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An Ethnographic Study of Sikhism in Suburban Chicagoland

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ABSTRACT (100-200 WORDS): This research is an anthropological ethnographic study of Sikhism as practiced in Chicago suburbia. Sikhism is explored as a separate cultural group, focusing on what it means to be a Sikh in the U.S. today.

The initial interview was conducted with Mohinder Singh, a Sikh priest affiliated with the Chicago chapter of the Sikh Society. Areas explored are religious tenets of faith, cultural differences, as well as political issues affecting Sikhs.

Mrs. Rani Singh is a mother of 3, and the wife of a hospital radiologist in Aurora. She is an outspoken defender of minority rights and an active member in the Sikh community. Rani and her children, Ravi, 17; Savina, 15; and Simer, 10; also participated in this study.

These investigative interviews, along with extensive background material, are presented along with my findings and conclusions. Issue headings are divided into 4 areas: 1) Cultural Group Identity as Evidenced by Unique Sikh Appearance; 2) Religious beliefs that influence Sikh behavior; 3) Sikh historical background influencing the Sikh community; and 4) Current political issues facing Sikhism.

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Introduction

I stumbled on the Sikh *gurdwara* quite by accident while searching for houses with "For Sale" signs in their front yards. Three blocks away from my apartment building in a mix and match area of new and older homes in unincorporated Palatine Township sat the unusual octagonal building built into a hillside. It was constructed of poured cement with a picture window on each side. To one side of the building was an asphalt parking lot with a chain link fence surrounding it, the gate left open. The sign in front was made of painted plywood and read:

Sikh Religious Society of Chicago
1280 Winnetka Avenue
Palatine, Illinois

Then in gold and black stick-on letters at the very top of the sign were two words: GRANTH SAHIB (At that point, I assumed it was someone's name.)

My curiosity was piqued. On Sundays I would sometimes see men dressed in turbans driving in local traffic on their way to this building. My husband told me what he knew; Sikhs were of Indian descent and they lived by a code of conduct referred to as the 5 Ks. Included in this code, was the requirement to wear turbans and swords. Since I had watched a documentary on TV reviewing political unrest in India after the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi, I was intrigued to think that this particular cultural group had set-up shop in my backyard. They seemed too quiet and withdrawn from the

community to be political activists, much less terrorists!

While pursuing an undergraduate degree at Northern Illinois University in anthropology, I realized I needed to focus my interests on one or two of the many divisions now under the general heading of anthropology. I enjoyed cultural anthropology the most and would often read ethnographic studies on my own. I knew my resources and family obligations prevented me from pursuing exotic field work that many others had done in New Guinea, the Philippine Islands and Africa. But wasn't there something worthwhile and of interest to explore closer to home? There was, and now I knew where. With very little background knowledge I began to consider investigating Sikhs for my first anthropological ethnographic study.

I wanted to know who they are, where and how they live, and finally, what it means to be a Sikh in the United States today. As I gathered background material I soon realized I needed face to face interviews with the people I wished to know and understand. I felt speaking with them could give me better insight into who they are and what they believe in. I wanted to study Sikhism as it is practiced here in Chicago suburbia.

My first contact with Sikhism was through Mohinder Singh, the Sikh priest affiliated with the Chicago chapter of the Sikh Society. We would later meet at the *gurdwara* to discuss Sikh religious tenets of faith, cultural differences, and some political issues affecting Sikhs today. He also gave me the name and phone number of Mrs. Rani Singh and urged me to speak with her for more complete information regarding some of my many questions.

Mrs. Rani Singh is a mother of three children and the wife of a

Copley Memorial Hospital radiologist in Aurora. She is an outspoken defender of minority rights and an active member in the Sikh community. Mrs. Singh also agreed to be interviewed and graciously opened her home to me.

After several weeks of reviewing notes and completing my field journal, I realized my advisor was correct when he suggested that the children of Rani Singh would be an excellent source of information. Dr. Provencher, my advisor and professor, is also a practicing anthropologist, currently involved with his own field work in Malaysia. Interspersed between teaching classes each semester he continues his own research while assisting us younger, inexperienced fledglings in the field of cultural anthropology. His continued enthusiasm, humor and interest in all aspects of anthropology was inspiring to me. So armed, I approached Rani about the possibility of her allowing me to interview her children. She was most helpful in rearranging their schedules to allow me time to talk with them one hot summer day. Rani's three children; her seventeen year old son, Ravi. her fifteen year old daughter, Savina, and her ten year old son, Simer, all sat and spoke to me about their cultural backgrounds and about growing up as Sikh-Americans.

These investigative interviews, along with background material made available to me, are the basis for the ethnographic study that follows. As my research developed, four areas of interest concerning Sikhism were explored:

1. Cultural Group Identity and Sikh Appearance.
2. Religious Beliefs That Influence and Direct Sikh Behavior.

3. Sikh Historical Background Influencing the Sikh Community Today.
4. Current Political Issues Facing Sikhism.

This thesis will present my findings in these four areas which explain some of the important aspects of being a Sikh in the United States today.

Part 1: Cultural Group Identity and Sikh Appearance

One of the things that sets the Sikhs apart from other Indian cultural groups is their unique appearance. This was not always so. Founding Father Guru Nanak and the first nine gurus did not require external signs of faith. However Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and last Guru, reorganized the Sikhs and became their spiritual leader from 1666-1707 (Singh 1963:42). He handed down a mandate calling for distinctive dress and appearance among his followers.

During his nine years as guru, Guru Gobind Singh is most noted for forming a casteless brotherhood known as the Khalsa among the Sikhs.¹ On April 13th, 1699 he introduced the Institution of Amrit Sanchar (baptism by the double-edged sword) on the day of *Baisakhi*. Then as now, those Sikhs baptized into the Khalsa are considered *Amritdhari* Sikhs (Dharam 1986:7) The men take on the surname Singh, meaning lion. The women use the name Kaur, meaning princess or lioness, as a middle name.

Five emblems or the Five Kakars of the Khalsa are as follows:

1. *kachha*—a pair of short white breeches or a specific type of underwear worn by both men and women.
2. *kara*—an iron bracelet worn on the right wrist.
3. *kirpan*—being armed with a sabre or sword.
4. *kangha*—a small comb carried in the head of hair of men and women.
5. *kes*—unshorn hair.

Along with these five symbols of faith and brotherhood is a code of conduct or Cardinal Rules of the Khalsa (Dharam 1986:11).

1. Keep *Kes* This is a symbol of saintliness. No removal of any bodily hair is allowed for men or women.
2. Adultery is prohibited. Be faithful to your spouse.
3. No tobacco, alcohol or drug use allowed.
4. Meat that is *kutha* shall not be eaten. (This refers to animals that are slaughtered by being bled to death.)

Sahajadhari Sikhs are clean shaven and their belief system is based on the teachings of Nanak as embodied in the *Granth Sahib* but they have not taken part in *Khande-Ki-Pahul*, the initiation ceremony of Amrit Sanchar (Dharam 1986:7). Both *Keshadhari*, or longhaired Sikhs and *Sahajadhari*, or clean shaven Sikhs constitute a social group with a long history and a present day community of faith. Most Sikhs are born into the faith but at the same time are free to leave (Juergensmeyer & Barrier 1979:2).

My informants were well aware of their unique appearance and were quite willing to talk about it and what it meant to them. Mohinder Singh appeared to be in his late thirties. He spoke in easily understood English and in a comfortable way, smiling often. He frequently looked directly at me as we sat and faced each other for our interview at the Palatine *Gurdwara*. He wore a blue dress shirt open at the neck with the cuffs buttoned. Black pants and shoes with a deep blue cotton turban wrapped around his head. He

explained that although Sikhs do not have priests or brahmin as such, for lack of an English word, he was called a priest.

I asked him if he still observed the 5 Ks? He told me he did and preceded to show me. "Naturally, the turban is evident", he said as he stood and reached just below the belt line of his pants and withdrew a small five inch long sheathed ornate pen knife. He told me he hardly knows it's on and it wouldn't cut a thing. It is more of a symbolic piece now. "Did he have trouble with airport security?" "Yes, he answered, but he could hardly hijack an airplane with this!" We both knew he was right. As for the other emblems of faith, he had never cut his beard and began to gently pull on it now. He took off his *kara* so I could see it. He told me it was a silver bracelet he had bought in India but that they could be made of any material or be of any color.

Observing the 5 Ks is considered to be a personal choice made by each individual, Mohinder told me, and while he observed them, others in his church did not. While some members were clean shaven he felt there was no animosity between those who did observe the 5 Ks and those that did not. He did admit that it might be easier for those who were professionals or in business for themselves to observe the 5 Ks.

Rani Singh related an interesting story concerning her husband and the wearing of the turban. After my initial call, Rani had graciously invited me to interview her one summer morning, at her home outside Aurora, in Prestbury. Running up to the front door, I was greeted by Rani's oldest son, Ravi. He was dressed in

traditional long white muslin pants gathered at the ankle and a blue cotton tunic. With bare feet, a top knot of hair on his head and the beginnings of a beard on his face, he smiled at me as he opened the door and shouted to his mother that her guest had arrived. Rani came around the corner wearing a print blouse and a pair of jeans. A thick black braid swung side to side down her back as she led me into their warm busy kitchen. She handed me a china cup of Indian tea, and then turned to Ravi and helped stretch a long piece of blue muslin that later would be used as his turban. Rani felt that prejudicial views against all minorities was a terrible thing and yet it existed, sometimes taking aim against one cultural difference or tradition. Often such intolerance is experienced by her own family. Her son, Ravi, attends a military academy prep school. He is denied the right to wear the R.O.T.C. dress uniform because he wears a turban. But as an American citizen, he is still eligible to be drafted into war. "The kids at the academy call him names. But I tell him, he is stronger than them," she related to me. "They could not stand alone in the everyday blue uniform, as he does, while everyone else is wearing their dress uniform. It is building character in him and it will make him a better person."

Fifteen years ago, her husband, Pavitar, a medical doctor specializing in radiology interviewed with Copley Memorial Hospital in Aurora. During the interview he was asked if he would consider practicing without his turban. His response, Rani told me, was this: "If I am not qualified for the position, if my credentials are not adequate, I will understand if you do not wish to hire me. If you do not wish me to be on staff because I am a Sikh I will understand."

But do not ask me to deny my religious beliefs." After a waiting period of six months, he was asked to join the staff as head radiologist to build and expand the department. The hospital was in need of his new skills and technical experience. He continues to practice there today.

Sikh women also observe the 5 Ks. Rani, sitting across from me, pulled her long braid around her shoulder to the front of her and fingered it. "I have never cut my hair." This she felt was an important observance. "I have a *kara* on but I can take that off, my *kangha* can fall out of my hair and I don't wear a sword but my hair is always with me, a constant reminder, and an outward reminder and symbol of my faith." Women also wear *kachha* or a specific type of underwear for personal comfort, hygiene and modesty.³ Men in India, she told me, sometimes wear only *kachha* (breeches) and tunics. In the U.S., most men wear their breeches under their pants. Her son, Ravi, is sometimes teased at school for wearing *kachha* as they are longer and distinctive from standard American underwear.

On my return visit to Rani's home to interview her three children, I was given more information about coordinating American culture with being a practicing Sikh. Upon entering the house, Ravi was just beginning to wrap his turban. He gladly folded and stretched it around his head in the hall mirror so I could watch him. He told me he began to "wear the turban" during middle school; 6th or 7th grade. Once begun, he was obliged to continue. At first, he told me, it would take him a half hour to wrap it. Looking back at pictures of himself at that age, he now feels he is more proficient and is now

using some personal techniques, while inviting comments from his friends on the styling. While individuality plays a role, some regional differences can also be seen in turban wearing. Ravi points out that the Malaysian and African Sikhs have distinctively different looking wraps while his father also used a different wrap typical of Sikh professionals called the starched wrap turban. His father being of Burmese descent also incorporated some of these regional techniques of folding as well. Ravi, on the other hand, chose to follow his mother's family in style, wrapping a fresh turban every day. To show me the difference between himself and his dad, he brought me upstairs to his dad's closet. There on a top closet shelf, upside down, were three rows of starched folded turbans, eight to ten in a row. His dad prefolds them periodically as needed for every day.

Moving out to the patio for the rest of our interview, Ravi related a story about turban wearing at school.

When I first started at Mar-Main Military Academy, I had a gym teacher that was most intolerant. We had five minutes to get completely dressed after gym. I told him I would need extra time to wrap my turban. I wanted to take it off for gym because if it gets knocked off that can be most embarrassing, although it's no big thing. He wouldn't give me extra time. So I told my momee she had to call the school and get me extra time. But she wouldn't do it. So I learned to

wrap my turban in 2 minutes!

He flashed a triumphant smile at me while Rani gave me a knowing look. Apparently she felt he had been capable of this feat before he ever needed to perform it.

Simer, Ravi's younger brother, had also experienced being called names. Responding to the question; "What's the hardest thing about being a Sikh?", he said, "Washing my hair. My dad helps me wash it in the morning but it's really long." After indicating just how long his hair is by pointing to the small of his back, he continued, "Also people call me names like camel jockey and smurfhead." A likable ten year old boy in jeans and a T-shirt, he wore his hair in a topknot with a white cheese cloth covering. He was in the 5th grade at the local public school. Simer preferred to wear regular clothes to school and church. He did not enjoy wearing *kajama* or traditional clothing of breeches, tunic and vest. He was anxious to begin wearing a turban however, and thought he would start to do so this school year or in the 6th grade. Setting the time to begin wearing the turban was also an individual's choice. Middle school grades, high school and even before or after college were considered appropriate times to take this up.

Savina is a pretty, fashionable looking girl even with her long braided hair. When asked about her clothing preferences she told me she enjoyed wearing both traditional dress and contemporary clothes. Her friends liked her to wear her traditional dress and she

enjoyed getting dressed up for weddings and church. Sometimes her friends would pressure her to wear her hair long and unbraided. But she would decline saying it would get in her way or get caught in something.

Rani during this interview session was dressed in traditional clothing and she told me she only goes out in public dressed traditionally. Later she would show me some of the outfits her sister sent her from India. Most were hand made and embroidered, some were made of crepe, nylon, rayon and cotton. Some were beaded while others were bright with yellows, pinks, and blues. Like all clothing, some styling was more popular now than others. But Rani has even saved her wedding outfit which Savina had worn recently to a wedding.

Orthodox Sikh appearance does provide this family with a feeling of extended family ties to other unrelated Sikhs, as the following story shows. Once when they were traveling in Switzerland, they saw a Sikh gentleman walking down the sidewalk. His beard was quite long and white. Ravi told me how he chased after him just to say hello. He had been the only other Sikh they had seen during their two weeks there. The man had been quite cordial. He was studying for his doctorate at the University and invited them all to come home with him to meet his family. Rani felt this friendly behavior was quite typical of Sikhs and a welcome difference from other nationalities. It is an interesting side-effect. Distinctive dress while opening the way to ridicule and mockery can also be used to signify group membership in situations where identity to the group

would otherwise be unknown. Some scholars have gone on to argue that if the modern contemporary societal practices of today are adopted by the Sikh community much of their distinctiveness would disappear as well as the bonds that hold their community together (Irschick 1979:53).

Continuing now with part two, let's explore some of the more intriguing religious aspects that bind Sikh life.

Part 2: Religious Beliefs That Influence and Direct Sikh Behavior

Along with the code of conduct given in part 1, the following rules have also been laid out to guide Sikhs in their daily life (Dharam 1986:13-14).

1. Bathe mornings and meditate.
2. Complete recitations.
3. Study readings from *Guru Granth Sahib*.
4. Visit *gurdwara* daily.
5. Earn a living by moral and earnest means. Share earnings with helpless and weaker sections of society.

Also:

1. Do not engage in idol worship.
2. Believe in *Guru Granth Sahib*.
3. Do not engage in a caste system.
4. Teach *gurmukhi* and *gurbani*. Teach your children the tenets and history of Sikhism.
5. Do not engage in infanticide.
6. Do not observe purdah.
7. Do not pierce nose or ears.
8. Be distinct but not offensive to other faiths.

Between approximately 1870-1920 many if not all aspects of Sikhism were in the process of being thoroughly examined and analyzed. New guidelines of orthodoxy were formalized and accepted

during this period of change (Barrier 1979:41). My informants were quite eloquent on the subject of religious faith and had much to share with me.

Mohinder Singh began by telling me of one major difference he saw between practicing Sikhism in India and in the United States. "In India, a service is given every morning. The *gurdwara* is closeby and everyone comes. But here services are held only on Sunday from 11-2 pm. as a convenience to those who can attend. Our 400 members come from all over the area."

Mohinder's major areas of responsibility were similar to any other minister, priest or church pastor. He often would bless new homes or pray with family members at the time of a death in the family. The *gurdwara* had been involved in a number of community projects but some had not been as successful as they had hoped.

Rani Singh was also able to explain various aspects of Sikh religious faith. Therefore in the following passages I have combined their ideas to present a more complete discussion of some of the central ideas presented to me during our interviews:

Concerning the Book of Knowledge or *Guru Granth Sahib*:

Ten Sikh guru prophets wrote the sacred religious texts of Sikhism. This is unlike other spiritual leaders like Christ and Mohammad who did not actually write themselves. These texts are thought to be the direct word of god and also incorporate some Hindu and Islamic works that are in agreement with Sikh teachings. Only the written word is worshiped not the gurus themselves. Characteristic of this

doctrine is the belief that the passages contained in the *Granth Sahib* are totally unique, project the universality of religion and are written in a poetic form which can be sung. To explain these characteristics, Rani told me;

Sikhism believes in god as above the cycle of humanness. He is and has no beginning or end. This is symbolized by the *kara* we wear on our right wrist. God is formless and everywhere while our soul is eternal. This relationship between a soul and god can be seen in these two analogies: The goal of the human soul is to merge with god as a drop of water is consumed by the ocean or as the light of a match merges into the light of a fire. When someone dies this part of the force is then reunited with the bigger whole.

Concerning *Karma* and lifecycles:

Sikhism teaches that your present life position is based on your previous life's situation. In other words, people living hellish lives are doing so because of their past deeds. *Karma* involves being reborn into another better life until at one point it ends with your soul reuniting with the force of god.⁴

Concerning achieving closeness with god, Sikhs prepare the mind, body and soul in the following ways:

1. Cleanliness of the soul through mediation. This is thought to be the closest way to be one with god on this earth.
2. Cleanliness of the body through bathing in the morning. The body is the temple for the soul.
3. Cleanliness of the mind through reading, singing hymns and dancing. The mind is the "tunnel between body and soul". The mind needs to be entertained, however, "garbage in, garbage out" is a motto Sikhs use to emphasize the importance of hymns and religious readings.

Concerning other major tenets of faith, three stand out:

1. *Dignity of labor* Sikhs feel they are brought up to be independent and motivated workers, no matter what professions are taken up. They take pride in being able to provide for themselves and their family.
2. *Generosity to others* One tithe of all income is given to the *gurdwara*, community and schools etc. Sharing with others who are less fortunate is also favorably looked upon.
3. *Reciting God's name* This is accomplished through prayer and mediation.

Through these efforts Sikhs receive strength and wisdom. "This is the avenue used to get us to god and god to us."

Sikhism is an open religion, where anyone can attend and take part in the services. However they do not believe in conversions. Rani explains why; "Your god and my god are the same god. Eventually we will all be one." To illustrate she recounts a recent

school episode of Ravi's. "Ravi's teacher asked him to write about the differences of his god. Ravi answered that he could not because god is god to all people, it is the same. However, he could write about the differences between Sikhism and Catholicism for instance. That he would do."

Some other examples of how religious beliefs affect daily Sikh life were given to me by the children. I questioned Ravi about having an Indian tutor come one summer to live with them so he, Savina and Simer could learn to read, write and sing hymns in the original language of the *Granth Sahab*, Punjabi. Ravi looked up at me sheepishly.

I was reluctant to learn. It conflicted with my golf. I like to play golf in the summer. Our teacher lived with us for a couple of months when I was fifteen. I was terrible to her. The classes were four hours long. I'm glad I took them though. Now I can say my prayers in Punjabi, before I said them in English.

Savina, unlike Ravi, really enjoyed learning Punjabi. "It was easy and now I feel closer to my cultural heritage."

Both Savina and Simer play the harmonium. Simer was expected to practice for one hour on a day when I was there. Made of all natural materials like wood and leather, the harmonium is a common household and *gurdwara* instrument. It was used for singing hymns.

Savina was able to tell me what set her apart, as a Sikh, from her

friends. "Politeness, respectfulness, and of course, our religious involvement which is a part of us everyday."

Indeed, the Singh home had its own prayer room containing a copy of the *Granth Sahib*. Family morning prayers were formerly read together every morning. Each child learned to recite and was corrected when wrong. A smaller prayer book is also used and can be carried with them. Now, due to busy teenage schedules, most prayers are done while meditating in the morning, alone. " But, Rani says, on exam days I know for sure that they say their prayers."

Along with religion, Sikh history and tradition are very real modes for directing and guiding parents and therefore influencing their children's behavior.

Part three, which follows, attempts to show how the Sikh community is linked to its past as well.

Part 3: Sikh Historical Background Influencing the Sikh Community Today

The first Sikh Guru was Nanak. He was born close to 500 years ago during an age of violent political change. During his lifetime the first Mughal emperor, Babur, ascended the throne. Sikhism evolved from a succession of ten gurus or teachers. The last guru died only a year after the last great Mughal, Aurangzeb, died. The Mughal emperors were Muslim; their subjects were Hindu. Akbar, the Great, favored a truce between the two religions. Nanak, influenced by mysticism, combined Hindu and Muslim doctrines which incorporated reincarnation and the concept of *karma* with brotherhood while rejecting the Hindu caste system (Tully & Jacob 1986:7).

Amar Das (1479-1574), the third guru, is probably best known for doing away with purdah, the Islamic practice of the seclusion of women and sati, the Hindu practice of burning widows. These practices were outlawed among his Sikh followers (Singh 1963:54).

The 5th guru, Arjun (1563-1606), built the Harimandir temple later named Amritsar, "the pool of nectar", and it is still a pilgrimage center today. Hargobind, the 6th guru, built Akal Takht, "the eternal throne" at Amritsar. This monumental building was erected to rule the Sikh community and lead its army. It is still a symbol of Sikh sovereignty and independence today (Dharam 1986:25). Together, the Golden Temple and the Akal Takht function interdependently; the Golden Temple representing the spirituality or the constitution of Sikhism while the Akal Takht represents the

mind and body or governmental body of Sikhism (Dharam 1986:25).

Arjun is also known for compiling the *Granth Sahib* which he completed in 1604, two years before his death by torture at the hands of the Mughals (Singh 1963:55). During the reign of the Mughal Empire, Sikhism went from being a passive, mystical religion to a distinct cultural group supporting a private army.

This brings us to perhaps the most legendary of all the gurus, Gobind Singh (1606-1708). Under whose leadership pacifist Sikhism was transformed into the militant Khalsa (Singh 1963:58). Fighting against minority repression he received the active support of the majority of the Punjabi Hindus. They joined the Sikhs to support their resistance to the Mughal Islamic regime.

By the middle of the 18th century, the Mughal Empire was in decline. The Punjab was ceded to the Afghan ruler, Ahmad Shah Abdali. Using guerrilla warfare, the Khalsa rallied and plundered the invading Afghans. In revenge, Abdali, blew up the Golden Temple and filled the holy pool with slaughtered cattle. The Akal Takht was razed to the ground but was eventually rebuilt (Tully & Sabish 1986:27).

After a peasant revolt in 1799, the Sikh kingdom, referred to as the "Land of the Five Rivers", was ruled by the Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1781-1839). This vast area of the Punjab contained a quarter million square miles of the richest and most strategically important turf in South Asia. Ranjit Singh ruled formidably but with diplomacy for forty years until his death in 1839 (Wolpert 1989:216).

On March 30,1849, after years of conflict with the British, the

entire Punjab was annexed into the British empire. It became the breadbasket of India and later the heartland of Pakistan (Wolpert 1989:224). Later the Sikhs would assist the British with suppressing the Indian Mutiny. From 1915 until the end of the first World War, 35,000 to over 100,000 Sikhs had represented the crown in the military services on all fronts in Europe, Turkey and Africa (Tully & Sabish 1986:29).

The above account is a thumbnail history of early Sikhism. In the passages to follow, I hope to show how this cultural history still affects the behavior and thoughts of the Sikhs interviewed for this study.

I began by asking Mohinder about the seemingly different agendas of founder Nanak and later leader Gorbind Singh.

In the beginning our religion needed to be consolidated and brought together. Once that was done we became divine warriors and acquired strength with our knowledge and wisdom. There are no contradictions here, only a growing and flowing continuation of the movement. If you are warriors without knowledge you may do things which are morally wrong. But we are warriors with this knowledge. We have strength and wisdom. Therefore we are able to protect our religion and do it wisely. Our movement has been strengthened with the introduction of the Khalsa.

Pilgrimages to Amritsar still seem to be an important way of demonstrating a commitment to the faith. Mohinder had, of course, visited the Golden Temple previous to his post at the Chicago chapter, but he felt only occasional visits were made by members of his congregation. Rani, was more emphatic about the need to return to the homeland on a regular basis.

We try to instill Sikhism in our children by making a pilgrimage to the Golden Temple every other year. We were there in 1980 and in 1983, but now we can't get visas to the Punjab. If I can't get back to the homeland there's no point in returning to India. So I encourage my family to come here. It's a lot of work but it is good for the children to have contact with their relatives. Next year, I guess, I will let Ravi travel alone to the Golden Temple; it's dangerous but it will be good for him.

I suggested that Ravi might be safer traveling with a group from the Palatine *gurdwara*, but Rani set me straight on this: "On no! That would be far more dangerous because no one would know they were American. They would just be a group of Sikhs, very dangerous.⁵ He would be better off being with friends or relatives there, just mingling in."

Sikhism had been opposed to the existing caste system since its inception. Yet as an integral part of Indian society, Sikhs are still affected by it in various ways. Every Sikh *gurdwara* is built with

four doors to admit all castes. "Men and women also eat together to symbolize our equality," Rani told me.

However some families are predisposed to marry into certain other families and arranged marriages are performed routinely in most Sikh households. Activities in which young women are allowed to participate before marriage may vary from one part of the world to another. However none of these women would dare do anything to jeopardize their chances of marrying into the "right" family (LaBrack 1979:140). Discussing the issue of arranged marriages and marriages within certain family lines, Rani considered, "Yes, it's true and I think it's because Hinduism is so ingrown into the culture we cannot escape it. But you must remember, Sikhism recognizes the equality of women unlike the Moslems with purdah and the Hindus with sati."

During our interview Rani related the events of her own arranged marriage at the age of nineteen, interrupting her third year of medical school. Her suitor was Pavitar Singh, a Burmese Sikh, who learned of Rani through mutual acquaintances. He had immigrated to the United States when Burma became a socialist country. Once established as an intern in Radiology, in Chicago, he began to seek a wife.

Rani at this age, had her own criteria for a husband. He was to be a physician, wealthy, and drive a Cadillac. The last point was very important to her and had become a family joke. Her father, unable to buy foreign cars on the open market, petitioned every year in an attempt to purchase a Chevy Impala for her. However, he was more

concerned about being able to find a physician husband for her and therefore, was quite pleased when Pavitar took an interest in her. Rani told me most wealthy Sikhs are involved in business. "If the sons have any political aspirations, they need the funds the family business can provide and therefore continue in business."

Rani was not interested in the idea of getting married and felt her younger sister would benefit from the match instead. She refused to meet Pavitar at the airport and her sister was too shy to go. So instead, her father, mother and an uncle brought him home on a Sunday in May. Rani's father took her aside and told her he was very impressed with Pavitar and his background. Pavitar would be a good match for her and she should talk with him. Among his positive characteristics was honesty (Pavitar had owned up to drinking alcohol on occasion). He also observed the 5 Ks. This was a major consideration.⁶ But Rani was firm, she was not getting married!

The family conversation shifted to talking more about the younger daughter and Pavitar, sensing something was wrong, told Rani that she was the one he had come to meet. Rani reacted by confronting her father about the matter. "I told my dad he was uneducated⁷ and therefore he was not a good judge of whom I should marry or when I should marry. I really lectured him." However, her father was to have the last word. He returned by saying, "So, go and speak to your university advisor who knows you and Pavitar and ask him what he thinks. Take Pavitar with you. But know I command this marriage and if you love me, as I love you, you will do this."

That same day Pavitar and Rani visited the advisor who gave her

this advice. "Pavitar is a good person for you. Do not be so concerned about your studies and pending final exams. Come back and study later, after your marriage if you wish. Besides women study medicine at the university for three reasons: One, they are poor and they wish to better their situation. Two, they are ugly and they need to provide for themselves. And three, they are pretty and wealthy like you, but end up old hags!"

Finally alone with her, Pavitar told her she need not feel pressured to marry him. In order to get her out of her family dilemma he would go to her father and tell him he did not like her and would then leave. This would release her from any obligation to marry him. His generous offer touched her. Two days later they were engaged, a week later they were married, and two weeks after that they were living in Chicago in a one bedroom apartment. Accustomed to living in a big house of eighteen rooms, the oldest of six children, Rani now felt poor with no servants or a house. "I insisted on a maid (even now many of my friends have Polish maids) because I did not know how to clean and do laundry etc. I would follow her around to learn from her."

Marriage ground rules were as follows:

1. Only one doctor in the family allowed.
2. Children within the marriage were expected.
3. Rani should be college educated.

Because he was an intern and farther along in his studies than she was, she would be the one to give up her career as a doctor. However Pavitar did feel she should complete some educational course of study in the United States. In order to complete a B.S. degree

without repeating classes she had already taken, along with skirting the problem of not having proper paperwork completed for foreign student status, she enrolled at a private university, Roosevelt on Michigan Avenue in Chicago. There she did graduate with a degree in medical technology. Now, she tells me, she wishes she had taken a degree in accounting instead. She has never worked one day as a medical technologist but does all the finances for her family and her husband's medical practice. Asking her if she regrets having given up her medical studies, she is thoughtful.

Many ask me that, but no. At first I cried. But when my children came I knew I could never do both. I would have centered on my work and they would have suffered. Now I look at my friends and how busy they are. I have one thing that they do not have, free time. Free time to spend with my family and time to handle other family matters.

Had the two of them grown closer after having had three children and his obvious success as a doctor? Rani seemed to skirt the question a little, telling me that arranged marriages are the Sikh way. Family is very important to them and is the foundation for their life together.

Talking with Savina, who had been born an American citizen and educated in American public schools, I was anxious to hear her views on marriage, family and career. She was quick to reply.

Well, first I do want an arranged marriage following Sikh tradition where my parents can look out for my best interests. But I would like it to be a Sikh-American rather than a Sikh from India because they are so different. I would like to go to college first, majoring in psychology. Even though I don't date, all my friends call me for advice and tell me I would be good at counseling. In fact, I've done some counseling through a school sponsored program already. I picture myself working 2-3 years and then taking time off to have a family. Perhaps returning to work later. I would prefer to have daughters, two daughters, that I could bring up in the traditional Sikh way.

Did she also have a set of criteria for her future husband to meet like her mother did? "Well, I would like him to wear the turban and be able to read and write in Punjabi. He should be a professional of some kind, a doctor, does that sound bad?—or a businessman."

Talking with Ravi, he seemed more ambivalent towards his future and also noted that he preferred to marry a Sikh-American stating that at least they would have that background in common. His own cousin, 20, who lives locally, had recently married an Indian girl through an arranged marriage. Ravi was sure that he could never do that! Did he have any other criteria for the bride-to-be to meet? "Well, I sometimes think about her personal appearance and what I

would find attractive. But I'm sure my marriage will be arranged. I won't have much say. I don't want to get married or even think about that. I'm sure when the time comes my parents will see that I am married." Children? Well, he didn't want to think about that either. He knew he should attend college. There was no question about that and one of the larger state universities would be fine, but again felt his parents would arrange all that. "I want to join the R.O.T.C. program in college. I also just started doing some volunteer work in the Copley Memorial ER. I thought people would call me names or ask me to stay away from them, but it hasn't happened. I really enjoy it. So medicine is an option."

Simer when asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, answered, an astronaut, NFL football player or a doctor of Radiology like his dad. His answer seemed quite typical of any ten year old boy.

Rani was quite pleased to learn of her childrens' feelings on arranged marriages. She agreed with them about their preference for Sikh-Americans saying she thought that was wise. But frankly, she preferred that they choose their own mates. "So, when things go wrong or get hard they can't blame it on me. They must work it out between themselves." Rani has had to deal with a few ups and downs in her own marriage. It seemed Rani and Pavitar were opposites in a lot of areas which could affect a marriage. She was an extrovert. She enjoyed social outings. Emotionally, she felt things deeply and openly. Pavitar, she told me, was more of an introvert. He shied away from social commitments and seemed quite unemotional at

times. Now, she said, she realizes that not only is it hard for her to deal with him and his differences but that it must also be difficult for him as well. Through it all they realized they had built a life together and the family, their family was still their top priority.

The fourth area of study covers some current events facing Sikhs today and how they have successfully integrated into our society on their own terms.

Part 4: Current Political Issues Facing Sikhism

The history of India's persecution of the Sikhs has indeed shaped their religion and their lives. Immigration to the U.S. and Canada as well as to other parts of the world seemed an acceptable way to handle the otherwise open hostilities found in their homeland. However, there were some distinct differences from the European immigrant experiences. The first and most obvious one being that Sikhs are not Europeans. In the U.S. and Canada the arrival of the Sikhs had been preceded by other Asian immigrants. "This made them heirs to the accumulated history of anti-Asian predispositions, prejudices and discriminations already developed with regard to Asian immigrants" (Chan 1979:194). Sikhs fleeing persecution at home were faced with prejudice abroad.

Sikh immigration to the United States can be categorized into two waves. Early immigrants, during the early 1900's, found work in lumbering or as illiterate farm hands. Now these farm hands have become farmers and farm owners. The lumber jacks now own the lumber mills (Kapany 1979:208).

The second wave was seen in the late 50's and early 60's. Professionals in many areas immigrated as a result of the relaxation of the immigration laws. It was this group of immigrants that have been credited with renewing interest in the basic principles and traditions of Sikhism. Second and third generation Sikh-Americans have carried these principles into agricultural, commercial and professional domains (Kapany 1979:208). This point seems to be

illustrated by the Singh family. Pavitar obviously immigrated to the U.S. during the second wave of immigrating professionals. His family seems to be quite traditional despite their exposure to American culture. His children also indicate a willingness to continue to practice as orthodox Sikhs and raise their children as such. Mohinder concurs, telling me that his congregation has expressed a desire to get back to basics. "Parents want their children to know of their cultural background and to be proud of it."

Rani's parents have immigrated to Canada since her marriage while other family relatives continue to live in India. Two percent of Canada's population is Sikh which is the same percentage of Sikhs in India.

It has been argued that the world wide immigration of Punjabi Sikhs has resulted in diversity, complexity, and variety in the Sikh religion, and understanding inter-group differences is as important as recognizing their similarities (LaBrack 1979:141-142). Indeed, both Ravi and Savina have indicated their desire to marry only Sikh-Americans. If this trend is indicative of most other Sikh-Americans, rather than just a preference of these two individuals, it could constitute a separate American ethnic group at some point in time.

The backbone of Sikhism today is in the establishment of 16 *gurdwaras* in the U.S. and Canada in the last fifteen years. It is obvious that Sikhs are able to retain their identity, beliefs, and traditions while participating in American and Canadian society, where they also show a deep commitment to involvement (Kapany

1979:208). At the end of our first interview, Rani spoke to me about her loyalties.

My husband and I are American citizens now. My children were all born here and are American citizens. So yes, we celebrate major holidays including Christmas and Easter. They are national holidays, American holidays. We put up a Christmas tree and color Easter eggs.

She thought a minute and then proceeded:

I have three wishes for my children. The first one is to be a good American. To be a loyal American. I think Sikhs can be very good citizens and be more loyal than others, because of our heritage as "Saints and Soldiers" We strive for personal character. Martyrdom with compassion is our motto. The second one is to cultivate the Sikh qualities that strive to make them a good person. To be an asset to society. To be a hard worker. To be known by their deeds. And the third one is to be a good Sikh first, because by being a good Sikh, they will make a good american. It just follows as part of our religious beliefs to be so. For Sikhs, religion is a goal to work for. It gives meaning to your life, direction and motivation to be a

good person.

Working from this foundation the Singhs, along with friends and relatives, were actively interested or involved in Punjabi politics. In fact, it has been argued that: "the extent which Sikhs abroad take a strong interest in politics and social events in the Punjab will affect their adaptation" (LaBrack 1979:40). Rani's involvement and interest in the Punjab was indeed a personal one. "I am not Indian but Indian policies affect me as a Sikh and hurt me deeply. I am not unbiased, the Punjab situation is painful to me.⁸" Rani has been politically active and supports trade barriers and sanctions against India in the hopes of slowing down technology leaks to the U.S.S.R.. But more directly, her efforts are in response to India's treatment of the Sikhs. By working with Amnesty International and other lobbying groups, and by writing letters to congressmen, she hopes to overcome prejudice against minority groups here and abroad.

Ravi too, voiced an interest in politics.

I would like to go to the Punjab and just go and see, perhaps get involved in politics there. I feel we need our own separate country and we really lack leadership. Just go and see, live there awhile, see if I can make a difference. But I know my parents would rather I concentrate on more personal achievements and accomplishments like attending medical school and so that is probably what I will do.

Although both the Singhs and Mohinder Singh expressed their desire to see a separate Sikh state, I'm not sure I would accept this as an indication of the Ghadar Syndrome⁹ as suggested by Juergensmeyer. In these particular cases neither family would have any frustration over their economic or social situations. As noted earlier, they share deep loyalties to this country although ethnic identities were still deeply tied to the Punjab. I think their push for a *Khalistan* stemmed more from knowing the present living conditions of family and friends still residing in India, as well as the present visa restrictions to visit the homeland. A more detailed look at the reasoning and motivations of those promoting a separate Sikh state is out of the range of this research.

Along with the preceding issues, Sikh families face other contemporary issues which will be addressed in the conclusion, which follows.

Conclusion

Like all parents, Rani had doubts about her abilities to successfully raise her children to be happy well-adjusted adults. She felt her position was even more challenging because, as a Sikh mother in a different cultural setting, she had no norms to follow, no similar experiences from her own childhood to fall back on and no support group to help her deal with cultural conflicts.

There are three times during a child's school career that a Sikh mother is quite anxious for that child. At 1st, 7th, and 9th grade levels. Simer first went to a Montessori Pre-School and he has done quite well in public school. Simer is a completely different child than Ravi. I don't think we will send him to the military academy. He doesn't need to be pushed that hard. Besides it was probably a mistake to send Ravi there. I thought he would get a better education there, but he tells me he only learned how to cheat. That really upset me. It's so competitive there. He told me he was going to buy a copy of the chem exam. I said no. He told me he saw it anyway because everyone had it. I told him he should write an essay to the colleges he applies to at admission telling them of the situation. If he doesn't, I will. It's not right. People think these students are the cream, they are not.

Rani reflected back on her own childhood.

All my father had to do was look at us a certain way at dinner and we knew of his displeasure. We would immediately get up, pick up our plate and leave the table. But me, I have had to spank all three of my children! American children talk back to their parents, or many of them do, and that cannot be tolerated. The language! I know they use bad language among their friends, but not at home.

Rani sat back and considered her kids' point of view:

My children think I am an interfering mother, but I do need to know what they are doing. I am very hard on Savina but I want her to be proficient at housework especially since she talks of having a career. But of all my children, I worry most over Ravi. He wants it all yet we have to push and push to get him to get good grades so he can go to college and be considered for medical school. He cannot understand the importance of this on his own. He cannot understand what it is like not having a lot of things or not having wealth. For instance, once we were traveling in Rangoon. The family we were visiting served yogurt. I said I didn't

want any in order to leave more for the younger children. Savina caught on but Ravi didn't, he thought the whole bowl was for him.

Relating again differences between her husband and herself, Rani continues:

My husband is more traditional in thinking than I am. I think that as the children grow, he is becoming quite disappointed, no really! All of a sudden he realizes how different from traditional values they have become. I was the radical one who had wealth and travel experiences which made me more tolerant of differences. But for my children I am the disciplinarian and so they think I am the traditional one. To be honest, I have changed my thinking to more traditional lines. I made a mistake not teaching Punjabi as a first language. My husband was Burmese and he did not speak it well. The kids had no one to play with so we taught them English. Now we know they would have learned it in school anyway. Others have told me they have learned from my mistake so I guess something good did come out of it.

Peer pressure seems to be alive and well within the Sikh community. The Sikh children seem to be faced with two sets of

peers, Sikhs and school friends. Ravi related a typical situation that came up during the school year.

I am a senior in high school yet I have never been to a high school basketball game. You know, you go to school functions to socialize and be with with your friends. My mother says it's a waste of my time and besides, I don't watch basketball on TV so why should I go. She doesn't understand that it's different.

Savina on the other hand was more understanding of her mother's interest in her. She told me she considered it guidance and a sign of her mother's caring. She felt her mom was only trying to help them become independent in the Sikh sense of the word; meaning a motivated and hard worker who would be ready to accept family responsibilities when appropriate. What was the hardest thing about being a Sikh? Savina felt the cultural differences made it hard. But at the same time she enjoyed the special interest and attention she sometimes received by being considered unique. Ravi told me for him it was sometimes difficult to feel proud. But the best part about being a Sikh was having an identity he could and should be proud of. You see, Sikhs have a rich and colorful past he told me.

Impressions and Final Review:

When confronted with trying to condense everything that I have learned on this project I began to feel inadequate. I will always be

grateful for the genuine, open, and candid answers I received from all my informants. Without a moment's hesitation they were willing to share very intimate feelings and thoughts with me. In return, they seemed only to expect my attention and willingness to listen. I feel fortunate to have interviewed people who were open and who, within their cultural group, were comfortable talking about all facets of their ethnicity without fear of retributions from other group members.

Sikhs seem to be heavily tied to their religion which, along with a strong sense of history and tradition, is the basis of their identity. The flip side is their ability to have become productive and responsible citizens in a very different world outside this cultural background. Despite their fears of encroaching Hinduism and American cultural attitudes in their young, Sikhism seems to be a source of pride and security for those who have immigrated within the last forty to fifty years and have achieved a level of success and affluence in the United States.

Problems or concerns involving enculturation into American society can be seen on a couple of levels. Obviously the distinct appearance of orthodox Sikhs can and does single them out from other Americans. It puts up a physical barrier of cultural difference and automatically separates us from them. Like other cultural markers (for instance, the dress of the Pennsylvania Amish) it cannot be denied that they do look different than mainstream Americans.

On the other hand, they do not separate their nationality from

their religion. The church or *gurdwara* is a center of meeting and reaches out to all Sikhs in the entire area. It is most definitely a foothold and a stronghold of orthodox Sikh culture, even though it too has made adaptations to American culture. Prayer meetings being held only once a week on Sundays is an example. Attendance is probably critical to the members' self-identity and therefore, a hindrance to deeper American enculturation. However the tenets of Sikhism can and do make for good productive American citizens. To be self-supporting loyal citizens is I believe a true aspiration of most American Sikhs.

Sikh cultural history mandates other cultural differences between Americans and Sikhs. The practice of arranged marriages is one of them. Although Rani could see the difficulties in choosing on all levels of need, from financial to emotional, the perfect mate for her children, both her older children fully expected her to be involved in a most traditional way in the selection of their future spouses. Courting practices seem stifling compared to typical teenage dating practices today. Few socially casual activities seem to be allowed for teenage children, especially those involving school related social events. Values and criteria as to what makes a good husband or wife seem to be, at least differently arranged. Where most Americans will list love, understanding, compassion, and positive communicating as foremost needs in a mate, Sikhs list a different set of needs. Family ties and family background are very important although the word "caste" is not used openly. The level of religious involvement is also a consideration. Issues of love,

communication, understanding and compassion are worked out after marriage.

Women's role after marriage seems to be changing for the Sikh-American woman. Rani gives us an account where although she was expected to be educated, her role after marriage was to be a "stay at home mom". From Rani's viewpoint marriage was a partnership based on equal but different roles within the family structure. She was responsible for caring for the children's daily needs, maintaining the home and preparing the family meals while also leading the family devotions. The man of the house was the family provider, spiritual leader, and helpmate with the children. Savina talked about her hopes and plans for a career as well as having a family, something Rani felt she could not do. I see this as evidence of a more liberal Western attitude in Sikh young women, at least in the sense that the equality of women and their need or desire to also pursue a career may be an acceptable cultural change for them.

Expectations for Sikh children were very similar to those for American children although parental involvement was perhaps more direct and discipline more strict than most American families provide today. I saw this as a positive difference. Both Ravi and Savina were looking forward to the good life of upper middle class America as experienced and provided by their parents. They wanted to be college educated because they felt it would provide them with the skills needed to be successful professionals.

No thought, other than for an occasional religious pilgrimage or visit to relatives, was given to returning to India. Although Ravi showed some political interest in India's Punjab, I feel he is already

too much an American to give up the goals and personal opportunities available to him here to seriously consider a move back to the homeland. Due to the cultural climate that these young Sikhs are exposed to at school and in the community I see them forming a sub-group here in the United States. As these young adults grow and mature I feel some confusion may arise as to their future role regarding their homeland.

Areas of future research are numerous. Family dynamics, mixed marriages or even an in-depth study of a specific ritual such as a wedding ceremony would be interesting. Political issues such as the movement towards a separate Sikh state among expatriates has some interesting aspects as well.

Another dimension on Sikhism was brought to my attention only recently. I was looking for an old feature story run in the Chicago Tribune on ethnic dress (which featured Simer representing the Sikhs in Chicagoland). As I briefly looked through the index outlining past articles I was surprised to see so many stories written about Sikh terrorism that had surfaced in India. Recently, a Sikh family living in Des Plaines had been shot by an unknown assailant. This family had been a member of the Palatine *gurdwara*. A family dispute or personal vendetta across international borders is assumed by police. Obviously there is an element of violence associated with Sikhism that I did not see first hand. I asked a Hindu-American of her views of Sikhs. She candidly told me of her earlier fear, while traveling in Canada, of being singled out, and becoming an unwilling victim of Sikh terrorism because of her

Indian ancestry. This seems quite a contrast to the well-adjusted family I interviewed. Rani did mention that there was a radical element of Sikhs and that the whole society of Sikhs should not be judged by the actions of a few. Yet others claim terrorist actions are passively accepted by the majority. This is another aspect of Sikhism that could be studied.

My overall impression of the Sikhs I interviewed is one of an independent proficient people who are able to identify which areas of American culture they wish to participate in. I hope political issues related to their cultural past do not undermine their goals and desires to be happy middle class citizens pursuing the "American dream".

Notes

¹The word Khalsa is derived from the Arabic root signifying purity and emancipation. The Sikhs consider this to be a global fraternity uniting man to man and man to God. Khalsa doctrine also directs: "He being a worshipper of one god looks upon all humanity as one" (Dharam 1986:10).

²The Granth Sahib also known as the Book of Knowledge, is the official doctrine of Sikhism.

³Indian history is full of passages describing raids on women and children during war and conflict. While this article of clothing was perhaps a deterrent to rape, it was not a chastity belt. It was more of a cultural distinction between Hindu women who did not wear underwear and Sikh women who did, according to Rani Singh.

⁴Discussing this with Mohinder Singh, I put the concept of *karma* and lifecycles into my own words in order to better understand it "So basically, I hypothesized, you can't make a mistake. You live lives until you get it right. Either you live lives that are better and better until you become one with god or if you make a mistake, you may have to live an unpleasant life but you can be reborn again—do it over again—learn from your mistakes until you get it right?"

Mohinder smiled broadly at me and nodded his head yes.

⁵Many sources report of continued harassment and prejudicial treatment against Sikhs in the Punjab, due to the involvement of two Sikh bodyguards in the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984.

⁶Rani was quick to explain, "Others have many excuses for not being able to observe the 5 Ks. And for some, it is harder to abide by them than it is for others. But every Sikh knows it is a matter of personal choice—to be strong, to be of good character, to be openly a Sikh. I would have more trust for a Sikh observing the 5 Ks than one who does not because it indicates to me an honest and strong character. They are being true to themselves."

⁷"My father was actually a very successful businessman owning his own businesses in tile and auto parts. But my mother and my father had only a basic education equivalent to high school."

⁸ As noted earlier, persecution of the Sikh population in India had escalated since the death of Indira Gandhi. Rani wanted me to know

of India's policies concerning the Sikhs which would not be the government's official position as given to the media. Among India's policies are: 1. Prosecuting and arresting Sikh children beginning at the age of six as terrorists. 2. A policy of arresting Sikhs and keeping them in jail for up to two years before given a trial. 3. Trial through remote video cameras.

⁹The Ghadar Syndrome is a "recurring phenomenon among intercultural communities. A militant nationalist movement is created abroad by expatriates for whom the movement is also an outlet for their economic and social frustrations and a vehicle for their ethnic identities. It is fusion of ethnic anger and nationalist pride" (Juergensmeyer 1979:189).

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