

## Becoming an Accidental Activist: Researching Religion in Community

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### ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the author's academic engagement with Sikh communities and on how their status as a Sikh academic scholar has led them to become a representative for Sikh communities to various statutory bodies including media, policy makers, RE teachers, community groups and the legal profession. The paper reflects on how different audiences have engaged with the author's research and how their status as an academic activist has impacted on their work. While some argue that academics should not engage in activism, claiming it compromises the objectivity of academic research (Wells, 2018), the author follows Choudry (2020) who argues that academics should seek to challenge dominant processes of knowledge production that are not solely driven by higher-education models and practices, but which require academics and communities to work together in a mutually dependent relationship.

### KEYWORDS

Sikhism, academic activism, accidental activism, knowledge production

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## Introduction

In this paper I reflect on my academic engagement with Sikh communities and on how being a Sikh academic studying Sikhs, has led me to become an activist and representative for Sikhs to media organisations, policy makers, RE teachers, community groups and the legal profession. I reflect on how different audiences have engaged with my research and on how this has impacted on my career to date. I discuss what it means to be a Sikh representative and the opportunities which community engagement provides to both academics and communities.

Back in 2007, I attended a Sikh camp to conduct research for an MA dissertation on young Sikhs and how they relate to the hair and turban. This week-long residential event organised by an informal collective of young Sikh professionals (Singh J, 2016) consisted of lectures and outdoor activities and was the perfect opportunity to engage with a group of young Sikh adults to carry out research. I enjoyed the experience of conducting fieldwork so much that I subsequently successfully applied for a PhD scholarship funded by the AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society programme under a Collaborative Doctoral Award (Catto, 2014). The scholarship necessitated a collaboration with a community organisation to co-develop a research project. In developing a project, I first reached out to local and national Sikh organisations to explore areas of mutual interest and found that the Bradford Educational and Cultural Association of Sikhs (BECAS) were also interested in understanding how young Sikhs in Britain were engaging with their religious and cultural heritage. However, while many members of BECAS held higher education qualifications themselves, given the sparse engagement between academia and British Sikh communities up to this point, there was little reason for BECAS members to be aware of the possibilities of collaboration with universities and of the impact of research.

Developing this collaboration with a ‘hardly reached’ group (Singh, 2020) through the partnership with BECAS, meant that BECAS had a stake in the research and were invested in its findings. While I was interested in events being organised by and for young Sikhs, BECAS were more interested in the role of Gurdwaras for young Sikhs. In co-developing research questions with BECAS, I gained experience in articulating the value of research and the practicalities and timescales of the research process. While I was, of course, presenting my emerging findings at academic conferences, my first experience of community engagement with research on religion was explaining my research in broken Punjabi to a room full of Sikh elders in Bradford. I subsequently found myself, thanks to BECAS, presenting my research in local Gurdwaras and at Sikh community events. My collaboration was particularly timely, occurring in the lead up to the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (UKRI, 2022) which was the first exercise to assess the impact of research outside of academia. Impact was defined in the REF as ‘an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia’ (UKRI, 2022). The move towards incentivising ‘impact’ related activities within the research funding system also helped justify my public engagement as an academic practice, as it was primarily through this engagement that I could demonstrate how my research was making a difference.

## **Being an ‘Insider’**

Having successfully completed my doctorate, I found myself being regularly invited by policy makers to advise on Sikh issues and began to straddle an interesting line between academic and community representative. While being Sikh meant that I was an ‘insider’ in terms of my family heritage and ability to understand Panjabi, I was an outsider in other ways, for example when it came to membership of ideological groups such as the AKJ and Damdami Taksal (Singh J, 2014). Nevertheless, I was fully aware that my normative Sikh identity as a male, turbaned, bearded Sikh made it easier for me to be regarded as a Sikh representative, both by Sikh organisations and by statutory bodies wishing to engage with Sikhs. Due to normative ideas of religious authority, framed by the dominant cultural presence of Christianity (Lauwers, 2022) and the lack of a recognised, ordained clergy in the Sikh tradition in a similar model to the Church of England or the Catholic Church, I found myself being regularly consulted for my expert opinion on Sikh community issues. I regularly emphasised that I was not representing the Sikh community as a whole but was presenting my observations from my research. Indeed, I recognise that while my external identity as a male turban wearing bearded Sikh has provided me with a type of ‘religious capital’ when engaging with Sikhs and with statutory organisations, the perception of my religiosity may have, for instance, impacted on my research in the form of respondents providing preferred responses to interview questions. Indeed, my status as a Sikh academic who has come to be regarded as a community representative, has come with a responsibility to pursue projects of interest or concern to Sikhs which I have become aware of through my engagement with community organisations and media, shaping my research interests, questions and methods.

## **Becoming a Representative**

As my academic career progressed, I also found myself regularly being invited by mainstream media to speak on behalf of the Sikh community. Being viewed as a ‘religious expert’, due to my research focus on Sikh communities in Britain, was somewhat unsettling. However, I ensured I was aware of the various issues and debates which were concerning Sikhs by regularly engaging with the wider community at in person events and via social media to ensure I could respond where necessary. In terms of my own standpoint, I found myself ensuring that I remained clearly unaffiliated from any one Sikh organization or institution to avoid accusations of bias. As an academic expert on Sikhs, I presented myself as providing a scholarly perspective on Sikh issues based on my research.

Having carried out various research projects relating to issues of religious and cultural transmission, in 2015 I found myself wanting to respond to growing frustration among many Sikhs about the labelling of Sikhs as ‘extremists’ and ‘radicals’ in media and policy circles (Singh J, 2017). When CREST, the Centre for Research and Evidence Security Threats issued a call for projects related to security issues, I thought this would be the perfect opportunity to examine the idea, context, framing and realities of Sikh radicalisation in Britain. This project allowed me to make useful innovations in knowledge production and in empowering non-academic audiences. As I carried out archival research on the media and policy framings of Sikh activism and interviews

with individuals who identified as Sikh activists, I found significant interest in the project and extensive community knowledge about the topic.

While drafting a report, rather than simply publishing my research, I presented my emerging findings to members of the Sikh community, some of whom had participated in or had memories of, the incidents I was analysing. Using my experience working with non-academic audiences, I reached out to Sikh organisations, to help facilitate a series of open access consultations with Sikh communities across the UK. These events were organised by Sikh organisations in community spaces and were open to the public. Each event attracted over fifty attendees, who followed Chatham House rules once the event had begun (no live streaming, tweeting etc). The events were extremely successful in allowing me to demonstrate the methodology behind my research, to explain the research process and to obtain feedback on the findings before publication.

I published my research in the form of a freely downloadable open access report (Singh, 2017). The report consequently gained significant traction both nationally and internationally, particularly in the UK, Canada and India, and was well received by academic and non-academic audiences, including policymakers and media organisations. The publication of the report led to engagement with policymakers at various levels of the UK government, including the Home Office, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), counter-extremism agencies and broadcast regulators, such as the Office for Communications (OFCOM). As a member of the MHCLG 'Sikh Roundtable', I was able to contribute to discussions around government policy regarding Sikhs which had significant effects in 2018 in the context of the ongoing persecution of Sikhs in Afghanistan. Having been contacted by legal representatives of Afghan Sikh refugees to assess the Sikh backgrounds of their clients, who were being rejected for not being Sikh, I was able to help the Home Office to better understand the basis on which these asylum applications were being rejected. Following my recommendations concerning the details of languages spoken by Afghan Sikhs, I worked to update the Home Office's 'Country Policy and Information Note Afghanistan: Hindus and Sikhs' document (Home Office, 2019).

As my CREST report became a key resource for policymakers when addressing issues around Sikh activism, I found myself increasingly being regarded as an expert helping policymakers to understand the context and dynamics of the Sikh community in Britain. As the report provided one of the first in-depth analyses of Sikh activism in the UK, it was also embraced as an important historical resource for Sikhs in diaspora, promoted by Sikh media and educational organisations. This coverage increased the profile of the research, leading to invitations from international organisations, including the World Sikh Organisation in Canada in March 2019 to headline a series of panel discussions in Toronto, Edmonton and Vancouver discussing the representation of Sikhs in policy and media. Unexpectedly, my research engagement also empowered Sikh communities and organisations by providing prominent open access resources and facilitating open dialogue community events. The community consultation event in Leeds was attended by a group of Sikhs in Leeds who used this model of engagement to establish the Sikh Alliance Yorkshire (SAY), which has gone on to hold similar open community consultations with policy makers on a variety of topics, including mental health, hate crime and bullying, and loneliness. These events helped

members of the Sikh community in Leeds become aware of the various local statutory organisations and enabled them to express their concerns about relevant issues.

## **Academic, Advocate or Activist?**

Being aware of issues raised by and affecting Sikhs in Britain and recognising my own privileged position as an academic working in a university setting, I felt some responsibility to try and examine these issues through research. As Flood *et al.* (2013) explain, academia can work as a site for activism when used as a tool to generate knowledge that can help disrupt systems of oppression or injustice and direct action in policy, law, and public debate. However, this idea of the 'academic activist' is challenged by Wells (2018) who takes a 'neutralist position' arguing that academic activism erodes trust in the objectivity of academic research. The sphere of activism according to Wells, is separated from that of academic research as 'the virtues of academics are the intellectual ones of curiosity, humility, and honesty' to be contrasted with the activist who lacks these commitments. However, Le (2020) notes that many academics become activists precisely because of what their research reveals and because they feel that it is their duty to inform those affected by their research findings. Furthermore, academic research can help disrupt and shed light on systems of oppression in policy and law and can challenge dominant scholarly perceptions of knowledge production (Choudry, 2020). In her reflection of her involvement in the campaign for paid parental leave in Australia, Marian Baird discusses the challenges and rewards of being an activist academic and considers the career tensions academics experience when participating in the public sphere. She argues that while managing these tensions can be difficult, academics can make a significant impact if they take an active role in translating their research into public policy, as I managed to do with my research.

## **Reflections**

My academic journey has highlighted the profound impact of values driven community engagement. As I have demonstrated, collaboration best emerges when academics and members of community organisations genuinely consider the purpose of their engagement and what they wish to gain from research. In my role as an academic, I have had the privilege of engaging with diverse publics and external stakeholders, including media professionals and policy makers, allowing me to facilitate constructive dialogue to bring together disparate audiences and organizations to address shared interests. I have found that starting conversations at an early stage is vital for co-creating research questions and fostering a collective understanding of the process of research. In addition, it is important to manage expectations, particularly regarding timelines and funding, as community organizations may be accustomed to different timeframes. I have demonstrated that collaborating with communities on research projects fosters the development of insightful inquiries and meaningful investigations.

As a sociologist of religion, I regularly use interviews and focus groups to understand people's perspectives on topics I research. When I have been invited to present at community events, I have found that as well as speaking about a particular research topic, I am also often informing the audience about the significance of the research

process. This has led me to consider the role of academia in the construction of knowledge, the place of the University in civic society and why community engagement is so important. Regional community engaged research can enable us to better understand the needs and challenges facing the region from different perspectives. By engaging with regional, diverse communities, academics can better understand and serve the needs of diverse populations and promote greater inclusion and equity both on campus and in the wider community.

One of the most difficult challenges for an academic / community representative is to strike a balance between scholarly objectivity and commitment to religious community. Finding a way to balance these two competing demands can be difficult, but it is essential for any representative of a religious tradition. Another challenge for academic representatives is to deal with the expectations of their religious communities. Religious communities often have high expectations for their representatives, and they may expect them to be experts on all aspects of the religion, to be able to answer any question that is posed to them, and to be able to always represent the religion in a positive light. In my own case, I have highlighted both positive and negative issues within the Sikh community, ensuring that I have provided evidence to support my claims. As an academic, I have been regularly called upon to provide insights to policymakers and the media. To embrace this responsibility to my best ability required genuine engagement with members of the community.

Indeed, part of my drive to engage with community audiences before publishing my CREST report, was to include community expertise, establishing trust through authentic engagement. Indeed, community engaged research can help both scholars and students develop 'structural competency' (Metzi and Hansen, 2013) which is an awareness of how structural issues including policies, economic systems, judicial systems etc produce and maintain modern social inequities can perpetuate inequalities, often along the lines of social categories such as race, class, gender and sexuality.

Academic engagement with communities is a powerful tool for driving positive change. Through collaborative research, open dialogue, and respectful relationships, it is possible to bridge gaps, empower marginalized voices, and create meaningful impact. This overview of my academic journey to date has highlighted the profound impact of values-driven community engagement. As an academic researcher, I have had the privilege of engaging with diverse publics and external stakeholders, including media professionals and policymakers. This unique position allows me to facilitate constructive dialogue, bringing together disparate audiences and organizations to address matters of shared interest. Starting conversations at an early stage is vital, as this enables the co-creation of research questions to forge a collective understanding. It is also crucial to manage expectations, particularly regarding timelines and funding. Given the lengthier timescales associated with funding awards in academia, it becomes essential to acknowledge that community organizations may be accustomed to different timeframes.

Whether personal or professional, this relationship management requires effort, open communication, the need to show appreciation and gratitude, a willingness to make time for each other, support and understanding, an ability to resolve conflicts constructively, acceptance and embracing of difference and most importantly, a desire to keep learning and growing together. Building strong relationships takes time and

effort – and there is often no immediate payoff. However, the very skills which can be developed through regional community engagement will serve academic staff and students well, especially given the threats and opportunities of artificial intelligence. Teaching which combines classroom learning, civic responsibility, community engagement and student reflection, provides students with important topics to research and clear employability skills, while regional community-based research which addresses community-identified needs, both validates communities' knowledge, and contributes to societal improvement. By working together, researchers and communities can bring diverse perspectives, skills, and knowledge to bear on complex real-world problems to create meaningful change.

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