Reflections of Resistance: A Generational Comparison of the Sikh Diaspora

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Introduction
Resistance leaders often assume popular and influential roles within diaspora communities. In many cases, they leave behind prominent legacies after their deaths. Why do we see variation in the memorialization of these leaders across different communities? Furthermore, how are these perceptions of resistance leaders formed? Understanding these perceptions of resistance leaders in diasporas is important because it informs government actors and academics about the motivations and psychology of ethnic and religious diaspora populations. The more that leaders understand the political circumstances of these communities’ home countries, the better they will be able to engage with these communities.

In this article, I argue that closer proximity to resistance leaders and relevant conflicts can predict one’s willingness to support resistance leaders. However, proximity only has influence when it is transmitted via familial connections. I also argue that gender, religious traditionalism, and family opinion play strong roles in predicting support. I examine these trends by analyzing the important case of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his presence in the Sikh diaspora, focusing on his legacy in the contemporary United States.

Literature
This research sits at the intersection of two literatures. First, there is a wealth of literature about diasporas and their relation to conflict. Second, there is a significant amount of research about the politics of memory, particularly surrounding conflict and traumatic events. Scholarship in these fields should be studied in conjunction.

Some scholars have formulated broader theories about various types of diasporas resulting from cultural, geographic, and sociological trends. Robin Cohen’s introduction to global diasporas surveys themes that are pertinent to different diaspora communities, proposing specific diaspora typologies: “victim, labour, trade, imperial, and cultural.”¹ The various theories and trends these communities evoke can provide some insight into what exactly leads diaspora populations to support resistance leaders.

Scholars who study collective memory evaluate how cultural factors determine how ethnic populations recollect periods of conflict and trauma. They also observe patterns of how

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survivors of genocide relate their experiences to their children. Carol Kidron examines how cultural differences of diaspora communities, specifically Jewish and Cambodian genocide survivors, play roles in those communities’ efforts to commemorate the past. In order to uncover the unique psychological trends prevalent within specific ethno-religious communities, it is important to examine how memory of trauma changes over time.

Theory
Diaspora communities remember resistance leaders in different ways. In this thesis, I will argue that proximity to specific historical events and time periods have had a discernible impact on the memory of those events.

I hypothesize that one's willingness to support a resistance leader is dependent upon one's proximity to the leader or conflict itself. For the purposes of this research, proximity is defined as distance in time and space to a particular conflict or resistance leader. Those who lived through the events surrounding a resistance campaign may be more likely to hold more extreme views of a leader.

I also test for alternative explanations that suggest that demographics or individual-level differences are a stronger determinant of one's willingness to support a resistance leader. Under this guise, views of Bhindranwale may be driven by other factors such as their ideological beliefs, demographics, or values.

Case Background
Before an analysis of Bhindranwale's legacy can be performed, it is mandatory to have an understanding of his rise to power and his actions during 1984. Bhindranwale was raised and trained as a Sikh preacher and established a large following throughout Punjab, India. He quickly gained popularity as he promoted a more separatist, militant, and orthodox interpretation of Sikh ideals. In late 1983, Bhindranwale and his followers occupied the Darbar Sahib complex with weaponry, where he continued to deliver his sermons to his supporters.

In June of 1984, the central government initiated Operation Blue Star (OBS), a military mission to flush out Bhindranwale and his followers from the Darbar Sahib complex. British Foreign Secretary William Hague estimated that as many as three thousand people were killed in the battle, including many pilgrims who were visiting the complex to celebrate the anniversary of the martyrdom of Guru Arjan, the fifth of the human guru lineage. The government's effort to remove Bhindranwale and his supporters manifested in the deployment of five infantry battalions, two companies of paramilitary police, and six tanks to carry out the operation. In the midst of the conflict, the face of the Akal Takht, or holy seat of Sikh political authority directly across from the main temple structure, was destroyed. The conflict also resulted in the destruction and looting of the Sikh Reference Library, which held

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4 Jakobsh, 46.
6 Mark Tully, "Operation Blue Star: How an Indian army raid on the Golden Temple ended in disaster," The Telegraph, June 6, 2014,
original manuscripts of the Guru Granth Sahib and other rare texts. Bhindranwale was killed during the battle along with many of his supporters. The destruction and loss of life was so catastrophic that the trauma continues to scar the Sikh community, debilitating its relationship with the Indian central government.

Tensions were further inflamed when Prime Minister Gandhi’s Sikh bodyguards assassinated her outside of her home in Delhi on the morning of October 31 in response to the military operation. As early as that evening, mobs began looting, raping, and killing Sikhs in an “incipient genocidal campaign,” leading to the deaths of roughly three thousand Sikhs in Delhi alone.

**Design**

To measure the Sikh diaspora’s perception of Bhindranwale, this study analyzes personal, semi-structured interviews conducted by the author with a diverse convenience sample of thirty-seven Sikh Americans throughout the Midwest and East Coast of the United States. Interviews were conducted inside gurdwaras, over the phone, and via email. Participants were recruited through visits to gurdwaras, university Sikh Student Association (SSA) events, and email distribution lists.

**Dependent Variable: Support for Bhindranwale**

To gauge Sikh Americans’ willingness to support Bhindranwale, participants were asked to describe their opinion of him. Responses were coded on a one-to-five scale, one representing unqualified non-support (UNS), two representing qualified non-support (QNS), three representing a neutral or mixed view of Bhindranwale (N/M), four representing qualified support (QS), and five representing unqualified support (US).

**Independent Variable: Proximity to Operation Blue Star and Anti-Sikh Pogroms**

In order to test the primary hypothesis, participants were asked where they were when Operation Blue Star occurred in 1984 as a means of gauging physical proximity to Bhindranwale. If participants were not yet born, they were asked about their parents’ physical location. Responses were coded as local if they were in Punjab, national if they were in India, and abroad if they were not in India at the time of the event.

Similarly, most participants were asked if their families were directly impacted by the anti-Sikh pogroms of October and November of 1984. Participants who responded “Yes” may have a more favorable opinion towards Bhindranwale.

**Independent Variable: Demographics**

Participants were also coded and tested based on demographic information. Age, place of birth, time of immigration, and reason for immigration can serve as predictors for one’s proximity to Bhindranwale. Age was used to test for proximity to historical events. Reason for immigration is an important factor in the case that the participant was facing discrimination in India.

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8 Tully.
Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Demographic Variable</strong></th>
<th><strong>Reason for Measurement</strong></th>
<th><strong>Coding</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Temporal Proximity</td>
<td>Categorized based on proximity to 1984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of Birth</td>
<td>Physical Proximity</td>
<td>Local, National, Abroad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time of Immigration</td>
<td>Potential Political Alien-</td>
<td>Economic, Discrimination, Marriage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education Level</td>
<td>Socio-economic Status</td>
<td>High School, Bachelor’s, Master’s, Doctorate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic of Study</td>
<td>Career Training or Aspir-</td>
<td>Dependent upon topic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Career/Parents’ Career</td>
<td>Socio-economic Status</td>
<td>White Collar, Blue Collar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kesh</td>
<td>Religious Traditionalism</td>
<td>Yes or No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Education level, topic of study, career, and parents’ career were used to measure socio-economic status. This measure may also predict one’s willingness to analyze Bhindranwale from a historical perspective. Education level was coded as high school, Bachelor’s, Master’s, and Doctorate.

Participants’ maintenance of kesh, or uncut hair, was also measured. A common theme of many of Bhindranwale’s sermons was the need for Sikhs to keep their hair uncut, a standard demonstration of respect for God. As a result, it may be the case that Sikh Americans who do not keep their kesh are more likely to critique Bhindranwale.

Independent Variable: External Factors

External views of Bhindranwale may also influence an individual’s opinion of him. Participants were asked if their sangat or family discusses Bhindranwale. Further, they were asked what their sangat or family’s opinion was of him. Strong Bhindranwale supporters may instill favorable opinions into the subject. Sangat and family opinions were coded as one if they held a negative view, two if they held a mixed or neutral view, and three if they held a positive view of Bhindranwale.

Results

Primary Hypothesis: Proximity

Of the variables pertinent to proximity: age, proximity to Operation Blue Star (OBS), parents’ proximity to OBS, and anti-Sikh pogroms, parent proximity to OBS was the only variable that yielded statistically significant results.

Proximity to OBS may not have yielded statistically significant results because participants trended younger. As a result, we might expect that parent proximity to OBS, which was statistically significant, was more impactful on their perceptions. This finding tells us that the closer participants’ parents were to Operation Blue Star, the more likely their son or daughter

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10 Mahmood, 77.
is to be a supporter of Bhindranwale. Inheritance of positive attitudes towards resistance leaders is thus more likely when a subject’s parents had close proximity.

*Alternative Explanations: Individual Characteristics and Demographics*

Individual characteristics and demographics also influenced participants’ willingness to support Bhindranwale. Of all of the alternative variables measured, gender, kesh, and family opinion were the only variables that yielded statistically significant results. Female participants were far more likely to hold negative, neutral, or mixed views of Bhindranwale compared to men. Approximately one-third of female Sikh Americans were supportive of Bhindranwale while two-thirds had qualified unsupportive or neutral views. In contrast, 81.8 percent of men held supportive views while 18.2 percent held qualified unsupportive or neutral views. One may infer that Bhindranwale’s role and presence in the Sikh community is associated more with a masculine Sikh ideology.

Kesh resulted in the strongest statistical significance out of all of the variables measured. A main emphasis of many of Bhindranwale’s sermons was the need for Sikh men and women to keep their hair uncut, a fundamental demonstration of respect for God. As a result, it may be the case that Sikh Americans who do not keep their kesh are more likely to critique Bhindranwale. 80 percent of participants who keep kesh were supporters, a far larger proportion compared to 22.2 percent of participants who had previously cut their hair. Thus, Sikhs who keep their kesh may hold more strictly orthodox perceptions of Sikhism and therefore be more sympathetic towards Bhindranwale’s doctrine.

11 Mahmood, 77.
Table 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Unqualified Non-Supporter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Qualified Non-Supporter</td>
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<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral or Mixed Supporter</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualified Supporter</td>
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<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unqualified Supporter</td>
<td>54.6%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
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Table 3:

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<th></th>
<th>Kesh</th>
<th>No Kesh</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualified Non-Supporter</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>55.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral or Mixed Supporter</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualified Supporter</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unqualified Supporter</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Family opinion also proved to be a predictor of participants’ willingness to support Bhindranwale. Similar to parent proximity to OBS, Sikh Americans rarely stray from the views of their families. Participants whose families are ardent supporters of Bhindranwale are much more likely to support him while those from families that did not support Bhindranwale (only representing 11.5 percent of cases) were exclusively qualified non-supporters.

**Conclusion**

These findings suggest that propensity for support is not solely based upon individual or external factors. Instead, a combination of demographics and surrounding perceptions, which may or may not be inherited from an individual’s parents, shapes one’s willingness to support resistance leaders. This suggests that the best method to understanding diaspora perceptions of resistance or political leaders would be at the family level. By examining the influence of the family unit, local and national government leaders can better understand the social structure and diversity of unique ethnic and religious diaspora communities in their constituencies. They may also be able to gauge the political preferences of these populations, enabling them to understand and serve the needs of these groups. Political leaders may also be able to acknowledge more painful or traumatic events of diasporas’ histories, such as the anti-Sikh pogroms or Operation Blue Star, strengthening the relationship between the modern political establishment and the diaspora.