

# INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

Rethinking the Inclusionary Potential of  
Religious Institutions: The Case of Gurdwaras in Singapore

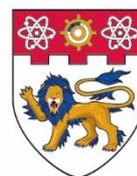
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# **INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS**

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**Rethinking the Inclusionary Potential of Religious Institutions:  
the Case of Gurdwaras in Singapore**

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## Abstract

Whilst Singapore's Sikh community is relatively small, it is also heterogeneous. Its diversity reflects differences in ancestral and socio-economic backgrounds. As spaces of worship that regularly bring together the Sikh community in space and time, Sikh temples – *gurdwaras* – are often conceived as important places through which a shared sense of religiously-defined community is reproduced. Yet, as much as religion can provide a bridge that integrates people of different ethnic, racial, national, and linguistic groups into a single faith community, so too can it act as a buttress through which differences and divisions are enforced within the community. We argue that whilst *gurdwaras* provide opportunities for transmitting Sikh principles and customs, and connecting the diaspora in Singapore with the traditions of their homeland, they can also play an important, and sometimes problematic, role in reproducing divisions and hierarchy within the Sikh community. We found that these divisions – particularly of ancestral background (tied to geographic and cultural regions of Punjab) and class – are often observed on two levels: between and within *gurdwaras*. By examining the complexities that *gurdwaras* in Singapore pose to the social integration of Sikh communities, we challenge the tendency in academic and public discourse to assume their inclusionary potential. This paper emphasises the importance of religious institutions in mitigating the incursions of exclusionary attitudes and behaviours within society, thus contributing to a more socially resilient and cohesive Singapore.

## Introduction

Singapore's resident population consists of three major groups: Chinese, Malays and Indians, of which Sikhs comprise less than 0.5 per cent.<sup>1</sup> At slightly over 12,500 people, the Sikh community is categorised as part of Singapore's Indian population and is often described as a "minority within a minority."<sup>2</sup> Whilst the Sikhs are considered a part of the country's Indian minority, they are qualitatively distinct from the "Indian" majority – most of whom hail from southern India, speak Tamil, and follow Hinduism. The term "Sikh" generally denotes people who originated from Punjab (although not all Punjabis are Sikhs) and follow the spiritual teachings of the Sikh *gurus*.<sup>3</sup> Most Sikhs in Singapore also speak Punjabi, the official language of Punjab.

Whilst Singapore's Sikh community is small, it is also heterogeneous. In recent years, the growth of "new" migrants has added further complexity to the Sikh population.<sup>4</sup> Whilst "new" migrants have injected "new diversity of ethnicities and culture never before seen,"<sup>5</sup> they have also triggered new identity politics that call into question the durability of Singapore's social harmony. The publication of the Population White Paper in 2013, in particular, has sparked widespread public debate concerning social cohesion and integration of foreigners.<sup>6</sup> If more differentiated and nuanced ways of managing difference are to be developed, the outcomes arising from encounters with difference need to be investigated.<sup>7</sup>

Within this context of growing diversity and concerns surrounding the integration of migrant communities, religion can play an important – yet mostly under-realised – role in bridging differences. Religion plays an integral role in mediating encounters, as the practice of religion can bring people from diverse backgrounds together in space and time. By bringing diverse communities together through worship, religion can help overcome the problematic alignment of "a spatial segregation of communities with lack of social integration."<sup>8</sup> Yet, as much as religion provides a cultural bridge that integrates people of different ethnic, racial, national, and linguistic groups into a single faith community, so too can it act as a buttress through which differences are enforced.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, there have been calls for research to understand better how religion can contribute to the (un)making of communities by critically assessing its purported inclusiveness, as "overstating religion's positive impact steers us away from confronting how religious practices contribute to patriarchy, racism, nationalism, militarism, and a host of other social and political ills."<sup>10</sup>

Addressing these calls, this paper explores the role of the Sikh temples (or *gurdwaras*, meaning "door to the Guru") in the social integration of the Sikhs in Singapore. The gurdwara plays an important role in the Sikh religious practices and communities – not only is it a place for the worship of the scripture, it also has an essential role in community life in village Punjab. Yet, the congregation-based nature of Sikh worship, coupled with the growing diversity of the Sikh population in recent years, means that *gurdwaras* and other spaces of

<sup>1</sup> Department of Statistics Singapore. *Census of Population 2020 Statistical Release 1: Demographic Characteristics, Education, Language and Religion* (Singapore: Ministry of Trade & Industry, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Press Trust of India, "Sikh community may have to evolve and adapt, says Singapore professor," *Business Standard* (3 November 2019), available at: [https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/sikh-community-may-have-to-evolve-and-adapt-says-singapore-professor-119110300074\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/sikh-community-may-have-to-evolve-and-adapt-says-singapore-professor-119110300074_1.html).

<sup>3</sup> The term "Sikh" has its origin in the Sanskrit word *śiṣya*, meaning "disciple" or "student". See Arunajeet Kaur, "The Evolution of the Sikh Identity in Singapore," in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008, 275-297, 275.

<sup>4</sup> 'New' migrants here refer to the second and later generations of migrants in Singapore, most notably in the last three decades. They include professionals and temporary migrant workers – many of whom share similar race and class identities with locals. See Yasmin Y. Ortiga, "Multiculturalism on its head: Unexpected social boundaries and new migration in Singapore," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 16.4 (2015): 947-963, 948.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Gomes and Jonathan Tan, "Christianity as a Culture of Mobility: A Case Study of Asian Transient Migrants in Singapore," *Kritika Kultura* 25 (2015): 215-244, 217.

<sup>6</sup> Jeanette Tan, "Population White Paper triggers nationwide debate," *Yahoo! News* (27 November 2013), available at: <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/-yir2013--population-white-paper-triggers-nationwide-debate-101840966.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Lily Kong, "Global shifts, theoretical shifts: Changing geographies of religion," *Progress in Human Geography* 34.6 (2010): 755-776, 769.

<sup>8</sup> Kye Askins and Rachel Pain, "Contact zones: Participation, materiality, and the messiness of interaction," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29.5 (2011): 803-821, 805.

<sup>9</sup> Orlando Woods and Lily Kong, "Parallel Spaces of Migrant (Non-)Integration in Singapore: Latent Politics of Distance and Difference Within a Diverse Christian Community," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 41.3 (2020): 339-354, 342.

<sup>10</sup> Wendy Cadge, Peggy Levitt, and David Smilde, "De-centering and re-centering: Rethinking concepts and methods in the sociological study of religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50.3 (2011): 437-449, 442.

Sikh practice provide opportunities not only for differences to be overcome, but also for divisions and exclusions to manifest. More than just a spiritual home for the Sikh community, *gurdwaras* have become a critical social space in which relationships amongst Sikhs are continuously made, remade and negotiated. Whilst the role of spaces of religious practice in building connections tends to be framed in largely favourable terms in public and academic discourse,<sup>11</sup> we argue that their significance is more complex and nuanced than theorised, not least due to the recent intermixing of “old” and “new” migrant communities in Singapore. This intermixing involves Sikhs from diverse class backgrounds, national upbringings, cultural differences, and linguistic groups coming into close and sustained contact. Thus, just as places of worship like *gurdwaras* strive to bring people together in ways that unify and align, physical proximity can also cause differences to become more enforced and boundaries to be more clearly defined. By investigating the role of *gurdwaras* in mediating relationships within the Sikh community, we emphasise the importance of religious institutions in host societies in playing a more proactive role in integration efforts, rather than placing the burden of integration solely on either individuals or the state.

Our focus on Singapore’s Sikh community also contributes to extending current academic studies of Singapore’s Indian community, which have tended to focus on the numerically dominant Tamil/Hindu community at the expense of the small but important communities from Northern India<sup>12</sup>. In a parallel vein, whilst studies on Sikh diasporas worldwide are emergent, they remain predominantly focused on immigrant-receiving countries of the global North – most notably the UK, US, and Canada.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Southeast Asia has not been a site for sustained investigation of Sikh communities, despite their long presence in Southeast Asia, beginning from the times when “Sikhs were placed by the British to help provide internal security in the colonial plural society” since the 1880s.<sup>14</sup> As a result of this lacuna, “models of the Sikh diasporic experience,” as Ballantyne argues, “tend to be grounded in British, North American, or even East African case studies.”<sup>15</sup> Singapore is different, however, because a high degree of cultural, ethnic, and religious plurality has existed since colonial times. The integration of Sikhs in Singapore is not simply about apposite inter-ethnic encounters between the Sikh community and a largely homogenous (often White) ethnic majority. Instead, the formation of the Sikh community is arguably more nuanced in Singapore, as it involves integrating into both the majority Indian community first, as well as the non-Indian population at large. This process is often entwined with “complicated notions of division relative to the social norms of Punjab” within the population,<sup>16</sup> and shaped, more broadly, by Singapore’s migration and labour governance regimes.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section briefly reviews academic literature concerning the role of religious institutions in community building, focusing on *gurdwaras*, before introducing the context of the Sikh community and *gurdwaras* in Singapore. The empirical findings are divided into two sub-sections, focusing on the complexities that *gurdwaras* pose to the social integration of the Sikh community on two interlinked scales: between and within *gurdwaras*. In conclusion, we emphasise the opportunities that *gurdwaras* present

<sup>11</sup> Ceri Peach and Richard Gale, “Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs in the New Religious Landscape of England,” *Geographical Review* 93.4 (2003): 469-490; Laura Hirvi, “The Sikh Gurdwara in Finland: Negotiating, Maintaining and Transmitting Immigrants’ Identities,” *South Asian Diaspora* 2.2 (2010): 219-232.

<sup>12</sup> Gerard McCann, “Sikhs and the City: Sikh history and diasporic practice in Singapore,” *Modern Asian Studies* 45.6 (2011): 1465-1498; see also Vineeta Sinha, “‘Mixing and Matching’: The Shape of Everyday Hindu Religiosity in Singapore,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 37 (2009): 83-106; Orlando Woods and Lily Kong, “The demands of displacement, the microaggressions of multiculturalism: performing an idea of ‘Indianness’ in Singapore,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46.1 (2022): 119-140, DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2022.2059387; Vineeta Sinha, “Unraveling ‘Singaporean Hinduism’: Seeing the Pluralism Within,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 14.2-3 (2010): 253-279.

<sup>13</sup> See, for examples, Ester Gallo, “Creating *Gurdwaras*, Narrating Histories: Perspectives on the Sikh Diaspora in Italy,” *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 6 (2012); Kathleen D. Hall, “The ethnography of imagined communities: The cultural production of Sikh ethnicity in Britain,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 595.1 (2004): 108-121; Hirvi, “The Sikh Gurdwara in Finland”; Kamala Elizabeth Nayar, *The Sikh diaspora in Vancouver: Three generations amid tradition, modernity, and multiculturalism*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004; Peach and Gale, “Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs in the New Religious Landscape of England”; Gurharpal Singh and Darshan Tatla, *Sikhs in Britain: the making of a community*, London: Zed, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Jasjit Singh, “Not Asian Enough? The Racialisation of Sikhs in Southeast Asia,” in *Global Sikhs: Histories, Practices and Identities*, eds. Opinderjit Kaur Takhar and Doris R. Jakobsh, Abingdon: Routledge, 2023, 260-277.

<sup>15</sup> Tony Ballantyne, “Foreword: Sikhism in Southeast Asia – Southeast Asia in Sikhism,” in *Sikhs in Southeast Asia: Negotiating an Identity*, eds. Shamsul A B & Arunajeet Kaur, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011, ix-xii, x.

<sup>16</sup> McCann, “Sikhs and the City,” 1465.

in building more cohesive Sikh communities in Singapore, whilst keeping in view their fragmentary potential in producing new – or perpetuating existing – forms of power relations and inequalities within the Sikh community.

## (Re)Making Integration through Spaces of Religious Practice

In recent decades, migration and the transnational flows it gives rise to have led to situations of growing diversity around the world. Amidst ongoing change, the importance of religion has been reified as a stabilising source of identity. Amongst other things, it provides a sense of belonging to an “imagined” faith community and a point of entry into a more tangible community of like-minded believers.<sup>17</sup> In academic and public discourses, spaces of religion have been recognised as having significant social and cultural value for facilitating encounters with difference, producing a shared sense of religiously-defined community. Due to the breadth and diversity of these spaces, any discussion of their general characteristics is often complicated by differences in religious tradition, scale, myriad styles of worship, devotional orientations and more.<sup>18</sup> Despite these differences, the importance of space in forging social connections within religious communities can be broadly approached from two levels.

On one level, spaces of religious practice are often understood to be significant in supporting “newcomers” by providing emotional and material support in the community as they settle into a locality.<sup>19</sup> By understanding immigrant churches in Canada as a form of “urban service hubs,” Ley argues that the “coalescence of faith with language, ethnicity, place of origin [...] created a singular identity” at places of worship “upon which bonding social capital readily coheres.”<sup>20</sup> In a study of the Hindu diaspora in Britain, King observes that the Hindu temple has acquired a “new significance” for the community because “it has become an important centre and meeting place for an ethnic and religious minority.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Peach and Gale also note how places of worship can aid the institutionalisation of family units in the new context and enhance migrants’ basic conditions in terms of housing, labour, and legal status.<sup>22</sup> On the other level, apart from examining “inward” interactions within the immigrant community, studies have also shown how spaces of religious practices have the potential to forge “outward” connections across differences, particularly between migrants and nonmigrants. For example, Korean migrant churches in America have been demonstrated to help bridge the gap between Korean migrant and American nonmigrant communities by reproducing the positive associations of each.<sup>23</sup> Such statements thus suggest how spaces of religious practice, in bringing together people from diverse backgrounds in space, time and belief, have the potential to bridge differences within the highly heterogeneous religious community.

Whilst important, the explanatory potential of studies like these has two limitations. First, most empirically-led studies of such spaces of religion tend to draw from Anglo-American and European contexts, thereby “assuming conditions particular to western states such as the dominance of a largely white Anglo mainstream.”<sup>24</sup> In these studies, the potential of spaces of religious practice in mediating encounters with differences is often framed in terms of inter-ethnic encounters between a largely homogenous “White” majority with non-White (often immigrant) “others.” Yet, unlike these places, Singapore is not a homogenous society dealing with the influx of diverse “others.” The ethnic, religious, and cultural plurality of Singapore has a long

<sup>17</sup> Patricia Ehrkamp and Caroline Nagel, “Immigration, Places of Worship and the Politics of Citizenship in the US South,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 37 (2012): 624-638.

<sup>18</sup> Spaces of religion encompass a wide range of spaces, including faith-based organisations, religious schools, meditation centres, amongst others. In the literature review, we focus on places of worship as an example of spaces of religion.

<sup>19</sup> Steven Vertovec, “Three Meanings of ‘Diaspora,’ Exemplified among South Asian Religions,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 6.3 (1997): 277-299; see also Hirvi, “The Sikh *Gurdwara* in Finland”.

<sup>20</sup> David Ley, “The immigrant church as an urban service hub,” *Urban Studies* 45.10 (2008): 2057-2074, 2063.

<sup>21</sup> Ursula King, *A Report on Hinduism in Britain*, Community Religions Project Research Papers (New Series), Leeds: University of Leeds, 1984, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Colin Clarke, Ceri Peach, and Steven Vertovec, “Introduction: Themes in the Study of the South Asian Diaspora,” in *South Asians Overseas. Migration and Ethnicity*, eds. Colin Clarke, Ceri Peach & Steven Vertovec, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 1-29; Peach and Gale, “Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs in the New Religious Landscape of England”.

<sup>23</sup> Elaine Howard Ecklund, “Models of civic responsibility: Korean Americans in congregations with different ethnic compositions,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44.1 (2005): 15-28.

<sup>24</sup> Ortiga, “Multiculturalism on its head”, 948.

historical lineage, recently compounded by the arrivals of “new” migrants who often share an ethnocultural heritage similar to Singaporeans, particularly with those of Chinese and Indian ethnicities.<sup>25</sup> In places like Singapore, the making of the Sikh community is thus often constituted through much more nuanced differences and distinctions *within* the community, as Sikhs from increasingly diverse class backgrounds, national upbringings, and cultural differences come in close and sustained contact with one another. As McCann argues, “more complicated notions of divisions relative to the social norms of Punjab must be acknowledged in this region (Singapore) of Sikh diaspora,”<sup>26</sup> signalling a more complicated picture of community formation in Singapore than is captured in the literature.

Second, dominant theorisations around the social potential of spaces of religion often fail to fully grasp their complex character and implications for the community. By revealing how places of worship offered a “refuge to establish confidence in a supportive social context to continue the struggle outside,” prevailing portrayals of spaces of religious practice tend to reflect “a spatial dichotomy of external stress and internal security.”<sup>27</sup> Although these spaces have the potential to overcome divisions within society, recent studies suggest that they often fail to do so. In a study of London’s Hindu and Sikh temples, Vertovec argues that “the assumed idea of the temple as a community centre can be problematic in relation to the divergent roles and meanings the temple can hold for different groups.”<sup>28</sup> Drawing on extensive qualitative studies of churches and Hindu temples in Singapore, Woods and Kong highlighted the everyday exclusionary experiences of migrants in these spaces, revealing how these spaces can reproduce the biases and prejudices of Singapore society, particularly against foreigners. These findings thus raise questions about the claimed integrative potential of religious spaces through the development of “parallel spaces of religious praxis.”<sup>29</sup>

Beyond these studies, there is also research that specifically focuses on the lived experiences of *gurdwaras* by understanding their integrative potential within the Sikh communities. Scholars have suggested how the *gurdwara*, particularly in a diasporic context, has the potential for (re)producing a sense of home that serves as “a socio-cultural hub and an identity marker for a more or less dispersed and diverse community.”<sup>30</sup> For instance, *gurdwaras* are said to play a vital role in the community life of Sikhs in Vancouver, Canada, by functioning as a “home base for new immigrants,” especially those who could not speak English or who were illiterate, a gathering place for seniors, and a refuge for the marginalised and the less fortunate – Punjabi Sikhs, other South Asians, or even Caucasians – through its institution of *seva* (meaning “selfless service”) and *langar* (meaning “community kitchen”).<sup>31</sup>

Whilst important, the empirical realities of *gurdwaras* revealed more nuances to such cursory observations and discourses. For instance, Gallo’s study in Italy found that the internal differences within Sikh communities (e.g., gendered differences between more established Sikh male brokers and others) are often inscribed and constituted in and through the *gurdwara*.<sup>32</sup> In the context of *gurdwaras* in Finland, whilst recognising how the *gurdwara* for many Sikh immigrants is much more than a place to worship, Hirvi notes that “there are also many Sikhs in Finland who avoid going to the *gurdwara*, mostly because of gossip and internal power struggles.”<sup>33</sup> In the UK context, Singh and Tatla found that there are two main categories of *gurdwaras*: one is what they call “mainstream *gurdwaras*” that “do not restrict membership or participation in the

<sup>25</sup> A large proportion of migrants, particularly construction workers, come from South Asia and can be generalized locally as “Indians”, while many workers from China, Vietnam, and Thailand have ethnic Chinese origins. See also Ortiga, “Multiculturalism on its head,” 948; Chua Beng Huat, “Multiculturalism in Singapore: an instrument of social control,” *Race & Class*, 44.3 (2003): 58-77.

<sup>26</sup> McCann, “Sikhs and the City,” 1465.

<sup>27</sup> Ley, “The immigrant church as an urban service hub,” 2063.

<sup>28</sup> Steven Vertovec, “Community and Congregation in London Hindu Temples: Divergent Trends,” *New Community* 18.2 (1992): 251-264.

<sup>29</sup> Woods and Kong, “Parallel spaces of migrant non-integration in Singapore,” 340.

<sup>30</sup> Barbara Bertolani, Sara Bonfanti, and Paolo Boccagni, “At home in the *gurdwara*? Religious space and the resonance with domesticity in a London suburb,” *Religion* 51.3 (2021): 423-442; See also, Gurharpal Singh, “*Gurdwaras* and Community-Building among British Sikhs,” *Contemporary South Asia* 15.2 (2006): 147-164; Kaveri Qureshi, “Sikh Associational Life in Britain: Gender and Generation in the Public Sphere,” in *Migration and Religion in Europe*, ed. Ester Gallo, Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 93-109.

<sup>31</sup> Kamala Elizabeth Nayar, “The making of Sikh space: The role of the *Gurdwara*,” in *Asian Religions in British Columbia*, eds. Larry DeVries, Don Baker, and Dan Overmyer, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010, 43-63, 51-53.

<sup>32</sup> Gallo, “Creating *Gurdwaras*, Narrating Histories.”

<sup>33</sup> Hirvi, “The Sikh *Gurdwara* in Finland,” 230.

management committee to particular caste groups” and cater for Sikhs of all ideological persuasions (approximately 85 per cent of all gurdwaras in the UK), and the other comprises caste-focused *gurdwaras* that predominantly belong to the Ramgarhia and Bhatia communities (15 per cent).<sup>34</sup> In the latter group of ‘caste-focused *gurdwaras*’, the *gurdwara* management committee is often associated with a particular caste group, attracting members of the same group. Whilst these caste-focused *gurdwaras* are less common than the so-called “mainstream *gurdwaras*,” they nonetheless form a significant minority of all *gurdwaras* in the UK, underscoring how “factionalism is [...] a permanent state of nature’ that has neither diminished nor lost its significance after several generations of British Sikh society.”<sup>35</sup> Additionally, also in the UK context, Singh found that young British Sikhs often have little involvement in the management of *gurdwaras* due to the persistence of such factional politics.<sup>36</sup> In sum, these findings offer a departure from the existing tendency to romanticise the role of religious places in connecting diverse members. They draw attention to the distinctions that are not only found within, but also between, *gurdwaras*, raising questions about the potential of religious sites, particularly *gurdwaras*, in bringing together and integrating Sikh communities.<sup>37</sup>

Extending these studies, this paper critically assesses how *gurdwaras* are variously perceived and experienced amongst the Sikhs in contemporary Singapore. In so doing, it problematises the monolithic portrayals of the inclusionary potential of *gurdwaras* for the diaspora communities, challenging the prevailing positive notion of the *gurdwara* as a “socio-cultural hub and an identity marker for a diverse community.”<sup>38</sup> Such a focus can enable a more nuanced, fine-grained understanding of the potential and politics of religious institutions in supporting and disabling cohesion within the community that can locate sites for future intervention. These processes and politics are now explored through a focus on the place of Sikhs in Singapore.

## The History and Place of Sikhs in Singapore

The Punjab region of the Indian subcontinent has been the historic homeland of the Sikhs.<sup>39</sup> Comprising the northwestern part of India and the eastern part of Pakistan, Punjab was one of the last provinces to be annexed by the British in 1849. The Punjab region in India comprises three areas: *Doaba*, *Majha*, and *Malwa* (figure 1).<sup>40</sup> Most of the initial migration was from the *Doaba* region, which has one of the highest population densities in Punjab. However, almost all regions of Punjab have now developed a dynamic culture of migration.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Singh and Tatla, *Sikhs in Britain*, 77, and Jasjit Singh, “House of the Guru? Young British Sikhs’ Engagements with the *Gurdwaras*,” *Journal of Punjab Studies* 21.1 (2014): 41-54, 42, available at: <https://www.punjab.global.ucsb.edu/sites/default/files/sitefiles/journals/volume21/no1/Singh.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> Singh and Tatla, *Sikhs in Britain*, 31.

<sup>36</sup> Singh, “House of the Guru?,” 47.

<sup>37</sup> Gallo, “Creating *Gurdwaras*, Narrating Histories,” 2.

<sup>38</sup> Singh, “*Gurdwaras* and community-building among British Sikhs.”

<sup>39</sup> Kaur, “The Evolution of the Sikh Identity in Singapore,” 278.

<sup>40</sup> According to McCann, the Punjab was divided into two zones by the Sutlej River so that by the beginning of the twentieth century the major Sikh Districts were: *Majha* – Gujranwala, Sialkot, Gurdaspur, Lahore, Amritsar, Kapurthala, Hoshiapur and Jullundur; and *Malwa* – Ferozepore, Ludhiana, Patiala, Nabha, Maler Kotla, Jindh, Ambala, and Kalsia. A third sector – the *Doaba* – was also identified. *Majha* and *Malwa* Jats – the primary soldier-agriculturalists of the region – acquired positive stereotypes, which facilitated their employment in India and abroad. See McCann, “Sikhs and the City,” 1479.

<sup>41</sup> Shinder S. Thandi, “Diversities, Continuities and Discontinuities of Tradition in the Contemporary Sikh Diaspora: Gender and Social Dimensions,” in *Women in the Indian Diaspora: Historical Narratives and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Amba Pande, Singapore: Springer, 2018, 161-176.



Figure 1: Map of Punjab's districts and regions.<sup>42</sup>

It was generally believed that the first Sikhs came to Singapore and Malaysia as *sepoys* (soldiers of the British Indian Army) in the early nineteenth century. Most of these Sikhs were rural Jat Sikhs, designated as a “martial race” by the British colonial authorities.<sup>43</sup> Subsequently, more Sikhs – primarily men – began to make their journeys to Singapore and were employed mainly by the police regiment under the British Commission in the late nineteenth century.<sup>44</sup> It is the primary duty of the Sikhs to establish a *gurdwara* when the number of residents reaches a critical mass, often around three to four hundred individuals, or 100 families, which is needed to facilitate its construction and maintenance.<sup>45</sup> The arrival of the Sikhs in colonial Singapore was swiftly followed by the establishment of the first Sikh *gurdwara* in Singapore, known as the Police Gurdwara. It was located in the Pearl’s Hill barracks, where most Sikh police officers and their families resided. Diversifying from the first wave of immigrants who were primarily in the police and military, subsequent migrants took up a variety of other occupations, such as clerks, storekeepers, dairy farmers and bullock cart drivers. Whilst Sikh migration before the 1930s was exclusively male, they began to establish families in Singapore with the subsequent movement of their wives.<sup>46</sup> This Sikh migration continued well into the 1950s, as more Sikh businesspeople migrated to Singapore following the 1947 India-Pakistan partition. Accordingly, the capacity of the Pearl’s Hill Police Gurdwara soon became untenable. It later expanded to Silat Road, becoming what is known as the Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road (Silat Road Sikh Temple) today. At present, there are seven Sikh *gurdwaras* in

<sup>42</sup> Adapted from Sukhdeep Kaur, Kiran Bains, and Harpreet Kaur, “Assessment of stunting and malnutrition among school-going children from different cultural regions of Punjab, India,” *Indian Journal of Ecology* 44.4 (2017): 898-903, and Margaret Walton-Roberts, “Transnational geographies: Indian immigration to Canada,” *Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe canadien* 47.3 (2003): 235-250.

<sup>43</sup> Richard Gabriel Fox, *Lions of the Punjab: Culture in the making*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

<sup>44</sup> Rishpal Singh Sidhu, *Singapore’s Early Sikh Pioneers: Origins, Settlements, Contributions and Institutions*, Singapore: Central Sikh Gurdwara Board, 2017, 1-22.

<sup>45</sup> Nachatter S. Garha and Andreu Domingo I. Valls, “Sikh diaspora and Spain: migration, hypermobility and space,” *Diaspora Studies* 10.2 (2017): 193-216, 211.

<sup>46</sup> McCann, “Sikhs and the City”.

Singapore. In addition to the Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road, there is the Central Sikh Gurdwara, Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha (at Wilkie Road), Gurdwara Khalsa Dharmak Sabha (at Niven Road), Gurdwara Pardesi Khalsa (at Geylang), Gurdwara Katong Sri Guru Nanak Satsang Sabha (at Wilkinson Road), and Gurdwara Sahib Yishun.<sup>47</sup>

To assess the role of *gurdwaras* in enabling and/or disabling the formation of community in Singapore, this paper draws on qualitative findings from a Ministry of Education Tier 2 funded research project on “New Religious Pluralisms in Singapore,” conducted between August 2018 and October 2022. The project critically examined the role of migrant communities in shaping inter- and intra-religious relations in Singapore, focusing on seven major religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, Catholicism, Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism. For the Sikh component of the project, in-depth interviews were conducted with 27 participants who self-identified as Sikhs, including 25 Singaporean and two non-Singaporean (i.e., migrant) Sikhs. Whilst our sample is not intended to be representative of the wider Sikh population in Singapore, we sought to ensure diversity in various aspects of our sample. The Sikhs in our sample span a wide range of ages, from 18 to 60s, with most participants aged 25 to 35. They come from various backgrounds, including white- and blue-collared workers, students, freelancers, homemakers, and retirees. All respondents’ names have been replaced by pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

## Negotiating Communities of Diaspora in and through Singapore’s *Gurdwaras*

Like other spaces of religious practice, the *gurdwara* is, in many ways, committed to serving people from all walks of life. More than just spaces where worshippers congregate and pay their respects, *gurdwaras* also function as community-building centres for people of all faiths. Not only do the *gurdwaras* serve food and provide shelter for the community, but they also provide classes for people to learn Punjabi, and Sikh music and culture. Yet, *gurdwaras* also have distinct characteristics and conventions that render them more open to particular communities, whilst less so to others. Just as the proximity of Sikhs in the space has provided many opportunities to overcome differences, they can also cause differences and divisions to be enforced. These implications can be observed on two levels: between and within *gurdwaras*.

### *Social integration between gurdwaras: imagined district distinctions*

Most *gurdwaras* are not only identified by their locations in Singapore, but some – especially those managed privately beyond the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board – are also associated with specific regions in the ancestral homeland of Punjab, India. For instance, Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha at Wilkie Road is popularly known as a “*Majha* temple,” as it is frequented by worshippers whose lineage is traced to Punjab’s *Majha* district. The same goes for Gurdwara Khalsa Dharmak Sabha at Niven Road, known as a “*Malwa* temple,” and Khalsa Dharmak Diwan at Geylang, a “*Doaba* temple.”<sup>48</sup> Jasmin,<sup>49</sup> a Singaporean Sikh in her 30s who frequents Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha at Wilkie Road, calls it “the *Majha Gurdwara*.” She explained, “Our grandparents came from the *Majha* district, they came here, then our parents were all brought up here [in Singapore]... then our fathers brought us here. So, we automatically identify this as our family *gurdwara* that we always go to. My friends from the *Malwa* villages, tend to go to that [Niven Road] temple down the hill.” A 29-year-old Sikh, Abinaash, also echoed Jasmin’s explanation: “the one at Wilkie Road, the one at the top is for Northern, and the one below is for southern Punjab... so I would say that the Punjabi community in Singapore have differentiated the minorities, they are already drawing lines within the minorities.”

<sup>47</sup> The divisions among these Sikh temples have historical lineage dating back to the early twentieth century. Refer to McCann, “Sikhs and the City,” 1479-1481, for more information.

<sup>48</sup> McCann, “Sikhs and the City,” 1480. The Gurdwara Khalsa Dharmak Sabha was formed when the *Malwas* broke away from the *Majha*-dominated Central Sikh Temple and Sri Guru Singh Sabha in 1924 due to “nascent rivalries triggered by financial scandal”. See also Kaur, “The Evolution of the Sikh Identity in Singapore,” 276 for elaboration on the “rivalries amongst the various Sikh factions that caused the initial Sikh organisations and places of worship to splinter, leading to the creation of the current seven venues of worship.”

<sup>49</sup> To protect participants’ confidentiality, all names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

Their sentiments demonstrate how the *gurdwaras* represent what McCann, a scholar of Sikh diasporas in Southeast Asia, described as “regional fissures [extending] far beyond the amorphous regional divisions of Punjabi society and represent a unique characteristic of Southeast Asian Sikh society.”<sup>50</sup> *Gurdwaras* not only represent the diaspora’s imaginations of the homeland, however. They also play an active role in reproducing these imaginations, translating such “regional fissures” onto the Sikh community. In particular, many respondents shared that such “fissures” tend to be maintained and reified by the upper echelons of the respective *gurdwaras* today. Nirajan, a 48-year-old self-employed Singaporean Sikh who frequents the Gurdwara Khalsa Dharmak Sabha at Niven Road (popularly known as the “*Malwa* temple”) explained how: “[W]hen it comes to board members, it’s still very clique-ish *lah*. It’s impossible for a *Majha* to lead a *Malwa* temple. It just won’t happen. Their membership form asks which village you come from, so you can’t run away from that.” According to Nirajan, most privately-managed *gurdwaras* are usually led by a “clique” of leaders who share similar geographical ancestry, even though most leaders are born and bred in Singapore. This situation differs from existing observations of UK-based *gurdwaras* and other *gurdwaras* based in Europe, where fissures in those *gurdwaras* were historically based around a particular socio-economic hierarchy, such as caste groups, rather than geographical locations.<sup>51</sup> Here, it becomes salient that Singapore’s *gurdwaras* – sites where the Sikh diaspora gather regularly — can enforce divisions amongst the Sikhs and, therefore, deserve further scrutiny for their potential in (un)making communities.

Yet, the “regional fissures” among these *gurdwaras* that many Sikhs in Singapore described are often more imagined than real. These differences between the three central Punjabi regions and people are imagined because they are primarily circulated through stories, and hearsay passed down over generations, what scholars have referred to as a “collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland,”<sup>52</sup> rather than by personal experiences and encounters. Nevertheless, these imagined fissures can have real implications within the Sikh community by shaping how they imagine their diasporic connections to Punjab and how they perceive other Sikhs in Singapore. Nirajan continues to share how Sikh adherents of different geographical lineages are imagined:

[T]his *Majha-Malwa* thing will come out in older people’s conversations. *Malwa* [people] are more conniving, *Majha* [people] are more hardworking and straightforward, and the Tanjong Katong people are more business savvy.... The *Doabas* are the most clique-ish, I would say... because of the small numbers.

Parveen, a Singaporean Sikh woman in her 40s who frequents the Gurdwara Pardesi Khalsa in Geylang, further echoed Nirajan’s remark, likening this district consciousness to “the caste system in the Sikh religion.” She added, “I prefer [visiting the] Geylang *Gurdwara*. The people are much more humble.” Aarti also described this “regional fissure” as a form of caste: “even in Sikhs, there are castes. So different castes would be [tied] to different temples. Somewhat allocated. You have your temple to pray at, kind of.” Rani, a Singaporean Sikh in her 30s who works as a teacher, echoed her sentiment, “The rich Sindhis and the rich Sikhs will go to Katong *Gurdwara*...the *Majha* and *Malwa*, they came in hardships – they were cart drivers in Singapore, doing security guard duties.” Jasmin found that differentiating *gurdwaras* by district lines has inadvertently created greater segregation than integration within the relatively small Sikh community in Singapore. She explained:

[T]here is segregation [within] the [Sikh] community as well, as people go to the different temples because they come from different districts in India. As we grow up, my generation finds it a bit weird. But my parents’ generation thinks it is completely normal because those people come from the same place, in the same community as

<sup>50</sup> McCann, “Sikhs and the City,” 1481.

<sup>51</sup> Sewa Singh Kalsi, *The Evolution of a Sikh Community in Britain: Religious and Social Change among the Sikhs of Leeds and Bradford*, Leeds: University of Leeds, 1992; See also, Singh and Tatla “Sikhs in Britain,” 77; Gallo, “Creating Gurdwaras, Narrating Histories”. That said, there are observations of *gurdwaras* in Vancouver, Canada, for instance, that surfaced the divisions relating to geographic regions like *Doaba*, *Malwa*, and *Majha* in the Sikh community – see Nayar, *The Sikh diaspora in Vancouver*.

<sup>52</sup> William Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1.1 (1991): 83-99, 83.

they grow up, and all go to the same place. There is no integration of the two in that sense. There's actually more of a segregation, I find.

Such segregation amongst the Sikhs appears more pronounced in the gathering of the Sikh community in Singapore, such as during the *Naam Ras Kirtan Darbar*, or *Naam Ras* for short, which translates to “Festival of Sikh Music.” Since its first event more than twenty years ago, *Naam Ras* has been lauded as the “largest gathering of the Sikh community in Southeast Asia.”<sup>53</sup> Initiated by volunteers from various *gurdwaras*, *Naam Ras* typically features speeches from gurus (teachers) around the world, devotional music, and heritage exhibitions to provide a deeper understanding of the Sikh faith and traditions to both Sikh and non-Sikh members. Yet, contrary to this vision, the “regional fissures” within the Sikh community continue to play out during *Naam Ras*. Malminder, a 21-year-old undergraduate, explained that “one major conflict that I have actually seen [was], “why are you here? You don't belong here [...] you won't be accepted into helping out at another place because you are not part of the gang. Same for serving and preparing food, if you don't belong there, haven't been living there and don't have connections, you will feel like an outsider over there.”

While Malminder had initially described *Naam Ras* as an event where “everyone just comes together for the love of God,” his experiences demonstrated how instances of frayed integration amongst the Sikhs continue to be reified in and through this space. Despite sharing the same event space, Sikh members, according to Malminder, tend to cleave and confine themselves to separate “bubbles” differentiated by their ancestry backgrounds. His sentiment was also similar to Abinaash's. Abinaash is a 29-year-old civil servant who felt that *Naam Ras* is largely organised by certain cliques of Singaporean Sikhs for “publicity stunts [...] they like to do those things which have publicity.” Their experiences thus demonstrate how such imagined differences within the community continue to generate concrete implications for inclusion and integration within the local Sikh community in Singapore.

Our study found that many second and third-generation Sikhs born and bred in Singapore are aware of such imagined “regional fissures” within the Sikh community. However, most assert that such divisions resonate little with them since they barely have personal connections with “home” in Punjab. Meeta claimed that, “our generation tends to not, ‘oh we only go to that *gurdwara* because it's for [people from] that district.’ Our generation is more of wherever our parents are. We just go there. Personally, I feel that we can go to any *gurdwara*.” Rani, a preschool teacher in her 30s, also shared similar sentiments. She described how “it is usually two, three generations back, my grandparents' or great grandparents' generations that have such consciousness.” Echoing these sentiments, Jasmin lamented how such consciousness of ancestry background and lineage tends to be more salient “in my parents' generation and my grandparents' generation... they are like ‘oh he is a *Majha*,’” but she argued that “he is still a Sikh, right?”

These sentiments by the recent Sikh generations in Singapore parallel scholars' observations of Sikhs in other parts of Southeast Asia and Sikh youth in Vancouver, Canada. For instance, given the relatively small number of Sikhs in Indonesia (fewer than three thousand), most Indonesian Sikhs tend to recognise each another “as part of a broader Sikh collectivity” despite the “internal divisions (by caste, class, regional origins in Punjab, factional allegiances, political ties, religious practices and so forth).”<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Nayar found that many Sikh youth (understood as third-generation diaspora) are often frustrated by the politics within the Sikh community, which includes identifications with specific geographic and cultural regions like *Doaba*, *Malwa*, and *Majha*, which resultantly deter them from participating in the *gurdwara*.<sup>55</sup> In light of these observations, consciousness centred on regional divisions in Punjab seems to be more salient amongst the earlier generations of the Sikh diaspora in Singapore. That said, such a territorial consciousness is increasingly negotiated amongst the recent diaspora generations, which signals a reimagination of “home” and “community” amongst Singaporean Sikhs over time. All in all, the anecdotes in this section illustrate *gurdwaras* become a political site through and from which differences – often centred on regional divisions – amongst Singaporean Sikhs are

<sup>53</sup> Rahimah Rashith, “Thousands attend the four-day Sikh festival to celebrate founder Guru Nanak's 550th birth anniversary,” *The Straits Times* (26 December 2018), available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/thousands-attend-four-day-sikh-festival-to-celebrate-founders-550th-birth-anniversary-and>.

<sup>54</sup> Verne A. Dusenbery, “Diasporic Imagings and the Conditions of Possibility: Sikhs and the State in Southeast Asia,” *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 12.2 (1997): 226-260.

<sup>55</sup> Nayar, *The Sikh Diaspora in Vancouver*, 208.

often enforced through differential treatment and exclusionary practices. Such divisions between *gurdwaras* also become more salient at large-scale inter-temple gatherings like the biannual *Naam Ras*.

### *Social (dis)integration within gurdwaras: from integrating to including “desi” migrants*

Divisions amongst the Sikhs are not only drawn *between gurdwaras*, but are also observed *within the gurdwara*. In recent years, many *gurdwaras* in Singapore reportedly received an increasing number of migrant workers. In particular, respondents in our study shared that they rarely encounter professionals in the *gurdwara*. Nirajan explained, “The higher end doesn’t even mix with the locals... They go to temples on different days from us.” Indeed, most respondents in our study often refer to “migrant workers” when reflecting on their encounters with non-Singaporeans in the *gurdwara*. This section thus focuses on Singaporeans’ encounters with migrant workers to understand how differences between these groups are encountered, enforced, and negotiated in the *gurdwara*. Using quotation marks to differentiate between “Singaporeans” and “migrants”, we attempt to disrupt the sense of categorical distinction that these two labels represent, recognising that, in reality, the boundaries between labels are often blurred.

The dynamics between Singaporeans and migrants need to be understood in the broader context of labour and migration governance regimes. In recent years, Singapore’s ageing population and falling birth rate have led to a growing dependence on migrants to provide key skills and services. Whilst the recent arrival of “new” migrants has injected “new diversity of ethnicities and culture never before seen,”<sup>56</sup> they have also caused identity politics to become issues of foremost socio-political concern. In response, the government established a National Integration Council to manage the latent politics between migrant and nonmigrant communities in 2009.<sup>57</sup> This can be seen to pre-empt the publication of a government white paper in 2013,<sup>58</sup> which projected that the total population would reach between 6.5 and 6.9 million by 2030, driven mainly by immigration and naturalisation programmes.<sup>59</sup> The white paper was very much criticised, sparking public debate concerning social cohesion and the integration of foreigners even a decade later.

Migrants make up about a quarter of the total workforce in Singapore, which can be broadly divided into two strands: “foreign talent” and “foreign workers.”<sup>60</sup> “Foreign talent” are typically skilled professionals and investors, who hold a form of employment pass that enables them to apply for dependents’ passes and grants them access to job mobility and pathways to permanent residence and citizenship. “Foreign workers,” known locally as migrant workers, are low-wage temporary migrant labour holding work permits from Bangladesh, India and China, often concentrated in the manufacturing, construction, and domestic service industries.<sup>61</sup> Unlike the “foreign talents,” foreign workers are often treated in more transactional and transitional terms. They have no access to citizenship, nor are they eligible for dependents’ visas. Male migrant workers, in particular, are also usually segregated from other populations in Singapore, and are mostly housed in state-approved, employer-provided accommodation in the form of purpose-built dormitories, industrial warehouses, and temporary quarters on work sites. Given their employment and visa statuses, migrant workers are non-citizens that are qualitatively distinct from their Singaporean and “foreign talent” counterparts. As scholars note, it is these calculated spatial forms of migrant incorporation at the level of policy that stratify their inclusion in everyday life.<sup>62</sup> Such differentiated measures of migrant labour thus reinforce hierarchical power relations in society that structure a particular, distinctive configuration of living with diversity in Singapore.

<sup>56</sup> Gomes and Tan, “Christianity as a Culture of Mobility,” 217.

<sup>57</sup> See Hong Liu, “Beyond Co-ethnicity: The Politics of Differentiating and Integrating New Immigrants in Singapore,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37.7 (2014): 1225-1238, for an overview of the Singapore government’s integration efforts.

<sup>58</sup> Woods and Kong, “Parallel Spaces of Migrant (Non-)Integration in Singapore,” 344.

<sup>59</sup> National Population and Talent Division, Prime Minister’s Office, *A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore: Population White Paper*, Singapore: Prime Minister’s Office, 2013, available at: <https://www.strategygroup.gov.sg/images/chart7.png.pdf>.

<sup>60</sup> Brenda S. A. Yeoh, “Bifurcated labour: The unequal incorporation of transmigrants in Singapore,” *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* 97.1 (2006): 26-37.

<sup>61</sup> Junjia Ye, *Class Inequality in the Global City: Migrants, Workers, and Cosmopolitanism in Singapore*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

<sup>62</sup> Junjia Ye, “Re-orienting geographies of urban diversity and coexistence: Analyzing inclusion and difference in public space,” *Progress in Human Geography* 43.3 (2019): 478-495, 488-489.

Against this backdrop, the relationship between Singaporeans and migrant workers in the *gurdwara* is often characterised by a conflicting situation of dependence and distance.<sup>63</sup> Many Singaporeans in our study recognised that migrant workers play an integral role in the operations of *gurdwaras* by contributing to tasks such as preparing food for the congregants and cleaning the space. Davinder said, “They will help clean the dishes and the *gurdwara* all voluntarily. No one is putting a gun to your head and telling you that you must be in the temple after you have eaten. But they do it voluntarily, on their own.” Similarly, Roor, a 58-year-old Singaporean freelancer, went further to emphasise the importance of migrant workers to maintain these spaces, “to keep the *gurdwara* going, we need them! We need the input, extra people coming in to make it run.”

Given Singaporeans’ dependence on migrant workers in maintaining the *gurdwaras*, migrant workers are integrated into the space by virtue of their regular volunteering efforts, albeit being included on unequal terms. Rupi, a Singaporean civil servant in her 30s, explained, “it’s a give and take, both parties get their thing. Once their work is done, the management doesn’t have to hire people.” Davinder, a 21-year-old undergraduate shared:

On Sunday, the temples have programs where they make a lot of food, you are drawing a crowd from everywhere. There are too many of them [‘desi’ migrants] that people cannot even sit down and eat, so the temple has to consider that. For example, at Silat Road, they [the temple management staff] would have tables dedicated only to families and children, and there will be a certain portion dedicated to the, we call them, the Desi boys. They don’t want families to be uncomfortable... imagine a mum [being] surrounded by 20 or 30 desi boys?

According to Davinder, the distance between Singaporeans and migrant workers was further amplified by segregation practices within the *gurdwara*, often executed by the management staff. By segregating different groups within a shared space, this practice reflects what scholars call “differential inclusion” that involves an ethnonational subgroup being separated from the majority group creating subtle divisions within the *gurdwara*.<sup>64</sup> Rather than an overt exclusion (from the *gurdwara*) or inclusion (into the majority group in the *gurdwara*), migrant workers tend to be “differentially included” in the *gurdwara*. Davinder’s anecdote also showed how relationships between Singaporeans and migrant workers tend to be more complex and nuanced than the typical “us versus them” narratives, problematising the straightforward binary between inclusion and exclusion in managing difference.

As migrant workers and Singaporeans are brought into proximity in the *gurdwara*, their differences become increasingly salient. For many Singaporeans, the different behavioural and cultural norms that many migrant workers bring with them are often unfamiliar. Yet, in the absence of visible and supposedly immutable signs of difference, such as race or skin colour, outward bodily practices and behaviour became the very means by which differences between Singaporeans and migrant workers are identified. Rupi explained, a “desi” is “[s]omeone of a labour class, working at the construction level. They dress weirdly, they behave weirdly.” Here, migrant workers – men and women alike – are thus typecasted as “desi boys” and “desi girls”. In general usage, “desi” is a neutral term that refers to “from India”. According to Rupi, “it’s derived from ‘deys’. ‘Deys’ just means country, but in relevance to Punjabis, it’s India.”

Yet, underlying such caricatures of migrant workers as “desi boys” and “desi girls” is a profoundly derogatory attitude towards migrant workers, underpinned by infantilising overtones. As Rupi admitted, “‘desi’ has been transformed into an offensive term,” echoing Jasmin’s claim that “desi” is a “slur” often used amongst Singaporeans. Such group-based stereotypes are reinforced through non-verbal encounters with migrant workers. Jaimall, a 21-year-old undergraduate, recounted his encounters with some migrant workers in the *gurdwara*, “If you come really close to them, you can get this smell of India... it’s like the farm kind of smell. I

<sup>63</sup> Orlando Woods and Lily Kong, “The irreducible otherness of *desi* and desire in Singapore’s *gurdwaras*: moral boundary-making in the shadows of a multicultural society,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2023), DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2023.2243326.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Junjia Ye, “Managing urban diversity through differential inclusion in Singapore,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 35.6 (2017): 1033-1052; Woods and Kong, “Parallel Spaces of Migrant (Non-)Integration in Singapore.”

think they generally don't take showers until they have gone home, so that smell just sticks to them." Meeta, an 18-year-old Singaporean female undergraduate, also lamented how migrant workers "can be a nuisance... They're very loud, very noisy, and sometimes don't respect the rules and regulations we have in Singapore." Besides "noise" and "smell," the dressing practices of "migrant workers" also became a point of contention. Kajal, a 24-year-old Singaporean female undergraduate, explained:

We Singaporeans, even though we're modern, know when we come to the *gurdwara*, we have to dress according to certain rules. We cannot wear jeans and shorts. But those girls come wearing jeans, shorts or inappropriate clothes... You see them let down their hair. They don't bother to cover their heads.

Here, trivial issues like indecent dressing and the lack of supposedly "modern" civilities and behaviours, tend to be elevated to the level of cultural and moral markers that bring differences between the "modern" Singaporean and "backward" migrant into sharp focus. Echoing Kajal's sentiment, Abinaash discussed his observation of the dynamics between Singaporeans and migrant workers at the *gurdwara*, "they [Singaporeans] do treat them differently because they are workers. I am a Singaporean, and you are from India... like I said it is a mentality." These anecdotes thus reflect how divisions within the society are often replicated and reproduced in the *gurdwara*,<sup>65</sup> raising questions about the potential of *gurdwaras* in promoting inclusion and engagement within the Sikh community, and the role of religious leaders and Singaporeans in these efforts. Even whilst sharing the same space in proximity, the fleeting moments of acknowledgement between the Singaporeans and migrant workers, if any, seldom translate to sustained relationships. Davinder described the relationship between these groups as:

[T]he relationship, on the general, is very cordial. Very cordial. Nothing in-depth. Nothing of substance. I respect you for you. I thank you for your service. That's about it. There is no disrespect. There is no ill-treatment when it comes to migrant workers. They are treated with due respect.

Whilst many migrant workers are said to be integrated into the *gurdwara*, not least because of their regular volunteering efforts, it remains unclear whether they are meaningfully included in and by the community. Moving from integrating to including migrant workers in *gurdwaras* would necessitate more opportunities for meaningful interactions between these groups, beyond the current polite acknowledgements of their efforts.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the complexities that *gurdwaras* pose to the building and cohesion of the Sikh community in Singapore. In doing so, it has added nuance to dominant discourses often centred on their inclusionary and integrative potential. Like other ethnoreligious communities, Sikhs may be outwardly similar, but are internally divided. The nodes of differentiation amongst the Sikhs span a wide range of categories, but ancestry lineage and heritage between members of different *gurdwaras* and the socio-economic class amongst members within *gurdwaras* remain most notable amongst others. Compared to distinctions along district lines amongst the local Sikhs, socio-economic class, however, appears to be a category that is trickier to bridge, as it is inextricably tied to behavioural and cultural norms.

To translate these challenges into opportunities for strengthening social cohesion, *gurdwara* and other Sikh leaders should resolve to move from simply *integrating* to *including* migrant workers into the broader Sikh community. The dominant rhetoric of inclusion and cohesion espoused by policymakers throughout the world, including Singapore, is often mediated and negotiated by the attitudes and behaviours of individuals on the ground. These attitudes and behaviours are often reflective of, and reinforced by, the communities to which an

<sup>65</sup> This observation is similar to recent studies of interactions between migrants and Singaporeans in Singapore's churches; see Lily Kong and Orlando Woods, "Disjunctures of belonging and belief: Christian migrants and the bordering of identity in Singapore," *Population, Space and Place* 25.6 (2019): 1-10, DOI: 10.1002/psp.2235, and Woods and Kong, "Parallel Spaces of Migrant (Non-)Integration in Singapore."

individual belongs.<sup>66</sup> As this paper has shown, places of worship like *gurdwaras*, and other associated religious spaces such as schools and learning centres can and do play an active role in aiding and abetting the reproduction of exclusionary attitudes and behaviours in everyday life. Whilst *gurdwaras* present opportunities to bring together people of the same faith, they also often reflect and reproduce social divisions. In placing a greater emphasis on encultured forms of division (e.g., ancestry lineage and heritage, class distinctions) over shared belief, practices such as spatial segregation and deliberate exclusion of migrant workers from shared space can further complicate the process of fostering inclusion and cohesion in the community. Without external interventions, individuals are less likely to embrace the seemingly discomfoting reality of experiencing “otherness,” which has always been an indispensable part of everyday life in Singapore, but has become a more contested experience in recent years. Ongoing research into these community dynamics will provide helpful insights as societies throughout the world continue to grapple with new and evolving expressions of diversity.

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<sup>66</sup> Kong and Woods, “Disjunctures of belonging and belief.”

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