

Swarn Singh Kahlon, *Sikhs in Latin America: Travels amongst the Sikh Diaspora* (New Delhi: Manohar) 2012
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The study of Sikh diaspora has commanded attention from many writers in the field and has in the last two decades found its voice in increasingly varying ways. However it can be generally surmised that the division could be the nature of the settlers' / migrants' link umbilically to Punjab. Those with strong and active links are analysed through conceptualisations and ground research in works such as Tatla's *Sikh diaspora: the search for a Statehood* and Shania's *Sikh Nationalism and Identity in a Global Age*. Both writings analyse the fractured secessionist call for a Sikh state and desire for "nationhood"; this could be considered as the politicisation process of Sikhs abroad. The other general stream includes the likes of Roger Ballard (e.g. 1994 and 2000), Bhachu (1984) and Nesbitt (e.g. 2000 and 2009) who try to understand the character of the Sikh diaspora as a settled community with less active links to Punjab; this could be viewed as the socialisation aspect of this diaspora. However, there is a common link all these works; they all circumscribe around the well-documented Sikh settlements in Europe and North America. It is in pursuing the lesser-known Sikh diaspora in Latin America that this book distinguishes itself in a personal, uplifting and informal manner.

By his own admission, Kahlon does not call for this book to be viewed through an academic lens however; by calling it a "study" (p. 8 and 81); there is a definite feeling of an author's wish for this work to be considered as seriously as any academic work published in this field. It is certainly innovative however, lacks academic rigidity; this ironically contributes to making it a good read. It is not a scholarly work of reference that could be used as a stringent citation. The book would lose its value should it solely be considered an academic text; it really is the account of a Sikh man's admirably altruistic and expansive journey to meet his fellow Sikhs. In one instance (pp. 14-15) he offers advice for the Sikh traveller by suggesting that merely standing in the airport's arrival concourse is bound to attract attention from a fellow Sikh. Sikhs in their *sahajdhari* or *mona* variety may take umbrage at this anecdotal "symbol of Indian identity". Having instinctively studied an uncommon strain of Sikh diaspora; Kahlon disappointingly and unreasonably chooses a monolithic representation of Sikhs. However, this personal story and other heartfelt personal engagements with "Latin American Sikhs" give this book a hearty travelogue feel conveyed in a personal diary style. Swarn Singh Kahlon easily sets himself apart from many writers in the way in which he engages with the people he writes about. The book has at its core an ethnographical approach without the perfunctory cross-testing required from an academic participant observer (or partaker in this case).

Methodologically, the stories follow the families' historical development in reverse chronology from the people he meets; most of whom are second and third generation descendants of the original Sikh migrants from India. The pattern is repeated in the various countries he visits and Kahlon's organised and structured aims are visible in the book's following chapters, each devoted to a different country and topic. Each

chapter helpfully contains a preamble that describes the topography, national characteristics and economy of the country in question. These nine chapters are preceded by a preface and an introduction that spans fourteen pages and amongst other entries contains a list of "International Conferences Attended" by the author and a loose methodological statement. The final parts of the book contain a chapter dedicated entirely to the author's own migratory experiences in the USA and ten appendices containing valuable primary sources such as reproduced newspaper articles and photos. It is the inclusion of the generations' old passport scans, some over a hundred years old in appendix 2, that will spark keen interest in Sikh diaspora anthropologists. These could be a valuable starting point for specialist studies of these Sikhs. This particular appendix perhaps also reinforces the work's semblance to the structure of academic literature and it is tempting to consider this work alongside that of Bruce La Brack (e.g. 1988) and Karen Leonard (e.g. 1992) on "Mexican Hindus" in Northern California as all authors report on similar developmental patterns of early migrant Sikhs e.g. marital habits and dichotomous religious practices. To do so however, would be an injustice to all works: they are generically dissimilar although Kahlon's observed Sikhs display characteristics of early 20th Century Sikhs settled in the Imperial Valley.

In chapter 1, Kahlon has the Sikhs and their habitual migratory "travel bug" (p.23) firmly in his sights as he traces the early origins of movements away from Punjab. In using McLeod's (in Barrier, Gerald and Dusenberry: 1989) questions on early Sikh migration, the book sets itself an ambitious aim to provision the reader with possible answers. This high aim, however, appears to get abandoned early on as little or no reference is made in the conclusion to these questions. Of positive note on the same page is Kahlon's use of McLeod's insistent inquiries to deftly layer over several other pertinent questions specific to "Latin American Sikhs". Starting on p. 25 and counting Guru Nanak amongst others; this chapter also offers a historical perspective on the active migration seen throughout Sikhs and Sikhism. It is here this reviewer feels that rather than basing the relative comparison on Indian government categories like Tamil, a comparative South Asian religions' approach may have deepened the writing (p.31). Kahlon also uses less obvious examples of Sikhs abroad or "emigrants" exiled including Dalip Singh and Ram Singh (p.25) - both of whom stretch a little too far, the definition of a migrant or traveller, simply due to the obligatory nature of their migration. Perhaps better examples of Sikh migrants would have illustrated the century old presence of Sikhs globally who as the author points out make up a disproportionate 10% of Indian immigrants as they only form approximately 2% of the Indian population (p.41). Towards the end this chapter loses its reference value by the inclusion of table 6 on p. 51 from a *Wikipedia* source that quotes Sikh populations around the world. The absence of erudite cross-testing is evidentiary by Kahlon's inclusion of data that estimates the number of Sikhs in the UK as "7,50,000".

In a mixed chapter 2, Kahlon uses the opportunity to familiarise the reader with the format of the following chapters that delve into the individual countries visited. The author also proposes a definition and the national identity of what could be considered Latin America. Also included is a "High Level Indian Government" report on the presence of citizens of "Indian origin". This gives the reader a good starting point for the author's journey as it is evidence of statistically based ethnography. This chapter does not attend to any one single aim as it also then goes onto detail the impact of Gurdwaras (p.61) and

the reasons for large scale Sikh immigrant settlements in Latin America (p.63). The most puzzling part of this chapter is the inclusion of “factors” (p. 64) that play an “insignificant” role for Sikhs in Latin America but are nevertheless included. Closing the chapter is Kahlon’s “Travel Diary”, all 18 pages of it; a section that probably belongs in the appendices as it dogmatically details the basics of his travel modes. The “Travel Nuggets” (p.81) also would have made a larger impact in verbal discourse rather than being drily recorded in this chapter. Of very good use here is a geographical map of the author’s travels on p. 66; this shows just how dedicated Kahlon must have been in pursuing his book’s aims, although calling them “campaigns” carries a freight that undermines the author’s perceived altruism.

Chapter 3 examines the Sikh population in Argentina and Kahlon considers this the most “significant country” with regards to his study (p.58) on Sikhs in Latin America; even though the presence of Sikhs is a relatively small number of the 1600 “Indians” reported on p. 57. Equally unsubstantiated is his statement that “...out of the total Indian immigrants, Sikhs form a majority” on the same page. Historians record that most of late 19th century Sikh settlers from India were part of the post-slavery British indentured labourers and as Argentina was not part of the British Empire; the presence of Sikhs requires some explanation. Kahlon not only understands the previous statement well, he uses this chapter with intricate familial detail to record a pioneering ground level history of Sikh migration to Argentina. His zeal at this discovery is plain in his records as this chapter is by far his most verbose being over 50 pages long (pp. 87 – 138). The inclusion of over 25 black and white pictures is also testament to the author’s diligence and he notes a significant discovery that early Sikh settlers were not accorded cremation but were buried in family tombs that are still fully maintained (p.92: plate 3). In noting that early Sikhs were single men employed as laymen on railway lines, set up shops and became middle managers the chapter could have benefitted even further from a cross-comparison with other early Sikh migration such as East Africa and South Asia where settlers also fell into the same early development pattern. Were the conditions at the destination or departure the same? Was it due to the skill-base being similar? This comparison could have been a critical addition to the field for someone with Kahlon’s enviable experience.

Chapter 3 sets the tone for the next nine country-based chapters with Kahlon using the families he meets as a springboard to record their oral history and using current sources such as newspapers he is able to comment on what the general populace make of the Sikhs. It becomes all too familiar a story after a few more chapters; the methodology being restricted to the contacts he has made or makes through other interviewees. Inherent in his writing style of diarised conversation, is repetition about the general hardship faced by all Sikh migrants on their voyages to the Americas. Significant focus however, is given to the success of the 3HO movement from California and into these Latin American territories. There are also excessive and extensive verbatim passages repeated from other sources, for example there is a full three page excerpt from a book titled “*India-Mexico: Similarities and encounters throughout history*” from p. 224 onwards. The reference to this work is also missing; so whilst not being required of a non-scholarly, an opportunity is missed for providing a useful source for further work in the field. After dealing with “larger” settlements of Sikhs in Latin America in the last nine

chapters, chapter 11 summarises the Sikh presence in “Other countries of South and Central America” that include Costa Rica he has just a single contact that owned a restaurant which was closed on Kahlon’s arrival (p.256). The author maybe signalling with this chapter that a full “continental” trip has been undertaken and successfully recorded with no efforts left untried.

After reading the nation-specific chapters, the author appropriates to this review the feel of an entrepreneur with literary flair conducting a personal Sikh pilgrimage. At many points, the reader is made amply aware of the humility and awe Kahlon feels as he meets descendants of Sikhs who do not speak Punjabi nor practice any cultural norms associated with Sikhs. Yet because Kahlon has the same outward male physical "Sikh" appearance (turban and unshorn hair) as their predecessors and is adept at engaging with the people he meets; they share with Kahlon their histories, many meals and valuable documents and pictures. This is the real skill of Kahlon; being dogged enough to track down these “Latin American Sikhs” and drawing out their stories. In doing this, the author leaves the reader more knowledgeable and thirsting for further understanding of the motivation for the migrants’ unusual presence in Latin America. The devotion in tracking down Sikhs in erstwhile “remote” places such as Belize, Costa Rica and Panama will point the way for yet another valuable turn in Sikh diaspora documentation; all thanks to this tenaciously published book. This is the real value of the book; opening up and deconstructing new diaspora research territories for others to follow up.

The book effortlessly and surprisingly, bridges genres for this reviewer; it is very much akin to books written by academically trained individuals who found travel writing a rewarding non-academic and perhaps anthropological pursuit. It is amongst the books of VS Naipaul, Salman Rushdie and Evelyn Waugh that Kahlon’s book could find peers, albeit a less polished one. Stretching the comparison slightly further; the book bears the unfettered style of travel writing as favoured by Bruce Chatwin in books such as *In Patagonia* (2005) – surely a first for a book on Sikh diaspora. Chatwin’s legacy was, and it is felt with Kahlon also, to redefine travel writing for those interested in immigrant kith and kin. Kahlon’s skill in using history in its oral and physical form and alloying it with contemporary lifestyles to show the reader the difficult conditions these Sikh families have come through will find a following both in the academic and non-academic world. However, the inclusion of an entire chapter (12) depicting Kahlon’s experiences as “a Sikh in the USA from 1985-61” (p. 257-288) complete with several black and white pictures of the author in situ may make some readers uncomfortable with its self-styled and self-serving tone; it is perhaps meant to be autobiographical but reads like a curriculum vitae.

It is significant to this reviewer that Kahlon's book begs the contemporary question that comes through so poignantly in his literature on Sikhs abroad: is the concept of diaspora still relevant? Probably more through chance than deliberation, Kahlon is adding to the burgeoning field of literature that debates the consideration of today’s Sikhs as diaspora or national citizens. This is a debate that surely in the years to come, is set to include literature in the academic, political and social arenas. The records collected by Kahlon in his conversations with the people he met will be valuable in understanding the diversity of identity amongst the Sikhs’ late-modern generations. His documented conversations, the century old passport scans and the newspaper articles

reproduced will be crucial primary sources for Sikh studies; this is Kahlon's addition to the emerging field. The little material available on these Sikh has suddenly and acutely increased through the efforts of his author. Kahlon also is acutely aware of topical debates on Sikhs and his conclusion (p.291) observes that caste is "conspicuous by its absence"; in this way the author becomes a good commentator as an "outsider" and these Sikhs could be a good focus group for a contemporary study of *zat*. In the closing sections, the very reason for Kahlon embarking on his journey appears to be aptly captured in the sentence that; "I am still intrigued as to how more than 100 years ago these so-called illiterate peasants of Punjab could get to know of such far-off lands as Argentina and find their way to these destinations" (p.291).

Ultimately the book, due to its multifarious approach, does not fully satisfy any specific aim and whilst it excites significantly in its approach, the end result is a tempting but short mix of a reflective personal diary and a contact list for further work. In adding to the ever-twisting debate of "Who is a Sikh?" (p. 194) the book's open-ended aims are only further encumbered. In the conclusions (pgs. 296-301), Kahlon also late-on introduces his political cogitations as he writes about being a *keshadhari* Sikh and the "turban" difficulties faced by the Sikhs in Latin America relative to the role of the SGPC's "institutionalised" *rahit maryada*. For this reviewer, a book with such a reflective title should probably try and avoid the politicisation of the author's travel experiences; it reduces the innovative research by trying to be too many things at once. The result is a work that ends up being unnecessarily reflexive. This becomes especially pejorative when Kahlon's answers to these "interminable" questions are compared to the detailed attention given by the likes of Opinderjit Kaur's 2005 work *Sikh Identity: an exploration of groups among Sikhs*. The book's welcome addition to the existing body of literature on Sikh diaspora is the significant contact list, the perils of ethnographical research in Latin America and the post-structural writing style. Some researchers will probably note that by including the interviewees' factual names and by shunning anonymity; Kahlon may risk his subjects' receiving unwanted attention and will almost certainly irk those who desire academic neutrality. Academic or not, this book is noteworthy to all readers interested in Sikhs; but especially to those who reflect on contemporary Sikh identity. Perhaps this book is part of the move into genre-hopping literature on Sikhs; a development that should be lauded by all – literati et al.

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