for the growing impoverishment". Nor does he attach adequate importance to the political considerations of the colonial rulers for this agrarian legislation. Barrier's essay has other inadequacies too, but it has the merit of being the first consistent exposition of this important legislation.

In his essay on "The Punjab Disturbances of 1907" (1974), based on his Ph.D. dissertation, Barrier assumes that the Punjab Government's attempts to help the agriculturists through "paternal" measures resulted, unexpectedly, in the alienation of the political support of the agrarian population in the central Punjab. The Government of India met this challenge by putting an end to "the local government's paternal programme". Minimizing its consistent pursuit of imperial interests, Barrier suggests that the government was not an impersonal monolith,

but an arena in which personalities, conflicting principles, and faulty channels of communication determined official policy and action.

Barrier's assumption that the communal pattern apparent after 1849 had its roots in the social and political structure of pre-British Punjab underpins his essay on "Mass Politics and the Punjab Congress in Pre-Gandhian Era" (1975). Urban politics tended to revolve around religious communalism which interfered with the growth of a broad based notion of nationhood. The Punjab Congress therefore proved to be ineffectual in developing sustained organization and contacts, and the Punjab remained much behind several other provinces in respect of constitutional politics before the Act of 1919.

### III

With the passage of time, Professor Barrier turned increasingly to Sikh themes. His Introduction to *The Sikhs and Their Literature* (1970), meant to provide a 'contextual statement' for his Bibliography, became the first and the most comprehensive statement of his understanding about the Sikhs during 1870-1920. Barrier assumes that the early decades of colonial rule were marked by a serious decline in the Sikh tradition which created a crisis of identity. Ernest Trumpp's view that "Sikhism was a Hindu sect" evoked a strong reaction. The defenders of separate Sikh identity found support in the works of M.A. Macauliffe. Sikhs had begun to take fresh interest in their past and historical literature in general. "Sikh boundaries began to be demarcated and maintained". The rites of passage, equality between men and women, education and Punjabi in Gurmukhi script were some of the other emerging concerns of the Sikhs.

Barrier goes on to talk of the emergence of new Sikh institutions leading eventually to the founding of the Chief Khalsa Diwan. He dwells at some length on controversies among the Singh Sabha leaders over the issues of Sikh identity, control of Sikh shrines, Sikh ceremonies, and conversion of outcastes. The Tat Khalsa, or the radical Sikhs of the Chief Khalsa Diwan, became alienated from the managers of the Golden Temple and some other organizations. These controversies were reflected in Sikh journalism and other publications of the period. Babu Teja Singh of the Bhasaur Singh Sabha (and the Panch Khalsa Diwan) was the most virulent opponent of the Chief Khalsa Diwan. Summing up this situation Barrier says that, within half a century, "the forces confronting the Sikhs had produced a wide and bewildering range of institutions. Although involved with the same problems, the institutions and their members came up with varied and often conflicting analyses of the nature of Sikhism and what must be done to insure its survival".

Barrier turns to "Sikh Politics in British Punjab" (1988) to underline that the relationship between Hindus and Sikhs became an absorbing

issue for Sikh leaders. “They were quite close in 1849, and to break them apart invited trouble.” The Arya Samajists insisted that “Sikhs were Hindu”. The Tat Khalsa increasingly portrayed the Arya Samaj as the number one enemy of Sikhism. Sikhs and Hindus contested the key issue of Hindi versus Punjabi, each tending to identify its language with religion and communal unity. Similarly, the tendency to focus on Sikh-Muslim relations can be traced in the editorial policy and news coverage of prominent periodicals. The government maintained the Sikh aristocracy and Gurdwaras as “channels for indirect control of Sikhs”. There was basic ambiguity in British attitude towards the Sikhs. The army officers studiously reinforced a sense of allegiance to Sikhism, but the British tried to keep “Sikh nationality” and it within bounds. Barrier points out that when Punjabis talked of ‘the nation’, they often meant the Hindu, Muslim or the Sikh nation. A renewed sense of separate political identity based on religion eventually brought the radical Sikhs (Tat Khalsa) into conflict with the British. Barrier seems to agree with a C.I.D. note on Sikh politics underlining the close connection between the “new faith” of the Tat Khalsa and disloyalty to the British. It may be noted that Barrier’s understanding of “Sikh resurgence” is not based entirely on his Bibliography. In more than 40 foot notes he refers to secondary works. The number of references to works given in the Bibliography is much smaller. Many of his views, therefore, were a part of the then received wisdom with its limitations. Barrier’s later essays and “introductions” on Sikh history reiterated the issues identified and positions taken in *The Sikhs and Their Literature*.

Gradually, in the 1990s, Barrier turned more towards the concerns of the diaspora Sikhs. His comments, however, always go back to the Singh Sabha period or the phase of ‘Sikh resurgence’. In his “Keynote Speech” (1999), Barrier refers to his journey into Sikh studies beginning with *The Sikhs and Their Literature*. He talks of several strands in the Sikh story, reiterating his basic position regarding the Singh Sabha movement, albeit with a shift in emphasis on recent developments. Over the decades, the crises of identity have, led to and, been shaped by the political traumas confronting the Sikhs after the mid-1980s. Referring to the recent controversies which were marked by “a variety of heated and polemical commentary” (reminding Barrier of the tract wars of the late nineteenth century), he talks of the shared assumptions about the role of key individuals, doctrines, and the *Guru Granth Sahib* as building blocks of Sikh identity. However, a discussion of Sikh identity for Barrier involves dealing with potentially conflicting interpretations of the past and contemporary events. His review of literature suggests to him that “the nature of Sikh identity has not been fully resolved”.

Barrier goes on to add that the success of the Gurdwara movement and the institutionalization of the SGPC’s control over Sikh shrines and Gurdwaras in the 1920s marked the culmination of the Singh Sabha

programs to mobilize the Sikhs, “but many issues prominent in the earlier period remained unresolved”. The authority of the SGPC was not recognized by all Sikhs, particularly outside the Punjab. Similarly, the authority of the Akal Takht was not seen as binding by all Sikhs. The issues of the *rahit* and Amritdhari/Keshdhari/Sahajdhari relations also remained unresolved. Several developments forced a fresh and controversial re-examination of the role of the *maryada* as a measure of Sikh identity. Here again, Barrier appears to assume that “identity” does not call for any definition. It is evident from his treatment that, for him, identity and action go together, which complicates his discussion of identity and makes “Sikh identity” exceptionally problematic. His paper on the Fairfax Gurdwara in Virginia in the same volume is interesting for his view of “identity”. He sees Fairfax as a rather extraordinary example of how local issues can escalate and induce debate over larger issues of identity. It is not clear, however, how differences of belief and practice within a religious community become relevant for the issue of identity which is conceived essentially in relation to others. Invariably, Barrier’s discussion of identity shifts from “a Sikh” to “a good Sikh”.

In a paper entitled “Sikh Emigrants and their Homeland” (1989) Barrier refers to the Sikhs in the Punjab from about 1870 to 1920 as the first phase of their emigration to other countries. He goes on to talk about the early experiences of Sikh emigrants in different countries and their networks from 1880 to 1920. This review suggests a gradual extension of patterns found in the Punjab. Like Sikhs in the Punjab, Sikhs abroad were not unified in terms of doctrine or social attitudes. The old divisions persisted, and existed in one form or another. There was no consensus about political goals or strategy. After 1920, they became involved in the radical movements like that of the Babbar Akalis. Barrier suggests that this early background is relevant for understanding the contemporary diaspora.

On the interesting subject of transmission of Sikh culture, in his “Formulation and Transmission of Sikh Tradition: Competing Organizations and Ideology 1902-1925” (1996), Barrier refers to “the definitive work” of Harjot Oberoi on this period. Barrier maintains that “Sikhism has never had an organizational church with generally accepted leaders who could resolve religious or political issues” in the intellectual debate over the Gurus, history, and the nature of tradition. He emphasizes that as in the Singh Sabha days, “the battle involves not just intellectual argument, but who controls institutions and dominates the communication network linking Sikhs throughout the world”. In his “introduction” to the same volume, Barrier reiterates this argument slightly differently. Events in the Punjab deeply affect the Sikhs abroad not simply because they sympathize with their home community but also because they share their cultural values and political aspirations. Without such linkages between the Sikhs in the Punjab and the Sikhs abroad the

recent disputes and debates among the latter would not have occurred. The prolonged controversy in Sikh studies, with its negative effects from the viewpoint of the academia required a study of the cultural baggage which the emigrant Sikhs brought with them and their linkages with the home community. Barrier thinks that only through “an open exchange of ideas and alternatives” academic Sikh studies “may reduce tensions and ultimately lead to a resolution of differences acceptable to Sikhs as a whole”.

In fact, Barrier refers directly to the issues and agenda in Sikh studies in three of his essays. In “The Role of Ideology and Institution-Building in modern Sikhism” (1979), he refers to the source materials available for fresh research and interpretation of the Singh Sabha period, and suggests four areas for exploration: “division and unity”, “the nature and function of Sikh institutions”, “British rule and the social and political mobilization of Sikhs”, and “evolution of theological and historiographic trends among Sikh intellectuals”. In “Sikh Studies and the Study of History” (1993), Barrier talks of tension between two approaches to Sikh historiography: the one more familiar inside the Punjab, and the other more at home in Western universities. The concerns of the “Punjab school” presented striking parallels to the writings associated with the Singh Sabha movement: respect for the Gurus, historical continuity, differentiation between Sikhism and Hinduism, hagiographic treatment of historical figures, and rejection of non-violence as a cardinal element within Sikh ideology. A second, contrasting group of historians has gradually emerged over the last several decades in Western universities. They question traditional sources and do not accept some of the suppositions of the Sikh historians. The Western historians regard Sikhism as “an evolving religious and cultural tradition, one that mirrors and in turn affects the environment in which it was evolved”. Barrier goes on to suggest how Sikh history can be incorporated in the American education system, and mentions five themes which cut across particular periods of Sikh history.

In relation to these themes, Barrier supports W.H. McLeod’s questionable view of Sikhism as a refined version of the Sant Tradition. He supports McLeod also about the Jat influence on Sikh culture and the Khalsa *rahit* which again is debatable. On the issue of identity, Barrier supports the controversial view presented by Harjot Oberoi. About the period of Sikh rule he suggests that there was nothing “Sikh” about it, or that there was no relationship between doctrine and state policies. This too has been questioned in recent research. He regards the Sikh resurgence of 1875-1920 as a good example of a “local” response to imperial or colonial system. Reiterating his earlier position, he maintains that the Singh Sabhas did not constitute a single movement at all but rather an assortment of organizations and individuals with differing commitments and views of history and society. He sees the strong

imprint of the Singh Sabha movement clearly in the intellectual roots and concerns of contemporary Sikhism, including the fusion of religion and politics which coalesced into the Akali movement and the Sikh Gurdwara Act of 1925. Two themes stand out as major focuses in Sikh history after 1947: resurgence of Sikh migration, and the attempts of the Sikhs to protect and consolidate their traditions by settling upon specific rules and rituals viewed as orthodox. In his "Introduction" to *Sikhism and History* (2004), Barrier feels gratified that the scholarly and public understanding of Sikhism had changed dramatically in the last three decades. He suggests that the leadership in addressing unexplored issues and traditions had often come from a growing group of Sikh and Western scholars trained, and teaching, in North America and Europe. However, much of this work is controversial.

#### IV

On the whole, Professor Barrier's work on sources is very useful for other scholars. He appears to sift through official records and vernacular sources easily to come up with generalizations. His "Introductions" provide a useful overview of the sources and the context in which these were generated. However, his assumption of the binary of 'Sikh' scholars located in Punjab and the Western academia is oversimplified. It ignores several major scholars located in the two hemispheres whose work does not quite fit into these two categories, apparently because of their critical use of the Sikh sources combined with respect for tradition, and their concern equally for continuity and change.

Furthermore, Barrier's generalizations, though attractive and appealing to the general reader, lack depth. This is evident especially with regard to his work on the Sikhs. Empirical evidence for the period 1870-1920 is mostly the basis of his generalizations, but for the later period as well as the period before annexation there is no such basis. Therefore, his views of the nature of Sikhism and Sikh identity have the weakest conceptual and empirical bases. His historiographic reviews tend to be influenced by his understanding of the Singh Sabha period. His confident style and the crispness of his generalizations conceal the elementary character of his basic position and lack of rigorous analysis. Finally, Barrier appears to be rather preoccupied with the growing communal competitiveness in the Punjab. He tends to minimize the direct and indirect contribution of the colonial state towards engendering communal outlook and attitudes. While cautioning his readers against taking the British records at face value, he himself gets carried away by explanations of their policies and actions. His preoccupation with divisions in the Indian and Punjabi society and their historical "roots" acquires a deterministic ring. He appears to think that partition of India and the Punjab was inevitable.

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***Dholi and Bhangra Artist*****Garib Dass Vartia (1939-2010)***Gibb Schreffler**University of California, Santa Barbara*

Punjab has recently lost one of her cultural treasures. Ustad Garib Dass was a master dhol-player and a foundational figure in the development of modern bhangra. He was among the small group of artists who, inheriting the old traditions of Punjabi music, shaped the new paradigms that have now become taken for granted.

Garib Dass was born “Vilayati” in 1939 in village Dochak, district Gujrat (West Punjab), the son of Narain Das and Pathani Devi of the Khari branch of the Bazigar (Goaar) people. His was a tribal community, made up of itinerant performers who lived outside of mainstream society in temporary *jhuggis* (huts). As a child he roamed in a band of some forty households while the Bazigars presented their signature *bazi* shows of physical feats and acrobatics. Indeed, the family lived outside society’s conventions such that it was not until “Vilayati” was age 5 that, having exhibited some health problems, his family first consulted a pandit, who subsequently renamed him “properly”: Garibu.

At Partition, Garibu’s Hindu community became refugees in East Punjab, where his family was eventually resettled in village Sialva Majri (Ropar). Living in a new land, and estranged from their performance circuit and patrons, they were forced to find other means of subsistence. From the time he was a young boy, Garibu laboured in the fields, pulled a rickshaw, washed clothes, and so on. However, by age 15, inspired by his cousin the late Ustad Mangat Ram, Garibu began to take an interest in dhol. He began playing for *kushti* and *kabaddi* matches. One of his first paying jobs was to make announcements with the dhol to advertise for the local traveling cinema.

In 1955, when bhangra as a staged art was just beginning to develop, Garibu received his first job in accompanying the dance at B.Ed. College in Chandigarh’s Sector 20. In that same year he worked with Surjit Mann at the Khalsa School in Kurali. However, he got his big break in 1965 when he met Professor Saroop Singh of Panjab University’s Evening College and was recruited to play for the bhangra team. He did so for a decade, during which time the team regularly came in first place. Having thus become a professional dholi in Chandigarh, Garibu acquired his urban name, “Garib Dass.”

It was in 1967, during the shooting of the film *Heer Ranjha*, that Garib Dass met the legendary dhol master of the pre-Partition generation, “Punjab Champion” Ghuggi of Amritsar, and made him his *ustad*. Later, Garib Dass met Chandigarh’s folk dance guru, late Sardar Bhag Singh, and soon became attached to his stable of artists. As part of this group, he appeared for the first time at the Republic Day festivities, New Delhi, in 1970, and made regular appearances at the event through 1986. During this period, the art of staged bhangra was going through development, and in his capacity as *dholi*, Garib Dass made contributions to what would become the more or less standard university-style bhangra that we see today. He gave performances throughout India, including annual trips to Bombay to play for events like Vaisakhi and Lohri melas. Garib Dass had cameos in several films, including *Sat Sri Akal* (1977) and *Jat Punjabi* (1979). He was the drummer for the instructional video *Learn Bhangra in 7 Days* (1989), in which one can see the classic bhangra routine at the height of its development.

Garib Dass went abroad for the first time in 1983, to Thailand and Singapore. With this, a new era in his career had begun. The visit he was clearly most fond of is when he stayed in Canada for six months during the 1986 World Exposition in Vancouver. After this experience, he had the credentials to travel all over, including: Germany (1990, 1999), Finland (1991), Turkey (1992), UAE (1994), Austria (1996, 1998, 1999), Australia (1997), Norway (1998), Sweden (1998), and France (1999), and four more trips to Canada.

Once Garib Dass had become an internationally performing *dholi*, his status was elevated such that his family were able to move out of the *jhuggis* in Attawa (Sector 42, where the hockey stadium now lies) into *pakka* housing in village Dhanas. They eventually shifted to the Bazigar ward in Dadu Majra where they reside today. However, Garib Dass did not intend for his family to live forever in government housing projects. He invested for the future in a plot of land in Mohali. For the once nomadic Bazigar community, the owning of land is a big step that cannot be overemphasized. From growing up riding on camels in West Punjab’s jungles, Garib Dass’ hard work and success was such that he has put his grandchildren in a position to be landowners. Indeed, providing for the family—a group effort—was one of his foremost values.

Garib Dass’ other core values were hard work and humility. It displeased him to see people use the *dhol* for certain kinds of excessive profit making, in which category he even included giving *dhol* lessons for payment. He lamented the trend for performers to appropriate folk musical traditions only to serve their egos and increased popularity. Garib Dass criticised the arrogance of some *dholis* who say they will not “lower” themselves to accompany students, or who seek work only with popular stage singers. Indeed, whereas many professional *dholis* have experience working with college-aged youths, Garib Dass had become

especially adept at working with young children. He was regularly called by local schools to ready their youngsters in dance performances at their annual and holiday functions. In his sessions with them, he imparted an awareness of history and heritage that the children miss in their own Western-influenced upbringing. It was in returning from a lesson at one of these schools in Mohali that he suffered tragedy. However, Ustadji's core religious philosophy, which he stated directly to me as such, was that although humans may not know why, God takes and gives what he does for a reason.

We at UC Santa Barbara had a close relationship with Garib Dass and a special fondness for him. While directing the Summer Program in Punjab Studies, Gurinder Singh Mann invited the master to conduct workshops on Punjabi dance. Over the course of the program, Garib Dass taught some 180 students, who consistently rated their sessions with him as one of the highlights of the summer. His patient and friendly instruction brought energy and enthusiasm to each batch of participants. It was in this context that I first met him, seeking to learn dhol and bhangra. We became fast friends, and over the years he contributed more than any other individual to the shape of my PhD dissertation on Punjabi drummers, which I dedicated to him.

In May 2003, the UCSB Center for Sikh and Punjab Studies invited Garib Dass to the United States for the first time, to hold workshops, visit classes, and give performances. I had myself recently suffered a motorcycle accident, but I knew how important this experience would be for Garib Dass so we went through with the program. He patiently accompanied me as I led him, hobbling, about Santa Barbara; he took care of me as much as I did him—his home-cooked meals were especially memorable. At the end of this residence he directed our students in a performance of two Western Punjabi dances that were near and dear to his heart: *jhummar* and *sammi*. We invited him back in 2007, in conjunction with the Center's sponsored course, "Music of Punjab." Afterwards, several of my students told me how special it was to have had the experience of interacting with him.

The last I saw Ustadji was in December 2007. I will never forget walking out on a pier into the Pacific Ocean with him, we eating salt-water taffy, and I trying to describe deep-sea creatures for which I knew no name in Punjabi. Nor will I forget his amazement at the knee-deep snow in which he walked, shivering and slightly terrified, in Connecticut. I remember our trips in Punjab, as to buy dhols at Fatehgarh Sahib's mela, with Garib Dass carrying two drums while perched on the back of my scooter. And ordering pizza for his whole family—most of whom had never tried this exotic fare—and having to meet the Pizza Hut delivery boys in the street of a nearby sector because they would not enter Dadu Majra Colony. I remember countless gatherings at Garib Dass' home with him and his family, as they tried to make me eat impossible amounts

of food. Mostly I remember his uniquely accented voice in endless private conversations we had about faith, morality, and culture.

We lost Ustadji on 16 November to a road accident, and though he had reached approximately 71 years of age, it seems clear he would have had many more years ahead of him. Garib Dass leaves behind his wife, Devi Labh Kaur, along with three sons and one daughter, seven grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Son Des Raj and all the male grandchildren have become dholis in his footsteps. He leaves behind, too, countless students whom he taught in schools and colleges or who, in recent years, had been coming to Chandigarh from abroad to learn from him. I count myself blessed to have been one of those. Few other dholis have had such commitment, not just to their art, but also to the highest standard of ethics and humanistic values.

*For examples of Garib Dass' music, please visit the UCSB Center for Sikh and Punjab Studies website at:*

[http://www.global.ucsb.edu/punjab/gharib\\_das.html](http://www.global.ucsb.edu/punjab/gharib_das.html)

**Ajeet Singh Matharu (1983-2010)**

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Those eulogized in the *Journal of Punjab Studies* are usually scholars, poets, and other luminaries. We marvel over their accomplishments and bid adieu to long time friends, scholars, and even mentors. This remembrance is of a different sort. For those of us that had the fortune to meet Ajeet, we were overjoyed, inspired, and eager to see the germination of a budding young scholar. On the morning of July 26, 2010, that opportunity was cut short after a tragic car accident, as Ajeet was traveling to his Punjabi class at the AIIS Institute in Chandigarh.

Ajeet Singh Matharu was born on February 7, 1983 in Reedley, California. The precocious and gifted young boy left his Central Valley home to pursue high school at the prestigious Phillips Exeter academy. Collegiate callings would see him return to his native California and begin his undergraduate career at USC. Excelling in his studies, Ajeet majored in History and Economics.

A strong passion for social justice led him to serve as part of the Teach for America corps. A high school teacher of history, Ajeet was devoted to his students. He was recognized by his Brooklyn public school for his ability to inspire, and dramatically improve the test scores of his students. Jeers, epithets, or even the defacing of his school picture never caused Ajeet to waiver in his commitments. He saw himself as a Sikh ambassador across cultures, always eager to greet, educate, and connect with those around him. A humanitarian passion led him to new causes. He was an advocate for dialogue between Palestinians and Sikhs, moved by his sense of moral justice and the desire to bring different people together.

While his sense of social justice could not be narrowly defined, Ajeet had a special place for his own community. Nurtured in one of the oldest Sikh settlements in North America, he was vested in his community. The post-9/11 violence was a spark that pushed his *seva* in a range of activities. From the Jakara Movement to SALDEF, Sikh Research Institute, and the Sikh Coalition, Ajeet was a bond between all major Sikh-American organizations. Earlier this year, he submitted a written testimony to the Oregon State Legislature in support of the repeal of ORS 342.650, a 1920s era law passed under a wave of anti-Catholic hysteria that outlawed religious attire and prevented *keshadhari* Sikhs, along with some Jews and Muslims, from being teachers in Oregon schools. The law was repealed this year due to the efforts of Ajeet and many others.

The California Central Valley's Sikh population provided an environment for Ajeet to cultivate his interests in the history of the Sikhs. Weekly Punjabi school classes, as well as a father with a vast library on Sikh-related materials nurtured his early development. His studies and travels in the Punjab, beginning in 2009, with UCSB's Punjab Summer program fostered what was going to be a life-long relationship with his parents' homeland. In fact this summer, his studies at the AIIS Chandigarh institute were further tethering him to this world.

Entering a graduate program in history at Columbia University, Ajeet excelled, accumulated recognition, and earned the respect of his teachers and peers. In his first year, the historiography of Sikh Studies became an overwhelming concern. Always self-reflective, he hoped to bring the same critical awareness to the field that he loved.

The idea for a historiography paper came in response to a call for papers for the first annual Sikholars: Sikh Graduate Student Conference; later development was seen in the form of a piece he wrote for the Sikh Foundation's web-series "Opportunities and Challenges for Sikh Academics." From these sparse cotyledons and numerous conversations where we challenged, provoked, pushed, and encouraged one another, I can provide some sense of how Ajeet saw the field, new debates that he sought to encourage, and the voice he wanted to provide.

Seeing Sikh Studies as nine different categories: orientalist, biographical, historiographical, identitarian, diasporan, feminist, revisionist, scriptural, and theoretical, Ajeet sought to explicate each through looking at the most important monographs in the field. He noted four major trends of the scholarship in the past four decades:

1. The continued uncritical usage of categories by practitioners in the field of Sikh Studies (such as Barrier's 'neo-Sikh' and Oberoi's 'Tat Khalsa') to refer to the Singh Sabha reformers. These categories themselves were a product of administrative anthropology and a colonial discourse to determine which Sikh groups were loyal to the Raj and which were not. While post-structuralists assert a critique of the relations of powers, in the Sikh context, they have been remarkably complementary in their categories with those of power.
2. An unreflective silent dialogue with some scholars of Sikh Studies and the project by many Sikh nationalists for Khalistan. With various publications arising in the 1980s and 1990s under this 'specter', a general consensus formed, although not quite unanimous, within the field that religious identity was fluid and hybrid in the pre-modern period and the modern Sikh identity and religion was created by early 20th century colonial elites. Most scholarship written during this period had a subtext in explaining the militancy, with results supporting a statist solution and the delegitimization of the

movement. The congruence of this opinion with that of the Indian state in its violent suppression of the movement has been largely overlooked.

3. The discrediting of both Sikh oral-tradition and Punjab-based, mostly Sikh, researchers in favor of Western-trained academics. The result being that there is a 'balkanization' and gulf between the Punjab-based scholarship and those trained in Western universities, who hold the former in low esteem. This process, starting in the 1970s, has born fruition with the now hegemonic locus of Sikh Studies decisively shifted outside of the Punjab.
4. The turn to the self-labeled 'critical theory,' institutionalized through the journal *Sikh Formations*, under the helm of Arvindpal Mandair. Without giving an endorsement, Ajeet acknowledged that this research project associated with the problem of translation of the concept of religion will continue to produce new scholarship in the upcoming years.

Beginning with preoccupation on understanding the field, Ajeet saw himself in different mode. He recognized that the most productive emerging scholarship in the field of Sikh studies requires multiple linguistic abilities, deep historiographical knowledge, beyond only that produced in Western universities, and access to private libraries, archives, and collections. He was seeking nothing less than a re-writing of Sikh history in the modern period. In personal conversations, he argued for a shift of periodization from 1800 onwards, rather than 1849, which is usually the date taken up by those interested in Punjab's modern period. His time in Punjab with AIIS was to gain requisite proficiency in Punjabi, in both Gurmukhi and Shahmukhi scripts. He was going to continue his study of Urdu and Hindi in the upcoming fall semester at Columbia. His preliminary works are most laudatory towards those authors such as JS Grewal and Gurinder Singh Mann with 'deep' understandings of multiple languages, including Persian, Urdu, Braj, and Punjabi in various scripts.

Engaging with theory, but ultimately seeing himself as an empirical historian, Ajeet wanted to revisit and revise the subaltern project. He was fascinated with peasants and artisans, but not in the turns that the later Subaltern Studies moved. Economic and social studies, rather than only following cultural and intellectual trajectories were to be part of his future work. He was excited and eager. In his own words, he wrote about new possibilities in the field and new research agendas: "I am both optimistic for the time ahead and proud to be taking part in creating it." On July 26, 2010 his opportunity was taken away far too soon, though we hope his thoughts, reflections, and challenge to those in the field may

live long after. I lost a friend and brother; the Sikh community lost an activist and advocate; the scholarly community lost a diligent, curious, budding young colleague. His mother (Jaswant Kaur), father (Joginder Singh), sister (Amandeep Kaur), and countless others whose life he touched in such a short period, will continue to miss him dearly.