



GURU NANAK
INSTITUTE
OF GLOBAL STUDIES

A Research Synthesis From the 4th Annual International Sikh Research Summit

Sikh Space in the 21st Century

Honouring the Past & Empowering the Future

SEPTEMBER 20 & 21, 2025 | IN PERSON & VIRTUAL | SURREY, B.C. CANADA

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We are grateful to have hosted this Summit within the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the Semiahmoo, Katzie, Kwikwetlem, Kwantlen, Musqueam, Qayqayt, Tsleil Waututh, and Tsawwassen First Nations.



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INTRODUCTION

This conference paper synthesizes research presentations delivered across both days of the Fourth Annual International Sikh Research Summit 2025, organized by the Guru Nanak Institute of Global Studies (GNI). The summit convened scholars, clinicians, technologists, educators, and community leaders to examine critical dimensions of contemporary Sikh life in Canada and the diaspora. Topics covered included the artificial intelligence revolution and its implications for Sikh communities, the educational culture gap between Punjab and Canada, colonial constructions of Sikh masculinity and spiritual disengagement, mental health research and culturally responsive clinical practice, and diasporic identity formation as mediated through museums and curated memory.

A unifying theme of the conference's proceedings was that of the "Sikh Space", something that Dr. Satpal Singh named in his closing address. This space is the dense, multidimensional terrain of Sikh existence encompassing values, institutions, identities, historical memory, and the ongoing struggles that define what it means to live as a Sikh in modern times. This synthesis presents, analyzes, and draws conclusions from the summit's major research contributions, advancing a research agenda for Sikh Studies at the intersection of modernity and tradition.

INTRODUCTION (CONTINUED)

The International Sikh Research Summit 2025, hosted by the Guru Nanak Institute of Global Studies, brought together researchers and practitioners across disciplines over two days to examine the challenges and opportunities facing Sikh communities in the twenty-first century. The summit was distinguished by the breadth of its intellectual scope and the depth of its empirical contributions: presentations ranged from keynote addresses on artificial intelligence to qualitative studies of Sikh bereavement, from phenomenological analyses of equity work in academic institutions to postcolonial readings of colonial editorial interventions in Sikh sacred texts, from quantitative studies of primary care access among Punjabi immigrants to intimate accounts of first-generation Sikh scholars navigating hostile academic environments.

The summit opened with an indigenous land acknowledgment and greetings from Prime Minister Mark Carney, the Mayor of Surrey Brenda Locke, and Premier David Eby, situating the proceedings within a moment of political salience for the Sikh community in Canada. The keynote address was delivered by Dr. Muninder Kaur Ahluwalia (Montclair State University), setting an intellectual and affective tone for the conference proceedings. Her presentation, "The Personal is Professional," is simultaneously a methodological claim, a political assertion, and an embodied practice, threaded through the summit's most compelling moments – surfacing again in Dr. Ranbir Banwait's discussion of the poet-scholar, in Dr. Harjeet Singh Grewal's argument that textual decolonization requires recovering the living voice behind the written word, and in Dr. Roselene Dhaliwal's account of the cost of invisibility for equity workers in Canadian institutions.

INTRODUCTION (CONTINUED)

Day 2 of the summit was convened under the guiding spirit of the Punjabi phrase *vidya vichari tara* ("knowledge is the guiding star") invoked in the opening remarks by Dr. Jaswinder Singh (McGill University). The closing remarks delivered by Dr. Satpal Singh (SUNY Buffalo, Professor Emeritus) offered a conceptual framework that retrospectively unified the proceedings across both days: the notion of "Sikh Space." This concept refers to the thick, layered terrain of Sikh existence which encompasses values, identities, community institutions, historical memory, and the ongoing struggle that defines what it means to live as a Sikh in the modern world.

This paper adopts Sikh Space as its organizing framework, arguing that the summit's diverse contributions are best understood as cartographies of this space. A major contribution of this conference was the mapping of Sikh Space's contours, identifying its fault lines, and proposing strategies for its cultivation and defense. The synthesis proceeds in two parts, corresponding to the two days of the summit, followed by an integrative discussion and conclusion. Part I (Sections 2–7) covers Day 1 presentations. Part II (Sections 8–12) covers Day 2 presentations. Section 12 offers a cross-cutting discussion, and Section 13 concludes with directions for future research.

THE PERSONAL IS PROFESSIONAL: SOCIAL JUSTICE AS A WAY OF SIKH LIFE

Abstract

The Personal is Professional: My Journey as a Sikh Scholar **Abstract:**

This presentation outlines the journey to owning my Sikhi and becoming a scholar who studies and works towards the promotion of mental health, anti-racism, and social justice. In sharing my own narrative, my goal is to get us all to further reflect on what our core values are, who our core people are, and how we see our life's work. I will begin by sharing my positionality - who I am and why that matters. More specifically, I speak about the formation and ever-changing nature of my identities through the ADDRESSING model by Pamela Hays and discuss how cultural context shaped my understanding of these identities. I will highlight my path to becoming a counselor, a psychologist, a professor, and finally chair of my department. Alongside my professional journey, I will also share what being a daughter, a sibling, an aunt, and a fiancée has meant in this journey, as the personal is professional. In addition, I will also discuss the importance of elders, ancestors, and history in shaping me, and my commitment to fighting injustice. I will end the presentation with an outline of the S-Quad model, which guides me to continue to engage in social action and provides a framework for others to do the same.

THE PERSONAL IS PROFESSIONAL: SOCIAL JUSTICE AS A WAY OF SIKH LIFE

Presented by Dr. Maninder Kaur Ahluwalia



Doctor of Philosophy, Counseling Psychology, Ph.D, New York University (NYU)

Dr. Muninder Kaur Ahluwalia, is an accomplished researcher, educator, and mental health professional with 25 years of experience in the field of counseling psychology. Dr. Ahluwalia earned her bachelor's, master's, and PhD in counseling psychology from New York University (NYU). She currently serves as Professor and Chair, in the Department of Counseling and Educational Leadership at Montclair State University, in Montclair, New Jersey.

The ADDRESSING Framework and the Question of Positionality

Dr. Muninder Kaur Ahluwalia opened Day 1 of the summit with a keynote address that modeled the very methodology it described. Dr. Ahluwalia began with her experience of growing up as a visibly Sikh woman in the United States, being mistaken for Muslim in the aftermath of 9/11, and caring for parents living with dementia while holding full-time academic and administrative responsibilities. Throughout these trials and tribulations, Dr. Ahluwalia found spiritual consolation, along with practical orientation within the Sikh principles of seva and chardi kala. The message was methodological as much as biographical: the self is data. The researcher who brackets her positionality in search of an illusory objectivity does not produce purer knowledge; she produces incomplete knowledge with its assumptions hidden.

The ADDRESSING framework, developed by psychologist Pamela Hayes, provided the conceptual scaffold for Dr. Ahluwalia's account of identity. ADDRESSING is an acronym that maps the dimensions of a multicultural identity: Age and generational influences, Developmental and acquired Disabilities, Religion and spiritual orientation, Ethnicity and racial identity, Socioeconomic status, Sexual orientation, Indigenous heritage, National origin, and Gender. Each dimension positions individuals simultaneously in systems of privilege and marginalization, often in contradictory ways. A Sikh scholar of Punjabi origin may occupy positions of race-based marginalization in a Canadian or American context while simultaneously benefiting from caste privilege, economic advantage, and gender privilege within the Punjabi community itself. The ADDRESSING framework, in Dr. Ahluwalia's use of it, is not merely a cataloguing tool but a prompt for ongoing reflexive practice: who am I in this situation, and what does that mean for the knowledge I can produce and the action I can take?

THE PERSONAL IS PROFESSIONAL: SOCIAL JUSTICE AS A WAY OF SIKH LIFE

Personal Narrative as Research Methodology

Dr. Ahluwalia's use of personal narrative was methodologically principled, reflecting her unique lived experience of a racialized woman in high-level professional environments. She argued that Sikh scholars operating in Western academic contexts face a particular tension: the dominant epistemological norms of those contexts require the suppression of personal voice in the production of "objective" knowledge, while the Sikh intellectual tradition (grounded in the lived experiences of the Gurus and the testimonial logic of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji) treats the witnessing self as an indispensable epistemic site. Adopting the conventions of detached scientific discourse is not achieving neutrality, but adopting someone else's positionality.

Her account of caring for parents with dementia illustrated this argument at a personal register. The Sikh values of seva (selfless service) and ardas (prayerful petition) were active theoretical resources. These concepts shaped what she noticed, what she endured, and what she understood about the relationship between suffering and growth. To write about caregiving, grief, and resilience in the Sikh family without drawing on those resources is to write from a positionality that is not hers. The argument has implications that extend well beyond the personal: the underrepresentation of Sikh voices in social science research in the diaspora is not only a diversity problem, but an epistemological one.

Dr. Ahluwalia introduced the **S-QUAD model** — **Strengths/Assets, Strategy, Solidarity, and Sustainability** — as a framework for understanding how communities engaged in social justice work sustain themselves over time. Each dimension addresses a component of collective resilience that individualistic models of advocacy typically miss. Strengths and Assets challenges equity-oriented communities to begin from an inventory of what they already have — relational networks, spiritual practices, historical knowledge, professional skills — rather than from a deficit-focused account of what they lack. For Sikh communities, the assets are substantial: the langar as a model of unconditional redistribution predating contemporary food security discourse; the sangat as a template for non-hierarchical community governance; the principle of sarbat da bhala (wellbeing of all) as a framework for justice that exceeds the communitarian particularism often attributed to minority religious traditions. Strategy refers to the development of coordinated, goal-directed action plans — the translation of communal strength into institutional impact. Solidarity emphasizes the building of alliances across communities, particularly across lines of race, class, gender, and religion that historically divide communities who share structural interests. Sustainability addresses the chronic vulnerability of social justice work to burnout, demoralization, and attrition — particularly among women, first-generation scholars, and members of communities whose affective labor of community-building is systematically unrecognized and uncompensated.

The Personal Is The Professional: Social Justice As A Sikh Way Of Life

Concluding the presentation, Dr. Ahluwalia emphasized explicitly that social justice work is a Sikh way of life, not an optional commitment or a political ploy. The Guru Granth Sahib Ji's persistent concern with the oppression of the poor and vulnerable, the Gurus' own practice of challenging caste hierarchy, religious persecution, and political tyranny, and the founding of the Khalsa as a community that crosses caste lines and commits to the defense of all, are fundamental commitments to social justice and the core orientation of the Sikh faith. To live as a Sikh is to participate in the ongoing project of sarbat da bhala. The S-QUAD model provides a framework for doing so in conditions of institutional complexity and adversity.

Mental Health as a Normal Part of Life

Dr. Ahluwalia closed her keynote with a direct assertion that mental health is a normal part of life, not a sign of spiritual weakness, cultural deviation, or personal failure. Addressing mental health openly in families, Gurdwaras, professional settings, and research programs is itself an act of social justice. The Punjabi cultural injunction against discussing psychological distress, encoded in phrases like lok ki kahenge and enacted through familial silencing and communal stigma, is not a Sikh value — it is a cultural inheritance that must be examined and, where it causes harm, transformed. This argument resonated across the summit.

Institutional Vision: The Guru Nanak Institute and the Path towards Guru Nanak University

Presented by Mr. Gian Singh Sandhu



Gian Singh Sandhu is recognized as a stalwart figure within the Canadian Sikh community for his leadership, and patronage of education, community activism, and higher learning. Since the 1970s, Mr. Sandhu has skilfully led organizations and high-stakes businesses in the forestry industry in Williams Lake and Vancouver, as a CEO and later as a consultant.

He is a founding member of the World Sikh Organization and served as the first president of the organization from 1984-1989. Today, Gian Singh is the President and CEO of Guru Nanak Institute, the first Sikh non-profit education and research institute of its kind in Canada.

Origins, Mission, and Academic Infrastructure

Gian Singh Sandhu, President and CEO of the Guru Nanak Institute of Global Studies, provided a comprehensive account of GNI's institutional origins, current programs, and long-term vision. Founded in 2021, GNI was conceived as a response to a structural gap: the absence of a research-grounded, academically rigorous institution dedicated to the study of Sikh history, philosophy, culture, and community. The summit itself is an expression of that mission, serving as a convening event for the strengthening of Sikh Studies research infrastructure.

GNI's faculty comprises twenty-seven PhD professors spanning multiple disciplines, and brings together scholars from institutions in Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, and India. Its academic programs cover Sikh history, Punjabi language and literature, philosophy, social sciences, and professional fields, offering pathways from certificate to advanced study. A commitment to accessibility is built into the institutional design: over four hundred students are currently enrolled on scholarship, and GNI's hybrid and online delivery models are specifically intended to reach students in Punjab who cannot relocate to Canada. The recent University Grants Commission agreement in India, which enables dual-degree enrollment, creates new possibilities for Indian students to earn GNI credentials while completing degrees at Indian universities.

Institutional Vision: The Guru Nanak Institute and the Path Toward Guru Nanak University

GNI Research and Digital Preservation Efforts

GNI is involved in a number of scholarly initiatives aimed at promoting underdeveloped areas of Sikh studies. To date, GNI has published books highlighting underappreciated Sikh scholars, the story of the Chhotey Sahibzadey, and supports independent scholars through short-term project funding. Among GNI's most significant scholarly initiatives is the Gurbani Arth Milaan project, a systematic commentary and exegesis program involving thirty-three scholars across institutions. The project addresses a long-standing gap in Sikh scholarly infrastructure. While extensive commentary traditions exist in Punjabi and Braj Bhasha, rigorously scholarly, academically accessible English-language exegesis of Gurbani is sparse. As Dr. Harjinder Singh Sandhu raised on Day 2, in the era of AI-generated Gurbani fabrications, a curated, peer-reviewed scholarly commentary corpus is both an academic project and an exercise in community protection and cultural preservation.

The Vision of Guru Nanak University

Gian Singh Sandhu's address culminated in a statement of the summit's institutional horizon, which is the establishment of a Guru Nanak University. The vision is a testament to the wealth of knowledge and scholarship that can be incubated by Sikh principles. GNI's current programs, faculty, and partnerships are understood as the foundations upon which a full university — accredited, research-intensive, and Sikh community-anchored — will eventually be built. The analogy Mr. Sandhu drew was to the great institution-founding moments of immigrant and minority communities in North America: institutions that began as modest initiatives and grew, over decades, into major centers of scholarship and community life.

Philosophical Transgressions, the Self and the Emergence of Modern Sikh Subjectivities

Presented by Dr. Harjeet Singh Grewal



Ph.D, Asian Languages and Cultures, University of Michigan

Within the Canadian university system, there are few Sikh Studies scholars as esteemed and knowledgeable as Dr. Harjeet Singh Grewal. Dr. Grewal is an Assistant Professor at the University of Calgary in the Department of Classics and Religious Studies.

He earned both his BA, and MA in Asian Studies from the University of British Columbia, and later earned a PhD in Asian Languages and Culture at the University of Michigan. His research explores the links between religious studies and history to contribute to decolonial theory, epistemology, and encourage community-engaged leadership. Currently, he is interested in studying anti-Sikh hate in the diaspora and developing Sikh academic research in Canada.

Pre-Colonial Sikh Textuality

Dr. Harjeet Singh Grewal (University of Calgary) presented a close reading of the textual history of a key early Sikh document, the Purat Janamsakhi, that he described as a case study in "philosophical transgression." The term designates the editorial and interpretive acts by which colonial-era scholars transformed Sikh textual traditions from within, altering their epistemic structure while appearing to preserve or even celebrate them.

The Purat Janamsakhi — among the earliest narrative accounts of Guru Nanak's life — was characterized, in its pre-colonial manuscript forms, by a notably polyphonic quality: multiple voices, perspectives, and even contradictory accounts of the same events coexisted within a single textual space. Dr. Grewal identified this polyphony as a deliberate epistemic feature, consonant with the dialogic and non-dogmatic intellectual culture of early Sikh communities. The text did not resolve its internal tensions but held them in productive relation — a formal practice that reflects the Sikh tradition's resistance to the monologic impulse toward singular, authoritative truth.

Philosophical Transgressions, the Self and The Emergence of Modern Sikh Subjectivities

The Colonial Monologic Imposition

The colonial encounter transformed the Purat Janamsakhi in ways that were formally as consequential as they were ideologically motivated. Colonial editors, working within the positivist and historicist conventions of nineteenth-century European scholarship, approached the text's polyphony as a defect to be corrected. The editorial work of Bhai Vir Singh — despite its profound contributions to the recovery and dissemination of Sikh literature — nonetheless imposed a monologic coherence on the text, selecting among competing accounts, harmonizing contradictions, and regularizing a narrative that had been, in its pre-colonial form, deliberately heterogeneous. The result was a text that looked like scholarship but was, in epistemological structure, a colonial imposition: it preserved the words of Guru Nanak while transforming the intellectual culture that those words were embedded in.

Implications for Contemporary Sikh Scholarship

The contemporary relevance is acute. As Dr. Harjinder Singh Sandhu noted in his Day 2 keynote, AI systems are already generating false Gurbani that mimics the linguistic and stylistic patterns of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji without being from it. The community's capacity to identify such fabrications depends on a textual literacy grounded in direct engagement with the tradition, breaking away from the codified summaries and authoritative editions that colonial-era editing produced. Dr. Grewal's work connects to the AI literacy concerns raised on Day 2 in ways that are not immediately obvious to most stakeholders. The use of AI tools in the study of Gurbani could enhance community engagement, yet without adequate human oversight and expertise, we could easily fall prey to erroneous commentary and misinformation about Sikh texts.

A RELATIONAL POETICS, AN ETHICS OF BEING IN SIKH IDENTITY

Presented by Dr. Ranbir Kaur Banwait



Ph.D, Asian, Diasporic Studies, Simon Fraser University.

Dr. Ranbir K. Banwait is a member of the Faculty of Education at Thompson Rivers University.

Her scholarship centers on language, knowledge, and education with a particular focus on the embodied, relational, and creative dimensions of learning as a counterweight to the instrumentalized knowledge-production that dominates contemporary educational systems.

Language, Power, and the Grammar of Thought

Dr. Ranbir K. Banwait (Faculty of Education, Thompson Rivers University) offered a presentation on what she called "relational poetics" — an innovative approach to language, knowledge, and education that foregrounds the embodied, relational, and creative dimensions of learning as a counterweight to the instrumentalized knowledge-production that dominates contemporary educational systems, and that will be further intensified by widespread AI adoption.

The presentation opened with a provocation borrowed from the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in linguistics: the language in which we think shapes not only what we say but what we can notice, feel, and imagine. Applied to the contemporary AI context, this insight carries urgency. AI systems are trained on linguistic corpora that predominantly represent English-language, Western-centric epistemic assumptions. The cognitive habits they model and reinforce — propositional reasoning, linear argumentation, information retrieval divorced from embodied context — are not universal human cognitive patterns but culturally specific ones. To accept AI as a neutral cognitive tool without examining its epistemic assumptions is to silently adopt those assumptions.

A RELATIONAL POETICS, AN ETHICS OF BEING IN SIKH IDENTITY

Dr. Banwait's response to this challenge was grounded in Gurbani. She argued that the linguistic and poetic structure of Gurbani constitutes an alternative cognitive grammar: a way of organizing thought, feeling, and perception that differs fundamentally from the propositional logic that dominates Western educational and AI systems. Gurbani's structure is not a stylistic choice but an epistemological one — it encodes a different understanding of how knowledge is produced, held, and transmitted.

Gurbani as Embodied Poetics

Central to Dr. Banwait's argument was the concept of shabad — the divine word, understood not merely as semantic content but as sonic, embodied, and relational event. When Gurbani is recited or sung, the shabad is not only conveying propositional information but creating a particular quality of attention, presence, and relation between the reciter and the listener, between the individual and the community, and between the temporal and the divine. This relational quality is not accidental to the meaning of Gurbani — it is the meaning. An AI-generated facsimile of Gurbani that reproduces its semantic content while stripping out the conditions of its embodied production is not Gurbani; it is a simulation of its surface features that systematically destroys its depth.

Dr. Banwait drew on the figure of the poet-scholar — the Sikh intellectual who does not merely study the tradition but inhabits it, whose life is a form of commentary on the Guru's teaching. This figure, she argued, offers a model for how Sikh education might develop in an AI age: not as a system for the efficient transfer of content, but as a relational practice of formation and witness. The poet-scholar is trained by the shabad; the shabad is understood only in and through the relational context of sangat and seva. AI can assist with information retrieval and language modeling, but it cannot substitute for this relational ecology.

A RELATIONAL POETICS, AN ETHICS OF BEING IN SIKH IDENTITY

Creativity and Imagination as AI-Age Resilience

Dr. Banwait concluded with a call to center creativity and imagination in Sikh educational practice as a form of resilience in the AI age. The capacities that AI systems most struggle to replicate — genuine novelty, embodied responsiveness, the capacity to hold contradiction in productive tension, the relational attunement of the teacher to the particular student in front of them — are precisely the capacities that Sikh pedagogical traditions have always valued and cultivated. The "education of the heart" that the Gurus modeled is not a poetic metaphor for something else; it is a description of a specific set of relational and contemplative practices that produce a different kind of knowing. An institution that takes this seriously will not simply add AI literacy to its curriculum; it will ask what kinds of humans the community needs to cultivate in conditions where AI is pervasive.

Tracing Equity and Inclusion with Feminist Scholarship and the Sikh Faith

Presented by: Dr. Roselene Kaur Dhaliwal



Doctor of Philosophy - Ph.D, Educational Theory and Practice, Simon Fraser University.

Dr. Roselene Dhaliwal is a practicing mental health professional who currently serves as a doctoral researcher in feminist phenomenology and equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). She holds degrees in nutritional science and education from the University of British Columbia, and Simon Fraser University where she is currently a professor in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

Her research examines the experiences of racialized women engaged in institutional equity work within Canadian post-secondary institutions, bringing together feminist methodology, phenomenological inquiry, and Sikh epistemological frameworks.

Phenomenological Methodology in EDI Research

Dr. Roselene Dhaliwal presented findings from her doctoral research: a phenomenological study of the experiences of women engaged in equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) work within Canadian post-secondary institutions. The study was motivated by a paradox she had observed directly. This paradox is that the institutional proliferation of equity commitments — diversity statements, EDI offices, unconscious bias training, strategic plans with equity pillars — has not produced corresponding improvements in the experiences of racialized women working within those institutions. The title of her analysis, "the inequity of equity," captures the paradox. The machinery of equity can reproduce and even intensify the inequities it claims to address.

Methodologically, Dr. Dhaliwal's study used interpretive phenomenological analysis to center the lived experience of women doing equity work, rather than the institutional experience of having equity work done to them. Participants were women, primarily racialized, who occupied formal or informal equity roles within Canadian universities. The study asked: what is it actually like — phenomenologically, affectively, corporeally — to do this work, in this institutional environment, in this historical moment?

Tracing Equity and Inclusion with Feminist Scholarship and the Sikh Faith

Non-Performative Commitments and Institutional Inhospitability

Dr. Dhaliwal drew on Sara Ahmed's concept of the "non-performative" to theorize the gap between institutional equity discourse and institutional equity practice. A non-performative commitment is one that does not do what it says: the diversity statement that does not diversify, the inclusion initiative that does not include, the equity office that does not produce equity. Ahmed's argument, developed through her own experience as a racialized woman in British higher education, is that non-performative commitments are not merely ineffective — they are actively damaging, because they create the appearance of institutional responsiveness that forestalls the more disruptive changes that genuine equity would require.

Dr. Dhaliwal's participants confirmed and extended this analysis in the Canadian context. They described institutions that maintained elaborate equity machinery while simultaneously making the lived experience of equity workers increasingly difficult: underfunding equity offices while expanding their mandates, soliciting equity workers' expertise without recognition or compensation, expecting emotional labor that was never acknowledged in formal evaluations, and dismissing concerns about institutional culture as evidence of the equity worker's own inability to "fit in."

The Invisibility of Proximity

One of Dr. Dhaliwal's most analytically striking findings was what she called "the invisibility of proximity." Equity workers, precisely because they are tasked with making the institution's equity commitments visible, frequently become invisible themselves. The institution's equity identity is constructed through them while they are simultaneously erased from the construction. Participants described the experience of being recognized as a resource and instrument — consulted for expertise, invited to committees, quoted in reports — while being simultaneously invisible as persons: their research contributions undervalued, their career trajectories stalled, their presence in the institution contingent on their willingness to continue performing the equity labor that the institution needed and did not adequately support.

Dr. Dhaliwal connected this to the Sikh philosophical framework of *sewa* as practice that, when genuinely motivated, effaces the ego and seeks no personal recognition. She was careful to distinguish this from the institutional instrumentalization of *sewa*: the Gurmat understanding of *sewa* is radically different from the institutional expectation that racialized women perform equity labor without complaint or compensation, invisibly and indefinitely, because that is what the institution needs. The community's deepest values are not the institution's convenient ideology.

Keynote: The AI Revolution — Where Are We Headed?

Presented by: Harjinder Singh Sandhu



Ph.D, Computer Science, University of Toronto

Dr. Harjinder Singh Sandhu completed his education in computer science from the University of British Columbia and later earned his PhD from the University of Toronto.

He is a leading expert in the field of AI and health technology, serving as a former CTO for Health and Life Sciences at Microsoft. Aside from his Big Tech experience, Dr. Sandhu is a successful founder and serial entrepreneur of several companies at the intersection of technology and healthcare.

The State of the AI Revolution

In a keynote address drawing on decades of experience as a computer scientist, entrepreneur, and former Chief Technology Officer for Health and Life Sciences at Microsoft, Dr. Harjinder Singh Sandhu offered a measured but urgent assessment of the AI revolution's current trajectory. ChatGPT's launch in late 2022 has produced approximately 800 million weekly users within three years — a pace of adoption without precedent in the history of consumer technology. Yet Dr. Sandhu cautioned against both uncritical enthusiasm and apocalyptic fear. The "scaling wall" encountered by recent foundation models — evidenced by the muted capability gains of GPT-5 relative to its predecessors — suggests that the exponential trajectory many assumed is not inevitable. We are not, he argued, on an uncontrolled course toward superintelligence.

The immediate reality is more nuanced and, in some respects, more challenging: AI systems are already sufficiently capable to transform the labor market, the knowledge economy, and the social fabric, even if they fall short of science-fiction superintelligence. The disruption is already happening, and the question is not whether communities will be affected by it but how they will respond.

Keynote: The AI Revolution — Where Are We Headed?

The Breaking of the Expertise Ladder

Dr. Sandhu's most consequential analytical contribution was his framing of AI as disrupting what he called the "expertise ladder" — the established social arrangement by which knowledge and skill are accumulated over years or decades of investment, and converted into professional authority, economic compensation, and social status. AI systems can now perform, at a reasonable level of quality, tasks that previously required years of training: legal research, medical diagnosis support, financial modeling, content production, software development. The junior professionals who would previously have spent years at the bottom of the expertise ladder, doing the foundational work that built expertise, are now competing with AI systems that can do that same foundational work faster and cheaper.

The implications for communities whose members have invested heavily in professional education as a pathway to economic security and social mobility are significant. For the Sikh community in Canada, whose diasporic trajectory has often involved sacrifice of one generation's economic comfort to fund the educational investments of the next, the disruption of the expertise ladder represents a particular structural vulnerability.

Community-Specific Implications

Several AI-specific risks bearing directly on the Sikh community were identified across the keynote and panel. The fabrication of Gurbani, as noted above, poses a threat to textual integrity and spiritual authority. AI systems trained predominantly on English-language, Western-centric data embed cultural biases that can render Punjabi cultural contexts invisible or distorted. At the same time, the possibility of fine-tuning existing foundation models on curated Sikh textual and oral archives — at a fraction of the cost of training from scratch — represents a genuine opportunity for community-controlled AI development.

Both panelists and audience members called for proactive investment in AI literacy across the community, with particular attention to the intergenerational gap: younger members are more fluent with AI tools but less equipped to critically evaluate their outputs against community knowledge; elders hold that evaluative knowledge but often lack the technical fluency to engage with AI at all. GNI's Gurbani Arth Milaan project represents precisely the kind of curated scholarly corpus that could anchor a community-appropriate AI fine-tuning initiative.

Bridging Educational Cultures: Punjab and Canada

Presented by Dr. Lakhvinder Singh Bedi



Ph.D, English Literature, Bachelor of Laws (LL.B.), MBA

Dr. Lakhvinder Singh Bedi is a Professor at the Guru Nanak Institute of Global Studies and a former Dean of Academics of Desh Bhagat University in Punjab.

Dr. Bedi possesses invaluable experience and perspective as an educator and administrator with over five decades of experience in interdisciplinary research, graduate supervision, and curriculum planning in India and Canada. He is a vital member of the GNI team, serving as Director of Enrollment and Student Services. With a distinguished academic career, he has served as a Dean of Academics and a tenured Professor across departments in the humanities and business. His research focuses on comparative education and cultural dimensions of learning, with particular expertise in the educational experiences of Punjabi students navigating the transition between Indian and Canadian academic contexts.

Theoretical Framework

Dr. Lakhvinder Singh Bedi presented a systematic comparative analysis of educational cultures in Punjab and Canada, grounded in Geert Hofstede's model of national cultural dimensions. Punjab sits at the collectivist end of Hofstede's individualism-collectivism continuum: group harmony, loyalty, and cooperative interdependence are primary values, and the teacher occupies a position of near-sacrosanct authority — described in Dr. Bedi's presentation as a "second god" in the eyes of students. Canada occupies the individualist pole. Independence, personal voice, critical engagement, and participatory dialogue are constitutive norms of the academic environment.

The intersection of these two cultures in Canadian classrooms — where Punjabi students who have been trained to defer to authority encounter professors who interpret that deference as intellectual passivity, disengagement, or insufficient preparation — produces systematic misreadings that disadvantage Punjabi students and frustrate Canadian instructors. The culture gap, Dr. Bedi argued, is not a problem of individual deficiency on either side but a structural mismatch that requires deliberate institutional response.

Bridging Educational Cultures: Punjab and Canada

Empirical Dimensions of the Gap

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) data, which Dr. Bedi drew on, documents that only one in four students completing standard schooling in Punjab can read a simple paragraph with comprehension. This is not merely a linguistic challenge but an epistemological one: students arriving in Canadian universities have been educated in a system that rewards memorization and penalizes deviation from authoritative accounts. The participatory, discussion-based, source-evaluating, argument-constructing model of Canadian higher education is not simply unfamiliar to them — it is experienced as a violation of what education is and should be.

Bridging Strategies: The GNI Model

Dr. Bedi presented the GNI educational model as a deliberate attempt to bridge this gap without either dismissing Punjabi pedagogical tradition or demanding its complete replacement by Canadian norms. GNI's programming builds students' capacity for critical thinking, source evaluation, independent argument, and participatory engagement through exercises grounded in Sikh intellectual traditions that already valorize these practices — the deliberative culture of the sangat, the tradition of vichar (critical reflection), the Gurus' own modeling of a learning relation that was dialogic rather than merely authoritative. This approach allows students to develop the capacities Canadian higher education requires without experiencing that development as a repudiation of their heritage. Benjamin Bloom's "2 Sigma Problem" — the well-documented finding that one-on-one tutoring produces dramatically superior learning outcomes — points toward mentorship-intensive models as a particularly promising direction for bridging programs.

Youth Voices: Healthcare, Colonial Masculinity, and Spiritual Disengagement

Presentations by:

Roop Kaur Dhillon
UBC BCom Student



Mehak Dhaliwal
UBC Integrated Sciences
Student



Navjot Kaur
UBC Medical Science
Student



Primary Care Access in the Punjabi Community

Navjot Kaur (UBC Medical School) reported findings from a community-based survey examining awareness of and enrollment in BC's Health Connect Registry among Punjabi community members across British Columbia. The study was motivated by a dual epidemiological and structural concern: 17.7% of BC residents lacked a primary care provider as of 2023, and the Punjabi community faces elevated risk for chronic conditions — hypertension, type 2 diabetes, and chronic kidney disease — that benefit from earlier-than-general-population screening thresholds.

Surveys administered to 526 community members at ten in-person Gurdwara sessions across BC produced striking findings. Fifty-six percent of respondents had no primary care provider, and among this group, sixty-six percent had never heard of the Health Connect Registry. Under-45 respondents were overrepresented among those without primary care, which is particularly alarming given that cardiovascular and metabolic screening guidelines for South Asian populations recommend initiation at ages thirty to thirty-five. Following a brief, accessible explanation of the registry, ninety-four percent of those without a provider expressed interest in enrolling. The study confirms that the barrier is informational and structural, not motivational.

Youth Voices: Healthcare, Colonial Masculinity, and Spiritual Disengagement

Colonial Constructions of Sikh Masculinity

Mehak Dhaliwal (UBC Integrated Sciences) offered a historicist reading of Sikh masculinity that challenged any assumption of its essential or purely religious nature. Drawing on colonial archival sources, Dhaliwal argued that contemporary performances of Sikh masculine identity bear the imprint of British colonial racial science and military recruitment ideology in ways that are rarely acknowledged.

Under Guru Gobind Singh Ji, the Khalsa carried a warrior identity that was spiritually grounded and community-protective. Following the end of the Sikh Raj, the British colonial administration systematized Sikh identity through the "martial race" theory. Captain R. W. Falcon's Handbook on Sikhs for Regimental Officers (1896) serves as a window into how the British apparatus categorized recruits by district, caste, and proximity to sites associated with Guru Gobind Singh Ji's geography. The practical effect was to privilege Khalsa Sikhi as the normative and dominant form of Sikh identity, marginalizing Naamdharis, Udasis, Sahajdharis, and other traditions within the broader Sikh world. Army service brought social and economic prestige; men adopted the martial identity and Khalsa rehat from material incentive, and veterans carried this colonially-shaped version of Sikhi back to their villages. The contemporary tension between a loyalty-and-order identity and Sikhi's emphasis on principled autonomy is, Dhaliwal argued, partly a colonial inheritance the community has not fully examined.

Youth Disengagement from Sikhi

Roop Kaur Dhillon (GNI Intern; UBC BCom) addressed what she described as a quiet but accelerating crisis: the withdrawal of young Sikhs from active engagement with Sikhi. She grounded her analysis in the etymological root of "Sikh" in the Punjabi verb sikhna — to learn — arguing that disengagement represents both a loss of religious practice and a rupture in the community's identity as a learning community. Dhillon identified four structural causes: Gurdwara governance that concentrates decision-making in older cohorts, the imposition of religious practice as compliance rather than inquiry, the dismissal of sincere youth questions (what philosopher Miranda Fricker calls "testimonial injustice"), and elders who position themselves as finished learners rather than fellow seekers — contradicting the very sikhna tradition they claim to transmit.

Beyond Silence: Advancing Sikh Mental Health Through Research and Practice

The Research Landscape

The Day 2 mental health panel, moderated by Dr. Muninder Kaur Ahluwalia (Montclair State University), synthesized findings from three distinct but complementary research programs that together constitute arguably the most rigorous body of Sikh-specific mental health scholarship currently available in the North American academic literature. The panel built directly on Day 1's framing by Dr. Ahluwalia: that mental health is a normal part of life and that addressing it openly is an act of social justice.

Dr. Robinder Bedi (UBC) presented findings from a systematic review of twenty published articles and fifty-eight case studies examining counseling and psychotherapy with Punjabi Sikh clients globally. Sikh clients rarely initiate mental health contact independently — they are typically referred by other professionals or arrive with somatic complaints. This pathway reflects the stigma encoded in *lok ki kahenge* ("what will people say"), identified by Dr. Amritpal Singh Shergill across twenty-seven years of clinical practice as the single most powerful barrier to seeking help in the community.

Dr. Bedi's review also identified a fundamental tension he characterized as being "damned if you do, damned if you don't": maintaining Punjabi cultural norms causes distress (particularly for women navigating patriarchal expectations), but deviating from them also causes distress through social exclusion and family rupture. Effective therapy did not urge clients to "follow their dreams" regardless of cost; rather, it explored pathways that honored both aspiration and the relational commitments clients valued.

Sikh Bereavement: A Phenomenological Account

Dr. Raman Kaur Mohabir (Licensed Mental Health Counselor; Fellow in Thanatology) presented findings from the first phenomenological study of Sikh bereavement experiences in the United States. Motivated by the near-total absence of literature on Sikh death practices from a mental health perspective, she conducted qualitative interviews organized around four major themes: influencing factors, participation in Sikh funeral observances, coping strategies and sources of strength, and post-bereavement growth.



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The findings revealed how community-based cultural expression and religious observances around death and mourning discourage individual grieving and the seeking of professional help. Only one participant in the study had succeeded in finding a Sikh therapist. Many had been discouraged from therapy by family systems in which the act of seeking help was read as a sign of insufficient faith or family failure. Dr. Mohabir's work underscores the need for both culturally competent clinicians and community-level psychoeducation about grief that draws on Sikh frameworks rather than replacing them with Western therapeutic categories.

Twenty-Seven Years of Clinical Observation

Dr. Amritpal Singh Shergill (Registered Psychologist, BC) offered reflections from more than two decades of clinical work with Sikh and Punjabi clients. The conflation of clinical mental illness with spiritual experience represents a structural risk requiring coordination between mental health professionals and Sikh clergy. This was illustrated by his account of a bipolar client whose community interpreted a manic episode as evidence of spiritual gifting, leading the client to discontinue medication. The panel converged on a distinction that must be maintained: gender equality, compassion, and dignity are Sikhi, while patterns that suppress them have been wrongly attributed to Sikhi.



Sikh-Panjabi-American Diasporic Imagination and Curated Memory



Presented by Kiran Kaur

Kiran Kaur is a Master's candidate in the Department of Feminist Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Her research focuses on how Sikh diasporic identity in the United States is produced and contested through the curatorial choices of museums and Gurdwaras, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and archival analysis.

Theoretical Framework

Kiran Kaur (University of California Santa Barbara, Master's candidate) presented an ethnographic and archival analysis of how Sikh diasporic identity in the United States is produced and contested through the curatorial choices of museums and Gurdwaras. She drew on Benedict Anderson's observation that census, map, and museum are the principal technologies through which modern states imagine and produce communities, extending this framework to stateless diasporas. Kaur draws on Robin Cohen's definition of diaspora and Brian Keith Axel's notion of the "diasporic imaginary" as affective and temporal rather than merely geographic, providing additional theoretical scaffolding for the presentation.

Three Representational Patterns

Kaur's fieldwork was grounded in the Sikh history, art, and memory memorialized in Yuba City, California. She identified three recurrent representational patterns in US Sikh diasporic spaces. The first is the figure of the secular immigrant: in post-9/11 America, diaspora organizations have positioned Sikhs as peaceful and diversity-affirming, at the cost of de-emphasizing the political, spiritual, and historical depth of Sikh identity. The second concerns the treatment of militancy and separatism: secular, mixed-audience spaces typically exclude radical politics, while internally-facing Gurdwara spaces actively memorialize them, performing different identities to different audiences. The third pattern is the absent woman: despite women's centrality to every chapter of Sikh diasporic history, they are largely invisible in curated narratives. Kaur noted the iconography associated with Mata Gujri Ji, rendered in Renaissance Catholic visual grammar, suggesting that even where Sikh women are made visible, the aesthetic frame is borrowed from colonial and Christian traditions.

Sikh-Panjabi-American Diasporic Imagination and Curated Memory

The Homeland-Diaspora Feedback Loop

Kaur's most analytically original contribution was her analysis of the feedback loop between diaspora representations of history and what kind of memory is kept alive at home by those who stayed. The Virasat-e-Khalsa is a museum inaugurated by the Punjab government in 2011. Located in Anandpur Sahib, the museum appears designed primarily for diaspora visitors on heritage pilgrimage. The exhibition ends its historical narrative before Partition and contains no reference to post-partition injustices like the 1984 Sikh Genocide and the 2021 Farmers' Protests movement. The secular narrative developed for American consumption is being ratified and reflected back from homeland spaces that the diaspora funds and visits. Kaur concluded with three open questions: how to narrate a story that platforms all Sikh voices across gender, caste, and political perspective; how to distinguish authentic diasporic nationalism from instrumentalized separatism; and how to pursue community-building work that does not require a nation-state to anchor it.

Discussion: Mapping Sikh Space in the 21st Century

Reading the presentations synthesized in this paper in relation to each other reveals patterns of convergence that are obscured when each is treated in isolation. We organize this discussion around seven cross-cutting themes that collectively constitute what we propose to call, following Dr. Satpal Singh, the problematic of Sikh Space: the challenge of creating, maintaining, and defending a multidimensional Sikh presence in the contemporary world.

The Decolonial Imperative

Day 1's presentations by Dr. Grewal, Dr. Banwait, and Dr. Kor Sandra converge on a single analytical claim: much of what the Sikh community treats as tradition is in fact colonial sedimentation, and intellectual integrity requires distinguishing the two. Dr. Grewal demonstrated this at the level of textual form — the monologic editorial conventions imposed on the Purat Janamsakhi are colonial imports, not pre-colonial Sikh norms. Dr. Banwait demonstrated it at the level of pedagogy — the instrumentalized, propositional model of knowledge production that dominates Western educational institutions is not the epistemological home of Gurbani. Mehak Dhaliwal's Day 2 presentation extended the analysis to masculine identity, demonstrating that the martial race ideology is a colonial construction layered over a spiritually grounded warrior tradition. Decolonization in Sikh Studies is not an optional political position but an analytical requirement.

The Literacy Problem

Across every domain represented at the summit — technology, education, health, religion, epistemology, politics — a consistent problem emerged: communities cannot navigate environments they do not understand. AI literacy, Canadian classroom literacy, healthcare system literacy, mental health literacy, textual literacy (including the literacy to distinguish authentic Gurbani from AI fabrication or colonial editorial distortion), and institutional literacy (the capacity to read and navigate the equity machinery that Dr. Dhaliwal's participants described) are all forms of knowledge the community urgently needs. GNI's educational mission — and the summit itself — can be understood as an attempt to create supplementary institutional infrastructure for this literacy work.

Discussion: Mapping Sikh Space in the 21st Century

The Relational Ecology of Learning

Dr. Banwait's "education of the heart," Dr. Ahluwalia's S-QUAD model, the mentorship panel's accounts of the relational networks that sustained first-generation scholars, and Roop Kaur Dhillon's analysis of the intergenerational relationships that protect youth from disengagement all point toward a shared insight: learning, in the Sikh tradition, is fundamentally relational. The Sangat is a learning community constituted by the mutual witnessing of seekers, transcending its common view as a social gathering. The Granthi is not just a liturgical functionary but, as Dr. Daljeet Singh argued succinctly, a spiritual guide whose relational presence provides the community with an irreplaceable resource. The mentorship relation is not supplementary to research but constitutive of the research community itself.

The Gender Lacuna

The invisibility of women recurred as a structural pattern across multiple presentations. In museum curation (Kiran Kaur), women are absent from the historical record. In mental health practice (Bedi, Shergill), women carry disproportionate burdens of cultural compliance while having fewer sanctioned pathways to seek relief. In Dr. Dhaliwal's phenomenology, women who do the institutional labor of equity work are less visible, not more, for doing so. Dr. Kor Sandra's position as the first Sikh woman to earn a history doctorate at UBC — as recently as 2022 — indexes just how recent the formal opening of the academy to Sikh women scholars has been, and how much lateral violence accompanied that opening. Dr. Satpal Singh's closing remarks, which praised the "daughters of the community" who have achieved distinction "despite the shackles we have imposed on them in the name of family, society, shame and guilt, even in the name of Sikhi," acknowledged the structural problem without yet resolving it. Future summits and publications should center gender as an analytical category rather than a supplementary concern.

The Institutional Gap

Multiple presentations identified the Gurdwara as simultaneously the community's primary institutional resource and a site of institutional failure and corruption. As Dr. Daljeet Singh argued on Day 2, the bureaucratization of the Granthi role has diminished a spiritually robust guidance function to a ceremonial one. As Roop Kaur Dhillon pointed to, Gurdwara governance excludes youth from meaningful participation. From a mental health standpoint, Gurdwara communities can inadvertently worsen mental health outcomes by reinforcing stigma. GNI, the summit itself, and the vision of Guru Nanak University represent an attempt to create supplementary institutional infrastructure that the Gurdwara alone cannot provide.



Discussion: Mapping Sikh Space in the 21st Century

The Narrative Question

Kiran Kaur's presentation asked a question that the entire summit implicitly orbited: who gets to tell the Sikh story, and to whom? The secular immigrant narrative, the diasporic nationalist narrative, the colonial martial narrative, the institutional equity narrative, the AI-optimism narrative — these are not merely representational disputes but contests over which version of Sikh Space will be institutionalized and transmitted. Research plays a role that goes beyond documentation: the act of presenting findings at a Sikh Research Summit, publishing them in scholarly venues, and making them accessible to community members is itself a form of narrative production. The community has a stake in ensuring that this production is plural, critical, and anchored in the Gurus' own commitment to sach (truth) and vichar (critical reflection).

Social Justice as the Thread

Dr. Ahluwalia's opening keynote framed social justice as an expression of sarbat da bhala — the wellbeing of all — that is constitutive of the tradition rather than supplementary to it. This framing threads through every presentation in the summit. Who has access to AI tools and literacy, who succeeds in Canadian classrooms and why, the healthcare access deficit, the mental health stigma, the historically absent woman, the EDI worker's invisibility, the first-generation scholar's lateral violence — these are all, at their root, questions of justice. Sikh scholarship that does not foreground this dimension risks misunderstanding the very tradition it claims to study.



Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

The International Sikh Research Summit 2025 demonstrated that rigorous, community-grounded scholarship on Sikh life is not only possible but urgently necessary. The twelve presentations synthesized in this paper represent contributions that, taken individually, advance specific fields — South Asian educational studies, AI ethics, diaspora studies, clinical psychology, colonial history, phenomenology, literary theory — and that, taken together, begin to constitute a field of Sikh Studies capable of addressing the community's most pressing challenges with the rigor those challenges deserve.

The through-line across both days was the insight that Dr. Ahluwalia articulated at the start and Dr. Satpal Singh amplified at the close: the personal is professional, and the Sikh tradition carries intellectual and ethical resources — sarbat da bhala, chardi kala, vidya vichari tara, the education of the heart — that are more relevant to the AI age and the justice demands of the twenty-first century than is commonly recognized. The task is to make these resources legible and applicable across the domains — education, technology, health, law, culture — where contemporary Sikh life is shaped.

Dr. Satpal Singh's closing metaphor captured the spirit of the enterprise: "I am a nightingale singing with passion and enthusiasm in an orchard that does not yet exist." The orchard — the Guru Nanak University envisioned as the summit's institutional horizon — is imagined before it is built, and the singing constitutes part of the building. The research presented at this summit is that singing: it anticipates and helps create the institutional and intellectual infrastructure that Sikh communities need to flourish in the century ahead.



Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

Priority Research Directions

Based on the summit's contributions, we identify seven priority directions for future Sikh Studies research. First, large-scale, longitudinal studies of educational outcomes for Punjabi international students in Canada are needed to move beyond descriptive accounts of the culture gap toward intervention research that can test the efficacy of bridging programs. Second, the AI and Sikh community intersection requires dedicated empirical attention: how are Sikh communities engaging with AI tools, what AI-generated Sikh content is circulating, and what institutional responses are most effective? Third, Sikh mental health research needs to expand toward adequately powered clinical trials of Sikh-specific therapeutic models. Fourth, gender must become a structuring category rather than an afterthought in Sikh Studies research design. Fifth, the textual history of pre-colonial Sikh manuscripts requires sustained interdisciplinary scholarly attention. Sixth, the political economy of Sikh diasporic representation — who funds museums, who controls curatorial decisions, whose stories are speakable in which contexts — requires sustained critical analysis. Seventh, the phenomenology of Sikh professional life deserves expansion from the pioneering studies displayed at this summit.

Institutional Imperatives

The summit's concluding call, framed around the dual imperatives of education and outreach, applies equally to academic institutions and community organizations. Research that remains within the academy does not fulfill its obligation to a community whose welfare it claims to serve. Equally, community engagement that lacks rigorous research backing cannot support the sustained, evidence-based institutional change that the community's challenges demand. The summit model itself — which convenes scholars and practitioners together, platforms both established researchers and emerging voices, and is held in accessible community settings — represents a productive institutional format that warrants expansion.

The torch that Dr. Satpal Singh asked the room whether it was ready to pass is the living tradition of Sikhi: the tradition of learning, questioning, and remaining in motion that the Gurus established and that each generation must choose to build upon. The presentations gathered in this paper are evidence that a new generation of scholars is well equipped to carry it forward into the 21st century.