

Report:
**Activities of the Global Institute for Sikh Studies:
Relevance for Sikh and Mainstream Communities
in the U.S.**

Cassandra Garita

UC Santa Barbara graduate; Peace Corps volunteer, South Africa

The Global Institute for Sikh Studies (GISS) is focused on two activities: research and the distribution of information. Scholars at the GISS have committed themselves to using current data and methods in conjunction with historical sources to reexamine Sikh history from the present perspective. This commitment to research has led the GISS to develop a digital collection of historical sources, making Sikh artifacts, manuscripts, etc. available for review at the push of a button. Furthermore, the GISS has pledged that it will share its research and resources with the greater global community. This includes those within the Sikh Panth residing both in and out of the Punjab, as well as communities entirely outside the Panth. This essay explores the ways in which the outlined activities of the GISS are useful for the mainstream American community as well as for the Sikh community at large. It examines the challenges posed to Sikhs living in a post 9/11 America, in addition to the rapidly evolving relationships between new generation Sikhs and their heritage. Ultimately this essay argues that the work done by the Global Institute for Sikh Studies is essential both in establishing the mainstream American community's understanding of the Sikh tradition, and in keeping the Sikh diaspora connected to the greater Sikh consciousness as the Panth continues to grow into a global community.

In order to argue the usefulness of the activities of the GISS for the mainstream American community, it is important to touch on the current misconceptions surrounding the Sikh tradition in America. Sikhs are not new to the United States by any account. The first Sikh Gurdwara was established in 1912 in Stockton, California, and over the past century Sikh communities have

developed in California, New York, and everywhere in between. Though Sikhs have been present in the United States for years, the targeting of Sikhs after the 9/11 attacks in 2001 shows just how little the American mainstream community truly knows about the Sikh tradition. Sikhs are often mislabeled as Muslim or Arab because of their appearance, and this has had wildly negative implications for Sikhs in post-9/11 America. According to the Sikh Coalition, over 300 cases of violence and discrimination against Sikh Americans were reported just in the first month after the 9/11 attacks. Since then, Sikhs have reported thousands of instances involving hate crimes, workplace discrimination, school bullying, and racial or religious profiling. One particularly notorious hate crime against the Sikh community is the 2012 shooting in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, in which a shooter opened fire on a Sikh Gurdwara, claiming the lives of six Sikh victims. Therefore, the work of the GISS is important to share with the mainstream American community because the current absence of accurate information has put Sikh communities all around the United States at risk. By creating an open dialogue with the mainstream American community, the GISS is working to establish a better understanding of the Sikh tradition, and is beginning to dismantle the common yet erroneous narrative that associates Sikhism with terrorism.

The work of the Global Institute for Sikh Studies is doubly important for the Sikh Panth as it confronts “the current shift...from an ethnic/Punjabi identity to a global community” (Mann, n.d.). While Sikhism originated in the Punjab, it has spread to various different countries including the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, and more. Increasing numbers of Sikhs are born outside of the homeland with each passing year. For older generation Sikhs, Sikh identity is rooted in a corresponding Punjabi identity. A new generation of Sikhs born abroad has a more complicated sense of self, as he or she must balance these inherited identities with those associated with said person’s country of birth. The diverse experiences of Sikhs in their adopted homelands are reshaping the ways in which they are approaching the Sikh tradition, and the work of the GISS is imperative as the Sikh Panth moves forward during this time of transition. The reasoning behind this statement is twofold. First, a portion of the research being conducted by scholars within the GISS is aimed at understanding and assessing the complexities of the Sikh Panth’s current state of affairs, and what they may mean for the future of the Panth as a global community. Thus through exploring and evaluating globalization and migration within the Sikh community, the GISS is largely assisting in establishing a better understanding of both the current status of the Panth and the direction it may take in years to come. Second, the

accessibility of research and information provided by the GISS allows for those in diaspora communities to remain connected to the larger Sikh consciousness, therefore ensuring that even Sikhs born outside the Punjab are well informed about and deeply connected to their religious and cultural beginnings.

As the Sikh Panth continues to blossom into an international community, the necessity of access to information will only increase, therefore confirming the importance of the activities of the Global Institute for Sikh Studies. By providing easily accessible, accurate information, the GISS is helping to break down existing false narratives surrounding the Sikh tradition and is consequently building a deeper understanding of it within the mainstream American community. The more educated the mainstream community becomes, the more supported Sikh diaspora communities will be. Furthermore, the efforts of the GISS support the unity of the Sikh Panth as it continues to develop outside of the Punjab. As increasing numbers of new generation Sikhs are born outside of the homeland, the GISS will provide the research and information necessary to support these Sikhs in their experiences and to assist in maintaining their connection to the Sikh tradition.

References

Fact Sheet on Post-9/11 Discrimination and Violence Against Sikh Americans. (n.d.). Retrieved June 1, 2017, from

<http://www.sikhcoalition.org/images/documents/fact%20sheet%20on%20hate%20against%20sikhs%20in%20america%20post%209-11%201.pdf>

Mann, G.S. (n.d.). "History." Retrieved June 1, 2017, from giss.org/giss.html

