Small but Strong: Growth and Development of the Sikh Community in Kathmandu

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Small but Strong: Growth and Development of the Sikh Community in Kathmandu

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
Nepal: Tibetan and Himalayan Peoples, SIT Study Abroad, Fall 2022
Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the following individuals and organizations for their support and assistance in the research and writing of this paper.

First and foremost, I would like to thank SIT for funding and facilitating this project, and for allowing me the creative opportunity to organize, conduct, and synthesize the work required.

I would also like to thank Nazneen Zafar for her assistance in my initial interview process. Her expertise and mentorship were instrumental in helping me to develop and refine my ideas.

I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to individuals in the Sikh community for participating in the interviews for this research study. Their candid and open responses were essential in providing a nuanced and complete picture of the research topic.

This research is dedicated to my godmother, Ek Ong Kaar Kaur Khalsa.
Wahe Guru Ji Ka Khalsa Wahe Guru Ji Ki Fateh

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**Introduction: The First Sikh Guru**

Early in his life, Guru Nanak Ji displayed an affinity for the divine. Soon after his birth in April of 1469 his father, Mehta Kalu, sent for an astrologer to ascertain the newborn’s *janampatri*, or horoscope. When the astrologer, a man named Pandit Hardial, viewed the child, he fell to his knees and touched Nanak’s feet, seemingly awestruck. Hardial congratulated Nanak’s father and proclaimed “Fortunate. Very fortunate indeed, you are, to have this child as your son. He will be a great person. He will be loved and respected, nay worshiped, by Hindus and Muslims alike. His name and fame will spread over many lands.”

After completing his formal and spiritual education in Punjab, Guru Nanak set out to fulfill this prophecy laid out for him. His world was plagued with political and imperial instability, with each new generation of rulers providing seemingly contradictory ideas surrounding societal success and spiritual enlightenment. India was ruled by a number of powerful empires, including the Mughal Empire and the Sultanate of Delhi. These empires were often in conflict with each other, and the resulting wars and political instability had a profound impact on the people of India. The two empires were constantly vying for power and territory, and their conflicts often led to violence and destruction. In addition to these imperial conflicts, there were also tensions between the Hindu and Muslim communities in India. These religious differences sometimes led to violence and discrimination, which further contributed to the political instability of the time. Overall, the imperial conflict in India during the time of Guru Nanak was a complex and tumultuous period, marked by constant struggles for power and religious tensions.

Despite these challenges, Guru Nanak and the Sikh faith that he founded emphasized the importance of equality, compassion, and community, providing a message of hope and unity.

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during a time of great upheaval. Caught between the priests, pundits, qadis, and mullahs, Guru Nanak saw discontentment all around him. In his eyes, hatred, fanaticism, falsehood, and hypocrisy had driven the world into sin. In order to bring light to the people of the world, Guru Nanak set out on several udasis or religious expeditions to disseminate what he believed to be the true word of God as he had learned it in his own practices. The places Guru Nanak traveled on his Udasis were often celebrated through the construction of gurdwaras or temples where divine experiences or interactions with the Guru had occurred.

The first stop in the Guru’s journey was Eminabad, a small town in Pakistan. Several gurdwaras in Eminabad reflect Guru Nanak’s teachings on humility through his encounters with a local carpenter, Lalo, and a rich property owner, Malik. In Haridwar, about 500 kilometers east, Guru Nanak spoke of the dangers of superstition, and a gurdwara was constructed on the banks of the Ganges to commemorate his arrival. In Gorakh Mata, Reetha Sahib, and Beneras, the construction of gurdwaras after the arrival of the Guru commemorated some encounter or

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2 — Sin, in the case of Sikhi, carries a distinct connotation separate from Western religious canon. Rather than retributive penance, sin is viewed as a person’s own deviation from their true path through haumai, or spiritual blindness. The Guru Granth Sahib repeats several times the statement that “suniye dukh paap ka nasu”—by listening [to holy teachings] are suffering and sin destroyed. According to the Christian doctrine, man suffers from the original sin of transgression committed by Adam. He can be saved only by surrendering himself to Jesus Christ. This idea is foreign to Indian thought. While the Guru’s grace is essential, man must work out his own liberation through prayer and good deeds. The idea of an intercessor common to the Semitic faiths is foreign to Sikhi.

3 — On reaching Eminabad, Guru Nanak was invited to stay in the home of a carpenter, Lalo, who was very poor. Sensing sincerity and generosity in the man, Guru Nanak gratefully accepted his invitation. At the same time, Guru Nanak was invited to stay at the home of a very wealthy man, Malik, who had made his money unfairly and by exploiting the poor. Guru Nanak declined Malik’s invitation and upon hearing the news, Malik demanded an answer from the Guru. Guru Nanak explained simply that Lalo’s roti was delicious and contained ingredients which Malik’s chefs could never hope to replicate. Guru Nanak held roti made by Lalo in one hand and the ones offered by Malik in the other and squeezed. From Lalo’s roti came milk while Malik’s drained blood. Guru Nanak explained this to Malik, saying Lalo’s roti was made with love and honest income while Malik’s were made by exploiting others. The Guru advised Malik to give away all his ill-gotten wealth to the poor and start life anew with honest income. Two gurdwaras, Gurdwara Chakki Sahib and Gurdwara Rohi Sahib, commemorate the Guru’s visits to Eminabad in 1500 and again in 1521. (Deju Singh Chilana, 3rd Udasi Guru Nanak)

4 — When he arrived in Haridwar, Guru Nanak dipped in the holy Ganges river and saw Hindus offering water to their ancestors facing east. Challenging what he perceived as the superstitious nature of the practice, Guru Nanak turned west and offered his own water, claiming he was watering his farm. The priests laughed and asked Guru Nanak how he could irrigate his fields in Pakistan from Haridwar. The Guru responded by stating in the same way he was unable to provide water to his farm from here, the priests could not offer water to their ancestors who resided beyond the physical realm. The priests took Guru Nanak’s parable to heart, and a gurdwara, Gurdwara Nanakwara, was built on the banks of the Ganges to commemorate the occasion.
event of religious or spiritual significance. For example, the reetha or Indian soapberry tree where Guru Nanak meditated in Reetha Sahib (figure 1) is present in the gurdwara to this day and remains an important historical site for Sikhs. In each of these places, the presence of the Guru and resulting gurdwaras laid the foundation for a strong site and center of community for Sikhs. Throughout the remainder of his Udasis, Guru Nanak traveled across a significant portion of southeast Asia, traversing over 28,000 kilometers in 24 years with his companion Bhai Mardana. Everywhere they went, they spread the word of the Guru and engaged in a broad spectrum of philosophical and theological debates, creating and developing the first Sikh communities in many locations across Pakistan, India, China, Tibet, and Nepal, even reaching as far west as Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Yemen (figure 2).

Figure 1: The sweet reetha tree at Gurdwara Sri Meetha Reetha Sahib where Guru Nanak sat. (Dr Avtar Singh Cheema. Flickr, 2010)
Visitors of *Sri Harmandar Sahib* in Amritsar, known in English as the Golden Temple, might be surprised to see Tibetan Buddhist monks offering their prayers at what is considered the holiest Sikh site in the world. The confluence of religious beliefs was not foreign to Guru Nanak on his travels, as he often encountered pandits, mullahs, lamas, and various other religious practitioners in his attempt to speak what he believed to be the One Truth of God, *Ik Ongkaar*. His third Udasi, undertaken from 1514 to 1518, spanned an area primarily composed of Buddhists and Hindus in Tibet and Nepal, and it is this journey that culminated in the belief among some Buddhists sects that the Guru was a reincarnation of Guru Rinpoche, or The Precious One. In Tibetan Buddhism, the term Rinpoche is used to refer to a highly realized spiritual teacher. These teachers are considered to be the reincarnations of previous spiritual masters, and are therefore considered to be especially enlightened and knowledgeable. Rinpoches are often believed to have the ability to manifest their wisdom and spiritual power in order to benefit others. They are considered to be
sources of guidance and inspiration for their students, and are often highly respected and revered within the Tibetan Buddhist community. The concept of Rinpoche is closely tied to the Tibetan Buddhist belief in reincarnation, which Sikhi also shares. According to this belief, the consciousness of a highly realized spiritual master can be reborn in the body of another person, allowing them to continue teaching and guiding their students in future lives.

Rinpoche Nanak Lama, as he came to be called by some Tibetan Buddhists, underwent a journey to the holy Kailash Mansarovar to converse with a group of Sadhus who resided on the sacred mountain Adi Kailash (Figure 3). His discussions of ascetic practices, connection to the physical form, and the tenets of samsara were chronicled in the Sidh Gosht, and his presence in Tibet, Sikkim, and Ladakh fostered communities of Sikhs and non-Sikh worshipers alike.

Figure 3: Adi Kailash from the Barkha Plain, where Guru Nanak met with 84 Hindu Sadhus to complete the Sidh Gosht. (Jean-Marie Hullot, 2016. Wikipedia)
Guru Nanak in Nepal: A Time of Turmoil

Upon leaving Kailash, Guru Nanak trekked along the Kali River and eventually reached the Kingdom of Nepal in 1515. Nepal at this time was undergoing an era of political turmoil due to regime change and factionary alignment. Preceding his arrival, the ruling dynasty was that of the Mallas, with a powerful king named Jayayakshya Malla slowly expanding the boundary of Nepal’s borders while simultaneously developing stronger central infrastructure. At the time of the king’s death in 1482, his kingdom was divided amongst his many sons, effectively denying the opportunity for a unified Nepal for the remainder of the dynasty through “internecine wars for territorial and commercial gains.” At the same time, the Rajputs of India, suffering costly military defeat against Mughal invaders, fought for and won over Gorakhnath in Nepal in an attempt to establish a more secure foothold in the subcontinent.

Entering in this tumultuous period, Guru Nanak bore witness to much suffering and unrest. During the period of his third Udasi, Guru Nanak is believed to have spent several months in Kathmandu. He conversed at length with local ascetics and pandits about their practices and spent considerable time around the Pashupatinath temple, a historically significant and long standing Hindu complex on the Bagmati river. The Guru’s spiritual discourse and relationship with the royal family led to a designation of land that would later become Gurdwara Nanak Math (Figure 4). Today, there are two gurdwaras maintained within the Pashupatinath complex, blending the traditional Newari style of Kathmandu with a continued reverence for the Guru and his teachings.

— Guru Nanak told the king to return to his kingdom and seek solace under the pipal tree on the hill beside the river. So the king had a temple built for his guru and a small shrine for himself where he often came to meditate. When the king died, some of his ashes were buried in the shrine according to his last wishes. A later king, Rana Bahadur Shah, is also said to have found solace at the Guru Nanak Math. He gifted considerable land to the temple so it might never want for support.

7 —
The existence of the gurdwaras at Pashupatinath, one of the most revered holy sites for Hindus in the world, could be seen as somewhat paradoxical. Not only are they constructed in the local Nepali architectural style, they also “revere a range of Hindu deities and several ascetics.” These two holy Sikh sites and their connection to the history of Nepal reflect several important characteristics of the convergence of Sikh and Hindu faiths in the country. Though demographically Nepal is dominated by Hindus, the intersection and coexistence with Buddhism and Sikh reflects a culturally significant religious pluralism. Though once ruled as a single kingdom, the monarchy of Nepal has often been de jure monarchies, with a wide variety of art, architecture, music, culture, and even faith. Sikh as an ideology is generally in line with a multiplicity of opinions and practices. As Gurpreet Singh stated in an interview, “we have always lived peacefully with the Hindus and the Buddhists. It is not in our faith to judge or tell others how to live, only to live our own truest lives and offer help to those who need it.”

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9 Gurpreet Singh: 2022. Personal interview
Sikhi in Nepal

Introducing concepts such as gurdwara, langar, or kitchen, and seva, or selfless service, allowed Sikhi to quietly flourish in Nepal after Guru Nanak’s initial visit. In Sikhi, the gurdwara houses the *Siri Guru Granth Sahib*, the holy book or Eternal Guru of the faith, but it represents much more than a place of prayer. Gurdwaras feed and house the needy, hold space for community gatherings, and coalesce Sikh community patrons, leaders, and citizens. Because the gurdwara is open to those of all faiths, it provides a safe space for religious and spiritual confluence. Gurdwaras, often built after important religious or historical events, commemorate the existence of a Sikh identity and facilitate the promulgation of a united Sikh community. Though small in stature, the gurdwaras in and around Kathmandu provide essential services to anyone in need, regardless of faith or belief. Today, Sikhs in Kathmandu number only around 50 or so families, yet their gurdwaras and combined community efforts reach thousands of people across Nepal each year. In line with the three core principles of the faith, Sikhs in Kathmandu have little trouble living amongst Hindus and Buddhists. They are satisfied with the opportunity to protect and serve the underprivileged however they can.

The commitment to service and community and moral excellence by the Sikh community in Nepal extends to the very formation of Kathmandu as a contemporary city, and the existence of Nepali Sikh communities reaches even further. Though the foundation for eventual communities was initially constructed through Guru Nanak’s memorialization, a sedimented path to migration was laid by Queen Maharani Jindi Kaur (*Figure 5*) in the mid-nineteenth century.

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10 — The three core principles or “golden rules” of Sikhi are as follows: *Naam Japna*, meditation on God and the reciting and chanting of God’s name to remember the strength and grace of God and Guru. *Kirat Karo*, to live an honest and hardworking life, speak the truth, live morally, and accept God’s gifts and blessings. *Vand Chakko*, literally “share and consume together,” sharing food, wealth, resources, and being part of a community sharing the values of the Guru.

11 — Queen Jindi Kaur was regaled for her beauty and character during her time as a regent of the Sikh Empire. After the British subdued the Sikhs following the First Anglo-Sikh War of 1845, the Maharani was imprisoned by British royal officers who cited concerns that her fame and cunning made her a strong rallying point for rebellion.
The queen arrived in Kathmandu in April 1849, fleeing perpetual imprisonment under British rule. During her 11 years of asylum, Jindi Kaur established several gurdwaras in the valley and enshrined within them handwritten copies of the Guru Granth Sahib. She was well-respected in her time by the royal family and people of Nepal, and historical reports identify her as “the first prominent Sikh in Nepal, who paved the way for the entry of others a hundred years later.”

Figure 5: Queen Maharani Jindi Kaur as depicted in a portrait by George Richmond wearing necklaces and earrings adorned with jewels and other valuables after her collection had been returned from confiscation in Benaras. (George Richmond, 1863. Gianfranco Ferre Research Center, Politecnico de Milano)

The Bloody Dynasties of Nepal: Historical Context

Following the demise of the previously dominant Malla dynasty in 1769, Nepal was united as a single amalgamated state comprising the Malla conquered kingdoms of Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhadgaon under Prithvi Narayan Shah, the Raja of Gorkha and first King of Nepal. The Shah was ambitious, and after securing territory in “Tarai, Kumāon, Garhwal, Simla, and Sikkim in northern India, as well as large portions of the Plateau of Tibet and of the valleys of the Inner Himalayas,”\textsuperscript{13} he sealed the kingdom’s borders and refused to trade with inquiring British officials in an attempt to create a strong and independent nation. Despite his political and territorial success, the legacy of Nepal as “united” by Prithvi Narayan and the Shah dynasty would end up volatile and bloody.

The son of the first Shah, Pratap Singh Shah, was quickly characterized as “having no distinction of right and wrong,”\textsuperscript{14} and banished his siblings and close allies of his father to avoid the possibility of a coup. Although he displayed an abundance of caution, Pratap Singh died of smallpox in 1777. He was succeeded by his son, Rana Bahadur Shah, who was slain at a royal audience by his elder brother, Sher Bahadur Shah, in 1806. Sher Bahadur Shah was in turn strangled to death the same year by a royal guard, Bal Narsingh Konwar, creating a power vacuum. The lapse in central authority resulted in Bhimsen Thapa, the leader of the Thapa Kaji, orchestrating the Bhandarkhal massacre, seizing power for the Thapa family and killing 93 people.\textsuperscript{15} In 1846, a descendant of Bal Narsingh Konwar, Jang Bahadur Konwar, was responsible for the infamous Kot massacre, killing at least 30 members of the royal family and setting up the newly founded Rana dynasty to effectively rule Nepal until 1951 through ministerial positions that rendered the power of the ruling Shah family obsolete.

\textsuperscript{13} Britannica: 2022. "Prithvi Nārāyaṇ Shah".
\textsuperscript{15} Kumar L. Pradhan: 2012. Thapa Politics in Nepal: With Special Reference to Bhim Sen Thapa, 1806–1839. p. 278
In the late 1940s and early 1950s, there was a noticeable shift in the ruthless dynastic strife that had dominated Nepali politics for the better part of two centuries. While Nepal had remained isolated among a region dominated by the British Raj, it was increasingly the recipient of outside influence from traders in Ladakh, Sherpas in Darjeeling, and Gurkha soldiers who had fought under the British in World War II. It is possible that Nepal saw opportunities for economic growth or political alliances following the end of the war, or that there were changes in the global political climate that led Nepal to open up to the outside world, but certainly there was a global predisposition at this time to challenge existing global norms. India, struggling against over one hundred years of British rule, fought for and achieved independence in 1947. To the north, China lay on the verge of a Communist revolution that would culminate in the invasion of Tibet in 1950.

Back home there were rumors of a Nepali Congress Party formed in exile. The Rana dynasty was able to maintain its power by forming a close alliance with the British Empire and by suppressing opposition to their rule. As this support from the empire waned, the Ranas became more susceptible to the ebb and flow of public opinion, and the newly formed Congress Party gained traction. It called for an armed revolution against the Rana regime. On November 12, 1950, the first “People’s Government” of Nepal was declared after the Congress party launched a successful assault on the administration.
Due to the compounding factors of economic development, political reform, and social change, Nepal underwent a period of intense societal upheaval during this time. Kathmandu as we know it today was conceived after decades of instability, and work began on the young metropolis starting in 1951. With assistance from the Indian government, Nepal began construction on crucial infrastructure such as highways and water supply systems; Sikhs were at the forefront. Manohar Singh, believed to be the first Sikh to arrive in Nepal in the 20th century, was a prominent employee of the Water Works Department under the Rana regime. During the transitional period, he played “a pioneering role in installing water supply systems and solving water supply problems in different parts of Kathmandu, including in the army barracks in the
Valley,” and was instrumental in facilitating infrastructure planning and execution for the following decades.

According to Durga Nidhi Sharma, former Secretary of the Nepal Government Public Works Commission, “there was almost no one like Singh.” Manohar Singh’s son, Hardyal Singh, followed in his father’s footsteps, and after completing his formal education with a degree in civil engineering in 1955 he was employed by the Nepal Road Department. During this time, a key infrastructure goal of the government was to create transport avenues in order to move materials necessary for such large-scale urban development. Hardyal Singh was instrumental in the development of Nepal’s first major highway, the Tribhuvan Highway completed in late 1956, and he was there to receive the first trucks driven across the Indian border carrying much needed supplies.

Kathmandu’s Sikhs Came in Trucks

In addition to engineering and often building the roads, Sikhs were also among the first to drive their trucks across them. Sardar Pritam Singh arrived in 1957 with his father and the two quickly settled in Kupondole, which would eventually become a community center for generations of Indian Sikhs entering Nepal. According to Pritam Singh, “We’d have to build the road as we drove our truck here. While it was less than a day journey from Amlekhgunj to Kathmandu, the rough road stretched it to four days.” Even before the roads were traversable, Pritam Singh and many Sikhs like him braved the journey, bringing with them the opportunity for development. Sikh drivers transported critical materials to projects such as the Trishuli Hydroelectricity Dam,

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18 ibid. p. 41.
the East-West highway, Sunauli-Pokhara highway, Butwal-Narayanghat highway, and even the Patan Hospital.¹⁹

 Aside from being a necessary component of infrastructure development efforts in Kathmandu, Sikhs like Pritam Singh helped transform the education system not only in regards to exclusivity, but also content. Under the Rana regime, formal academic education had largely been limited to the ruling elite. The majority of the population remained illiterate, and while there were education programs in place they focused on vocational skills such as “sewing, weaving, cutting, carpentry, masonry, agriculture, and other trades, with a concentration on employment.”²⁰ Pritam Singh founded the Modern Indian School in 1978—even today among Kathmandu’s most reputable educational institutions—which, though initially catered towards Indians, quickly attracted the attention of Nepali parents and students. Rupy’s International School—another well-respected school for younger children—followed suit in 1982, inspired by Rupy Singh’s educational experience as a young Sikh in India. From construction and

transportation to literacy and education, from art, food, and culture to fashion, Sikhs have remained integral to the heart of Kathmandu.

Several Sikhs stand outside the pre-2015 Gurdwara Guru Nanak Satsang
(Ravinder Singh Sethi, date unknown)

21st Century Sikhs in Kathmandu: Overshadowed?

By most quantitative estimates, the Sikh community in Kathmandu is declining. Several interviewees referenced the 7.8 Richter magnitude earthquake that devastated the city. Local business owner Prabhmeet Singh stated “since the earthquake, people have left. They are unsure about the future of the city and the safety of their families, so they have moved away.”

Additionally, the COVID-19 Pandemic placed a heavy economic burden on Sikh laborers and business owners. Singh estimates there are approximately 50 Sikh families remaining in

Kathmandu, with additional reports placing the number somewhere around 600 people as of the 2011 census. In addition to uncertainties about the future, several other factors may have contributed to this apparent decline.

*The Caste System* — The caste system in Nepal is a social hierarchy that has traditionally been a major part of the country's culture and society. The system is based on the Hindu notion of varna, which divides people into four main categories: Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (merchants and traders), and Shudras (laborers and artisans). In Nepal, the caste system operates in a slightly different way than in other parts of South Asia. Rather than being based on the varna categories, Nepal's caste system is divided into a hierarchy of castes and sub-castes, with each caste having its own specific social status and privileges. At the top of the hierarchy are the Brahmin and Chhetri castes, which have traditionally been the most powerful and influential. At the bottom are the Dalit (untouchable) castes, who have traditionally been discriminated against and oppressed.

The caste system in Nepal has been an important factor in shaping the country's social, economic, and political structures. It has determined people's social status and opportunities, and has been a source of both privilege and discrimination. Over the years, there have been efforts to reform the caste system and promote greater social equality, but the system continues to have a significant impact on Nepali society. Although the caste system is a Hindu tradition, its impact on Nepali society extends beyond just the scope of practicing Hindus. According to Aseem Hasnein, “caste organises social life not only among Hindus but also in Muslim, Christian, Sikh and Buddhist communities in the region. It is an intergenerational system based on birth into a caste group.”

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Lack of Political Representation — Nepal is a federal parliamentary democratic republic, meaning that the federal government structure divides power between the central government and the various states or provinces. As a parliamentary democracy, the people elect representatives to the national parliament, who then fill the necessary cabinet positions. Because Nepal is a multi-party political system, there are several different political parties that compete for power, notably the Nepali Congress, the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Center). Although there are over 70 functioning political parties in Nepal, Sikhs have never garnered the political authority necessary for proper political representation outside of small regional victories. Although Indian Sikhs in Kathmandu enjoy some special privilege with regards to business and property ownership—a right that is not afforded to other vulnerable groups such as Tibetan refugees—some Sikhs are still acutely aware of the lack of political representation. One interviewee who requested to remain anonymous stated “It is deeply frustrating to be denied voting. I am a part of this community and this country and it seems as if the politicians do not respect that.”

Community: Strength in Conviction, not Numbers

In a country whose religious demographics are dominated by Hindus and Buddhists, and indeed in one of the oldest Hindu nations in the world, it is somewhat understandable that most journalistic accounts use language like “dwindling” or “under the shadow” to describe the state of the Sikh community in Kathmandu. Many who view the community from the outside see gurdwaras in disrepair and associate the edifice with its inhabitants. This, however, is somewhat of a misrepresentation of the Sikh community. Here, strength of community is not defined solely

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24 Anonymous, 2022. Personal Interview
by the number of Sikh families, or even the number of gurdwaras, but in everyday practices and an unwavering commitment to service. In political theory, the strength of a community is generally understood as its ability to maintain its coherence, solidarity, and effectiveness over time. A strong community is one that is able to maintain its identity, values, and interest, while also supporting its members. From a purely numerical perspective, it is easy to adopt the view that Sikh communities in Kathmandu are smaller—and therefore weaker—than their Hindu or Buddhist counterparts.

The concept of community strength can be approached from several different angles. Some emphasize the importance of shared values, norms, and institutions that can provide a basis for collective action and coordination while others focus on the importance of external factors such as supportive policies, resources, and state institutions in enabling resilient communities. A 2022 article from the Kathmandu Post explains: “Gurdwaras are nestled away from the public eye, operating all in hush-hush, and in the shadow of Hindu temples…Sikhs in Nepal are likely to continue to face underwhelming exposure.”

From this perspective, the relative attendance and exposure of Sikh institutions in comparison to Hindus and Buddhists directly correlates to an “underwhelming” community aspect. There are, however, several other aspects of community that are important to consider when attempting this type of claim.

**Strong Institutions** — Though they may not be sufficiently reflected in state and federal institutions, Sikhs in Kathmandu rally around different, more community based efforts to promote community strength, which help construct the framework for community members to work together and provide support and resources to those in need. For example, several interviewees referenced their knowledge of or participation in the Nanak Satsang Youth Committee (NSYC), an organization chaired by Pritam Singh and headquartered at the Gurdwara

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26 Bajracharya, 2022.
Guru Nanak Satsang in Kupondole. Prabhmeet Singh stated that the organization is responsible for “social work, event planning, festivals, and serving the community however it is needed.”

The committee has 48 members, but only a dozen or so are active at any given time.

Nevertheless, Prabhmeet Singh was able to provide several examples of NSYC both organizing and providing space for community members to be together, and organizing the community to provide resources and assistance to others in need well beyond what should be possible given its size. In the immediate aftermath of the 2015 earthquake, NSYC provided meals, support, and even financial resources to over 1,000 displaced Nepali residents in Pokhara. In Kathmandu, “Gurudwara committee was the first to organize and coordinate relief activities in and around Kathmandu City. Langar was provided to hundreds of people who took refuge at Gurudwara premises. Relief materials were provided to the Earthquake victims in and around the city.”

Additionally, Khalsa Aid, an international humanitarian NGO, has coordinated with NSYC several times in order to provide international relief in Nepal, deferring to the committee's expertise and community network to best understand how to disperse aid.

**Social Capital —** Social capital, which refers to the connections and networks that exist within a community, is often seen as an important factor in community strength. Strong social capital can help to foster trust, cooperation, and collective action among community members, which can in turn help to support the community as a whole. Because of the centrally important tenet of Sikhi *Vand Chakko*, social capital in the Sikh community is incredibly strong.

Community members are always willing to share resources and foster broader community connections. This can be observed at any gurdwara service or in any gurdwara *dharamsala* in the city, where one can easily see a plethora of Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike coming together. Again the

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27 Prabhmeet Singh, 2022. Personal Interview
importance of the gurdwara as a center of community strength is key to understanding the openness of Sikhs and their willingness to reach out and strengthen those around them however possible.

**Inclusivity and Diversity** — Communities that are open and welcoming to people of different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives can foster greater understanding, cooperation, and resilience. Though previously stated, it is again worth noting that those of all backgrounds and faiths are welcome at the gurdwara to eat, sleep, and pray, and welcome in the community in whatever way works for them. Krishna Prasad Kadariya, a caretaker of the gurdwara Nirmal Akhada inside the Pashupatinath temple complex, stated “Guru Nanak’s words are true and we can follow them without changing our religion too.”

In a personal interview, Kartapurkh Singh claimed “Sikh is a religion of acceptance. We welcome people from all backgrounds and beliefs into our community. You do not need to convert to Sikhism in order to be a part of our community. We believe that everyone has valuable perspective from their own experiences. We encourage people to stay with their own beliefs and practices and also to participate and learn from the traditions and teachings of Guru Nanak. We are all part of one family and we are strongest when we come together.”

**Conclusion: Small but Strong**

Overall, community strength can be promoted through shared values and goals, strong institutions, community networks and social capital, and overarching inclusivity. The strength and prominence of the Sikh community in Kathmandu is not perceived in comparison to other beliefs or practices, nor to the minority status Sikhs occupy in Nepal. As Parwinder Singh stated, “the community is small but strong.”

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29 Bajracharya, 2022.
service and betterment serve as general practices that help unite the Sikh community in Kathmandu, and allow them to help others. From a journalistic perspective, labeling the Sikh community as “overshadowed” does in some ways serve to highlight the challenges of Sikh minorities. Encroachment on sacred land and access to the full inclusive rights of citizenship are topics that are important to marginalized communities across the globe.

Highlighting the strength, resilience, and kindness of the Sikh community does not serve to undermine the idea that there remain structures in place that are detrimental to Sikhs and many other minoritized groups, but it is also important to frame people’s identity and struggles in context. Parwinder Singh’s claim of “small but strong” Sikh communities underscores the core principles of the faith that allow Sikhs to exist peacefully in a place like Nepal. Regarding the continuation of Sikhi and the next generation of Sikhs in Nepal, the future remains unclear.

Nepal is just now emerging from a noticeable lull after COVID-19. As Kathmandu awakens once more, it remains to be seen how future generations will approach their commitment to the practices and principles of Sikhi. It is also important to consider the looming threat of another major earthquake, which scientists believe will occur in the near future. Given the strength of their roots and communities, it is likely that these communities, small but strong, will continue to thrive in the Land of Truth.
Glossary of Terms

**Janampatri:** also known as a birth chart or natal chart, a detailed horoscope or astrological chart that is prepared based on the date, time, and place of a person's birth. This chart is used in Vedic astrology to provide insights into an individual's personality, relationships, and potential future events.

**Udasi:** religious journey involving a dedicated and disciplined pursuit of spiritual growth and enlightenment, through practices such as meditation, prayer, and self-reflection. The ultimate goal of the Udasi journey is to achieve union with the divine and to become one with the infinite consciousness of God.

**Gurdwara:** a place of worship for Sikhs. It is typically a spacious and open building that is used for religious services, community gatherings, and other religious and cultural activities. Gurdwaras are often adorned with beautiful architectural features, such as ornate domes and intricate carvings, and are open to people of all faiths and backgrounds. Inside the gurdwara, there is typically a central shrine or sanctum where the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the holy book of Sikh, is kept. The gurdwara is also home to the *langar*.

**Sri Guru Granth Sahib:** the holy book of the Sikh religion. It is a collection of sacred texts, hymns, and poems composed by the Sikh Gurus and other spiritual figures. The Guru Granth Sahib is considered the eternal Guru, or spiritual guide, of the Sikhs, and is treated with the utmost respect and reverence. It is typically placed on a throne in the gurdwara, and is given a ceremonial cloth and other decorations to signify its sacredness. The Guru Granth Sahib is written in the Gurmukhi script and is available in a variety of translations and editions.

**Langar:** a communal kitchen and dining area found in gurdwaras. The langar is an integral part of the gurdwara and serves as a space where people from all backgrounds and walks of life can come together to eat and share a meal. The food served in the langar is always vegetarian and is prepared and served by volunteers from the local community. The langar is open to all visitors, regardless of their faith or social status, and serves as a reminder of the fundamental Sikh principle of equality and the oneness of all humanity.

**Sri Harmandir Sahib:** also known as the Golden Temple, the holiest site in the Sikh religion. It is located in the city of Amritsar in the Punjab region of India. Sri Harmandir Sahib is a beautiful and majestic building, constructed in the 16th century, that is adorned with intricate carvings and covered in gold leaf. It is surrounded by a large pool of water, known as the Amrit Sarovar, which is considered sacred by Sikhs. The Golden Temple is a major pilgrimage site for Sikhs from around the world and is open to people of all faiths and backgrounds.

**Seva:** a fundamental concept in Sikhism that refers to selfless service to others. It is based on the belief that serving others is a way of serving God and of demonstrating one's love and devotion to the divine. In the Sikh tradition, seva is seen as a form of spiritual practice that can help individuals to overcome ego, selfishness, and greed, and to cultivate humility, compassion, and selflessness. Seva can take many forms, such as volunteering, charity work, and community service, and is often performed without any expectation of reward or recognition.
Suggestions for Further Research

1. A study on the role of the gurdwara in the social and cultural life of the Sikh community in Kathmandu. This could involve interviews with community members and observations of gurdwara activities and events.

2. An examination of the practices and rituals of the Sikh community in Kathmandu, with a focus on their origins and significance. This could include interviews with religious leaders and community members, as well as a review of relevant literature and texts.

3. A comparison of the experiences of Sikh women in Kathmandu with those of Sikh women in other parts of Nepal and India. This could involve interviews with women from different generations and backgrounds, as well as a review of existing research on the topic.

4. An exploration of the challenges and opportunities facing the Sikh community in Kathmandu, with a focus on issues such as education, employment, and social mobility. This could include interviews with community leaders and members, as well as a review of relevant data and statistics.

5. A study on the interfaith relations of the Sikh community in Kathmandu, including their interactions with other religious communities in the city. This could involve interviews with community members and religious leaders, as well as observations of interfaith events and activities.

6. A comprehensive investigation into the challenges facing the Sikh community in Kathmandu, including issues such as discrimination, marginalization, and inequality, and an analysis of the strategies being implemented to address these challenges.

7. A study on the role of Sikh youth in Kathmandu and their potential to shape the future of the community, including an examination of their involvement in community organizations and initiatives, as well as their aspirations and goals.

8. An analysis of the relationship between the Sikh community in Kathmandu and the broader Nepali society, including an examination of potential areas of collaboration and conflict, and an assessment of the ways in which the community is perceived by other religious groups in the city.

9. A historical examination of the migration patterns of Sikhs to Kathmandu and their integration into the city over time, including an analysis of the challenges they faced and the ways in which they have contributed to the city's social, cultural, and economic development.
Works Cited


