

## REASSESSING THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE NEW ZEALAND SIKH COMMUNITY 1881-1914

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### Introduction

Research on the history of Sikhs in New Zealand has stalled since the ground breaking work by W.H. McLeod, *Punjabis in New Zealand*<sup>1</sup> in the 1980s. This has been in part due to what Sekhar Bandyopadhyay calls “the story of exclusion” which he has suggested renders migration and migrants from India invisible in New Zealand historical writing.<sup>2</sup> The Sikh community from its inception was a small community and this has made it marginal to traditions of national history writing. Since the 1980s, research on colonial New Zealand has been largely ordered around Māori-Pākehā relations and this has meant that only limited attention has been devoted to minority communities, like the Sikhs. Of course, this exclusion is part of the larger marginalisation of Asian migrant communities in the writing of New Zealand’s history, a dynamic that Brian Moloughney, John Stenhouse and Tony Ballantyne have suggested has been central in the creation of the dominant narratives that shape New Zealand national identity.<sup>3</sup>

After publishing landmark works on the development of the Sikh textual tradition and the evolution of the Sikh community, McLeod focused his attention on the history of Sikh migration to New Zealand.<sup>4</sup> Drawing on McLeod’s extensive knowledge of Punjabi history and his fieldwork in the North Island during the early 1980s, *Punjabis in New Zealand* reconstructed the history of the Punjabis who had their homes in the central North Island in the first half of the twentieth century. Although at this point some socieologists and ethnic studies scholars were working on the history of Punjabi migrant communities in Southeast Asia, the United Kingdom and North America, McLeod’s study of New Zealand Punjabis was the richest *historical* case study of Punjabis beyond

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1 W.H. McLeod, *Punjabis in New Zealand* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1986).

2 Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, “A History of Small Numbers: Indians in New Zealand, 1890–1930,” *New Zealand Journal of History* 43, no. 2 (2009): 150-168.

3 Brian Moloughney and John Stenhouse, “‘Drug-Besotten, Sin-Begotten Fiends of Filth’: New Zealanders and the Oriental Other, 1850-1920’, *New Zealand Journal of History* 33, no 1 (1999): 43-64; Tony Ballantyne, “Writing out Asia: Race, Colonialism and Chinese Migration in New Zealand History,” ed. Charles Ferall, Paul Millar, and Keren Smith, *East by South China in the Australasian Imagination* (2005): 87-109.

4 E.g. *Guru Nanak and the Sikh religion* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968) and *The Evolution of the Sikh Community : five essays* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976). For an overview of McLeod’s career see his *Discovering the Sikhs: autobiography of a historian* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004).

their homeland published at that point. In the New Zealand context, McLeod's work remains the only text on this tradition of migration that has been extensively researched, making use of Punjabi-language materials and understood these migrants against the distinctive regional features of their source culture. More recent work by Jacqueline Leckie has attempted to highlight the contributions made by 'Indian Settlers' to New Zealand society, but this approach places little emphasis on the importance of religion or specificities of regional identity.<sup>5</sup> The research presented in this essay draws upon previously neglected sources, especially colonial newspapers to offer a reassessment of the early development of the Sikh community in New Zealand. These sources, I argue, not only add depth to some of the arguments developed by McLeod and Leckie, but they also revise several basic assumptions. These newspaper materials open up the public life of these early immigrants. The sources provide new insights into the arrival dates of the community, interaction with colonial society, its occupations, military service as well as the reconstruction of cultural practices from 1890 to 1914. These new details provide us with an enriched and enlarged picture of early Sikh history in New Zealand, adding texture to earlier scholarship that has been reliant on oral history.

### ***Punjabis in New Zealand: Analysis of Methodology***

Although McLeod's *Punjabis in New Zealand* remains the landmark study of the community in New Zealand, it is important to underscore the limits and parameters of that work. McLeod's study was pioneering and made effective use of oral interviews, but he made little use of newspaper materials. This strategy did condition the basic shape of McLeod's narrative.

#### *McLeod's Methodology*

McLeod's initial research began by encompassing print culture sources, such as books, journals, newspapers and governmental records.<sup>6</sup> In researching these records he ran into difficulties discovering significant official information on the early Sikh community in New Zealand. Some important information on the early community was kept by the Customs Department, but in 1952 these records were lost to a fire. In light of this archival loss, McLeod had to rely on "incomplete shipping lists" which proved insufficient as they only provided "names, dates and places of arrival."<sup>7</sup> McLeod also made use of the register of entry permits as another source of immigrant information, but it was restricted to the post-1920 period, so any Sikhs present before this date were not recorded within it and as a result the early movement of Sikhs into the country remained shrouded in mystery.

Because of the thin returns from these archives, McLeod chose to rely on oral histories from the early members of the community and their descendants. McLeod's

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5 Jacqueline Leckie, *Indian Settlers: The Story of a New Zealand South Asian Community* (Dunedin, New Zealand: Otago University Press, 2007).

6 McLeod, *Punjabis in New Zealand*, 5.

7 *Ibid.*

method of acquiring oral histories was as “informal as possible.”<sup>8</sup> He chose to use this method to “assuage suspicions” and to “establish credentials with the prospective informants.”<sup>9</sup> To cultivate this relaxed atmosphere, McLeod did not use a tape-recorder and kept his notebook out of sight as he questioned the informants, requiring him to remember what was said in the interviews. After he completed the interview, McLeod would write up the information in a standardized format as soon as he possibly could.<sup>10</sup>

### *Problems in Methodology*

Multiple problems arose from this form of questioning which include the limits of the memory of the informants and the interviewer, the limited sample of interviewees he chose to utilize from the Waikato and King Country regions and the form of questioning he used. These factors were further compounded by the wariness of some community members towards McLeod because of his status as an outsider. The questions he chose to ask were carefully structured, but narrow in scope. As a result of this strategy, gaps were formed within the historical narrative which posed problems for McLeod in gathering full and accurate information about the early Sikh community

### *Limitations of Recalling the Past*

The recollection of the informant is an important feature in McLeod’s method. R. Kenneth Kirby has argued that as interviews go further back in time, we are faced with the “possibility of distortions influenced by subsequent changes in values and norms”<sup>11</sup> which have the distinct possibility of “altering perceptions.” As time continues to pass, according to Kirby, “we would expect this danger to grow.” Because McLeod conducted his interviews over sixty years after the Sikh community in New Zealand was consolidated, many aspects of common life, especially in the private domain were not discussed by interviewees. Thus, aspects such as communications to India, personal experiences, relationship pressures have not found their way into McLeod’s work. But some public activities such as interactions with the justice system, sporting pursuits and even entertainment activities are also missing from McLeod’s historical narrative. The recollection of all the details which occurred in the past cannot be expected from the informants.<sup>12</sup> Therefore not only was McLeod faced with the possibility of altered perceptions of the past but also with gaps in the historical narratives. Many men had passed away and some were descendants of the original settlers who were now beyond the limits of the community memory. McLeod was able to verify the information he had by comparing it with other accounts and written materials such as letters and by allowing informants to correct oral materials after the interview. But the nature of his

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8 *Ibid.*, 6.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*, 8.

11 R. Kenneth Kirby, “Phenomenology and the Problems of Oral History,” *Oral History Review* 35, no. 1 (2008): 22-38.

12 Donald C. Swain, “Problems for Practitioners of Oral History,” *The American Archivist* 28, no. 1 (1965): 63-69.

research strategy and the oral sources he relied upon imposed some clear limits on the picture of the past he assembled.

#### Issues in Question Style & Response Recording

The second point that needs to be noted is McLeod's method and style of questioning and how he recorded the responses. As noted earlier McLeod relied on recalling answers to questions from memory after the interview had taken place. This method of questioning poses problems not only in recollecting data required but also ignoring other potentially important information. This was further exacerbated by the fixed set of questions which McLeod chose to work with. The twelve questions he chose to use neglected important aspects of popular practise and the private life of the community.<sup>13</sup> This perhaps reflected McLeod's own awareness that these might be sensitive matters that interviewees would be reluctant to share with a researcher from outside the community. Kirby notes that "the potential bias of the interviewers questions are frequently based in the research agenda."<sup>14</sup> McLeod's use of a fixed survey inadvertently locked himself into this very problem. James Hoopes has stated that these surveys "can tell us about the ideas of still larger groups" but in doing so they do not always capture the "richness" of these histories.<sup>15</sup> According to Hoopes, as long as the answers were "standardized," the information obtained "must be relatively thin and lacking in detail."<sup>16</sup> This style of questioning provides us with answers but leaves out important information such as *why* the interviewee answered the question in a certain way. To solve this problem Hoopes recommends that details such as these are "best obtained in detailed, "open-ended" interviews" where the "respondent is free to answer at length in his own words."<sup>17</sup> McLeod attempted to do this, but in doing so he focused on answering the twelve questions with little attention given to additional information unless it was directly relevant to the questions. Without these additional details, McLeod was unable to better understand how these individuals recreated their life in New Zealand. Pursuing these details will hopefully allow us to understand how their lives were changed and redefined in the new Christian dominated setting where the norms of the homeland were difficult to maintain.

#### The Problem of "Undercoverage"

The next issue McLeod had with his oral survey was what has been termed by Robert Groves as "*undercoverage*"<sup>18</sup> of informants. "Undercoverage" essentially refers to the bias present when sampling a population for a survey. It generally occurs when a range

13 McLeod, *Punjabis in New Zealand*, 8; "McLeod, W.H., Professor: Papers," Interviews, 1975, MS-3279, Hocken Library.

14 Kirby, "Phenomenology and the Problems of Oral History," 24.

15 James Hoopes, *Oral History: An Introduction for Students* (USA: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 46.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*, 47.

18 Robert M. Groves et al., *Survey Methodology*, 2nd ed. (John Wiley and Sons, 2009), 72.

of the population is not adequately represented in the survey. These coverage problems can occur “internally” or “externally” to the survey and they generally occur when the sampling frame or parameters for determining who to survey are established.<sup>19</sup> For McLeod, his informants came from a small sample in the Waikato and King Country. He sought his interviewees by “hearing of Sikhs living in the King Country region” and drove “around with his sons until he found one.”<sup>20</sup> This method of finding interviewees locked him into these two regions for the bulk of his oral information. The communities in these regions reflected some of the earliest settlers and provided information on others who sojourned. The sample could only account for certain segments of the population, namely a specific group in the North Island and mainly from the post 1900 period. Prime examples of missing individuals include defence force personnel such as Jagt Singh<sup>21</sup> and Weer Singh<sup>22</sup> who had both fought in World War I, with Weer Singh being traced back to 1894. Individuals such as these were not remembered by McLeod’s informants but their stories are important elements in the broad development of the community. This absence of information compounds the consequences of McLeod not using print materials and his presumption that the Sikh community had a relatively late inception in New Zealand. Based on oral reminiscences McLeod suggested the origins of the community lay with Phuman Singh in the mid-1890s. His heavy reliance on the oral histories combined with a selected group of interviewees limited the scope of McLeod’s narrative.

#### Wariness towards the Interviewer

These limitations were compounded by the wariness of some informants of McLeod. McLeod was aware that the standing<sup>23</sup> of an individual was important in the community and shaped inter-personal relationships. As an outsider, it was likely that some questions remained about McLeod’s motivations and what the information might be used for. Of course, community members tended to be cautious of Pākehā because the New Zealand authorities had cracked down on the community in the early decades of the twentieth century by implementing race-based policies such as the Immigration Act of 1901. These past actions left substantial suspicion towards Pākehā New Zealanders, and inevitably by implication towards McLeod. The relationship between the interviewer and the informant is critical for oral history to be produced. It is clear that details have been omitted from certain narratives provided to McLeod, such as religious beliefs, relationships and deeply traumatic aspects of life, such as the circumstances of murder and tragedy within the community. These details give us some indication towards the level of trust held by the informant towards the interviewer. Whatever the reasons, revealing such intricate and personal information to an outsider would have required gradual trust, something which

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19 *Ibid.*, 73.

20 McLeod, *Punjabis in New Zealand*, 3.

21 New Zealand Defence Force, Personnel Archives, “SINGH, Jagt - WW1 13/1011a - Army,” n.d., Box. 29, AABK.

22 New Zealand Defence Force, Personnel Archives, “SINGH, Weer - WW1 N/N - Army,” n.d., Box. 29, AABK.

23 McLeod, *Punjabis in New Zealand*, 23.

may not have developed during the time of research for all informants. Ultimately the key component is trust, in a quote from Kurkowska-Budzan and Zamorski “interviews are supposed to be characterized by respect, *trust* and knowledge.”<sup>24</sup> Taking together these issues means that while McLeod’s work produced a rich reading of the New Zealand Punjabi community against the backdrop of its Punjabi antecedents, his picture of Punjabis and ultimately Sikhs in New Zealand remained partial.

We have seen some of the issues arising from McLeod’s method of research in regards to oral history and print culture records. Careful and extensive use of newspaper material can often be an important counterpoint to oral histories. This is not to say any one body of sources is more important than another, but that these two approaches complement each other and may give greater accuracy and greater detail to the history being recreated.

### **Print Culture: New Evidence on the Sikh Community**

McLeod also reached the conclusion that the data available in newspapers was insufficient to provide significant information about the Sikh community in New Zealand.<sup>25</sup> McLeod did not make use of newspaper research as references to Punjabi migrants were scattered throughout the vast number of newspapers produced by colonial presses. In a non-digital age, the returns for many hours of research would have been unsatisfactory. The creation of databases such as *Papers Past*<sup>26</sup> has transformed this situation and researchers are now able to conduct targeted searches over long runs of many newspapers. This technological shift means that researchers can assemble a substantial body of evidence out of scattered traces that Sikhs have left in the colonial press.

Print culture material offers an important foundation to the research of Sikh history in New Zealand. The push by the government to digitize and centralize newspapers and archive records has given greater access to New Zealand’s rich past, which includes the Sikhs. Materials such as shipping lists, court appearances, entertainment and local governmental activities are present throughout the colonial newspapers and offer a wealth of new information on the previously obscure beginnings of the community. This print culture can in turn generate new questions. Newspapers identify particular individuals and events that interviewees can be asked about. Perhaps the key insights that come from these print culture sources is that they illuminate the social worlds of these migrants and allow us to read the history of Sikh migrants against the broader backdrop of colonial New Zealand society rather than privileging the Punjabi homeland.

The use of information contained in newspapers helps to increase aspects of Sikh history once thought inaccessible to scholars. These include an earlier date of settlement of the community within New Zealand. The presence of settlers (other than Phuman

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24 Marta Kurkowska-Budzan and Krzysztof Zamorski, *Oral History: The Challenges of Dialogue*, vol. 10, Studies in Narrative (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2009), 6.

25 McLeod, *Punjabis in New Zealand*, 5.

26 Papers Past database can be found at <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast>

Singh and Bir Singh) was first noted in 1893 in regions beyond the main centres, in areas such as in Blenheim and Hawkes Bay. These men were acquiring businesses and travelling into local ports. This provides additional information on the earliest settlers in addition to the two brothers Phuman and Bir questioning the assumption that the community began establishing itself in the early 1900s. New evidence shows that it is possible that settlement was much earlier.

What is also shown is the wider geographical dispersion of the community, which went beyond the North Island and into the South Island of New Zealand. The new evidence runs contrary to research done by scholars, such as McLeod and Leckie, who place the Sikhs in the North Island at the onset of the migration. The presence of Sikhs in the South Island appeared at the same time as they had appeared in the colonial presses in the North Island.

There is also a negation of the perceived seclusion of the community. This is apparent through the interactions with society and colonial institutions such as the justice system. Sikhs did not remain locked within their own community choosing to be members of society by donating to charities, joining organisations, sponsoring entertainment and establishing multiple businesses. These were men were very much a part of New Zealand society.

The occupational diversity went beyond hawking and the commercial retailing as previously understood by McLeod. The concentration on a limited number of individuals discovered through oral interviews left him focused on these occupations. With the discovery of numerous men through newspapers (noted later in this article), Sikhs were found to be present in additional occupations working as miners, athletes and port workers right across New Zealand.

These colonial records do not just amend past scholarship they also provide us with aspects of Sikh history which have not been extensively recorded by the scholars. The new information adds details about the mobility of the community within New Zealand showing the recreation of cultural practices, entertainment and sporting activities, support for local charities and institutions, details about court and criminal activities as well as Sikh military connections to the colony. This information widens the understanding as to how Sikhs interacted and integrated with colonial society during the earliest stages of migration into New Zealand.

The opportunity has been presented to scholars to now further expand upon the history of Sikhs in New Zealand. With greater accessibility to newspapers, the earliest phase of Sikh migration has now been reviewed in light of the recently developed sources from *Papers Past*.

#### *The Early Sikhs (1890-1900)*

The first references to Sikhs in colonial newspapers came from Wellington. "Godson Singh" and "Harunam Singh" were boarding in a house on Willis St. They were arrested for drunken behaviour and destruction of property on 19 April 1893.<sup>27</sup> These two Sikh

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27 "Page 2 Advertisements Column 4," *Evening Post* (April 19, 1893), 2.

men were the first from the community to reach print records and the first identifiable people to come into contact with the justice system. Two other individuals of Sikh descent in Blenheim, located a short distance across the Cook Strait in the north of the South Island, appeared in the print record the following year. Joe Falk Singh purchased a share of Wing Lee's Garden Market from Joe Kak on 22 May 1894.<sup>28</sup> Both men's last names are distinctly Sikh, "Kak" being a Jat clan name from Uttar Pradesh, making them easy to identify. At the same time as these Sikhs appeared, brief references were made to movement of others in different parts of the country. Sikh individuals were entering New Zealand ports located in the Hawkes Bay<sup>29</sup> and Wellington<sup>30</sup> during the early 1890s, a testament to their highly mobile nature. During 1894 Weer Singh appears in Taranaki on the West Coast of the North Island. This recently discovered individual was one of the first pioneers who settled in the country. During the 1890s, Weer Singh was present in Taranaki and Wellington. While in Wellington, he was present with another Sikh, Geeman Singh.<sup>31</sup> The *Evening Post* noted Geeman Singh in an advertisement after his father sent a message from Punjab stating "Sant Singh wishes to communicate with you at once."<sup>32</sup> The address where Geeman could be found was in care of Weer Singh. Weer's presence is not only within newspaper records but also in New Zealand Defence Force archives showing his service for the country in World War 1.<sup>33</sup>

By 1898, the *Taranaki Herald* recorded a Puang Singh being "granted a hawkers license" by the chairman of the local council.<sup>34</sup> In 1895, Sikhs had reached Wanganui and a Singh was mentioned there for the first time. A stray reference to an auctioneer's article references a bag owned by a "Singh" which was to be auctioned off as unclaimed baggage.<sup>35</sup> Though brief in nature, it provides us with some idea of how early Sikhs entered Wanganui. The *Wanganui Herald* and *Chronicle* provided some of the most detailed information on Sikh activities. This was centred mainly on one individual, Phuman Singh. His activities were recorded heavily in newspapers. This reportage included business dealings such as partnerships with other Indians, showing how he began his retailing career.<sup>36</sup> Phuman also made donations to various organisations<sup>37</sup> as well as being involved in criminal proceedings<sup>38</sup> and even hiring help.<sup>39</sup> These details

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28 "Page 3 Advertisements Column 2," *Marlborough Express* (May 22, 1894), 2.

29 "Arrivals," *Hawke's Bay Herald* (April 15, 1893), 2.

30 "Arrived," *Nelson Evening Mail* (September 9, 1897), 2.

31 "Page 1 Advertisements Column 4," *Evening Post* (November 14, 1898), 1.

32 "Local and General," *Evening Post* (February 22, 1898), 4.

33 New Zealand Defence Force, Personnel Archives, "SINGH, Weer - WW1 N/N - Army";  
New Zealand Defence Force, Personnel Archives, "SINGH, Jagt - WW1 13/1011a - Army."

34 "Taranaki County Council," *Taranaki Herald* (December 6, 1898), 3.

35 "Auction Sales," *Wanganui Chronicle* (January 10, 1895), 3.

36 "Abraham & Singh," *Wanganui Chronicle* (February 2, 1898), 1.

37 "Trawling," *Wanganui Herald* (February 20, 1899), 2.

38 "Magistrates Court," *Wanganui Herald* (November 17, 1899), 3.

39 "Page 1 Advertisements Column 9," *Wanganui Chronicle* (July 16, 1900), 1.



were not restricted to the 1890s but continued into the early 1900s providing us with information of not only his activities but also those of his family. An example of this is Mrs Singh who was looking for a “good girl for house work” in Victoria Avenue, Wanganui where she lived with Phuman.<sup>40</sup> This large corpus of information on Phuman gives us an even greater insight on a Sikh individual and how his life in a typical New Zealand town was like. The new research also runs contrary to the argument that Sikhs generally kept to themselves, avoiding interaction with the majority British community.<sup>41</sup>

In 1896, the first references were made to the Salvation Army and its involvement with early Sikh migrants into New Zealand. Adjunt Sukh Singh was holding an “Indian Durbar” in the Salvation Army barracks located in Fielding, in Manawatu-Wanganui.<sup>42</sup> Neglected in the existing scholarship, the Salvation Army were closely linked to many of the earliest Sikh migrants. Further Sikhs are mentioned at various other “Indian Durbars” including a Lukh Singh as well as another Indian, Dev Ratna.<sup>43</sup> These records of Salvation Army involvement are also noted on death certificates of some Sikhs such as Saugh Singh, as mentioned earlier. His certificate was signed by the Salvation Army suggesting that he had continuing connections with the organisation.

By 1897, Sikhs were appearing in newspapers right across New Zealand, not only in the North but also the South Island. One of the first references in the South came in 1897 in an extraordinary case of religious observance being described by the reporter. Kalla Singh had perished due to typhoid and his brothers applied to the local council in Claremont, Canterbury for permission to carry out a cremation. Permission was granted and the ceremony took place. The reporter described the scene stating “firewood was piled 3ft high” and the “deal coffin containing the corpse was placed on it.” He goes further to describe the cremation as “more firewood was put on top” and “the whole was soaked in kerosene and fired.” The detail is graphic going so far as to describe that “when the corpse fell to pieces the corpse was exposed to the view of the spectators for some time.” This rare instance of cremation is the first recorded act of religious activity from the Sikh community during this early stage of migration. This ceremony shows how Sikhs transplanted culture and tradition into a new society.<sup>44</sup>

In the same year, another Sikh was also noted on the West Coast of the South Island in the mining town of Greymouth. Here, Seaball Singh was in court attempting to claim money from a Māori woman.<sup>45</sup> The reference shows “Seaball Singh v. Rihaka Tauhere (Mrs George)” attempting to “claim £2 10s.” The court case was described as being “a very lengthy hearing.” The defendant was ordered to pay “£1, costs of court and 13s.” The reference reflects the continued engagement with the justice system. We

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40 “Page 3 Advertisements Column 5,” *Wanganui Herald* (May 16, 1899), 3.

41 McLeod, *Punjabis in New Zealand*, 113.

42 “Page 3 Advertisements Column 6,” *Feilding Star* (April 21, 1896), 3.

43 “The Salvation Army,” *Feilding Star* (April 23, 1896), 3.

44 “Miscellaneous,” *North Otago Times* (June 16, 1897), 1.

45 “Untitled News,” *West Coast Times* (June 5, 1897), 2.

can see this again in 1899, when a theft had occurred in Invercargill which was covered by newspapers nationwide. Two Sikh men were involved in the theft of goods from a hawker in the region. G.C Singh and Gurdath Singh were both accused of stealing along with a third offender.<sup>46</sup> G.C, Gurdath and Martin Denham had also been “charged with stealing goods of the value of £90” from another hawker “Abedebox Mollock.” According to the *Grey River Argus*, the robbery took place “in the house of Lawburn, near Cromwell” in central Otago. All three were convicted and the act was serious enough to warrant prison time for all men. G.C. Singh and Denham received one month’s imprisonment while Gurdath Singh received a three month sentence.<sup>47</sup> This was the most serious crime committed within the community between 1890 and 1914.

Through these records we can now see a more detailed picture of the Sikh community. Not only was the population larger, more diverse and widely spread, it was also very much a part of New Zealand society. Sikhs were located from Auckland to Invercargill before the end of the nineteenth century working in a range of jobs, interacting with a range of other colonists and engaging key colonial institution like the courts. What must be understood from this is the community was larger and older than initially thought of by scholars such as McLeod and Leckie. This activity in the 1890s continued to increase into the 1900s as Sikhs became more prominent and anti-Asian sentiment drew attention to them.

During the 1900 to 1910 period, more Sikhs appeared across New Zealand in greater numbers. Occupations within the community became more diverse and travel into the colony more frequent. In 1900, the Sikhs mentioned during the 1890s continued to be present. These include Phuman and Weer Singh, both mentioned earlier with their lives in the public sphere continuing to be recorded.

New connections with India were forming in New Zealand. The Indian Army reached New Zealand on 11 February 1901 at Wellington from Australia<sup>48</sup> as an extension of the trip for the celebration of the federation of the Australia colonies. The *Bay of Plenty Times* saw the arrival of the troops as a “sentimental” tribute to New Zealand’s loyalty to the Empire as opposed to Australia where the visit was seen as “business.”<sup>49</sup> These celebrations in Australia were met with immense excitement with newspapers describing crowds of “seven hundred and fifty thousand” being present in Sydney.<sup>50</sup> This same excitement was felt in New Zealand according to the *Wanganui Herald* which described the route of arrival being “lined by thousands.”<sup>51</sup>

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46 “Invercargill,” *North Otago Times* (September 27, 1899), 3.

47 Per Press Association, “New Zealand Telegrams,” *Grey River Argus* (September 28, 1899), 4.

48 “Arrival of Indian Troops” *Wanganui Herald* (January 11, 1901), 2.

49 “The Bay of Plenty Times and Thames Valley Warden” *Bay of Plenty Times* (February 8, 1901), 2.

50 “The Commonwealth Celebrations in Sydney,” *Thames Star* (January 2, 1901), 2.

51 “Arrival of Indian Troops,” 2.

*The Growth of the Sikh Community (1901-1914)*

The Indian Contingent represented regions in Punjab from where post 1901 immigration would be the highest. One of these included the 15th Sikhs drawn from Ludhiana.<sup>52</sup> These Sikhs were carriers of information and this was transmitted back to Eastern Doaba, located a short distance from Ludhiana. They were further supported by multiple Punjabi and Sikh regiments, including the famed 36th Sikhs who defended Fort Sarghari in 1897 against thousands of armed Afghanis. In total six regiments of those visiting New Zealand were raised from Punjab. These Sikh soldiers shared their experiences of New Zealand with local reporters of the *Evening Post*, a newspaper based in Wellington. One soldier remarked that “he would not care to live in this country even if they doubled his pay — it was too cold.”<sup>53</sup> Racial language was also used to describe these soldiers in the *Evening Post* referring to the army as “dark skinned soldiers of the King.”<sup>54</sup> These soldiers travelled extensively across New Zealand. The Indian contingent began its journey in Wellington after arriving from Melbourne. The contingent travelled into towns such as Palmerston North, Wanganui, Auckland, Gore, Nelson, Dunedin and Invercargill. Some of these towns had a Sikh presence within or nearby them during 1890s.

Contacts further developed with Sikhs in India with the entry of a Sikh dance troupe from Punjab in 1902.<sup>55</sup> These men performed acts such as “long pole spinning”, “stick combat” and “varied feats of arms”: this could suggest the Sikh martial arts called *Gatka* being performed.<sup>56</sup> They were described by local newspapers as “Eastern sensations” and members of “the famous Sikh Tribe.”<sup>57</sup> What is of the utmost importance here was the support of local members of the Sikh community previously unknown to scholars. R. Singh, a fruit broker from Hawera located close to Wanganui, sponsored the troupe and was listed as the “lessee.”<sup>58</sup> R. Singh was a business man much like Phuman Singh who dealt in the confectionary as well as fruit and vegetable business.<sup>59</sup> R. Singh had established himself in Hawera and, like other Sikhs, expanded his business. At the same time he engaged the courts for crimes committed against him.<sup>60</sup> Singh was assaulted by Timothy O’Neill after Singh had “asked him to go out” of his store. O’Neill was drunk “and refused.” Singh pushed “him out quietly” resulting in an altercation on the street. O’Neill pleaded guilty and voluntarily offered to pay all costs. Chatta Singh, a Sikh hawker, was also recorded in Taranaki in 1903, the region where the town of Hawera

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52 “The Indian Troops,” *Southland Times*. (March 2, 1901), 2.

53 “The Western Section. Its Arrival Last Night,” *Evening Post* (February 25, 1901), 5.

54 “The Western Section. Its Arrival Last Night.”

55 “Page 6 Advertisements Column 2,” *Evening Post* (April 1, 1902), 6.

56 “Sikhs Punjab Indian Troupe,” *Fielding Star* (June 10, 1902), 2.

57 “Page 3 Advertisements Column 2,” *Bush Advocate* (April 19, 1902), 3.

58 “Page 6 Advertisements Column 2,” 6.

59 “Page 2 Advertisements Column 4,” *Hawera & Normanby Star* (April 18, 1903), 2.

60 “Magistrate’s Court,” *Hawera & Normanby Star* (December 10, 1903), 2.

was located. He was in court giving evidence against a Māori offender who had stolen “£10 from a purse he found on the road.”<sup>61</sup> The offender had purchased goods from Chatta Singh with the money and Singh identified the individual as the person who had given him the money. Chatta provides us with a different engagement with the justice system, not as a victim or offender but as a witness.

In 1903 another Sikh business man, Lullah Singh was located at 114 Manners St, Wellington. Lullah Singh was a “masseur, hydropathist and herbalist” who could solve problems of “swollen feet” and “nervous complaints.”<sup>62</sup> Weer Singh was recorded in *Northern Advocate* in 1906, this time in the Northland (north of Auckland) on “a charge of vagrancy” and “he was taken to Auckland.”<sup>63</sup> His repetitive brushes with the law make his movements easy to track.<sup>64</sup>

Colonial newspapers also record Sikhs who passed through New Zealand ports during this period. During 1909, numerous Indians are mentioned on the ship S.S. Aparima which was docked in the port of Wellington. The article mentions Lal Singh, among other Muslims and Hindus, in a critique of using immigrant labour over the local Waterside Workers Union. Lal Singh was described as wearing the “green turban of the Prophet.”<sup>65</sup> There seems to be some confusion about the religion of the man who maybe mistakenly was thought of as a Muslim. By 1910 there was a brief reference to two Sikhs entering the port of Wellington from Lyttleton, Christchurch. They are simply listed as “Singh” in a passenger list arriving on the S.S. Mararoa on 2 April at 6.45am.<sup>66</sup>

Amongst these continued details about Sikhs during this decade were short references to Phuman Singh of Wanganui. His life is well recorded by McLeod and Leckie and he was believed to be the first known Sikh settler in New Zealand. References to his life and family come up during this decade as the wealth of his family increased. In 1900 Phuman’s wife placed an advert in the local *Wanganui Chronicle* for hired help to take care of her children and household chores.<sup>67</sup> In the same year his wife was looking for hired help, he was contributing to various organisations such as the local “more men” fund, which supported New Zealand troops in engagements overseas through donations from the general public.<sup>68</sup> His contributions had been occurring regularly since 1899 and included other organisations such as the New Zealand Rifle

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61 “Theft of Money,” *Taranaki Herald* (August 27, 1903), 2.

62 “Page 1 Advertisements Column 3,” *Evening Post* (March 24, 1903), 1.

63 “Local & General,” *Northern Advocate* (November 22, 1906), 2.

64 Weer Singh was also present in Hawera during 1900 according to the *Hawera & Normanby Star*, January 29 1900.

65 “Local & General,” *Hawera & Normanby Star* (October 22, 1909), 4.

66 “Shipping,” *Evening Post* (April 2, 1910), 4.

67 “Page 1 Advertisements Column 9,” 1.

68 “Local More Men Fund,” *Wanganui Chronicle* (January 25, 1900), 2.

Association<sup>69</sup> and the Famine Relief Fund in Transvaal, Africa.<sup>70</sup> His wealth had grown significantly enough that by 1909, he had a personal telephone connected to the exchange in Wanganui.<sup>71</sup> These intricate details suggest how successful he had become in New Zealand in a relatively short amount of time, something reflected by other Sikh settlers during this early period of migration into the colony.

In the South Island Sikhs appeared on the West Coast during 1904. As mentioned in the 1890s Sikhs were already established in the region. Four Indian brothers named “Singh, George, Riordan, Bob Scott, ‘Sandow’” entered a weight lifting competition for the Antonio Circus in the hopes of winning a “handsome medal.”<sup>72</sup> These men were described as “local men” and they had also entered a local wrestling contest at the same event. One Singh was later identified as Brann Singh by the *Otago Witness* and he lost his wrestling match against Riordan according to a Greymouth correspondent.<sup>73</sup> On 5th November of the same year, more Sikh athletes appeared in Greymouth as reported by the *Grey River Argus*. A group from the “Physical Training School” planned to do a “grand refined, athletic and gymnastic display.”<sup>74</sup> This group included a Sunda Singh who was described as a “champion Indian athlete.” The West Coast of the South Island contained multiple Sikhs who were attracted to athletic pursuits. This group of individuals did not appear anywhere else in the country and the information provides us with an interesting perspective on entertainment and sports within the community. The only other Sikh discovered in the South Island during this decade was a Sham Singh who was located in Christchurch. Again, he appears in the public eye because his criminal activities reached the national *NZ Truth* newspaper.<sup>75</sup>

From 1911 to 1914 newspaper records of Sikhs in New Zealand dissipated significantly. Some Sikhs did appear in newspapers but the focus was largely on Weer Singh. Weer Singh appeared in newspapers multiple times for offences relating to liquor. He was arrested for “keeping liquor for sale”<sup>76</sup> in Paeroa, near Wellington. This was followed in quick succession with more arrests for being drunk.<sup>77</sup> His repeated arrests landed him in the local gaol for a month. By tracing Weer’s brushes with the law we can map his movements across the North Island. He continuously appeared in papers beginning in 1894 and ending with his death in 1918. Two other Sikhs were captured in colonial presses during this period of Sikh migration. A “Singh” was leaving for

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69 “N.Z. Rifle Association’s Meeting N.Z,” *Wanganui Chronicle* (February 21, 1899), 2.

70 “The Refugee Fund,” *Wanganui Herald* (October 26, 1899), 9884 edition, 2.

71 “Local & General,” *Wanganui Herald* (December 11, 1909), 5.

72 “Antonios Circus,” *Grey River Argus* (March 21, 1904), 2.

73 “Land and Water,” *Otago Witness*. (March 23, 1904), 55.

74 “Page 3 Advertisements Column 4,” *Grey River Argus* (November 5, 1904), 3.

75 “Shikkured Sham,” *NZ Truth* (February 12, 1910), 6.

76 “A PROHIBITORY LAW. The Danger of Admitting Hindus,” *Ashburton Guardian* (May 28, 1914), 5.

77 “Drunk and Disorderly,” *Ohinemuri Gazette* (April 3, 1912), 2; “Local and General,” *The Ohinemuri Gazette* (February 16, 1912), 2.

London from Wellington on the S.S. Ruapehu, on the 27 June 1912.<sup>78</sup> Another “Singh” appeared travelling domestically across New Zealand. He travelled from “Auckland to Gisborne to Napier” then to Wellington on the S.S. Tarawera, in February 1913.<sup>79</sup>

### *The Post 1914 Period*

The question needs to be asked as to why Sikhs suddenly dropped out of the press by 1914. There were multiple reasons for this. First was the deteriorating situation in Europe with the rise of Germany and the onset of World War 1. Newspaper coverage on the situation was extensive pulling away from relatively minor local events. At the same time, events in Canada had transfixed local media from 1914. The *Komagata Maru* incident involving six hundred Indians (mainly Sikhs) was being covered day by day by newspapers in New Zealand. From the planning stages of the ship right through to its leaving Vancouver, the incident reached national headlines. The ship was to be used by Gurdit Singh to “test the recent court decision that Canada cannot exclude natives of India.”<sup>80</sup> The situation was treated with the utmost urgency between Ottawa and the Indian government. “There is great anxiety in official circles concerning the voyage of an emigrant ship with Hindus”<sup>81</sup> and this was not only felt by the Canada but by Australia and New Zealand too. The *Poverty Bay Herald* stated that the situation had a “direct bearing on the problems that confront Australia and New Zealand” and if they asserted their right in entering Canada, then “they will equally desire to assert it in New Zealand.”<sup>82</sup> The newspaper much like the growing anti-Asian sentiment of the time exaggerated the immigration situation. It believed the law would stop the “tide of immigrants from the Old Country” which had now become a “full flood.”<sup>83</sup> These exaggerated fears of non-white immigration in colonial presses reflected the situation on the ground in New Zealand. This attention to detail with multiple events unfolding across the colonial world shows how presses shifted attention away from New Zealand, as fears of war and immigration set in by 1914. This also sheds light on the overall attitude of the general population toward Indian and Sikh migration into white British dominated colonies.

### *Sikh Engagement with the Justice System*

The majority of newspaper references present us with a community engaged with the justice system in New Zealand. Why was there a focus on these judicial activities throughout colonial newspapers? The growing anti-Asian sentiment and the slow influx of Sikhs with their distinctive identity attracted public attention towards the community. Newspapers reflected this attention through racist sentiments which they often sought to exaggerate through editorial articles. This saw newspapers focusing on the negative

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78 “Shipping Port of Wellington,” *Evening Post* (June 28, 1912), 6.

79 “Shipping Port of Wellington,” *Evening Post* (February 14, 1913), 6.

80 “Testing the Law,” *Poverty Bay Herald* (May 25, 1914), 3.

81 “A PROHIBITORY LAW. The Danger of Admitting Hindus,” 5.

82 “A Questions of Color,” *Poverty Bay Herald* (May 29, 1914), 2.

83 *Ibid.*

aspects of the Asian communities in New Zealand, such as criminal activities. This was not something unique to New Zealand but reflected attitudes throughout much of the Empire at the time. This was compounded by the sensational nature of reporting where criminal activities within New Zealand in general were extensively recorded especially during the earliest periods of Sikh migration. The attention to criminal behaviour can also be seen in the new cultural context these men entered. These men shifted into a new society where the rules and restrictions of rural Punjab no longer applied. These were young men who would often lack parental and familial restrictions as well as guidance in New Zealand. This new found freedom could often lead them into brushes with the law. Many of the men who were arrested would have been young adult males who found a new exciting life far different from the one they had come from.

Even though these details of the Sikh community were covered extensively by colonial presses, they were by no means the norm of the community and may not reflect the community in its totality. The new migrants were adjusting and settling into a new society and this could often create friction as they adjusted to it. These unique and overlapping set of conditions drew much attention to the community often for negative reasons.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has shown that colonial newspaper material provides us with a wealth of new and important information on the once obscure Sikh community in New Zealand. Print culture sources detail the public life of the community showing how the Sikhs were deeply embedded in the new and foreign society, a far cry from rural Punjab. Sikhs were involved in New Zealand society on many levels through occupations, entertainment, interaction with colonial institutions, donations to charities and sporting pursuits, something which questions the implied seclusion of the community by the previous scholarship. These connections with the community around them were not restricted to particular areas in New Zealand, their dispersal was much wider than previously envisaged and their movements within the colony were much more frequent. In addition to this, the dating of the arrival of the Sikh community needs to be revisited with the new evidence detailing an earlier presence of Sikhs in the colony, questioning the assumption that Phuman and Bir Singh were the first known settlers in New Zealand. The new research offered here questions, supplements and adjusts the previous scholarship suggesting that, while Sikhs were a community of *small numbers*, they were very much a part of New Zealand's history.

## Biographical note

Harpreet Singh, a fourth-generation New Zealand Sikh, is pursuing doctoral studies at the University of Otago. He has an MA in Religious Studies from the University of California and an engineering degree.