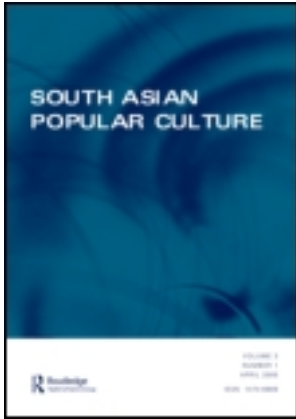


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## 'Forced' conversions in the British Sikh diaspora

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The concern over 'forced' conversions believed to be initiated by 'predatory' Muslim males, who 'groom' Sikh 'girls' into converting to Islam against their will, continues to resurface within the British public eye. This narrative first emerged in late 1980s and early 1990s and has been reproduced to establish the threat of the Muslim 'Other'. Such a discourse remains fixed within the Sikh social fabric as the tale continues to circulate within the collective despite a lack of evidence to support such claims. By examining the construction and manifestation of this narrative, this paper will explore the question of Islamophobia to explain why such a sensational account composed of 'villains and victims' or 'friends and enemies' has remained so prominent within the Sikh diasporic community.

### Introduction

In August 2007, the BBC Asian Network broadcast a live discussion about 'so called' 'forced' conversions of Sikh (and Hindu) 'girls' to Islam following an article claiming that the police denied this was happening with no evidence or record of a single case to date.<sup>1</sup> The debate involved various people telephoning, many of them recalling stories from a friend of a friend they knew who had been coerced into converting to Islam and one girl recalled her own experience of being 'lured' away from Sikhism by a Muslim boy who tried to 'groom', 'manipulate' and 'entrap' her within the folds of Islam. This story is all too familiar within the Sikh community; such a narrative has been persistently reproduced to warn 'vulnerable' Sikh 'girls' about the 'dangers' of 'predatory' Muslim men, a tale that has become deeply embedded within the Sikh imagination, a myth that continues to resurface within the public eye, readily consumed by the diaspora.<sup>2</sup>

One must question, for what reasons does this particular story remain so integral within the Sikh community? Why are Muslims thought to pose such a threat to the Sikh identity? Moreover, why has this narrative remained so prominent and subscribed by so many Sikhs in the absence of police or other evidence to support such claims?

### Methods

The nature of this research is concerned with how particular meanings become fixed within particular discourses. Stuart Hall refers to discourse as:

A group of statements which provide a language for talking about- a way of representing a particular kind of knowledge about a topic. When statements about a topic are made within a particular discourse, the discourse makes it possible to construct the topic in a certain way. It also limits the other ways in which the topic can be constructed. (Hall 291)

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Discourses thus produce meaning and, as Hall notes, since all social practices essentially entail meaning, all practices must therefore have a discursive element (Hall 291). In relation to the ‘forced’ conversions narrative, this research is concerned with the discursive practices which have enabled the emergence of an anti-Muslim or Islamophobic position within sections of the Sikh imaginary. The prevalence of this particular story against the backdrop of the British ethnoscapes enables the articulation of Sikhness, thus the telling and re-telling of this story enables Sikhs to become Sikhs. The corpus being referred to throughout this paper is composed of semi-structured interviews with 30 Sikh respondents including students, young professionals and community leaders; they were UK-based (Leeds, London, Birmingham and Leicester), between the ages of 18 and 40, both male and female. Various mainstream media literature, Sikh organizational material and ‘right wing’ accounts obtained from the Internet are also explored throughout. The corpus demonstrates quite clearly the popularity of the ‘forced’ conversions narrative and thus maps out a discourse which has become institutionalized and fixed within the Sikh diasporic community. In this paper my focus will be exclusively on the ‘forced’ conversion narrative; this is not to discount or reject the existence of other narratives or to treat the Sikh community as a monolith.

The story which follows illustrates the way in which Sikh identity is constructed through an antagonistic relationship of inclusion and exclusion, where on the one hand Sikhs represent ‘modern-ness’, ‘Western-ness’, ‘independence’ and ‘equality’, and on the other hand, Muslims represent ‘backwardness’, ‘non-Western-ness’, ‘oppression’ and ‘patriarchy’. Through this system of binary oppositions the discourse is organized and identities formed as frontiers between friends and enemies are established. This system of binary oppositions establishes an equivalential relationship between the terms and their opposites. In other words, on the one hand we have a sequence of metaphors that link Sikhness to ‘modernity’, ‘equality’ and so on, and on the other hand there is a counter sequence that gives content to the previous sequence. For example, ‘modernity’ is contrasted with Islam, Islam is made equivalent to patriarchy, etc.<sup>3</sup> The content and meanings of these terms only arises by articulating the contrastive elements, thus the antagonistic ‘Other’ is intrinsic in the construction of this discourse, each of the key terms organized in this binary fashion can of course generate other discursive oppositions. The ‘forced’ conversion narrative as we will go onto see, establishes a contrastive relationship with Muslim male ‘predators’ and Sikh male ‘protectors’, as we will examine this narrative works on many levels structuring relations between the genders and in the process articulating a particular identity for the Sikh community.

### **Sikh narratives on ‘forced’ conversions**

The ‘forced’ conversions narrative is enunciated in a variety of sites, journalistic, popular and alas, even academic:

In recent years, the organization of religious and political extremism (inaccurately termed ‘fundamentalism’) has taken place both on and off educational premises. This presentation of political ideology under the guise of religious orthodoxy attempts to recruit and mobilize young men to become perpetrators of violence. For example, leaflets circulated in Bradford exhorting young Muslim men to rape Sikh women and murder homosexuals are traceable to extremist Islamic organizations operating across the UK, but funded from outside it. (Macey 857)

Reading this somewhat sensational account in which Muslim males are allegedly ‘urged’ to rape Sikh women, could either be interpreted as an effort to instil and encourage a fearless denouncement of ‘predatory’ Muslim males, or as a symptom of the banal way in which

Islamophobia circulates. Similar statements can be seen featured on many Sikh/Hindu websites and organizational literature, and right-wing media articles<sup>4</sup>; collectively these texts present the same narrative structure in which ‘vulnerable Sikh girl’ is ‘coerced, manipulated and groomed’ into the ‘folds’ of Islam by the ‘Muslim male sexual predator’. Such accounts are widely available and continue to resurface within the British Sikh diaspora.

These accounts remain perplexing for three reasons; first, they appear to accept that the phenomenon of ‘forced’ conversions is happening in the absence of any evidence. Second, the authentication of the leaflets like those Macey (845–66) refers to are not contested, which is rather curious as there is a possibility of such ‘false flag’ leaflets in which material coming from Muslim sources is fabricated for anti-Muslim groups. Third, these accounts are reductive and disingenuous with justifications centred fundamentally upon the ‘issue of religion’ argument to construct their analysis, thus ‘by referring to these as characteristically “Muslim” crimes it fixes the representation of Muslims as criminalized, and thus valorises the logics of racist pathology’ (Tyrer 184). Such descriptions, then, appear to reaffirm, overstate and amplify notions of Muslim ‘predatory’ behaviour towards Sikh ‘girls’ whilst failing to address the important questions concerning the ways in which these stories have been constructed and the purpose, context, and role they serve within the Sikh community.

The structure of the ‘forced’ conversions narrative is along the lines of a script with friends and enemies, heroes and villains. This is the story of the ‘brave and courageous’ Sikhs trying to save ‘their girls’ from the ‘Muslim oppressor’ whose only agenda is to ‘coercively’ convert through means of ‘trickery, lies, deceit and manipulation’. Interestingly, Sikh men converting were not seen as a problem as testified in the interviews, for example, the following was a common response:

I don’t know of even one Sikh boy who’s converted, its mainly girls because for Muslims we are kaffirs, we are their enemy, so the way to get to us is to take the girls because they know that it’s the biggest insult and dishonour if the girl runs away because girls are the respect of the family and that’s why they target them and not boys; they see Sikh girls as easy and they call them things like slags. (Interview 1, Sikh male, 40 years old, community leader)

According to the corpus, the basic stages of conversion are expressed as follows:

- Sikh girl is away from home and family as she goes to university or college, she gains her independence/freedom and starts to go out drinking and clubbing.
- Muslim man befriends her disguised as a Sikh. He uses a Sikh name or wears the Kara,<sup>5</sup> and even drinks, to fool the girls into thinking that he is Indian/Sikh. According to this type of narrative the Muslim man is given an incentive; for every girl he converts there is a cash prize and a secured place in heaven (despite his drinking).
- They form a relationship where the girl is ‘groomed’; they fall in love and when emotionally attached he reveals his true Muslim identity. The cracks begin to show as she is being pressured to convert to Islam; family ties are cut, and she is trapped.
- She tries to escape but compromising photos have been taken of her to use as blackmail, or she is impregnated, thus cannot risk shaming the family.
- She is then beaten up or taken to Pakistan to work as a prostitute; no one knows of her whereabouts.

This narrative framework can be seen in the respondents’ accounts, for example:

Since I’ve come to university I’ve heard from my mates in Birmingham and Leicester about Muslim guys trying to convert Sikh girls, they’ve told me Muslim guys will go out wear the Kara and even wear a turban and have a fake Sikh name and then obviously when they go out

they'll chat to Sikh girls and stuff and then Sikh girls will obviously think they're Sikh guys and slowly they'll get manipulated. (Interview 5, Sikh male, 20 years old, student)

The sexualisation element underlying the narrative combined with notions of manipulation are features which are particularly stressed by the respondents:

It is bad if how Muslims convert Sikhs is done how I've been told, which is by manipulating them pretending to be Sikh; I've seen on the Internet a Muslim guy saying how much he hates Sikhs, he's got a list with pictures of all the girls he's tried to convert with their names, there's about 25 of them, saying what he's done to them sexually and what he plans to do to them again sexually, it's been taken down obviously. (Interview 2, Sikh male, 19 years old, student)

The notion of disguise, the phases of entrapment and the 'grooming'<sup>6</sup> process combine to construct the specific agenda thought to be in practice by Muslims in their 'mission' to convert Sikh 'girls':

In Bradford you see like so many Muslim guys who will come to Sikh parties with Karas on so they look basically like they're Sikh, like if you've got cut hair you can't tell, so if you've got a Kara on you could be a Sikh, and then if a girl falls for it and gets emotionally attached to the Muslim there's only so much you can do, like a distant Sikh relative of mine, the same thing happened to her; a Muslim guy took her and she's now left her family and they miss her so much but can't do anything 'cos she's like living in London with him and no one knows really where she is 'cos they've cut all ties from the family, he met her in a party, this is what they do they'll go out dance with them, take their number and carry on playing this game that they're a Sikh and then when the girl gets emotionally attached he'll say actually I'm not a Sikh but then it's too late, you hear so many stories that the girls even get shipped off to Pakistan and they get forgotten about and they get treated badly. (Interview 7, Sikh male, 22 years old, student)

Within this narrative, however, there also appears to be a degree of discrepancy or self-awareness which illustrates the 'hearsay' nature of the story:

I'm not saying that this happens to all Sikh girls who convert; some might get treated with respect, but you do hear the bad side quite a bit. It's definitely manipulative though, I mean at uni for example I've heard that there are underlying Muslim extremist groups that try and target Sikh girls and Hindu girls, and if they succeed they get money and a place in heaven. (Interview 7, Sikh male, 22 years old, student)

The respondents clearly identify the stages of the 'forced' conversion narrative. What emerges from this story is an emphasis on the sexual 'predatory' nature of the Muslim men who are described as preying on 'young vulnerable Sikh girls'. The construction, then, of Sikh females within this discourse is key. When asked about portrayals of Sikh women in British society the following was a fairly typical response:

I think Sikh girls are represented as being quite independent and educated 'cos the majority of us will go to university and work hard, I think sometimes though we are also seen as people who drink a lot and go out a lot which is not so good, especially when you see some of the girls and the stuff they wear like short skirts, that doesn't make us look good, but generally I think we are represented well because we integrate and adapt well in Britain. (Interview 14, Sikh female, 27 years old, young professional)

The respondents appear to express the danger of over-exposure to Anglo-British society, which is thought to lead to excessive drink and promiscuity amongst Sikh girls:

I think generally Sikh girls are largely seen as hard-working, clever, independent and modern, but then some Sikh girls have been masked from social society [sic] by their parents with an over-protective upbringing; this has resulted in their increasing anger and annoyance and once given the opportunity of freedom have grasped it in a rebellious way and gone to extreme lengths of doing all things frowned upon within Sikh culture and do such things to excess

rather than moderation like drinking and going out. (Interview 10, Sikh male, 25 years old, young professional)

Here we see a paradoxical image of Sikh females emerge, where on the one hand they are articulated as being vulnerable, helpless and defenceless; the 'damsel in distress' who essentially needs protection. Yet, on the other hand, we also see such subjects represented as independent, modern and liberated. Underlying this contrast appears a warning in which too much exposure to the 'modern', 'glittering', Anglo-British lifestyle also leads to self-indulgent, pleasure-seeking hedonism; this seems to suggest that too much female agency is dangerous and it is upon this notion that the discourse is constructed:

I feel that to some extent there are stereotypes of Sikh girls as being quite unruly or wild, however Sikhs as a whole community are seen as big drinkers and perhaps this makes Sikh girls easier targets for Muslim men to convert because a lot of the times it is out in clubs or parties and probably when the girl is drunk that Muslims prey upon Sikh girls. (Interview 16, Sikh female, 28 years old, young professional)

Throughout this narrative there appears to be a sense of dislocation of Sikh women that requires the regulation and policing of such subjects with their perceived growing independence in the British diaspora. We will now look in more detail at how this 'warning' tale has been reproduced and circulated to create a scandal about 'forced' conversions and the Muslim folk devil.

### **'Forced' conversions and 'white slavery' tales**

The regulation of female bodies is clearly not a novel phenomenon and the policing of such subjects continues to exist both within Western and non-Western societies through various means and measures, according to Kempadoo, female sexuality in Western society articulates women as 'sexual passive beings' (Kempadoo 128). Such constructions locate all women as vulnerable subjects and condemn notions of sexual activity and permissiveness in females, as McIntosh notes, 'unchastity is much more evil in a woman than in a man' (McIntosh 68); promiscuity amongst males is thus accepted whereby they are largely constructed as 'active and sexually predatory' (McIntosh 68).

The case of the 'forced' conversion narrative has a number of parallels with the case of the 'white slavery' panic; a widespread fear in the early twentieth century based upon notions of 'innocent' girls being lured away and forced to enter the sex trade by 'foreigners and particularly Jews'. The 'white slavery' scare was the product of a moral crusade against prostitution initiated by both fundamentalist Protestants and the women's Suffragette movement; during the scare, the media shaped public opinion by creating numerous stories which claimed that organized criminal syndicates were on a rampage to kidnap young white women and force them into a life of prostitution (Doezema). 'White slavery' thus came to mean:

The procurement, by force, deceit, or drugs, of a White woman or girl against her will, for prostitution (Doezema).

The 'white slavery' scandal spread across the US and Europe and has been documented extensively with worldwide organizations devoted to its abolition; the concern received great coverage in the media and became the subject of novels, films, plays, conferences and laws and legislation (Doezema). In reality, however, only very few cases of 'white slavery' actually existed, thus it is often viewed as nothing more than myth (Grittner 7). The main elements involved in the 'scandal' surrounding 'white slavery'

consisted of notions about ‘innocence deceived’, ‘youth and virginity despoiled’, ‘disease and death’ and the ‘corrupt and depraved foreigner’ (Doezema).

According to Bristow, the fabrication of the image of young ‘female abduction’ and the spoiling of virtue was a portrayal that became so ‘symbolically supercharged’, so ‘psychologically overloaded’, that gradually both the reformers and the public ‘got carried away in their own rhetoric’ (Bristow 37). The media’s contribution was integral with continuous ‘outbursts of mass publicity about how white slavers lurked everywhere, waiting to lure un-suspecting females into bondage’ (Bristow 37). This same notion is similarly echoed within conversion narratives in which the stories ‘warn’ the community that Muslim ‘predators’ are on the ‘prowl’ at university and college campuses or in clubs ready to ‘target and entice’ Sikh ‘girls’. The role of the Jew in the case of ‘white slavery’ appears to serve the same purpose of the Muslim in the case of ‘forced’ conversions; they both work ‘as the universal scapegoat’ (Bristow 42).

The Jewish folk-devil in the ‘white slavery’ panic was largely constructed by the media with its vast newspaper coverage; such hysteria had a clear anti-semitic aspect to it. The anti-Semitic stereotypes of ‘evil’, ‘villain’, ‘predator’ illustrates how this ‘association of Jews with abduction was predetermined by the logic of “white slavery”’. It did not depend upon the existence of Jewish procurers’ (Bristow 46). Thus, the construction of the Jewish ‘other’ worked merely to reinforce notions

[t]hat Jews were by nature criminal, that they organized widespread conspiracies to corrupt and pollute the Christian world, and that they ritually murdered Christian children in order to obtain their blood for baking the unleavened Passover bread. (Bristow 46)

Such absurd sensationalization appears to mirror the Sikh Islamophobic themes running throughout the conversion narratives, with stereotypes of the ‘depraved and lecherous’ Muslim, notions that feed into the anti-Islamic vision of a Muslim ‘enemy’ threatening the purity of Sikhism through ‘forced’ conversions; therefore, this narrative not only has a family resemblance to the position of the ‘white slavery’ scare in perpetuating and reflecting anti-Semitism, but it may be seen also as its structural analogue.

In addition to this, the stories of ‘white slavery’ suggested ‘a pattern of promiscuity, weakened family and community controls, but still-strong sanctions against “fallen” daughters. They also suggest a helping hand from predatory procurers’ (Bristow 97); thus, it was ‘girls’ away from home who were thought to be at most risk as they were the most ‘vulnerable’ in the ‘outside’ world. The following account demonstrates this:

He was very loving to me, said he would be good to me as a father or brother. He lay with me in bed and I was so frightened and so stupid, that I cannot say what he did with me. I don’t know what to say. (Bristow 98)<sup>7</sup>

This notion of the ‘vulnerable girl’ away from home is similarly expressed within the ‘forced’ conversion narratives that almost always appear to start once the ‘girl’ has left her home and community as she goes to university or college; the following poem obtained from a Sikh website shows this:

Mummy and daddy were professional middle class,  
I was at college studying for my A levels,  
I was shy and obedient but I wasn’t content,  
I longed for excitement,  
I wanted to live the world,  
I wanted to be as bold as brass and that was my intent.  
At college one day, a lad approached me, as he came towards me,  
I could see from afar around his neck, he wore the moon and stars.

He was very persistent and sweet,  
 Told me I was beautiful from my head down to my feet.  
 In my innocence by these tender words I was fooled,  
 This Muslim boy loved me.  
 And the love for my own family cooled.  
 My stupidity lead me to follow western trends,  
 I allowed him to become my boyfriend,  
 He had me under his hypnotic spell,  
 What I was going to do next nobody could tell . . . .  
 ('Why I chose Sikhism')<sup>8</sup>

Within the 'white slavery' narratives it was often suggested that there was a 'generation gap', which often made it difficult for girls to receive emotional support or understanding from their family unit. Thus this drove them away as they found it elsewhere, in 'the dance halls' or the 'street culture' of their neighbourhood (Bristow 157); this notion of parental control or 'lack of understanding' has also been articulated in the conversion stories as a cause for why Sikh 'girls' are easy targets for Muslims:

A lot of Sikhs girls give themselves a bad name these days and that's why a lot of them can be targeted, because parents are still quite strict when you get to a certain age and you're bought up in a country like this and you're the only one who can't go out and all your friends can, so when they do get that chance when they are away from home at uni or college, they do it like they're doing it for the past 10 years that they've missed out on, that is not socially acceptable in the community and that's why they're easy targets. (Interview 25, Sikh female, 18 years old, student)

There also appears to be a somewhat voyeuristic element to both these narratives in which the sexualisation of the 'white slavery' and 'forced' conversion stories is central; Bristow notes that 'there is some evidence that some adolescent girls may be subject to fantasies of sexual surrender' (Bristow 43). In relation to the 'white slavery' panic Bristow suggests that:

Sexual awareness is still mainly fantasy, an age at which erotic longing, terror and anguish all blend and ferment together. The emancipation of the modern girl, far from putting a stop to such fantasies, actually encourages them . . . . That many of the reported abductions and drugging were connected with contemporary novelties that had both frightening and stimulating facets, like the dark cinema and the powerful motor car, lends credence to this argument. (Bristow 43–44)

This seems to correlate with the 'forced' conversion narratives in which the 'modern' Sikh girl in British society is used to symbolize and evoke the apprehensions felt by the community in a society of perceived promiscuity and permissiveness, the added exaggeration of the sexualisation contributes to project a stronger sense of fear coexisting with an apparent sense of gratification whereby the sexual abuse is often emphasized and perhaps to some extent even relished throughout.

The myth of 'white slavery', according to Doezema, was supposedly about protecting women, and this 'supposed threat' to young women's safety served as both a marker of and metaphor for other fears, including the growing of women's independence, the breakdown of the nuclear family unit, and loss of national identity with the 'influx' of immigrants. Fundamentally the underlying moral concerns with the 'white slavery' scare were essentially about 'controlling young women rather than protecting them' (Doezema). Similarly we can see the 'forced' conversion narrative as an attempt to domesticate the perceived emergence of a young, independent Sikh female cohort. The threat of the 'predatory' exogamous Muslim male, then, disciplines the assertive Sikh female body into its designated 'traditional' place, the idea being that the cost of Sikh women expressing



their freedom and independence is the potential enslavement to unscrupulous Muslim men and their removal from the warm embrace of a Sikh community.

### **‘Forced’ conversions, the ‘war on terror’ and Islamophobia**

As the story goes, we have the idea of Muslim puppet-masters secretly financing young Muslim men to seduce Sikh women. We have ideas of secret messages from the Qur’an, which all Muslims are programmed to obey. We have the idea that mainstream non-Muslim societies are subverted or threatened by Muslim powers to comply with ‘predatory’ practices of Muslim men. The figure, then, of the Sikh female body and the ‘predatory’ Muslim male helps to account for the homogeneity of the Sikh community, which it lacks due to migratory displacements. This antagonistic discourse subscribed to by sections of the Sikh diaspora represents or purports to explain a potential loss and by using the available narratives of Mughal persecution and partition turmoil, they can continue to re-describe their situation to identify themselves as Sikhs in Britain. In other words, these Sikh narratives represent both the possibility of a Sikh identity and the failure of that possibility to be fully realized. The failure of Sikhism fully to constitute Sikh subjects in the conditions of the diaspora is represented through the presence of a Muslim antagonist.

This can be illustrated with my interviews that continually draw upon the two key historical events of Mughal oppression: during the birth of Sikhism, and the Partition. Such narratives have collectively transpired to crystallize the Muslim ‘enemy’ and locate the notion of ‘forced’ conversions within a historical context:

The Mughals saw us (Sikhs) as a threat ‘cos it was something different and saw these fresh and modern ideas people started picking up on so they thought look they’re attracting so much attention so they’re gonna take people away from that community and create their own, so they saw it as a threat and they wanted to subvert that threat before it developed; I think that’s why there was that conflict at those times. (Interview 26, Sikh male, 35 years old, community leader)

The ‘forced’ conversion narrative has been articulated as a phenomenon rooted in the past; such a construction works to establish a clear dichotomy of the ‘friend’ and the ‘foe’:

Aurangzeb was spreading the word of hatred and death so that Sikhism would be wiped out. Having failed to do so, Aurangzeb then moved on to getting his followers to rape and kill Sikh women whose families failed to convert to Islam. So they were basically opposed to Sikhs because Sikhs stood for everything they didn’t, they opposed our teachings, our faith and ultimately our message of equality which went against their beliefs. (Interview 3, Sikh female 28 years old, young professional)<sup>9</sup>

Similarly the Partition narratives echo the same notion of the Muslim ‘enemy’ as ‘oppressing, abusing and forcefully converting’ the Sikh collective:

Women during partition were sacrificed in name of Sikhism to prevent the religion dying out and being taken over; these women and the families should be respected because they didn’t allow Muslims to rape and convert them, instead they sacrificed their lives. (Interview 8, Sikh female, 33 years old, young professional)

Again we are able to see the articulation of a distinct opposition in which ‘good’ triumphs over ‘evil’:

Partition shows the bravery and courage of our women and such a sacrifice is praiseworthy because in doing so it shows the strength of the Sikhi; these women died for Sikhism, they took their life rather than converting to Islam and this heroism should not be forgotten. (Interview 29, Sikh male, 23 years old, student)

As we can see, the two narratives of Mughal rule and Partition appear to have been blended into the 'forced' conversion narrative circulating within British society. What is remarkable is that, given the age of the respondents, they did not have first-hand knowledge of the Partition, but were acutely aware of it as another episode of hostility towards Sikhs by Muslims. While one can understand that the theme of Mughal persecution would circulate through religious institutions since its appearance in the formative period of Sikhism has made it almost canonical, one must conclude that stories about the Partition circulate and are transmitted through family and cultural mechanisms.<sup>10</sup> The trope of Mughal persecution should not be seen however as an explanation of Sikh–Muslim conflict; rather, its availability enables a form of Sikh and Muslim conflict to take place, but it does not cause it. Sikh–Muslim conflict in the UK is not a continuation of the Mughal persecution, if for no other reason than the structural dissimilarities between the Mughal rulers of India and the Muslim settlers in Britain. In India the Mughals constituted a powerful ruling elite able to institutionalize its privilege and authority; however, in Britain Muslims are but one of the contending ethnicized communities whose capacity to exercise autonomy is extremely limited.

Similarly one could argue that the Partition is not a direct cause of Sikh–Muslim tension within the contemporary landscape. During Partition the rape of women and aggressive conversions became the most extreme method of persecution; such narratives implied that the honour of the community rested with its women and their 'duty' not to allow themselves to be violated by the 'Other'. Such atrocities, however, are not unique to Sikhs, as these horrific experiences were also encountered and shared by the Hindu and Muslim communities; thus, like Mughal autonomy, Partition is not a cause of recurring hostilities between Sikhs and Muslims, it is rather a language adopted by Sikhs to construct a 'threat' and in doing so identify themselves in the UK.

One can ask: Under what circumstances is this language drawn upon and in what circumstances by drawing upon this language do Sikhs respond to it? One of the conditions that would enhance the capacity of the Mughal persecution and Partition trope to circulate is provided by the uprooting of the Sikhs and the formation of a diaspora within Britain. This displacement of Sikhs opens up a requirement to both re-stitch and re-imagine the Sikh community once again in which we see articulated yet again: the threat of the Muslim Other. In light of this, one might wonder why Muslims remain the biggest threat rather than, for example, Anglo-British males or other 'ethnic groups'? This discourse appears fixed upon 'forced' conversions to Islam rather than Christianity or any other religion. Other 'ethnic/religious' groups in the UK are not seen to be as problematic as Muslims, and despite the fact these groups are also involved in crime and the sex industry, it appears within the Sikh diaspora such collectives are not targeted as a threat, as this narrative continues to focus its attention specifically upon the Muslim 'Other'. This could perhaps be best understood with the place of Sikhs in Britain.

The Sikh community is distinct, and popular images of Sikhs in the West have often portrayed them as a gallant and courageous 'martial race',<sup>11</sup> as victims of racial discrimination, as activists dedicated to their faith, and as talented and educated businessmen (Singh and Tatla 9). This contrasts to those experiences of 'BrAsian' Muslims<sup>12</sup>; for example, studies have suggested that Muslims in Britain are more likely to suffer from poorer housing conditions, possess poorer health and are more likely to be unemployed within the labour market compared to their Sikh (and Hindu) counterparts (Abbas 10). Moreover, education studies have also shown that 'the Muslim percentage of those with higher educational qualifications was just below the England and Wales average (13.5% versus 14.3%). For Sikhs however it was 17%' (Abbas 30).<sup>13</sup>

Sikhs in the UK are thus perceived as a community that has integrated and adapted well within a society in which there seems to have manifested a union between the Sikhs and the British.<sup>14</sup> For Sikhs, the acceptance, and to some extent the conscious embrace, of 'Britishness' enables them to represent a modern, independent and hardworking community, which has subsequently transpired to give them a greater social status and mobility as the mainstream dominant values of British society such as 'Western-ness', 'secularization' and 'middle-class occupancy' (Chakraborti and Garland 383–98) have been willingly endorsed by the Sikh diaspora:<sup>15</sup>

There's no problems or conflict with the British community; Sikhs integrate a lot better, a lot more Sikhs have well spoken English and get along with British culture, whereas Muslims you get a lot of them that don't even speak English and they keep themselves to themselves in their own small little communities, they just wanna stick to that. (Interview 29, Sikh male, 23 years old, student)

Sikhs are willing to get on with everyone, they work hard and do well in Britain, but Muslims don't want to adapt or change, they will say that they're Pakistani or Muslim first before they say they're British; a lot of Sikhs will say they're British first. (Interview 10, Sikh male, 25 years old, young professional)

Muslims, then, appear to be largely constructed as 'static', 'backward' and 'oppressive', unable to adapt and accept British values. Tyrer suggests:

It is therefore significant that what we see in the warnings to Sikhs with all its spurious claims of Muslim infiltration in order to prevent the further upward mobility of Sikhs are definitions of whiteness and Britishness that are predicated around socio-economic status. Thus, the Muslim threat is related both to Muslim hatred of whites and to the lowness of Muslims in socio-economic terms, a trope that not only reinforces the Eurocentric notion of Muslims as defective white males, but which is also an alternative marker for the lowness of Muslim behaviour. (Tyrer 205)

The Sikh diaspora thus seems to have an ambiguous relationship with the West. The pride of many Sikhs in serving the colonialism of the British Empire and the justification of this service suggests a community in which decolonization is still incomplete. The position of the Sikh community as defenders of the British imperial rule in India and as one of 'martial races' helped separate them from an anti-colonial, political identity. Thus, Sikhs were both subject to the empire and in many cases enthusiastic in its service; as such, they have a complex position in relation to the colonial and anti-colonial. This ambivalence was further established when Sikhs, along with other Indian communities, ended up occupying an intermediate position in imperial hierarchy, especially in Africa. As a consequence, the West is neither totally 'Other' to the Sikhs nor are they the same as the West.

In the attempt to negotiate this position we can see the development of a Sikh Islamophobia, which in the context of postcolonial Britain attempts to write the Western character of the Sikh community by differentiating them in radical ways from the community that is currently seen as the epitome of anti-Western sentiments. As S. Sayyid writes:

The metaphorical excess of 'Muslim' and 'European' points to the politicization of these labels since they operate as surfaces of inscription for a wide range of demands and mobilizations that are not reducible to the facticity of being European or being Muslim. Islam and the West become the names of antagonistic global projects which increasingly polarize the world and its history. (Sayyid 'Euro-Islam' 1)

Sections of the Sikh community are taking sides in this process of polarization. The project to locate Sikh communities (and by extension perhaps Sikhism itself) around a Western pole implies the construction of a new Sikh identity. This construction is dependent

on a version of Islamophobia; therefore, it is important to understand whether this Sikh project is articulating a distinct form of Islamophobia, or simply expressing a generic global Islamophobia. In other words, to what extent can the discourse on 'forced' conversations be described as being Islamophobic; in short, is this Islamophobia distinctly Sikh?

Within the discourse mapped out it would appear that Islamophobia in the Sikh diaspora is clearly about more than a fear or hatred of Muslimness/Islam; rather, it is a way of articulating the aspirations of a Western identity through their exclusion and dismissal of the non-Western; that is, the Muslim subject. This suggests the need to define Islamophobia not in terms of 'unfounded hostility' towards Islam or Muslims, but rather, in terms similar to the ones that Barnor Hesse ('Racialized Modernity') uses to define racism (the regulation and disciplining of non-European-ness by reference to European-ness).<sup>16</sup> Keeping this in mind, it is possible to see Islamophobia as:

A specific historical phenomenon which articulates sustained contrasts with Islam and Muslims as means of establishing Western character of a culture or society. It comes into being not with birth of Islam but with emergence of the West as destiny of the world. (Sayyid 'Are Unicorns Muslim?' 5)

It is important to recall that there were long periods in which Sikh–Muslim relations were not necessarily antagonistic. Thus, it becomes significant to account for the reasons as to why Sikh–Muslim relations may be increasingly defined in conflictual rather than convivial terms, especially in the postcolonial setting of Britain. The 'war on terror'<sup>17</sup> has contributed to increasing Sikh-Muslim antagonism, not because it heightened Islamophobia, but because it also seemed to point to an end of the belief in Western hegemony:

One way to begin describing the context of this 'war' is to understand it as symptomatic of the turmoil unleashed in trying to come to terms with the ending of the Age of the West. Recent disquiet on the western front has arisen from the combined and unsettled impacts of globalizations and multiculturalisms. Suddenly the authority to speak of the 'truth', the 'right' or the 'good', is no longer so easily rendered synonymous with the proclivity to speak Westernese – the language of the Western supremacy. In the last 100 years Westernese has been subject to intense and incessant challenges, interrogation and military and civil struggles. Particularly, since 1945 social movements motivated by anti-colonialism, civil rights, Black power, feminism, anti-racism, anti-apartheid, environmentalism, Islamism, to name but a few, have radically undermined and decentred its naturalized imperial claims. As a consequence, every time the West is invoked, the difficulty of making that invocation is revealed. We can see this in the way in which the self-image of the West seems frequently unable to avoid its ignoble flipside. (Hesse and Sayyid 12–17)

On the ground this meant that there was a marked increase in what the Metropolitan Police described as 'faith related hate crimes'; most of these cases involved verbal or physical attacks on perceived Muslim targets (EUMC 11).<sup>18</sup> Attacks and incidents, however, were not confined only to the Muslim population, as many Sikhs were often confused or mistaken for Muslims. Following the attack of 7/7, it was reported that a Gurdwara in Kent was firebombed; in addition to this, the Sikh Federation (UK) also recorded a total of five further attacks on Gurdwaras and two violent assaults on people from the Sikh community – it was suggested that 'the turban-wearing Sikh community is under siege' (Nagarajah 1–3).<sup>19</sup> The resentment about such mistaken identity was also articulated by my interview respondents as follows:

I've heard of some stories of Sikh men in turbans being called terrorists, which I think is really unfair and just shows the ignorance of some people who assume everyone's the same, like if you're Asian that must mean you're a terrorist and so a Muslim when that's not the case; people in Britain don't seem to take into account other religions and ethnicities they

tend to group us all together instead . . . . With this whole thing of mistaken identities means in the eyes of the Westerners all Asians are seen as largely Muslims or terrorists, and this has made relations more tense because Sikhs and Hindus don't want to be associated with acts which they had nothing to do with and I think a lot of them almost resent the Muslim terrorists in that sense because they've given a bad name to us all now. (Interview 2, Sikh male, 19 years old, student)

This sentiment of the Muslim community bringing the Sikh community down and Sikhs thus wanting to disassociate themselves from Muslims was a typical response:

I think there's always been that kind of thing of Sikhs don't really like Muslims generally, since the whole 9/11 thing though I think this has intensified because there's the weariness of us being tarred with the same brush as Muslims, living in Britain there's nothing to distinguish me as being a Sikh I don't wear a turban, Kara, I'm just seen as an Asian guy and I'm definitely weary of being tarred with the same brush of people thinking that I'm a Muslim, I wouldn't want someone to think that I was a terrorist and I think that fuels the resentment towards Islam definitely. (Interview 10, Sikh male, 25 years old, young professional)

The following demonstrates the consensual Sikh rhetoric of 'we are Sikh not Muslim':

Sikhs have come to Britain and made an effort to integrate within the culture; Sikhs have worked hard in Britain, they are very educated and are doing very well for themselves, we haven't caused any problems in Britain, we have just come here and worked hard and got along with everyone, so when Muslims who don't work as hard or contribute nearly as much as us, come over here and carry out acts of terrorism and then we receive the backlash too this makes us resentful and angry towards Muslims, because why should all our efforts be squashed because of their actions? It also shows the ignorance and lack of education of people in Britain who class Asians in the same category under Muslim; just because we are Asian it doesn't mean we are anything like the Muslims – in fact quite the opposite. (Interview 5, Sikh male, 20 years old, student)

Thus the 'war on terror' created conditions in which Islamophobia flourished. As such the Sikh community was not immune to this development – but again the Sikhs were in an ambiguous relationship as both consumers of the Islamophobic discourse, which would seem to confirm the negative image of the Muslim community, and also as victims of Islamophobia since many Islamophobes could not tell the difference between a Sikh and a Muslim. The current articulation of a distinct Sikh subject position is thus dominated by a discourse in which Islamophobia plays an increasingly central role, and the view of the Muslim 'enemy' persists despite little (if any) evidentiary support outside the Sikh community; such a self-referential system of significations has colonized the Sikh imaginary and has thus become the language through which Sikhs are able to identify themselves.

## Conclusion

This paper has sought to demonstrate how the 'forced' conversion narrative has been constructed within the Sikh diaspora in the UK. In this narrative Sikh 'girls' appear to be at the core around which this warning story is articulated; they have become the targets for this particular story because of the anxieties they are perceived to evoke, to elaborate the loss of women appears to transcend to become a marker of loss of viability of the Sikh collective. In addition to this the construction of the 'forced' conversions narrative was also explored to observe the ways in which this story has created a sense of anxiety within sections of the Sikh community through the creation of the Muslim 'folk devil' as a means to regulate Sikh female bodies.

The 'forced' conversions narrative has a phantasmagorical structure which works to reproduce the historical battle between 'good' and 'evil'; it is a tale to rescue the BrAsian Sikh community from abandoning their traditions, and although it may or may not be true,

it re-engages, stabilizes and regulates the community through the articulation of such a fear. The 'forced' conversion narrative illustrates the power of fantasy in which a vision of a nebulous threat has been established. This story helps Sikhs become Sikhs; it enables them to identify themselves, and is thus used to negotiate the various anomalies experienced in the somewhat unsettled diasporic condition. These 'forced' conversion narratives seem to echo the 'white slavery' scares and the role they played in articulating and representing anti-Semitism.

The focus of the 'forced' conversion narratives on the 'predatory' Muslim males allows these stories to be inserted as a Sikh chapter in the development of the current wave of Islamophobia. This of course does not mean that these 'forced' conversion narratives and the antipathy towards the figure of the Muslim are simply the consequences of the 'war on terror', nor should they be seen as lying dormant waiting for the events of 9/11 or 7/7 to ignite them. The narratives grew up independent of contemporary Islamophobia; however, they cannot but be influenced by the development of its dominant manifestation. As such, many of the elements of this form of Islamophobia help to reinforce the anti-Muslim aspects of the 'forced' conversions narrative.

### Notes

1. This live discussion can be found at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/asiannetwork/documentaries/forcedconversions.shtml>.
2. The extent of this story can be gleaned by even a cursory examination of Sikh websites such as <http://www.whychosesikhism.com>; the national press such as *The Mail Online* ('Police Protect Girls'); as well as in academic accounts: see Macey (845–866), and throughout my fieldwork.
3. See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (*Hegemony*) for details of what they call the logics of equivalence in the construction of a discourse
4. Examples of these websites include: <http://www.whychosesikhism.com>; <http://www.sikh-lionz.com/hut.htm>; <http://www.hinduunity.org>; see also 'Police Protect Girls'.
5. The Kara is a steel bracelet worn by Sikhs identifying an external marker of their faith.
6. An example of how this association between Muslim men and grooming is established can be seen in the case in Lancashire (Innes), which hit news headlines claiming that Anglo-British girls were being 'groomed' into prostitution. The idea was that, through the use of drugs and other forms of coercive behaviour, Pakistani men trained/prepared these girls for a life of prostitution. Two Pakistani men were jailed for endangering two underage girls with alcohol and drugs before having sex with them. What is interesting about the descriptions of this case is how the criminality of Pakistani men is read through a cultural prism, so that it establishes an association between culture and crime that is absent in many other accounts of other criminal cases. For example, in cases of serial killers, who are disproportionately white males, it is rarely suggested that being Anglo-British is responsible for their broken lives and violence that they use against their victims. See also 'Grooming of White Girls'.
7. For further discussions on the phenomenon of white slavery, see Walkowitz (*Prostitution and Victorian Society*); Barry (*Female Sexual Slavery*); Fisher (*Prostitution and the Victorians*); and Grittner (*White Slavery*).
8. This website is interesting because it exemplifies the binary oppositions between Sikhs and Muslims, which we discuss throughout the article. The website purportedly aims to educate Sikhs about Sikhism; however, it does this exclusively by contrasting Sikhs and Sikhism with Islam and Muslims, rather than with other religious communities. For example, the website shows a picture of a burqa-wearing Muslim woman in contrast to a turban-wearing Sikh woman whose face is uncovered; this plays out the dynamic of Sikh emancipated women versus oppressed Muslim women. In addition, the site has clear warnings for Sikhs to avoid Muslim attempts to convert them; this is illustrated by contrasting the 'beauty' of Sikhism with the 'questionable doctrines of Islam' ('Why I Chose Sikhism').
9. Aurangzeb (1618–1707), the Mughal Padishah who ruled India for 48 years.
10. It is also surprising that the more recent anti-Sikh pogroms in Delhi in 1984, largely instigated by Hindus following the assassination of Indira Gandhi, do not resonate in the same way as

Muslim persecution of Sikhs. This was clear from my respondents who, while aware of the pogrom in 1984, saw it as an anomaly, unlike Muslim attacks on Sikhs, which were seen as part of a larger continuous pattern of hostility. As such, even the events of the breakdown of law and order during Partition were not accorded much causal weight in explaining the anti-Sikh massacres that took place. Clearly there is a greater affinity between Sikhs and Hindus; as one of my respondents expressed it, in a fairly typical response from those interviewed: 'I think we get on much better with Hindus because our beliefs are similar, our religion, our culture our values are very much the same and Sikhs and Hindus can both pray side by side in the temple. Unlike with Muslims, we have too many differences, the way we live is totally different to Muslims, but Sikhs and Hindus do things the same especially in Britain, we work hard and make an effort to integrate' (Interview 9, Sikh male, 39 years old). This view again reinforces the way in which Muslims are seen as the antagonistic 'Other'; this may help to account for the way that the attacks on Sikhs by Hindu mobs in 1984 are interpreted very differently and remembered very differently than those attacks carried out by Muslims.

11. The concept of 'martial' races was first articulated by Lord Roberts, the commander-in-chief of the British Indian army, and it referred to Indian races which were considered to have the necessary qualities to be good *sepoys*. It tended to exclude communities who had long experience of British rule and thus were far more politicized than the Bengalis, for example. While the concept of martial races included Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims, Sikhs unlike the other two communities were seen as entirely belonging to the martial races. See Yong (*The Garrison State*) and Streets (*Martial Races*) for elaboration.
12. BrAsian is a term used to 'designate members of settler communities which articulates a significant part of their identity in terms of South Asian heritage' (Sayyid 'BrAsians' 5).
13. Tahir Abbas' study makes use of the 2001 British census, which for the first time had a category for religious affiliation and, therefore, allowed the isolation of Muslims, Sikhs and so on from their aggregate designation such as Pakistani, Indian, etc. See Abbas (*Muslim Britain*); see also Modood (247–50).
14. Despite the level of integration, BrAsian Sikhs continue to struggle for public recognition; this can be demonstrated by the case of a Sikh pupil's expulsion from school in Wales for wearing the Kara in November 2007. However, in July 2008 the student won her battle as 'Mr Justice Stephen Silber concluded the school was guilty of indirect discrimination under race relations – Sikhs are a race – and equality laws' (Gillan).
15. The Race Relations Act (1976) states that it is unlawful to discriminate on the grounds of colour, race and nationality, and on the grounds of ethnic or national origins, in the fields of employment, education, housing, and the provision of goods, facilities and services. Sikhs in the UK are protected as an ethnic group under the Race Relations Act (1976); see Commission for Racial Equality, Race Relations Act.
16. For more details see Hesse ('Racialized Modernity').
17. While there is an expectation that the new US administration will shy away from the label and some of the more obvious tactics associated with the 'War on Terror', it is still not clear whether the institutional assemblages which form the infrastructure of the 'War on Terror' will altogether be abandoned; thus the logic of the 'War on Terror' may outlast its logo.
18. See Malik for a contrary view that there was no significant increase in Islamophobia in this country.
19. See Puar (*Terrorist Assemblages*) for an analysis of the impact of the 'War on Terror' in the Sikh community, particularly Sikh men.

### Notes on contributor

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