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Conflict, community, and culture: an oral history of Sikh migrants in Birmingham, 1960-1979

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Contents

ABBREVIATIONS

BBCSMSA – Birmingham and Black Country Sikh Migration Story private archive.

IWA – Indian Workers Association.

INTRODUCTION:

On 31st July 1961, the former Congregational Chapel of 130 High Street, Smethwick, reopened its doors to the Birmingham community after years of closure. Yet, in a marked departure from its Anglo-Christian origins, this time, it was as the first *gurdwara* (Sikh temple) in Birmingham, United Kingdom. The opinion pages of local newspapers were filled with discussion of the new place of worship:

"Do they want a temple? Give them one and make Smethwick the Mecca of the Midlands…Why on earth should Smethwick people integrate and become a multi-racial community if they don't want to?".[1]

Throughout the ensuing two decades, Birmingham's Sikh migrant population grew in size and presence. Between 1961 and 1979, Birmingham and the neighbouring Black Country became home to twenty new *gurdwara.* Previously exclusively 'white' neighbourhoods – notably Smethwick and Handsworth – became somewhat 'symbol areas' of Sikh presence where, by 1978, 50% of residents were Asian, of whom almost half identified as Sikh.[2] [3] Yet despite the efflorescence of its Sikh community throughout the post-colonial era, and Birmingham's international recognition as 'one of Britain's race relations capitals', no academic studies have yet been dedicated to its post-war Sikh migrants.[4] Their lived experiences of the racialised attitudes epitomised in the above quote are currently tremendously under-researched. It is this conspicuous gap in our historical understanding of Sikhs, one of the Britain's largest migrant communities, which this dissertation seeks to fill. Based on original oral history interviews with twenty-four Sikhs who migrated to Birmingham from India and East Africa between 1960 and 1979, it will explore the adaptation of a highly visible minority group to British urban life.

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[1] P. T. Beal, 'Threats and Coercion', 'It's Your Opinion', *Smethwick Telephone and Warley Courier,* 4 August 1961, in E. Buettner, ''This is Staffordshire not Alabama': Racial Geographies of Commonwealth Immigration in Early 1960s Britain', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History,* No.4, (2014), p.719.

[2] J. Rex, *The Ghetto and the Underclass: Essays on Race and Social Policy,* (Hants: Gower, 1988), p.55.

[3] J. Rex and S. Tomlinson, *Colonial Immigrants in a British City: A Class Analysis,* (London: Routledge, 1979), p.70,86.

[4] Rex and Tomlinson, p.70

Wider political and social context:

The above opinion piece serves as just one example, discernible from the 1960s, of an increasingly public expression of anxiety towards Britain's burgeoning 'coloured' population. Throughout the ensuing two decades, Commonwealth immigration formed the prism through which disorder in Britain came to be conceived.[5] Nowhere was this more visible than in Birmingham, where in 1964, parliamentary candidate for Smethwick, Peter Griffiths, for the first time made race a decisive electoral issue. Griffiths' evocative calls for tighter immigration controls and 'educational apartheid' – seemingly targetted towards the Indian community who constituted two-thirds of Smethwick's 'coloured' population – paved the way for the cogent cultural symbolism of Enoch Powell, infamous for his 1968 'Rivers of Blood speech' and denouncement of immigrants as 'the Enemy within'.[6] [7] Soon after Powell's speech, delivered in Birmingham, the second Commonwealth Immigrants' Act was passed to restrict primarily Indian-East-African immigration to Britain. Despite the simultaneous birth of Britain's 'race relations' industry, this confirmed the cross-party consensus that the very presence of Commonwealth immigrants constituted a problem in Britain. So-called 'Powellism' – the pervasive ideology which attributed social and economic crises to the growing presence of Britain's 'coloured' population – became decisively entrenched at this historical juncture.

Thus, the 1960s and 1970s marked a complex era in which both the government and civilians appeared divided as to the appropriate future of race relations. On the surface, there was commitment to ending racial injustice. In a series of Race Relations Acts in 1965, 1968 and 1976, the government gradually outlawed racial discrimination: first in public places, then in housing and employment, and finally, indirect discrimination, including in education, local authorities and trade unions. However, legislative limitations, including the exclusion of religious items such as the Sikh turban from the remit of the Act, saw discrimination continue.

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[5] S. Hall, 'Racism and Reaction', in S. Hall, T. Huddleston, A. Little, B. Patekh and J. Rex, *Five Views of Multi-Racial Britain,* (London: Commission for Racial Equality, 1978), p.30.
[6] Buettner, p.722.
[7] E. Powell, election meeting speech, (Birmingham, 13 June 1970), http://enochpowell.info/Resources/May-June%201970.pdf, [accessed 24/02/18].

Whilst progressively extensive in scope, Race Relations legislation failed dramatically to end racial inequality.

Literature:

It is within the context of perpetual racial injustice in Britain that a wealth of migrant studies literature has been focussed. This began in the 1960s with the emergence of bodies such as the Institute of Race Relations (1958), Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (1964) and Runnymede Trust (1968). Early studies focussed largely on racial minorities' structural disadvantage and reflected a so-called 'assimilationist' model of thought. Two local examples are the Marxist surveys of John Rex and Robert Moore in 1969, and John Rex and Sally Tomlinson in 1979, which observed the existence of a 'coloured underclass' in Birmingham.[8] They theorised that racial minorities faced continued exclusion from mainstream employment, housing and welfare – 'systematically at a disadvantage compared with working-class whites' – and so 'in effect a separate underprivileged class'.[9] This conception of a racial 'underclass' reflects the dangerous homogenisation of 'black' migrants common to migrant studies prior to the late-1970s. Since then, encouraged by the thought-provoking racial theories of Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, scholars have increasingly recognised not only the diversity of minority racial groups, but each group's heterogeneity in terms of ethnicity and religious affiliation. As Roger Ballard and Geoffrey Driver observed:

'We have *ethnic,* not just *racial* diversity in Britain today. The minorities are not simply black or brown skinned individuals in a white society; they possess, in each case, a distinctive *community and cultural life* as an integral part of their being'.[10]

Ballard himself has contributed greatly to the ever-flourishing field of ethnicity studies, particularly that of Punjabi Sikh migrants to Britain. Other important contributions to this field are Gurharpal Singh and Darshan Tatla's study of Sikhs to Britain, Parminder Bachu's work on

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[8] See J. Rex and R. Moore, *Race and Community Conflict: a study of Sparkbrook,* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), and Rex and Tomlinson (1979).
[9] Rex and Tomlinson, p.275.
[10] R. Ballard and G. Driver, 'The Ethnic Approach', *New Society,* 16, 1977, p.543.

East African Sikhs, and the smaller and locally focussed accounts of Alan James, Kitty Fitzgerald and Raminder Singh on Sikh children, Manchester Sikhs and Bradford Sikhs respectively.[11]

Methodology:

In recognition not only of Britain's ethnic but religious diversity, my dissertation will focus specifically on Sikhs in Birmingham in the 1960s and 1970s. As social historians frequently find true of subaltern groups, the histories of 'ordinary' Sikh citizens were inaccessible through conventional documentary sources. Oral history interviews with twenty-four first-generation Sikhs therefore form the main basis of the study. This includes interviews I personally conducted, and video interviews to which I have generously been granted access by researchers for the public history project, Birmingham and Black Country Sikh Migration Story, which have never been used in academic history.

Oral history continues to face considerable criticism by academics. Chronological distance and related issues of 'subconscious repression', 'reconstructed' memory and 'conscious avoidance' of truths, as well as the bias of the interviewer, are primary amongst critics' concerns as to the reliability of oral interviews.[12] However, as oral historians frequently identify, all historical sources, as human constructions, are fundamentally subjective.[13] I also believe such subjectivity serves as an asset to the construction of this social history. As Alessandro Portelli noted, 'oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did'.[14] The selection or omission of certain memories has offered me invaluable insights into interviewees' subjective interpretations of historical events – they are *psychological* truths – and are thus as valuable to history 'from below' as more visible 'facts'. My dissertation seeks not to

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[11] See G. Singh and D. Tatla (2006); P. Bhachu, (1985); A. James (1974); K. Fitzgerald (1986); R. Singh (1992) in bibliography.

[12] P. Thompson, 'Problems of Method in Oral History', *Oral History,* 1:4, (1972), pp.4-5.

[13] Thompson, p.1.

[14] A. Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different', in R. Perks and A. Thompson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader,* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p.52.

represent all Sikhs in Birmingham, but to uncover genuine and personal experiences, through the detailed life stories of a small sample of the whole.

Given the limited size of my interviewee sample, and their diversity in terms of gender, age, occupation, and place of origin, I was surprised as to the somewhat formulaic quality of their narratives. Recurring themes were those of a transition from hardship to success, which was chiefly measured by educational achievements and economic advancement. Discussions of housing, work and education often constituted the main section of interviews; as such, these themes predominate in my dissertation. Most prominent was interviewees' uniform conception of the role 'Sikhdom' – that is, their identity as Sikhs and belonging to the Sikh group – as explicitly advantageous to their adaptation and advancement as migrants to Britain. Interviewees migrated from urban Jullundur, rural Punjabi villages, and prosperous Kenyan towns; they arrived as accomplished professionals, unskilled labourers, and dependent, homesick children. Yet within these multiplex discourses of displacement and aspiration, interviewees consistently relayed the primacy of a Sikhdom in achieving their multifarious ambitions. My dissertation reflects this prevailing theme. Grounding migrants' life stories in the social and political context of the 1960s and 1970s, I argue that Sikh migrants in Birmingham consciously *exploited* Sikhdom to ameliorate their social and economic standing in a hostile British environment. I seek to build on the post-structuralist and post-modernist themes of ethnicity scholars such as Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, whose work departs from simplistic narratives of migrant subordinance, and acknowledges the influences of both external constraints and personal preferences in migrant behaviour. My argument is twofold.

Chapter one explores how Sikh migrants drew upon Sikhism to forge an exclusive community which operated on the principle of reciprocity. It reveals how the Sikh migrant community acted as an incubator for emotional, financial and practical support unavailable to migrants outside the parochial group. As such, the Sikh community proved invaluable to migrants' access to friendships, housing and employment when excluded from the mainstream.

Chapter two explores Sikh migrants' preservation and reclamation of religious culture, including dress, artistic customs, food and language, as affirmation of their visible

distinctiveness in Britain. It considers how their conscious assertion of difference was used to distinguish Sikhs from other migrant groups and thus inspire intrigue in, and forge a trustworthy reputation for, Sikhs in a British context.

Throughout, my dissertation reveals the importance of religion to migrants' individual and collective 'identity': both the distinguishing qualities of the individual, and their 'cognitive, social and moral connection with a broader community'.[15] [16] As such, it provides an important development to 'South Asian' migrant histories which sometimes obscure the narrower foundations for migrants' identity and allegiances. Moreover, given the dearth of literature on migration to Birmingham, despite its importance as a migrant destination, it provides an invaluable contribution to British social history. It uncovers the voices of a group, whom despite being at the forefront of national and local political and social debates, have so far been 'hidden' from history.

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[15] Merriam Webster, 'Identity', https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/identity, [accessed 10/03/18].
[16] F. Polletta and J. Jasper, 'Collective Identity and Social Movements', *Annual Review of Sociology,* 27:1, (2001).p.285

CHAPTER ONE: COMMUNITY

'There was a lot of love back in the days. The reason why there was a lot of love was because we used to depend on each other'.[17]

The 'ethnic community' in Britain has attracted a wealth of academic attention since the arrival of post-war Commonwealth migrants. Doubtless, this is because 'community' – broadly defined as 'a unified body of individuals' – denotes a degree of exclusivity between members, and thus the very existence of such communities communicates a level of ethnic division in British society.[18] For early Marxist scholars who ascribed ethnicity to 'false consciousness', or observed the existence of a 'coloured underclass', ethnic communities were mere products of rejection by indigenous social groups.[19] More recently, migrant historians' frequent focus on the 'South Asian diaspora' has obscured the primacy of narrow, religious community allegiances, and often attributes migrants' exclusive cultivation of South Asian ties to 'look[ing] back to the homeland'.[20] This chapter challenges these assumptions. First, it explores Sikh migrants' active formation of a parochial Sikh community in Birmingham, built not only on shared ethnicity, but shared religion. Second, it argues that premised on such *ethno-religious* commonality and governed by reciprocity, the Sikh community served as a sophisticated mechanism for advancement in British society. Throughout, it builds on post-structuralist and post-modernist themes, considering community formation as premised on both 'internal preferences and external constraints', which provided migrants with support unattainable from the British mainstream.[21]

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[17] Interview with Gursevak Singh Shergill, Birmingham and Black Country Sikh Migration Story private archive (BBCSMSA)*,* (14/04/17).

[18] Merriam Webster, 'Community', https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community, [accessed 10/03/18].

[19] S. Castles and G. Kosack, *Immigrant Workers and Class Struggle in Western Europe,* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p.7.

[20] P. Panayi, *An Immigration History of Britain: Multicultural Racism Since 1800,* (London: Routledge, 2010), p.138.

[21] C. Ballard and R. Ballard, 'The Sikhs: The Development of South Asian Settlements in Britain', in J. L. Watson, *Between Two Cultures: Migrants and Minorities in Britain,* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), p.53.

Interviewees' formation of and commitment to the local Sikh community constituted a prominent theme of their oral histories. Uniformly, interviewees relayed a conscious identification as Sikh and an active pursuit of ties with fellow adherents on the basis of shared religious belonging. Some interviewees were explicit in their description of the Sikh community: 'Sikhs are a distinct group'; 'there was a very close-knit Sikh community'; 'in them days…Sikhs did stay together'.[22] [23] [24] Other interviewees used less categorical descriptions, using ambiguous descriptions such as 'the community' and 'our people', and thus assuming the interviewer's recognition that these ties were necessarily centred on religion. Surinder Singh, for example, described his children having been 'more or less raised within the community'.[25] Only later in the interview when he noted 'we lived amongst Sikhs', did it become apparent that by *the* community, Surinder meant the exclusive Sikh group.[26] Thus, Sikh friendship and community reflected a kind of 'taken-for-grantedness'; it was implicit to migrants' life stories, and to their lived experiences of 1960s and 1970s Birmingham.

Yet whilst ostensibly unspoken, Sikhs' community formation was presented as nevertheless expressly calculated. Migrants described their active pursuit of alliances with fellow adherents as providing unique opportunities for friendship and promoting feelings of security. As sociologist Jim Rose observed, migrant community formation helped individuals 'to make an initial positive approach to their new environment'.[27] This exploitation of Sikh unity was most apparent in interviewees' discussion of the *gurdwara*. Uniformly, the *gurdwara* was portrayed less as a centre of religious devotion than as a social and cultural hub. The institution of *langar* (community kitchen), which provided 'food for all'; the practice of 'congregation'; and *gurdwaras'* reliance entirely on volunteers performing *sewa* (charitable work) promoted a culture of inclusivity from which migrants could profit. Sukhdev Singh explained, 'I'd go to the *gurdwara* both for social reasons and for my mind to relax'.[28] Female interviewees described the comradery in the *langar* as they cooked, and the liberation of

[22] Interview with Sewa Singh Mandla, BBCSMSA, (14/04/17).
[23] Author's interview with Karamjit Singh Tanday, (19/01/18).
[24] Interview with Sukhwinder Singh Panesar, BBCSMSA, (31/02/17).
[25] Interview with Surinder Singh Bakshi, BBCSMSA, (10/0417).
[26] Interview with Surinder Singh.
[27] E. J. B. Rose, *Colour and Citizenship: A Report on British Race Relations,* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.457.
[28] Interview with Sukhdev Singh Gill, BBCSMA, (16/02/17).

attending a community centre in which children were accepted. Rajinder Kaur recalled the welcoming attitude of her local *gurdwara* leader: 'I used to say...'I got little children with me'. He said 'bring them with you'.[29] For children, *gurdwara* attendance 'was an exciting time...the youth used to get together, learn Punjabi, play games'.[30] It was thus a centre for socialisation: 'a place where you congregate', which 'everybody used to look forward to going to', where 'we'd serve food...get together...sit together': 'no class differences'.[31] [32]

Such uniform reliance on a centre of worship for social ends helps to explain migrants' pursuit of Sikh community membership, as opposed to racial or ethnic associations. As a social organisation, Sikhism provided a unique commodity: a community *institution,* which acted as both a cultural incubator and a literal 'escape' from the exclusionary British mainstream. This was somewhat pivotal to migrants' social survival in 1960s and 1970s Birmingham. The 1965 Race Relations Act, infamously 'declaratory rather than effective or efficient', and its 1976 successor which outlawed indirect discrimination, had little influence over migrants' exclusion from local community associations.[33] One interviewee was ostracised from a social club in the late 1960s – '[as] soon as went in we were beaten up badly...They shouted, 'niggas not allowed''.[34] Another remembered his application to a local hockey team being ignored in the early-1970s.[35] Moreover, legitimations of racial prejudice from political elites consistently corrupted school playgrounds, where white children chanted 'Enoch Powell! Enoch Powell! Enoch Powell!'.[36] Thus, that which at 'home' had functioned primarily as a site of religious sanctity – 'in Tanzania...every day we went to the *gurdwara,* we sat and listened to *navara sahib* (prayers)*,* then we went home' – was enshrined with new meaning in the British context.[37] The Sikh temple and the community which it fostered was mobilised for 'hockey,

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[29] Interview with Rajinder Kaur Bakshi, BBCSMSA*,* (10/04/17).
[30] Interview with Manjeet Singh Booprai, BBCSMSA*,* (24/02/17).
[31] Interview with Sewa Singh.
[32] Interview with Tarlok Singh Bansal, BBCSMSA*,* (14/02/17).
[33] Z. Layton-Henry, *The Politics of Immigration: Immigration, 'Race' and 'Race' Relations in Post-War Britain,* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p.50.
[34] Interview with Piara Singh Purewal, BBCSMSA*,* (05/05/17).
[35] Sukhdev Singh remembered that 'no one wrote back' to his applications to local hockey clubs. In Interview with Sukhdev Singh.
[36] S. Jefferies, 'Britain's most racist election: the story of Smethwick, 50 years on', *Guardian, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/15/britains-most-racist-election-smethwick-50-years-on,* [accessed 27/03/18].
[37] Interview with Rajinder Kaur.

football, basketball, volleyball, athletics': a 'good escape', and a 'great advantage because you are welcome'.[38] [39] According to Roberta Ricucci's typology of believers, then, Birmingham's Sikh migrants could aptly be defined as 'tightrope walkers' of Sikhism.[40] Whilst ostensibly religious devotees, their motivation to attend religious institutions was as social and cultural as it was spiritual. Gurinder Singh explained, 'Coming to the gurdwara was a sense of coming home… where you have a sense of belonging, you have a sense of being at home'.[41]

However, in light of Sikhs' experiences of exclusion, they relied on other members of the religious community for more than mere companionship and leisure-time pursuits. The migrant 'network' was in fact central to Asians' *survival* in the overtly racist terrains of post-war Britain. Contemporary politicians, journalists and sociologists all paid considerable attention to the phenomenon of the 'Asian lodging-house': 'formerly grand terrace houses not suitable for single family occupation', confined to so-called urban 'twilight zones', owned by immigrants who 'housed their incoming friends and relatives for free'.[42] The lodging house was just one of many community-focussed housing options, including the 'joint family' home (usually occupied by two brothers, their parents, and their respective families), houses of distant kinsmen, and community-funded privately-owned homes. Gurmail Kaur explained that upon arrival to Britain, she, her mother and four siblings relied on the hospitality of her estranged cousin.[43] Piara Singh, having no established kin in Britain, lived in a Smethwick Sikh lodging house: 'there was eight of us sleeping in one bedroom…four in another bedroom', a system which he relied upon because 'during them days [it] was difficult to find accommodation'.[44] This was confirmed by contemporary race relations surveys which revealed that 'Asians were discriminated against in the public housing sector just as much or more than they were in the free market' for the 1968 Race Relations Act 'took a long time to have an effect', and so throughout the focus period, 'Council Housing and purchase aid mortgages, were largely closed to the West Indians and Asians who sought to use them'.[45]

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[38] Interview with Piara Singh.
[39] Interview with Rajinder Kaur.
[40] R. Ricucci, 'Religion in Adolescent Immigrants in Italy: A Case of Identifying with or Turning away from their Communities?', *Journal of Contemporary Religion,* 25:3, (2010), p.432.
[41] Interview with Gurinder Singh Mandla, BBCSMSA, (13/04/17).
[42] Rex, *The Ghetto,* p.52-3.
[43] Interview with Gurmail Kaur, BBCSMSA, (14/02/17).
[44] Interview with Piara Singh.
[45] Rex, *The Ghetto,* p.31.

Sewa Singh remembered: 'In some places they'd have a vacancy. But they'd see you and go 'Oh, it's just been let!''.[46]

Within this context of discriminatory housing allocation, Sikhs migrants were thus highly dependent on fellow adherents, with whom they could foster close links as members of the Sikh 'quasi-brotherhood'.[47] As contemporary sociologists observed, 'Sikhs usually live separately…in a house owned by members of their own group'.[48] This separatist system was primary to migrants' economic prosperity, cultural preservation, and the maintenance of important family obligations. Karmajit Singh noted the generosity of lodging-house residents in establishing their Sikh acquaintances: 'when my dad came in the sixties, for six months he didn't have a job. The rest of the people there where he was staying actually gave him money to send back to the family'.[49] Gursevak Singh explained the reciprocity of the system: 'you'd share a house with ten or fifteen people…out of the ten guys, they would choose whoever the best cook was. He would stay and make the food'.[50] Piara Singh was one such 'housekeeper', who cooked traditional Indian food such as *paratha* and wrote Punjabi letters for illiterate lodgers, before he found work.[51] Premised on ethno-religious commonality, Sikh houses also allowed for cultural exchange and therefore softened the displacement experience. When Sukhwinder and his father struggled to make particular Indian comfort foods, they 'had an arrangement with the landlord that they make our *chapatti* for us'.[52]

Thus, whilst city housing administrators observed 'Asian' inner-city areas disdainfully as 'a hells brew of social and personal problems', of 'sinning' landlords who were 'lowering housing standards'; Sikh migrants' community housing systems in fact represented a sophisticated mechanism for mutual advancement.[53] Sikhdom guaranteed migrants' inclusion into a supportive local community, within which newcomers were not only provided with shelter, but were quite literally bought time to find work. Simultaneously, the economically active

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[46] Interview with Sewa Singh.
[47] Ballard and Ballard, p.31.
[48] R. Desai, *Indian Immigrants in Britain,* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p.26.
[49] Interview with Karamjit Singh.
[50] Interview with Gursevak Singh.
[51] Interview with Piara Singh.
[52] Interview with Sukhwinder Singh.
[53] Rex, *The Ghetto*, p.53.

were cared and catered for by fellow adherents who could reproduce coveted cultural norms. The religious group was thus not merely a product of Sikhs' exclusion from the mainstream, nor a mechanism for non-integration – a force for separatism which many historians have attributed to 'a powerful 'myth of return'' to the sub-continent.[54] Rather, it was voluntarily mobilised and paramount to migrants' settlement in Britain.

However, the pervasiveness of racial discrimination in housing meant that Sikh migrants continued to rely on community support for more than mere survival strategies upon migration. As Ballard and Ballard observed in the mid-1970s, the all-male Sikh lodging house was often 'ordered in terms of adaptation', functioning as something of a stepping stone towards more permanent investment in Britain.[55] Home-ownership afforded migrants several benefits. First, it provided freedom from rental obligations as wasted expenditure: Gurmail Kaur explained, 'we thought…it's better than to live on rent'.[56] Second, it represented a man having 'established himself' sufficiently to sponsor his whole family's migration: 'when they own their own properties…then they can bring their wives over'.[57] [58] Third, it reduced migrants' economic vulnerability in the event of redundancy, which as Rex and Tomlinson found in 1979, Birmingham's Asian workers were almost twice as susceptible to.[59] Gursevak Singh explained of first-generation Sikhs: 'when they own their own properties…at least they [had] some sustainability and some foundations'.[60]

However, given the widely historicised limitations of the 1968 and 1976 Race Relations Acts, interviewees continued to depend on fellow Sikhs in the private housing market. As Bob Hepple noted, race relations law was 'not a technical device that is capable of doing as much for ethnic relations as the microchip has done for communications'.[61] Mortgage lenders, for example, continued to exercise 'indirect' racial discrimination under the premise of risk-

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[54] J. Brown, *Global South Asians: Introducing the Modern Diaspora,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.59.

[55] Ballard and Ballard, p.31.

[56] Interview with Gurmail Kaur.

[57] Interview with Jaswant Singh Johal, BBCSMSA*,* (10/02/17).

[58] Interview with Gursevak Singh.

[59] Rex and Tomlinson, p.117.

[60] Interview with Gursevak Singh.

[61] B. Hepple, 'Have Twenty-five Years of the Race Relations Acts in Britain been a Failure?, in B. Hepple and E. Szyszczak (eds.), *Discrimination: The Limits of law,* (London: Mansell, 1992), p.19.

aversion strategies such as 'red-lining'. As such, in Newtown, Birmingham in the late-1970s, 59.2% of white home-owners in comparison with just 5.4% of Asian homeowners had accessed building society finance.[62] Consequently, Gurmail Kaur remembered her parents buying from her brother-in-law's cousin, and Sukwinder Singh described his father's reliance on 'hand outs' from friends whom, because of the 'safety net' established under the 'ethnic reciprocities of...pioneer households', trusted that 'obviously he'd pay them back'.[63] [64] [65] [66] Other interviewees facilitated these exchanges: 'we [would] buy a house, do it up and sell it. Then we buy another one'.[67] Indeed, Rex and Tomlinson found that Asians in Handsworth in the mid-1970s were six times more likely to borrow from a private individual than their white-British counterparts.[68] Given that kinship support was restricted by the Indian government's prohibition of monetary exports, migrants were thus reliant on assistance from the ethno-religious group. Sukwinder Singh explained, 'because the numbers were so few...it was a very closed knitted community...if you see a Sikh person...you used to greet him open arms...helping them, helping the families', because of a mutual understanding of 'what they left behind in India'.[69]

These bonds of reciprocity contributed to a discernible concentration of Sikh migrants in just a few inner-city districts. Over half of interviewees who disclosed their specific locality had migrated to the infamously Sikh area Handsworth, whose Asian population grew from approximately 2% to 50% between 1961 and 1978.[70] Whilst academics have widely attributed this separatism to Asians being 'forced to live in the inner-city by segregation processes' – that which John Rex termed 'ghettoisation' – interviewees consistently presented their concentration in Sikh enclaves as willing isolationism.[71] Indeed, proximity to the ethno-religious community provided home-owners with a mechanism for overcoming racial prejudice: the 'organic' racism which Solomos et al. have observed as 'reproduced' by, but

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[62] Rex and Tomlinson, p.146.
[63] Interview with Gurmail Kaur.
[64] Interview with Sukhwinder Singh.
[65] Ballard, 'Differentiation', p.105.
[66] Interview with Sukhwinder Singh.
[67] Interview with Surinder Singh.
[68] Rex and Tomlinson, p.146.
[69] Interview with Sukhwinder Singh.
[70] Rex, *The Ghetto,* p.55.
[71] Rex, *The Ghetto,* p.3.

nevertheless external to, 'state apparatuses' of discrimination.[72] First, it facilitated belonging for Sikhs as a collectivity of excluded migrants. Gurinder Singh explained, 'it was quite a relief to move to Birmingham', for in majority-white North London, he 'had no friends who were similar to me. Nobody there wore a turban'.[73] Similarly, Surinder Singh 'came from America to live amongst Sikhs...I could've got an even better job in America...but we wanted to live with our own people'.[74] Second, segregation limited migrants' exposure to, and provided protection against, acts of racial animosity. Preet Kaur recalled that as children in late-1970s Cape Hill, 'we were really protected from what's going on in the outside world'.[75] It was only when she began secondary school in a 'white' suburb that 'open racism when you're out and about became more prevalent'.[76] Piara Singh remembered the Sikh neighbourhood mobilising to thwart a local National Front meeting. 'We went to stand in the queue...80 of us. Once Enoch Powell came, he was confronted'.[77] Others described the more routine protection school children provided each other from 'skin heads' and 'teddy boys' on their daily commute.[78] [79] Thus, whilst sociologists' seemingly hyperbolic contentions that 'racism is the single most important fact of life for large numbers of South Asians' were not unfounded; Sikhs' personal narratives suggest that within this context of racial injustice, they still constructed their own lives through active community formation.[80] The Sikh group was mobilised in light of both 'internal ethnic consciousness' and external 'rejection and hostility': a force for advancement in a prejudicial environment.[81]

The second realm in which interviewees indicated the primacy of Sikh community aid was work. Whilst migrants' settlement in Birmingham depended on engagement in economic activity, ethnic-minorities were often subject to overt discrimination in employment throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In 1976, reports revealed that 89% of complaints to the

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[72] J. Solomos, B. Finlay, S. Jones and P. Gilroy, 'The organic crisis of British capitalism and race: the experience of the seventies', in *Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain,* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1982), p.9
[73] Interview with Gurinder Singh.
[74] Interview with Surinder Singh.
[75] Interview with Preet Kaur.
[76] Interview with Preet Kaur Gill, BBCSMSA*,* (13/04/17).
[77] Interview with Piara Singh.
[78] Interview with Sukwinder Singh.
[79] Interview with Manjeet Singh.
[80] J. L. Watson, 'Introduction: Immigration, Ethnicity and Class in Britain', *Between Two Cultures: Migrants and Minorities in Britain,* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), p.2.
[81] Ballard and Ballard, p.51.

Race Relations Board were unsuccessful.[82] Moreover, in 1979 Rex and Tomlinson observed that opportunities for interview, access to skilled occupations, and offers of promotion were all less attainable by Asian applicants in Birmingham.[83] Under these circumstances, systems of mutual support within the Sikh community proved essential both to migrants' access to employment and circumvention of workplace inequality. Sewa Singh described how his *Babaji* (spiritual father) from the local *gurdwara* assisted him in establishing a solicitor's practice in Birmingham, having re-trained upon migration from Kenya. 'He found me a new office…he helped me to fund it, helped me to get clientele, got me going'.[84] Similarly, numerous interviewees noted the invaluable role of Sikhs with pre-existing workplace links. Jaswant Singh's father exploited his connections with a Sikh foreman in a local foundry to 'put in a request with the boss…because…the jobs were very few to go by'.[85] Manjeet Singh described his father's role as an unofficial foreman, suggesting: 'he was such a hard worker…that anybody dad recommended to that organisation, they more or less got a job'.[86] Thus for interviewees, the heterogeneity of the Sikh community – the diversity of members' occupational and financial positions – and the strength of their bonds as religious 'brothers', proved invaluable to their exposure to employment opportunities.

Moreover, the exploitation of Sikh connections allowed migrants to reproduce support systems within the workplace, and thus tip the balance of power towards Sikh employees. For some, this facilitated the formation of a majority-Sikh workforce and thus avoidance of the what sociologists commonly observed as Asians being 'isolated by language….by the English workers'.[87] Balwinder Kaur described the textiles factory in which she worked as 'an Indian factory, mainly…There were more Sikhs than other women…so we spoke Punjabi…it was like being at home'.[88] Similarly, Manjit Kaur recalled enjoying work because, 'the factory is English, but they all Indian ladies there. So they all my friend'.[89] However, systems of referral did not only help migrants to avoid social exclusion from the wider worker group; they proved

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[82] Interpreted from 'Table 6,' Report of the Race Relations Board 1975-6, quoted in Rex and Tomlinson, p.121.
[83] Rex and Tomlinson, p.98-126.
[84] Interview with Sewa Singh.
[85] Interview Jaswant Singh.
[86] Interview with Manjeet Singh.
[87] Rose, p.454.
[88] Author's interview with Balwinder Kaur, (19/01/18).
[89] Author's interview with Manjit Kaur Sangha, (19/01/18).

essential for the circumvention of continued workplace discrimination. Preet Kaur remembered her father's 'brawls' with white colleagues who thieved money from the Sikh group: 'he said, 'no I'm not going to give it to you…no one's gonna give [it to] you''.[90] Likewise, Gursevak Singh described how his *gurdwara* tug of war team defended Sikh workers on pay-day. 'When you used to get your brown pay packet, you used to get noticed by the gangs…Because they being a tug of war team…they stood up and tried to protect the community'.[91]

Such memories of informal workplace protection contribute significantly to the history of Britain's migrant workers. First, they challenge the analyses of countless contemporary race relations scholars who assumed the South Asian worker to be systematically disadvantaged at work, observing discrimination as receiving 'tacit approval of some shop stewards' or as 'invariably too much even for shop stewards' to change.[92] [93] Second, they disrupt the wide historiographical consensus as to the reliance of British-Indian workers on their 'ethnic' trade union, the Indian Workers Association (IWA). Whilst Gill, Josephides and Lacroix are amongst countless historians to have focussed on the 'political struggles for civil and human rights' by the IWA, noting its strong presence in Birmingham in particular, no interviewee mentioned the Association.[94] Instead, informal, ethno-religious support systems were presented as primary to tackling workplace injustice. Evidently, for interviewees, Sikh community membership offered invaluable assistance unrivalled by official systems of 'ethnic' representation.

Yet for some interviewees, such systematic workplace prejudice inspired a preference for self-employment. Although the phenomenon of the 'Asian business' has received considerable scholarly attention, few academics have played close attention to the reciprocal alliances which governed the success of both entrepreneurs and their co-ethnic employees. Manjeet Singh described his father's reliance on being incorporated into a local Sikh peddling group for economic survival upon migration. 'It was hard to find work…So the first job dad did was

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[90] Interview with Preet Kaur.
[91] Interview with Gursevak Singh.
[92] Rose, p.454.
[93] Rex and Tomlinson, p.125.
[94] T. Lacroix, *Indian and Polish Migrant Organisations in the UK,* University of Oxford, (2014), p.13.

a door-to-door salesman…they did help each other'.[95] In turn, peddling allowed Manjeet's father to foster contacts with local employers: 'doing his sales pitch…he got familiar with some *gori* (white men)…a supervisor at one of the steel factories…because of that, Dad got the job'.[96] Similarly, Gurmail Singh remembered hiring a 'fellow elderly Sikh man…desperate for work' in his Smethwick corner shop. Yet whilst initially, Gurmail 'employed him to help him as much as ourselves', he proved essential to the success of business. 'We felt we had a level of honesty and trust from him being a Sikh'.[97] For other entrepreneurs, Sikh employees were crucial to cost-reduction. Manjit Kaur remembered her first job in an Indian factory requiring financial sacrifices: 'They never give the good money. They never give the fifteen minutes break'.[98] Nevertheless, it provided a necessary stepping stone to secure employment with 'a very nice man'.[99] Similarly, Tarlok Singh and Jaswinder Singh recalled the pressure to provide free labour for the 'family' business: 'I remember going to school, coming back, and helping out in the shop…you have to go and help out in the shop'.[100] Such solidarity between entrepreneurs and employees fundamentally challenges Marxist analyses of post-war migrants – most infamously those of Castles, Kosack and Miles – which consider ethnicity to be secondary to class in the formation of social relations.[101] Shared experiences of exclusion united middle- and working-class Sikhs along ethno-religious lines, which provided a foundation for mobilisation towards individual betterment. As Paul Gilroy recognised of racial groups, the religious group served as a 'complex and inclusive collectivity with a distinctive political language', the formation of which was premised on 'common history, culture and language, as well as the effects of racism'.[102]

This chapter has revealed that for Sikh migrants to Birmingham in the 1960s and 1970s, religion proved an unrivalled foundation for community formation; itself invaluable to their adaptation and advancement in a hostile British society. Extending beyond ethnic affinity, Sikhdom promoted cultural and moral commonality, which forged a foundation of trust and

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[95] Interview with Manjeet Singh.
[96] Interview with Manjeet Singh.
[97] Author's personal correspondence with Gurmail Singh Gill, (21/05/18).
[98] Interview with Manjit Kaur.
[99] Interview with Manjit Kaur.
[100] Interview with Tarlok Singh.
[101] Miles denounced analyses of '"race" outside…class relations'. In R. Miles, 'Marxism vs the Sociology of Race Relations', *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* 7:2, p.231.
[102] P. Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack,* (London: Routledge, 1987), p.14-5.

obligation between adherents. As such, the Sikh community was continually exploited for emotional, practical, and financial support, unattainable in the British mainstream.

CHAPTER TWO: CULTURE

'If you were afraid of your own shadow, like a dog…they smell you out. If you were a Sikh…and show who you are, people respect you'.[103]

Another primary theme in Sikh migrants' life stories was a marked commitment to Sikh culture and its facilitation of individual and collective advancement in Birmingham. An inherently ubiquitous concept, culture is generally considered broadly by anthropologists and cultural historians to denote a 'complex whole' of values, behaviours and symbols – a community's 'ways of life' – inherited yet learned; both material and non-material.[104] Yet despite the 'cultural turn' of the 1970s, the reproduction of South Asian cultural forms in Britain has been widely observed through a somewhat ethnocentric lens.[105] Contemporary 'Powellites' attributed migrants' culture – traditional foods, religious dress and mother tongue – rather simplistically to a 'prevention of contact with the wider society'.[106] In a similar vein, many historians have focussed either on the cultural 'Othering' of migrants by white-Britons – that is, the 'process…through which identities are set up in an unequal relationship' – or have implicitly assumed 'cultural traditionalism' and 'integration' to be mutually exclusive.[107] This chapter challenges these trends. Exploring Sikh migrants' cultural preservation through their personal narratives, it develops post-structuralist theories of culture as historically contingent. It reveals that the very act of 'Othering' by politicians, peers and colleagues inspired a reactive pride amongst migrants in *ethno-religious* culture, that is, both explicitly religious and broader ethnic symbols, similarly deep-rooted in 'Sikhdom'. This enabled Sikhs to distinguish themselves amongst South Asian migrants to improve prospects of success in a hostile environment.

Migrants' pride in Sikh culture was prominent in every interview analysed for this study. Both explicitly and indirectly, interviewees communicated the importance of preserving distinctive

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[103] Interview with Surinder Singh.
[104] P. Burke, *What is Cultural History?,* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), p.29-30.
[105] The 'cultural turn' has been defined by Burke as historians recognising 'the importance of values', leading to 'the history of everything: dreams, food, emotions, travel'. In Burke, p.31-2.
[106] D. Brooks, and K. Singh, 'Ethnic Commitment Versus Structured Reality: South Asian Immigrant Workers in Britain', *New Community,* 7, (1978), p.22.
[107] M. Crang, *Cultural Geography*, (London: Routledge,1998), p.61.

Sikh cultural forms as migrants to Birmingham in the 1960s and 1970s. This began at introduction. Identifying themselves by the Sikh designations *Singh* and *Kaur,* every interviewee set themselves deliberately apart from both the host community and other South Asian groups. Subtle efforts towards cultural preservation ran strong throughout interviewees' accounts, as they uniformly detailed their commitment to the Punjabi language: 'once you're in the house, you don't speak English. You speak Punjabi'; 'we wanted to teach our children Punjabi'; 'My Grandmother never let us speak English in front of her. It was always you have to speak Punjabi'.[108] [109] [110] Yet most marked was interviewees' commitment to the preservation of traditional ethnic dress in the formation of identity and sense of self as a migrant. For women, this involved *kesh* (uncut hair) and the *salwar kamiz* (female Punjabi suit); for men *kesh* (including their beard) and the turban. Manjit Kaur described how the particularity of the *salwar kamiz* afforded a sense of belonging and thus ease in the host environment: 'I have never ever have trousers…I feel comfortable in my *own* dress…suit dress'.[111] All seven female interviewees maintained their commitment to *kesh* throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Of seventeen male interviewees, thirteen had preserved or readopted *kesh.*

Yet it is evident that the preservation of cultural dress did not simply reflect an unquestioned transplantation of ethno-religious tradition, but also a refusal to succumb to racialised expectations of the host community. As scholars such as Paul Gilroy and Etienne Balibar have identified, racial discrimination in the late-twentieth century was not narrowly premised on differences in 'biological heredity'.[112] So-called 'new racism' of the 1960s and 1970s often focussed more on 'the insurmountability of cultural differences' between host and ethnic communities.[113] This was not only espoused by infamous anti-immigration politicians such as Enoch Powell, who lamented 'Sikh communities' 'campaign to maintain customs inappropriate in Britain'.[114] His 'Othering' of migrants through evocative images of Asians as

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[108] Interview with Karamjit Singh.
[109] Interview with Jarnail Singh.
[110] Interview with Preet Kaur.
[111] Interview with Manjit Kaur.
[112] E. Balibar, 'Is There a Neo-Racism?', in E. Balibar and I. Wallerstein (eds.), *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities,* (London: Verso, 1991), p.21.
[113] Balibar, 'Is There a Neo-Racism?', p.21.
[114] E. Powell, Speech to the Conservative Association, (Birmingham, 20 April 1968), reproduced in the *Telegraph,* https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/3643823/Enoch-Powells-Rivers-of-Blood-speech.html, [accessed 10/03/18].

'archetypal 'alien'', appeared to legitimize systematic religious discrimination across multiple realms, particularly work and education. Gursevak Singh remembered the 'turban ban' by Wolverhampton Transport between 1967 and 1969: 'they said 'you wear a turban, so…you won't be able to become a conductor'.[115] That which Sikhs considered religious discrimination was sanctioned under the 1968 Race Relations Act, for the government suggested that 'there are circumstances and conditions in which turbans and beards might constitute a safety or hygiene hazard'.[116]

Yet, as religious symbols came to constitute the primary hurdle to Sikh men's economic and educational advancement from 1968, as discrimination only 'on the ground of colour, race or ethnic or national origins' was outlawed by the second Race Relations Act, interviewees detailed their stalwart commitment to *kesh*.[117] Recognising that intolerance was focussed on their religious cultural identity – 'people like myself who stood out because of…*kesh* were easily picked on'; 'I was picked on because I was a misfit' – migrants sought to reconstitute the signification or the turban in employment and education.[118] [119] Santokh Singh decided to re-adopt *kesh* in 1970 having secured a job as a teacher, to prove that his turban did not detract from his occupational proficiency. 'I thought because I was offered the job alright, I can't be refused. So, on the first day I went to school with a turban…The headmaster was surprised'.[120] However, he maintained that although 'it was a very difficult time; because [of] the subject – the *importance* of the subject – I used to teach, everyone valued me'.[121] Similarly, Surinder Singh suggested that wearing a turban as Chief Medical Officer for Birmingham in the late 1970s was impactful on public conceptions of Sikh migrants. In reference to religious prejudice, he explained, 'once I was sitting at the top table…it all stopped…Just by being there…people saw that I was just like them'.[122] Surinder believed the

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[115] Interview with Gursevak Singh.

[116] Report from the Select Committee on Race Relations and Immigration, Session 1968-69. 'The problems of coloured school-leavers', Vol.II, Minutes of evidence, (1969), p.100. https://parlipapers-proquest-com.bris.idm.oclc.org/parlipapers/docview/t70.d75.1969-058531?accountid=9730, [accessed 25/03/18].

[117] Race Relations Act 1968, http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1968/71/enacted, [accessed 04/04/18].
[118] Interview with Jaswinder Singh Chaggar, BBCSMSA, (10/02/2017).
[119] Interview with Manjeet Singh.
[120] Interview with Santokh Singh Saran, BBCSMSA, (17/02/2017).
[121] Interview with Santokh Singh.
[122] Interview with Surinder Singh.

respectability and publicity attached to his role supported Sikhs' advancement. 'If you were there…you have seen my name every day in the newspaper…you have seen me on radio'.[123] Given that he was 'the first one with a turban', he explained, 'I personally think that makes a very big difference'.[124] For younger migrants subjected to playground prejudice, proclamation of the turban was, likewise, important. Sukhwinder Singh explained that white pupils 'used to gang on us…they took my turban off and all sorts'.[125] But his elevation to the role of prefect in Sixth Form earned him their respect: 'those guys who used to gang on us became friend…because they knew if they say anything to a prefect, they in trouble'.[126]

Of course, attempts to associate Sikhdom with occupational proficiency were not universally effective. Nevertheless, the cultural pride of older-generation migrants had a discernible influence over younger Sikhs, who expressed a common self-perception as belonging to a respected ethnic-minority group. Karamjit Singh believed that his parents' generation challenged popular impressions of Sikh migrants as unskilled: 'They went into big jobs and started showing them, 'hey there, we're qualified!'…And these people came with their turbans on'.[127] Younger migrants Tarlok and Suvinder subsequently suggested that 'British people, they…highly respected Sikhs those days'; 'they knew to employ a person who had a turban on'.[128] [129] Given that religious discrimination was in fact pervasive throughout the 1970s – as high-profile employers continued to exclude Sikhs on the basis that 'customers might be offended' by their 'beard and turban' – these narratives are invaluable in explaining Sikhs' commitment to their ethno-religious culture.[130] Their active self 'Othering' stimulated a collective Sikh pride which seemingly overpowered their cultural alienation by white-Britons.

Thus, as contemporary anthropologists observed, beginning in the 1960s, 'Sikh men became rather embarrassed of their rapid abandonment of the turban in the early days'.[131] Migrants'

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[123] Interview with Surinder Singh.
[124] Interview with Surinder Singh.
[125] Interview with Sukhwinder Singh.
[126] Interview with Sukhwinder Singh.
[127] Interview with Karamjit Singh.
[128] Author's interview with Suvinder Singh, (19/01/18).
[129] Interview with Tarlok Singh.
[130] D. Tune, 'No beards behind the counter, Sikh told', *Daily Mail,* 11 July 1973.
[131] Ballard and Ballard, p.37.

attempts to *reclaim* and *redefine* the symbolism of the turban in the 'race relations era', having 'actually realise[d], no, we have to start standing up for our rights…we are part of this country and we should be accepted', reveals an active exploitation of Sikh culture for advancement in the host environment.[132] It suggests that religious culture, as scholars such as Stuart Hall, Abner Cohen and David Mason have theorised of ethnicity, was 'situational'.[133] It was mobilised, reproduced and strengthened when migrants' religious victimisation rendered it necessary: something of an 'instrumental flag of convenience' in a discriminatory context.[134] Their efforts to preserve specifically Sikh cultural forms also reveals the primacy of religion to their advancement in Birmingham, and thus facilitates an important revision to a wealth of migrant studies whose focus on South Asians obscures individuals' more parochial identities.[135] As Hedge and Sahoo recently acknowledged, 'the histories of Indian diasporic experiences are far from being linear or singular'.[136]

However, migrants' mobilisation of Sikh cultural idioms was not only intended to foster a hard-working group identity. For many migrants, Sikh culture proved explicitly advantageous, marking them 'unique' in economic and social spheres. Representations of Sikhs in local and national press provide a telling insight into their perpetual identification as 'strange and exotic' throughout the 1960s and 1970s.[137] Sikhs were marked for 'dazzling…turbans', 'their smells and queer food', and grandiose religious processions of 'flowers…chanting and beating the spiriting drum'.[138] [139] [140] Nor was such 'Orientalism' limited to literary representations of migrants.[141] Numerous interviewees detailed their continual exposure to racial and ethnic ridicule, often within the workplace. Gurinder Singh recalled how his mother's white-British colleagues mocked her Punjabi name, Mohinder: 'so they ended up calling her Linda. And that

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[132] Interview with Gursevak Singh.
[133] D. Mason, *Race and Ethnicity in Modern Britain,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.83.
[134] Mason, p.83.
[135] See, for example, Brown (2006) and Panayi (2010).
[136] R. Hedge and A. Sahoo, 'Introduction', *Routledge Handbook of the Indian Diaspora,* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p.6.
[137] Ballard and Ballard, p.55.
[138] P. Howard, 'Barrister in turban wins', *Times,* 5 October 1967: 2.
[139] Special Correspondent. 'The Sikh-12 Jobs In 18 Months-Is A Manual Misfit', *Times*, 19 January 1965: 13.
[140] Reporter, 'The Punjab Touch in Southall', *Times*, 23 January 1967: 10.
[141] 'Orientalism', refers to 'a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and…"the Occident."' In E. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient,* (London: Pantheon, 1978), p.2

was the name that stuck with her at work'.[142] Manjit Kaur remembered being teased by factory colleagues for mispronouncing English words: 'everyone start laughing at me…You say 'tin', we say 'teen'.[143] For others, exclusion was more overt. 'In the office…they used to go to parties…if you're Indian you weren't invited'.[144] As Rashmi Desai observed of the minority Indian worker in the 1960s, 'English workers behave as a group and isolate him'.[145]

Yet it was within the context of their identification as 'Other' that migrants described a capitalisation their cultural difference as a mechanism for generating interest from white colleagues. Manjit Kaur explained how she made 'every other worker jealous', fostering a strong relationship with her boss by making him Indian *chai* (tea). 'He say, 'come on Manjit, come on love, make me nice cup of…*chai*'. He like my tea!'.[146] Similarly, Santokh Singh initiated friendships with other teachers through a Punjabi card game. 'I teaching them Indian game…they used to play *ubi* during the lunchtime…everyone liked that'.[147] Santokh's elaboration that 'the headmaster was surprised how I could have such good relations with the whole staff' reveals the sheer shrewdness of this embracement of his racialised identity.[148]

For Surinder Singh, the novelty of his turban facilitated occupational progress. As an applicant for Chief Medical Officer for Birmingham, Surinder explained that although 'there was supposed to be an interview board of eight people…twenty people turned up', because 'people here were surprised that an Indian would apply for a role being the doctor for the whole city'.[149] As the successful candidate, Surinder claimed 'being a Sikh, it helped me enormously'; 'the advantage was the interview board was so big that we kept on talking to each other, and asking me questions'.[150] Thus, Surinder's religious distinctiveness – his perceived 'alien culture' which delineated his potential to 'assault…patriotism…morality…the

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142 Interview with Gurinder Singh.
143 Interview with Manjit Kaur.
144 Interview with Karamjit Singh.
145 Desai, p.84.
146 Interview with Manjit Kaur.
147 Interview with Santokh Singh.
148 Interview with Santokh Singh.
149 Interview with Surinder Singh.
150 Interview with Surinder Singh.

law' – in fact afforded him a unique opportunity to exhibit his experience by stimulating intrigue in his application.[151]

Similarly, other migrants perceived non-material Sikh culture to have equipped them with unique occupational skills. Bikram and Piara Singh both presented their fluency in Punjabi as valuable cultural capital, securing them careers in interpreting. 'An immigration officer…he keep ringing me all the time. He said, 'we need people like you''.[152] Similarly, Jaswant Singh exploited his cultural distinctiveness in a dentistry school interview in the late-1960s. When asked how he used his hands, he responded:

'I do woodwork…I do rowing'. They said, 'what else do you do?'. I said 'I play *thabla* [(Punjabi drums)]'…there's me, playing *thabla* on the table...they saw the movements of my hands and they were amazed'.[153]

Jaswant's indication that 'Western' hobbies were insufficient to impress interviewers, and that *thabla* provided a novel outlet through which he could demonstrate his dexterity, again reveals a conscious exploitation of his ethno-religious cultural difference. This corroborates Stuart Hall's conception of migrant identity as a *process*, forged through a mobilisation of 'traditions of the past', which in Britain became 'symbolic marks of exclusion'.[154] These symbols were used by migrants 'to give themselves an alternative or counter position in relation to gaining access…to use the identity question as a way of levering spaces open'.[155] Sikh migrants embraced the culture which constituted their identification as ''the Other'…the stranger in the midst' to improve their economic and social positions.[156] This powerfully challenges both Marxist sociology and a wealth of South Asian migrant history, which have reduced migrant cultural traditionalism to a backwardness inherent to their societies of origin. Whilst the former has presented migrants' ethnic identities as a 'false construction' which merely disguises their position in the social 'underclass'; much migrant history considers the reproduction of culture as key to the 'diaspora concept' that is, migrants' 'vision

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[151] A. Sherman, 'Britain's urge to self-destruction', *Daily Telegraph*:9, September 1979.
[152] Interview with Piara Singh.
[153] Interview with Jaswant Singh.
[154] S. Hall, 'Politics of identity', in T. Ranger, Y. Samad, and O. Stuart, *Culture, Identity and Politics,* (Aldershot: Avery, 1996), p.131-2.
[155] Hall, 'Politics', p.130-2.
[156] Hall, 'Racism', p.23.

of South Asia as the place to be'.[157] [158] [159] Ethno-religious culture can neither be reduced to a mere 'hangover' from migrants' past, nor that which would disappear in light of migrants' achievement of economic and social equality. Sikh migrants of all educational and occupational backgrounds consciously drew upon Sikh culture for advancement as British citizens.[160]

However, Sikh migrants' exploitation of their culture was not confined to their interactions with white-Britons in the mainstream economy. As discussed in chapter one, with mass migration came 'the rapid rise of an Asian-owned small business sector in Britain'.[161] Such entrepreneurial vigour was observed in Handsworth, where Rex and Tomlinson acknowledged the centrality of a 'migrant' identity to Asian entrepreneurship. 'The Soho Road on one hand and Lozells road on the other are clearly marked by the presence of immigrant shops and cultural centres…directed to an immigrant clientele'.[162] Correspondingly, Sikh migrants' establishment of the so-called 'specialist ethnic market' – Sikh grocers, tailors and legal practices catering specifically to the migrant market – was noted by numerous interviewees.[163] Jaswant Singh recalled his father establishing 'the first Asian' grocery business on Soho Road in 1958, after which interviewees witnessed a gradual flourishment of Sikh businesses. When Karamjit arrived in 1965, he remembered there being three 'Indian shops' which 'imported all the stuff from India'.[164] By the late 1970s, Soho Road was home to three cinemas used for 'Indian movie[s]' and 'Punjabi music show[s]', and a café which 'just did…Indian food'.[165] [166] [167] Similarly, in neighbouring Sparkbrook in 1969, Rex and Moore observed that 'a higher proportion of Punjabis than in any other community seem to be shopkeepers'.[168] Numerous migrant women developed clothes businesses, spending 'almost

[157] Castles and Kosack, p.7.
[158] Rex and Tomlinson, p.275-6.
[159] Brown, p.59.
[160] Castles and Kosack, p.7.
[161] H. Aldrich, J. Cater, T. Jones and D. McEvoy, 'Business Development and Self-Segregation: Asian Enterprise in British Cities, in C. Peach, V. Robinson and S. Smith, *Ethnic Segregation in Cities,* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), p.170.
[162] Rex and Tomlinson, p.72.
[163] Ballard and Ballard, p.38.
[164] Interview with Karamjit Singh.
[165] Interview with Sukhdev Singh.
[166] Interview with Tarlok Singh.
[167] Interview with Karamjit Singh.
[168] Rex and Moore, p.132.

six to seven hours at the sewing machine at home', until 'late at night, maybe one, two o'clock in the morning' making traditional Indian clothes to supplement household income.[169] [170] Jarnail Singh and Sewa Singh similarly developed independent legal practices on Soho Road, assisting migrants 'especially in immigration', given that interactions with white-British solicitors 'was very, very difficult because a lot of them couldn't speak any English'.[171] [172]

Dependent on fellow migrants, such entrepreneurship necessitated an embracement of Sikh culture. Sikh identity thus afforded migrant entrepreneurs multiple market advantages. As members of the ethno-religious group to which their demand market belonged, they possessed sensitivities to food preferences, customary dress and mother-tongue unattainable by white counterparts. Crucially, they enjoyed cultural ties with India, pivotal as the site for exportation of 'ethnic' goods. Suvinder Singh explained that he would visit India 'seven or eight times in a year' to source materials for his clothes business.[173] This is particularly significant given, as an East African Sikh, India had never been Suvinder's 'home'. Yet his commitment to Sikh culture: speaking Punjabi, keeping 'my turban and my hair', and being 'attached up with the temple', facilitated cultural connections, when lacking personal links with India. In turn, this facilitated economic progress in Britain: 'I built up my business…I opened up a few shops'.[174]

Possessing such cultural capital, migrant businesses proved a primary outlet for Sikh economic activity. Karamjit Singh explained that, arriving in the mid-1960s, 'we was limited to three shops'.[175] British vendors' failure to stock 'all the *daals* and all the things' necessary for the *roti, chapatti, chana, sabji* and *samosa* central to interviewees' descriptions of their home-lives, evidently rendered them insufficient to win migrants' unrivalled custom.[176] This corroborates the findings of Aldrich et al. in Bradford in 1978, where Asians constituted just 17% of the population, yet represented 67% of customers to Asian-owned businesses.[177]

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[169] Interview with Piara Singh.
[170] Interview with Preet Kaur.
[171] Interview with Jarnail Singh Bhinder, BBCSMSA, (14/04/17).
[172] Interview with Sewa Singh.
[173] Interview with Suvinder Singh.
[174] Interview with Suvinder Singh.
[175] Interview with Karamjit Singh.
[176] Interview with Karamjit Singh.
[177] Aldrich, Jones and McEvoy, p.172-8.

By establishing sites which were not only culturally but commercially 'Sikh', migrant entrepreneurs forged a set of distinctly diasporic vocations, founded on the very efflorescence of Birmingham's Sikh community. As such, migrants both circumvented and *disrupted* the exclusionary British economy. They not only avoided traditional, prejudicial employment markets; their creation of entirely new business models, inimitable by white-British entrepreneurs, also reflects a shrewd mobilisation of their culture to exploit what Ballard would term 'a chink in the armour of racism'.[178] Those traditions which were dismissed by critics as the 'alien element' in British society were in fact exploited as alternative means to economic progress, thus also communicating migrants' commitment to economic integration.[179]

This chapter has revealed that, for Sikh migrants to Birmingham in the 1960s and 1970s, cultural traditionalism and social and economic integration were not conflicting goals. Rather, migrants perceived their ethno-religious cultural forms to be powerful strategies for social and economic advancement as permanent British citizens. Culture was mobilised for both assimilation and separatism, proving adaptable according to the nature of migrants' exclusion from the British mainstream. Sikhdom was thus a source of empowerment.

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[178] Ballard, 'Migration and Kinship', p.224.
[179] Powell, Speech, 1968.

CONCLUSION:

This dissertation takes Birmingham as a microcosm of urban British society in the 1960s and 1970s. It has explored the manifold experiences of exclusion seemingly inherent to migrant life in Britain, and has brought to light the sophisticated responses to such marginalisation by one of Britain's largest migrant groups: the Sikhs.

Sikh migrants' narratives of adversity were diverse. Memories of both 'overt discrimination at the time', and less systemic racisms such as being 'called names', reveal the multiplex forms of exclusion to which Sikh migrants were subjected in late-twentieth century Britain.[180] [181] Exclusion was premised on biological and cultural difference, manifested as racial, ethnic and religious discrimination. Yet within this complicated racialised terrain, Sikhdom was uniformly presented as providing the resources necessary for migrant advancement. It provided a clear foundation for the formation of a supportive community, and it furnished adherents with distinct cultural idioms to exploit as both social and economic capital. 'Sikh' strategies were thus multiple, flexible and selectively employed by migrants according to their personal experiences. When migrants faced prejudice, they mobilised resources which facilitated their integration into the mainstream. When the mainstream proved explicitly *exclusionary,* Sikhdom facilitated migrants' complete circumvention of conventional realms. Sikh community, culture and ultimately, success, were thus constructed by migrants themselves.

By highlighting the primacy of Sikhdom to migrants' identities and narratives of success, my dissertation thus provides some critical revisions to existing migrant studies literature. First, it contests influential Marxist approaches which reduce ethnicity to 'false consciousness': mere means for subjugation by the economic elite.[182] Second, it challenges a wealth of 'South Asian diaspora' history which suggests broad ethnic allegiances between migrants. Interviewees' focus on ethno-religious identity as providing more tangible resources for advancement reveals the merits of narrowing the focus of historical study even beyond the so-called 'ethnic' approach. Only when scholars seek to uncover the histories of ethnic 'sub-

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[180] Interview with Gurinder Singh.
[181] Interview with Karamjit Singh.
[182] Castles and Kosack, p.7.

groups' through their own narratives will we truly understand the diverse social history of Britain's poly-ethnic society. Guided by the personal narratives of migrants themselves, my dissertation thus stands as an important contribution to British social history. It provides unparalleled insight into how Race Relations legislation and 'Powellism' were experienced and responded to by those whom they targetted. It attributes historical and thus social and economic agency to those absent from the archives.

Indeed, this dissertation has opened up a new area of analysis which warrants further study. My interviews drew on some fascinating themes, such as factionalism between South Asian groups (for example, Sikhs and Muslims), and the similitude of male and female migrant experience. Whilst outside the remit of this dissertation, these themes are pertinent to social history, and have the potential for stimulating interdisciplinary studies.

This dissertation has uncovered the narratives of a group whose social, economic and cultural contributions to Britain are seminal to British social history. Shaped by conflict, community and culture, their lives as migrants led to one uniform narrative: 'I came to Birmingham, and since then, I'm Birmingham'.[183]

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[183] Interview with Jarnail Singh.

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