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The Reception given to Sadhu Sundar Singh, the Itinerant Indian Christian ‘Mystic’, in Interwar Britain

Abstract

In 1920 and 1922, an Indian Christian called Sadhu Sundar Singh toured Britain. Widely renowned in the global Christian community in the interwar period, Singh was notorious for certain stories of miracles, for his appearance and for the ways in which he epitomised Eastern Christianity. Using Singh’s correspondence and a range of newspapers, this article argues that British audiences were attracted to Singh because of his appearance and ethnicity and because he conformed to stereotypes of essentialised Indian spirituality despite his Christian faith. It argues that the reception to Singh in Britain must be understood in relation to the perpetuation of Orientalist understandings of Indians and Indian religions in the interwar period.

Keywords

Sadhu Sundar Singh, imperial migration, Indian Christianity, Orientalism, representation

There were four names which at one time made India famous in every part of the world because they were representatives of different regions of modern thought and influence. These were: Sir J. C. Bose in the region of Scientific Research - everyone seemed to know of his botanical discoveries; Sadhu Sundar Singh in the realm of Religion - crowds gathered to hear him lecture wherever he went; Mahatma Gandhi in the realm of Politics [...]; Rabindranath Tagore, lately taken from us, who calls for further notice, in the region of Art.¹

According to Emily Kinnaird, one of the founders of the Young Women's Christian Association, writing in 1944, Sadhu Sundar Singh was one of the most famous Indians in the interwar period.² Singh, an Indian Christian preacher, was widely renowned in the global Christian community for his association with miracles and for his missionary work in Tibet. He also attracted notable attention for his appearance. A tall man of Indian ethnicity who always wore a saffron-coloured robe and turban, a style associated with Hindu or Sikh 'holy men', Singh was often depicted as an Asiatic version of Christ. Regularly described as a 'mystic', he was feted for his focus on the Gospels in his preaching, but also for his distance from Church leadership and hierarchies. He came to more global prominence when he toured Europe and America in 1920 and 1922, on both tours visiting Britain. During these travels, Singh attracted notable press and public attention, with particular emphasis on the ways in which he epitomised Orientalist notions of Indian spirituality, despite his Christian faith. In fact his Indianness, despite operating at a time of high empire, was pivotal to his popularity in Britain. Not only was his ethnicity apparent through his skin colour, Singh further accentuated his difference by using the moniker Sadhu, a term used for Hindu ascetics, and retaining the surname Singh, which was an identifiable surname of followers of the Sikh religion. There is suggestion that he also sometimes used the title 'Sahib' or 'Fakcer', both

Islamic Arabic terms, the latter used to denote a Muslim Sufi ascetic.³ Although Singh revealed a broad universal approach to religion, which was common with many other theologians in this period, the racial and ethnic features of his appearance and clothing ensured that he consciously perpetuated essentialised notions of Indians and Indian spirituality. Although Singh was able to challenge colonial hierarchies through his social and physical mobility, particularly in his elevation through Christian circles and access to broad British congregations, it was through his deliberate retention of 'Indian' features that he became one of the most famous Indians of his time.

As Srinivas Aravamudan has argued, the reception to globally renowned religious South Asians such as Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo and Jiddu Krishnamurti, and more in the later twentieth century, despite different religious traditions and backgrounds all perpetuate the appearance of a rather homogenous export-friendly South Asian religious cosmopolitan.⁴ Brian Pennington has ably demonstrated the ways in which the image of Hinduism was constructed in the colonial era not just by Britons but also by Indians, while the lived history of the religion was no such construct.⁵ In particular, as Richard King argues, the idea of the noble ascetic became a core value of the religion, which was reflected in the image of other Indian religions too.⁶ Singh was remarkable because he was a Christian and yet his popularity lay in the ways in which his was understood through this prism of Orientalism. As Jane Iwamura has argued, with reference to America after the 1950s, certain religious figures from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, 'Oriental monks' as she describes them, were perceived as representative of an otherworldly spiritualism. Despite their heterogeneity they were all portrayed in homogenous ways in terms of their clothing and appearance, particularly their conformity to certain features such as a 'calm demeanour', and their 'manner of dress'.⁷ Singh was viewed very much in the mould of these later 'Oriental monks'; he was consistently appraised in relation to his image, dress and manner. He played

into stereotypical ideas of Indian religious figures and that of the 'exotic' by wearing saffron-coloured robes, turbans and sandals, and his 'costume' was integral to his success, as was his ascetic lifestyle.⁸

With its focus on a migrant Indian to Britain at the height of empire, this article highlights the ways in which Indians could utilise transnational and global networks within and outside empire, during the interwar period, to their own gain. His reception by both broad Christian congregations and liberal elites, and specialised and mainstream British press, underlines the varied ways in which the empire and its colonial subjects were understood in the metropole.⁹ Where focus on Indians in Britain in this time period has tended to concentrate on social groups such as students, princes, politicians and a range of workers, Singh was a 'Religious International'. He was a man who benefitted from the ways in which, as Abigail Green and Vincent Viaene have argued, religious identities had become globalised between 1880 and the 1930s in the western world.¹⁰ Although there have been hagiographies and theological studies of Singh, this article focuses on the reception in Britain to Singh's 'Eastern' uniform, and, most importantly, the ways in which this specific colonial encounter reveal the uncritical ideas of 'Indian' spirituality that persisted in the interwar period.

Singh's Christianity and Mobility

As scholars of comparative religions have discussed, the development of Indian Christianity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was one that drew upon the traditions of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh practices as well as those of Christianity.¹¹ It was not unusual to find a prominent Indian Christian who embraced a syncretic approach and image, as did Singh. The success of Singh's Christian persona in the Indian subcontinent was indicative of the growing convergence of Indian religious groups with Protestant Christianity, thus making many Christian teachings familiar to Indian audiences. In the nineteenth century there had

been notable moments of union between Unitarians and the Hindu reform sect the Brahmo Samaj. Rammohun Roy and Keshub Chunder Sen, members of the Brahmo Samaj, both travelled to Britain in the nineteenth century and placed emphasis on the ‘Protestant’ elements of their religion.¹² They espoused a monotheist version of Hinduism and Roy expressed admiration for Jesus and the teachings of the Gospel, evident in his 1823 book on the New Testament, *The Precepts of Jesus*. Roy was mistakenly described by some as a convert to Christianity.¹³ Roy was also open to Islam, thus projecting a faith similar to that of the Christian Unitarians in which the ‘brotherhood of mankind’ was central.

Beyond that, Roy, the first known Brahmin Hindu to visit Britain, became a celebrity not only in religious circles but also in British ‘society’. He had a full social calendar, met members of the royal family, had constant press attention in the UK and US and could be described, as Lynn Zastoupil does, as a ‘transnational celebrity’ on three continents. Roy was a precursor to Singh not only in his universalism but in his public reach.¹⁴ He was present at King William IV’s coronation. Politicians and philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham, Thomas Macaulay and Robert Owen all clamoured to meet with him. And, on a visit to Manchester, a crowd of factory workers followed him around insistent on the chance to touch him or shake hands with him.¹⁵ Michael Fisher has explained that ‘Britons largely regarded him as a savant from ‘the East’, yet one sympathetic to progressive Christianity’ and as ‘a man from whom they could derive ‘Oriental wisdom’’.¹⁶ Roy regularly attended Sunday church services and was buried in a private cemetery in Bristol. There were numerous press notices after his death and his grave became, and still continues to be, a site of commemoration.¹⁷

Like Roy, Sen met with various Church leaders, especially Unitarians, on his visit to Britain, but also with leaders of other faiths such as Judaism.¹⁸ Sen had a close friendship with Friedrich Max Müller, the Sanskrit scholar, with whom Sen stayed in Oxford. Müller

suggested that Sen translate the New Testament into Sanskrit as a prayer book for an Indian audience, and believed that Sen was fundamentally a Christian at heart.¹⁹ Other Indian religious itinerant figures were also discussing Christ and Christianity before Singh's visits to Britain. Swami Vivekananda, the noted Hindu reformer who spoke at the 1893 Parliament of Religions in Chicago, had used the example of Christ to argue that God could only be known through humanity. Observers of Singh were keen to emphasise the innate spirituality of Indians but also the Asiatic roots of Christianity. Many scholars and church people acknowledged that Jesus had lived in the Middle East and had great affinity with 'Eastern' people. Vivekananda, Mohandas Gandhi and Sen had argued that Christ had been an 'Asiatic'.²⁰ It was not unusual then for Singh to take up a distinctly 'Indian' Christian role.

Singh visited Britain during the aftermath of the Great War, when British congregations were exhibiting disillusionment with western institutions. The Edwardian period brought about a rise in interest in new religions, inside and outside of the church, with even *The Times* reporting upon the 'spiritual renaissance' and 'mystical revival' in Britain on the eve of the First World War.²¹ Despite a hardening of racial attitudes towards Indians after 1857, Satadru Sen has explained how some migrants were able to follow a careful strategy of social mobility, constructing multiple identities, which reveal the ambiguities within empire in relation to race, class and gender.²² One of the largest groups of Indians in Britain, university students, often aped British manners of clothing and culture while also engaging in nationalist politics and retaining other familial traditions.²³ As Homi Bhabha has argued, in relation to Macaulay's 1835 minute to create 'brown Englishmen', there were limits and ambiguities in this 'mimicry' as the Anglicised colonial Indian was emphatically not English.²⁴ Singh did not attempt to mimic British 'gentlemen', and yet his self-presentation was based upon western, Orientalist stereotypes of Indian sadhus. In his own cultivated persona, he too was carefully constructing multiple identities, from Christianity and the

Indian subcontinent, to forge a successful role that could appeal to audiences in multiple locations. He was able to appeal to the demand for new religions, and his ethnicity helped here, but also present himself as a familiar figure drawn from the annals of Christian folklore.

Discussions about the universality of Hinduism and Christianity across this period were not only influenced by theological discussions on theism, but also by Indian claims to fitness for governance. Gandhi, who came to international fame at the same time as Singh, had also been inspired by the Gospels and had often discussed Christ's teachings with his mentor Tolstoy. Gandhi's syncretic approach to religion, his appropriation of various religious symbols in his writings and political career, proved to be highly influential in his challenges to colonial rule. Singh, on the other hand, though he adopted a syncretic approach too was not engaging in such challenges to the 'politics of difference'.²⁵ He was not asked about, nor did he discuss, the growing Indian nationalist movement, though his travels undoubtedly had an impact on the cultural politics of the relationship between Britain and India. Singh had access to Church leaders and thus was on one hand able to become part of an elite colonising institution, but was also welcomed within broader, less-elite congregations through his construction of multiple identities: son, preacher, mystic, ascetic, 'Hindu'. Singh publicly eschewed devotion to the religions of his ancestors. He was anxious not to be seen as a guru or saint by his Christian followers, and yet he deliberately retained elements of Indian religious culture. Therefore, although Singh was operating in a highly political environment, Singh's embodiment of a typical 'Oriental', instead of broadening ideas about Indians, did little to challenge preconceived stereotypes.

It was in drawing from a combination of Indian influences while presenting his Christian message to audiences in Britain that Singh prospered. As Janet Lynch-Watson has argued, part of Singh's popularity lay in his endeavour to 'proclaim the Gospel with an authentic Indian accent and not in tones and cadences imported from abroad'.²⁶ Singh

appeared to interpret the Gospels from an 'Indian' mindset, appropriate to the lifestyle he had been brought up in. This was also extended into his deliberate appropriation of the turban, robe and long beard. Reverend Kelso of the Western Foreign Missionary Society, a Pittsburgh Presbyterian missionary society who administered the Punjabi mission that Singh joined after his conversion, explained in 1931 that 'this man with oriental garb and mien has arrested the attention of the serious student of Christian Missions by his Indian methods of preaching and his characteristically Indian manner of interpreting Christian truth'.²⁷ Although all accepted that his clothing was 'Indian', there were debates on whether Singh's theological outlook was influenced in any way by other 'Eastern' religions or whether, as most of his supporters argued, he had actually returned to the first principles of Christianity. In making the opposite journey to European missionaries, Singh used existing colonial networks to deliver sermons and bring over new converts to Christianity not only in India and Tibet, but also in Britain, Europe and the USA, to become a truly global representative of Christianity in the interwar period.

Singh's Introduction to British Audiences

The story of Singh's conversion fascinated Christian audiences worldwide. In December 1904, at the age of fifteen, Singh was having a spiritual and philosophical crisis while contemplating suicide. His recently deceased mother had been a devout Sikh and his father was a wealthy landowner in the Punjab. One night Singh had a vision of Christ, who spoke to him of his persecution. Singh immediately converted to Christianity, despite the opposition of his family and community, and was baptised in 1905. He moved to a mission and soon embarked upon an evangelic career, travelling around India and Tibet preaching about the Gospel. He relied upon the communities he visited to provide him with food and shelter. Despite his conversion he retained the clothing associated with his Sikh upbringing, namely a

turban and saffron robes. The travelling, ascetic lifestyle that Singh favoured imitated those of Indian sadhus, yet was also similar to Christian saints such as St Francis of Assisi.

Importantly, he could gain access and proximity to Indian communities through his familiar garb and manner, thus making conversion easier.

After the revelation of Christ, Singh was allegedly involved in a number of other miraculous events. One such incident was in a village in Tibet where Singh was arrested for preaching heresy and imprisoned in a well by a Lama. On the third night, a mysterious helper opened the padlocked gate to the well, let down a rope to free Singh, and healed his injured arm before disappearing. Singh described his saviour as an angel, others wondered if it was Christ.²⁸ Another incident in a Tibetan village occurred when Singh was being driven away by men with sticks and stones who were stopped by the appearance of men in 'bright garments' whom Singh believed were angels sent to protect him.²⁹ As the Reverend Emmet, who was Vice Principal of Ripon Hall and also fellow of University College, Oxford, explained in the 1920s, many of the stories that Singh was involved in were directly comparable to incidents that took place in the New Testament. There are even accounts of Singh fasting for forty days.³⁰ These stories all added to a perception that Singh was different, whether drawing from Indian or early Christian traditions, and added to his exotic charm.

Singh came to fame outside of South Asia largely through the efforts of Rebecca Jane Parker, wife of Arthur Parker, members of the London Missionary Society (LMS) in Trivandrum, South India. Rebecca Parker wrote a biography of Singh in 1918, initially produced for the Malayalam community with whom the Parkers worked, and then published by Fleming H. Revell for British and American readers in 1920. They first met in February 1918 when Singh visited Trivandrum but Parker was already aware of Singh. She used the words of a Wesleyan missionary to describe his appearance: 'No one can look upon him for

the first time without being struck by his close likeness to the traditional portrait of Christ'.³¹ In her book, Parker immediately addressed the 'Hindu' aspects of Singh's life, from the moniker of 'Sadhu', which she explained as someone who takes up a religious life from early on, renouncing worldly pleasures and donning a saffron robe, to the practice of ascetism in India, which Parker explained was easier to follow in India as the favourable climate allowed for an outdoor life.³² She appreciated this form of Indian Christianity that Singh adopted as wholly appropriate for the mission work in India as his clothing, lifestyle and preaching allowed him access to Indian communities. In 1922, the Parkers translated Singh's book *At the Master's Feet*, a collection of teachings used in Singh's sermons, from Urdu into English. They were instrumental in publicising Singh to British and international audiences because they were aware that Christians would be fascinated by this Indian - a novel character who offered new avenues of spiritual enlightenment for occidental audiences.

Singh and Rebecca Parker began a correspondence from March 1918. In his letters, Singh addressed Parker as 'my dearest Mother' and signed off as 'Sundar', often as 'your ever loving son', and referred to Reverend Parker as 'Father'. Parker, born in 1865, is described as adoptive mother to Singh in the LMS Archives, and she was certainly an older, benevolent figure who looked after Singh, who had no mother of his own. It is evident that their relationship was framed through this mother-child dynamic even though Singh was meant to hold a dominant teacher role. In this Parker followed the route that many other British maternal imperialists undertook with Indians at the time, as discussed by Antoinette Burton, Kumari Jayawardena, and Barbara Ramusack, allowing her to assert authority over a man of different ethnicity despite his religious authority.³³ Although a collaborative relationship that prospered during a period of 'Indianisation' where racial hierarchies were becoming looser in India, the imperial social order was maintained as Parker emphasised her maternal role and his ethnic difference.

Singh wrote to Parker regularly from 1918 till his last on 14 April 1929. In December 1919, Singh wrote to Parker advising her that he was heading to Bombay to arrange a visit to England.³⁴ By the middle of January 1920, Singh had arranged his travel from Bombay to Liverpool and within a month had arrived in the UK.³⁵ Singh's first 'tour' of the West covered Europe, the USA and Australia and he spent a substantial amount of time travelling around the British Isles, from February to May 1920. He visited the major cities of Birmingham, Cambridge, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Oxford, Liverpool, London and Manchester.

Interest in Singh increased when he came face to face with new congregations who interpreted his lifestyle in their own manner. Biographers of Singh have a number of anecdotes about his tour in 1920 such as when he was mistaken for a post box in the London fog because of his bright robe, and he was often compared physically to Christ.³⁶ The German theologian Friedrich Heiler begins his 1924 biography with the following sketch:

A strange guest is standing before the door of an English house: a tall, upright figure in a long, saffron-coloured robe, with a large turban round his head. His olive complexion and his black beard proclaim his Indian birth; his dark eyes, with their gentle expression, reveal a heart at rest, and they shine with an infinite kindness. The stranger gives his name to the girl who opens the door: Sâdhu Sundar Singh. The girl gazes at him for a moment in astonishment, then she hastens to call her mistress:

'There is someone at the door who wishes to see you ma'am; I can't pronounce his name, but he looks like Jesus Christ!'³⁷

Singh's other biographer B. H. Streeter, who had first described the above scene, explained that in the 'streets of a Western city the saffron robe and turban are conspicuous', but that Singh also stood out with his height and, despite his clothing, because of his manner and

bearing he looked ‘as if he had stepped straight out from the pages of the Bible’.³⁸ The five year-old nephew of Willie Hindle, host to Singh on his first night in Liverpool in February 1920, was adamant that Singh was Jesus Christ, and a girl patient at a Swiss children’s hospital in March 1922 told a sister ‘*C’est le Christ!*’³⁹ Perhaps he was more aptly described as ‘Jesus Christ wearing a turban’.⁴⁰ These responses exemplify the complex, entangled reception to Singh and the mystical aura that surrounded him. He encouraged audiences to worship him, as Indian sadhus are deified. Yet, in comparing him to Christ, they keenly accentuated his Christian authenticity.

The correspondence with Parker continued regularly while Singh was in Britain as he detailed the various places he visited and people he met. By the beginning of March he had a large number of invitations to speak to church congregations including ones from Reverend Jowett of Westminster Chapel (who was to introduce Singh to the congregation as an ‘apostle from the East’), the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishop of London and some from Ireland, where Singh was to visit in April.⁴¹ During this trip, Singh started gaining notoriety for his public addresses and his appearance. The *Scotsman* was impressed with his simple, straightforward manner of evangelising in Edinburgh and was keen to describe his ‘striking and picturesque appearance’, his ‘flowing saffron robe’, ‘middle brown skin, powerful dark eyes, and glossy black hair and beard’ which ‘readily convey to the mind his Eastern origin, and his time-honoured dress proclaims him to be a sunyasi [sic] or a Sadhu, a holy man’.⁴² The commentator for the *Scotsman* was also impressed with Singh’s relative fluency in the English language. An extract from an unnamed London paper in the *Madras Mail* explained that though Singh did not speak English ‘easily’, he made up for it in gesture, passion and earnestness. ‘It was a strange experience to see this dark face and Eastern garb in a London church’, said the journalist, describing the ‘curious setting to the ascetic Indian, with his saffron wrap’, but the crowd at St Bride’s church listened intently to his sermon.⁴³ On the

other hand, *Britain and India*, a journal of the Britain and India Association which had Theosophical connections, noted that Singh's English was 'fluent and clear' and that his style was 'eloquent' at a meeting at the YMCA in London.⁴⁴

British press comment on Singh could not avoid remarking upon his attire, using terms such as the 'East' and 'Orient' to mark out Singh's 'exotic' nature. An interviewer for the *Westminster Gazette* was heavily impressed by the 'remarkable Eastern figure' whom he likened to Jesus in the flesh, admiring his 'soft glossy black' hair and beard and explaining that his 'tall, manly figure adds dignity to the flowing robes, with their striking saffron'.⁴⁵ Towards the end of his stay in Britain, the *Manchester Guardian* noted that Singh had been making a deep impression on London society, 'popular here as a drawing-room lion' and cutting a very striking figure in his 'Oriental robes'.⁴⁶ Georgina Home, in the *Spectator*, appreciated Singh's presence in London as indicative of the growing strength and contribution of the East to Christianity. Though Singh was decidedly Eastern in his choice of saffron robe, stories of miracles and 'Eastern mysticism', he had a 'strongly attractive' power and radiance, and Home compared him to the apostles and commended his interpretation of the New Testament.⁴⁷

Singh received a number of letters from admirers during his visit in 1920. Many were aware of Singh's reputation before his arrival. Ethel Turner, a member of the LMS, who lived in Almora, India, had informed her English family that Singh would be arriving and so her sister and brother sent letters to Singh welcoming him to the country.⁴⁸ Turner had written a piece for the *Chronicle of the London Missionary Society* in April 1920 explaining how the First World War had left westerners weary and dissatisfied with organised Christianity and how '[i]nto the midst of this Western materialism steps Sadhu Sundar Singh, the young Indian Christian devotee, clad in his orange robe and turban, a commanding, arresting figure in the midst of our drab western materialism'.⁴⁹ As with Home, Turner was aware of the

growing desire of western Christians to look to the East for alternatives after the war.

Turner's parents also sent a letter to Singh inviting him to stay with them in their home in Hayling Island, Hampshire, with the following:

Ever since I heard about you I have felt how much our land needed you, & we pray that once again the East may bring a new light to our needy land, that the Star in the East may bring the Sun of Righteousness with healing in His beams to us all.⁵⁰

In a reverse of the standard imperialist and missionary messages, it was not India that needed Christianity to 'save' its people, but rather this Indian Christ-like figure that was to resuscitate Britain.⁵¹ It was seen as appropriate that this particular Indian, who epitomised the Oriental and Occident, should come to evangelise in Britain, bringing distinctly 'Eastern' elements to his mission.

Christian newspapers had glowing reports of Singh's sermons. Charles Bernard Mortlock, using the pen name Urbanus for the *Church Times*, was swept away by the presence of Singh at a meeting in Church House in London. Not only was Mortlock impressed with Singh's simple, direct and intense sermon, but also by his lack of self-consciousness and of course by his appearance – 'a magnificent figure of masculine beauty' with the 'authentic deep-seeing eyes of the mystic' 'clad in a long garment of pale saffron, with a shawl of vivid orange about his shoulders'.⁵² Another Christian newspaper, the *British Weekly*, printed reports on Singh's sermons on Good Friday and on Maundy Thursday to a congregation of over 1500 at Westminster Chapel. Singh's 'saffron robe' was noted for becoming 'familiar to London audiences' making him 'one of the most picturesque figures in London' and he was described as 'St Francis of the East'. In reference to his sermon at Westminster Chapel, the reporter went as far as to state that 'no more remarkable figure has

ever appeared on the missionary platform'. The report went on to explain that one of the features of Singh's simple addresses was that he often repeated the same sentence, likening this to the repetition of Buddhist chants but also a necessary device to 'secure the attention of the natives' in Tibet, which was evidently also appealing to British congregations.⁵³

Though his English was limited, thousands of men and women had seen him speak during his travels and were inspired by his original approach and the evidence of his faith in Christ.⁵⁴ Singh's biographer Heiler collated a number of articles and personal recollections about Singh's trips to Europe describing, for example, the deep effect he had on the congregation at St Bride's Church in Fleet Street, London in 1920. The *Church Times* depicted Singh as 'a man from another world', and an English theologian clarified in a letter to Heiler that Singh gave the 'impression of an outstanding man, who has renounced great possessions, exulting in the saving power of his Master, and one who speaks with the utmost simplicity'.⁵⁵ It was this simplicity, as remarked upon by other commentators, which allowed Singh to appeal to mass audiences, but it was also his Indianness. The *Christian Patriot* described Singh as a 'true *Sanyasi*' and the 'manifestation of an ideal of religion' rooted in the East.⁵⁶ With the publication in 1921 of a biography by B. H. Streeter of Queen's College, Oxford, and his Indian doctoral student, Aiyadurai Jesudasen Appasamy, entitled *The Sadhu*, which was reviewed widely, Singh was by now one of the most well known Indians in Britain, as Kinnaird later attested.⁵⁷

Singh's Visit in 1922 and After

After a year in Tibet, Singh set out again for Europe via Palestine in 1922. From Marseilles, he visited Switzerland, Germany, Sweden, Norway and Holland. He was greeted with large crowds in Continental Europe, struck by his robe, turban and bare feet in his sandals.⁵⁸ At the

end of his European trip he returned to Britain to rest and to attend the Keswick conference, an annual gathering of evangelic Christians. By 1922, Singh was a more familiar entity, but there remained a continued interest in noting his Indian attributes. The *Manchester Guardian* report of the Keswick conference described Singh as a ‘Hindu Missioner’ in his saffron robe with a ‘noble head and noble features’, though he was of course not ‘Hindu’ by faith. The reporter explained that one of the appeals of Singh was his ‘Eastern’ method of preaching, taking Christianity back to its origins and the first principles of the Gospel that had not been corrupted by centuries of western interpretation. Again, this look to Eastern spirituality post-war was best accepted in a man who was not ‘Western’ but was still Christian. The *Guardian* also explained that Singh’s saffron robe was one worn by Hindu ascetics and was a symbol of renunciation, but did not clarify why he retained this symbol of another religious tradition, or how it helped his mission.⁵⁹ The deliberate description of the colour of Singh’s dress as saffron, a colour and term associated with Hinduism, and Sikhism, further confused the lines as to whether British commentators saw Singh as Christian or not. It is evident that his appeal lay not merely in his Christian faith but precisely because of his ‘Indian’ features and the parallels commentators were able to draw between Singh with Christ and other saints.

When Singh left Britain in August 1922 he professed that he would not be returning to Europe, disillusioned with many aspects of western Christian society, including limited Church attendance, intending to concentrate his mission on Tibet. He had published a number of works and collections of his sermons and teachings in the meantime, including his *Meditations on Various Aspects of the Spiritual Life* in 1926. The Bishop of London provided the foreword and described Singh as ‘an Eastern ascetic, clad in his saffron-robe, and like the old Friars, dependent on charity’.⁶⁰ Other books, also published by Macmillan, included *Reality and Religion: Meditations on God, Man and Nature* (1924) and *The Search After Reality: Thoughts on Hinduism, Buddhism, Muhammadanism and Christianity* (1925). In

1929, Singh published *With and Without Christ* in which he discussed some of his disillusionment with Western Christianity. He was critical of the lack of devotion or commitment to religion, and the high level of materialism he encountered. Attendance at churches on Sundays was the only religious observance that many undertook according to Singh, but he neglected to appreciate the multiple ways people engaged with church structures indirectly through societies, schools and community events.⁶¹ The structure of the Anglican Church did not appeal to the wandering ascetic and he had no designs on its organisational reach. A reflection of a meeting Singh had with an Indian Christian in Cambridge highlight Singh's concerns. The student had become disillusioned by his stay in Britain and his visits to Continental Europe where he encountered numerous 'heathens' who were either agnostic or atheist, admiring the Indian example where nearly everyone followed some religion, even if it was not Christianity. They discussed the way in which many Christians had no 'experience of Christ', many did not believe in the divine and miraculous aspects of Christ's life that were so essential to Singh's preaching.⁶²

Singh did face criticism from Christian circles, particularly from Catholics in India and sceptics in the Germanic and Scandinavian countries. Oskar Pfister, a Swiss Pastor and friend of Sigmund Freud, published a pamphlet, most probably in 1927, attacking Singh entitled *Sundar Singh's Evident Untruths: A Warning + Appeal*. This pamphlet was written in English to highlight some of the arguments in Pfister's earlier work, *Die Legende Sundar Singhs*. The criticism concentrated on the fabulous stories of visions and miracles that were associated with Singh's life, in particular an alleged visit to Tibet in 1923 and the stories of miracles in Alfred Zahir's 1917 biography.⁶³ However these rationalist critiques did not hamper Singh in Britain. He had been welcomed warmly by congregations across the British Isles, mostly entranced by his personality, and so it is notable that women outnumbered men five to one in the audience at St Bride's.⁶⁴

In many ways it appears as though Singh operated in a vacuum, isolated from the other Anglo-Indian interactions of this time period and his counterparts such as Tagore and Gandhi who were also notorious but engaging in broader political discussions on colonialism, which Singh avoided. However, they did all know people in common. C. F. Andrews, who was a friend of both Gandhi and Tagore, first met Singh when Andrews was teaching at St Stephens College in Delhi and wrote a biography of Singh, which was published in 1934. By the time Andrews' biography was published Singh was a well known figure to well-read British audiences. A review for the *Times Literary Supplement* did not need to introduce Singh as their readers were familiar with the basic biographical details.⁶⁵ Andrews concentrated on Singh's theology though he admitted that he had often been asked about Singh's appearance. He explained that the retention of the long beard, a prescription of the Sikh faith, as well as his clothing and lifestyle were important to show Singh's affinity with Indian people, something that Andrews advised other Indian Christians to adopt.⁶⁶ Andrews recounted an incident in London when Singh was brought to meet some 'high rank' members of society keen to hear miraculous stories, which angered Singh who only wished to talk about Christ.⁶⁷

Edward Thompson, the historian and writer who had been an ordained Wesleyan, and was also a colleague of Tagore's, reviewed Andrews' book for the *Observer* in August 1934 in which he described Singh as a Saint who spoke with 'moving simplicity'.⁶⁸ Thompson had previously been critical of Singh's lack of theology and had dismissed the adventurous stories of Singh's life as parables in a review of Heiler's biography of Singh for the *Bookman* in September 1927. Thompson did, however, admire certain aspects of Singh's manner: 'his extraordinary combination of clear Christian belief with the genuinely Indian tradition in his bones'. Thompson asserted that it was Singh who had taught Tagore and Gandhi to respect Christianity.⁶⁹ Singh, on the other hand, had been quick to note that though Tagore and

Gandhi were influenced by Christianity, they were not Christians and should not be regarded as such.⁷⁰ As a Swedish commentator put it, Gandhi and Tagore were ‘influenced by Christ’, while Singh was ‘wholly given up to Christ’.⁷¹ This comparison between Singh, Gandhi and Tagore is telling as they were often appraised together by commentators in this period. Singh was a religious man. He was not involved in formulating visions of an independent India as his counterparts did. However, all three men were moving between the spaces of India, Britain and further afield in the interwar period, were engaging with syncretic approaches to various religions, and were ‘preaching’ their philosophies to broad audiences. They also all wore distinctive clothing, which was often noted as ‘authentic’. However, with Singh’s inability to challenge colonial hierarchies, in his conformity and willingness to be ‘Orientalised’ and his lack of involvement in political discussions on nationalism or colonialism, he was unable to hold much relevance beyond theological circles after his death.

As promised, because of his disillusionment with western Christianity and need to concentrate on his mission in Tibet, Singh did not visit Europe again after 1922. He was last heard from in 1929; concerns were raised within a few months about his disappearance in the foothills of Tibet with reports in the *Daily News* and *British Weekly*.⁷² There were numerous rumours of sightings but his body was never found.⁷³ He was officially proclaimed dead in 1933 allowing British newspapers to print obituaries and remember his visits to Britain.⁷⁴ The mysterious circumstances surrounding Singh’s disappearance added more allure to a life already littered with mystical occurrences. That no trace of his body could be found bears the last comparison that Singh’s life had with the Gospel and of Christ in the resurrection. Many refused to believe he was dead, believing he was living a life of solitary meditation in the foothills of the Himalayas, imitating the path taken by Hindu monks who often retreated to hermit existences at the end of their lives. Even his demise could be interpreted through syncretic traditions.

Even after his official death, Singh continued to inspire and fascinate Christian congregations in Britain. The Reverend C. F. Angus used his story for a sermon on conversion to a university audience at Cambridge in 1949.⁷⁵ It has been argued by Kathryn Lindskoog that C. S. Lewis was inspired by Singh's life after reading Dorothy Sayer's radio play, *The Man Born To Be King: A Play-Cycle on the Life of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*, in 1943 which quotes from Streeter and Appasamy's biography of Singh in a footnote. Lindskoog argues that Singh was inspiration for Lewis's 1946 novel *That Hideous Strength* whose protagonist meets a 'great native Christian mystic' called Sura, who eventually disappears and it is unknown if he is alive or dead.⁷⁶ Numerous books and articles continued to be written on his teachings and about his life by Christian hagiographers and more recently there have been more substantial historical appraisals of Singh and his reputation with more focus on his Indian and Tibetan career.⁷⁷

The Indian Christian

Sadhu Sundar Singh was significantly an *Indian* Christian, often described at the time as an 'Eastern' Christian, largely independent of church organisations, using the religious customs of his birth to shape his theological and practical understandings. Many Indians had converted to Christianity in the nineteenth and twentieth century under the influence of European missionaries, and many had taken up the religious profession. The concern about appropriate clothing for such Indian clergymen was considered at length and many were at odds to preserve their 'Indianness' in face of opposition from their European mentors, and as Avril Powell has pointed out, many retained 'Indian' names as Singh had.⁷⁸ However, Singh was unusual in his movement outside of India, as he engaged directly with British Christians in the imperial motherland. He shared much in common, then, with non-Christians

Rammohun Roy and his contemporaries, Gandhi and Tagore, in his desire to present himself through a combination of religious practices to western audiences and the similar ways in which he was received.

Singh concentrated his preaching on the Gospels, but his life could also be interpreted as an imitation of the Gospels through his life of austerity and ascetism in a pre-industrial environment. Although Singh greatly appealed to the villagers he met in Tibet, who were drawn in by his miraculous aura, men and women in Britain were attracted to the exotic, ‘traditional’ charms that Singh brought to the contemporary Christian message too. Singh was perceived as highly charismatic because of his exotic novelty, and also because of the familiar Christian message he espoused. As Nathan Söderblom, the Swedish theologian who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1930 for his work towards Christian unity, argued in 1922, Singh was shaping his philosophy in an independent mould but his practices could all be traced in Christian theology. Singh did not take up Hindu or Sikh practices or beliefs such as yoga, he did not believe in the transmigration of souls, and he talked to men and women equally.⁷⁹ But his ethnicity, appearance and manner of preaching added new ‘Indian’ elements, which were not just used for Indian or Tibetan audiences, but were also crucially important for his success in his preaching tours of Britain.

Though our knowledge of Singh’s experiences depends largely on other people’s viewpoints, through his letters with Parker, his biographers and press reports, we can assume by the ways in which he continued to preach to British audiences in his turban and robe and describe himself as a ‘Sadhu’ that he felt he could capitalise upon this interest, even if later he got tired of the attention. It was a combination of the stories surrounding him and his striking appearance, all relating to his Indian origins, that added to his infamy. His relationship with Parker, tempered by her maternalism, helped the Indian reach new audiences and find broad, international success. Singh’s racial and ethnic background was not a barrier for British

audiences who readily accepted him as preacher and seer, and he was able to provide spiritual comfort for British people as much as the people he sought to convert in India and Tibet. However he was always set apart through Orientalised descriptions. Singh was successful in Britain at a time when interest in New Age spiritualism was increasing and Singh was able to epitomise an interest in the novel while retaining roots in the traditions of the Gospel. We see this in the numerous comparisons to Christ, even though Singh posited that if ‘Christ came to Europe in the dress of a Sadhu the people would think He was ‘cracked’’.⁸⁰ Although discussing an itinerant ‘Sadhu’ in a saffron robe would generally conjure up the image of a Hindu ascetic, in the early 1920s, there was only one man who fit that description and he was a Christian evangelist.

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¹ Kinnaird, *My Adopted Country*, 23. Jagadish Chandra Bose (1858-1937) was the first person in the world to demonstrate wireless transmission of electromagnetic waves and a renowned botanist who demonstrated the electric nature of plant responses to stimuli.

² The Rev. James Kelso put Singh in the top three most influential Indians, alongside Gandhi and Tagore, in his piece ‘Sadhu Sundar Singh: The Apostle of the East and West’, 75.

³ Rev. E. Schwab to Dr. E. E. Fife, 18 August 1927. Box 2, Folder 1. Sheldon and Fife Family Papers. University of Oregon Libraries.

⁴ Aravamudan, ‘Guru English’; *Guru English*.

⁵ Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented?*.

⁶ King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 123.

⁷ Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*, 6.

⁸ For more on the definition of ‘costume’, and the context of clothing in India, see Tarlo, *Clothing Matters* and Belfanti, ‘Was Fashion a European Invention?’.

⁹ See Burton, *At the Heart of the Empire*; Hall and Rose, *At Home with the Empire*; Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism*; Visram, *Asians in Britain* among others.

¹⁰ Green and Viaene, ‘Introduction: Rethinking Religion and Globalization’.

¹¹ See Dobe, ‘Flaunting the Secret’, for his own interpretation and for bibliographical information on further relevant works on Indian Christian figures.

¹² For more on the Brahma Samaj see Kopf, *The Brahma Samaj*.

¹³ Collet, *Life and Letters*, 184, and *Bristol Mercury*, 14 September 1833.

¹⁴ Zastoupil, *Rammohun Roy*, 1, 49.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 215-16.

¹⁶ Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism*, 252.

¹⁷ Midgley, ‘Transoceanic Commemoration and Connections’.

¹⁸ ‘Welcome Soiree to a Hindu Reformer’, *The Standard*, 13 April 1870, 6.

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- ¹⁹ Müller, 'My Indian Friends', 348.
- ²⁰ Schouten, *Jesus as Guru*, 93, 136; Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West*, 22. For more on Hindu reformers discussing Christ in this period see Sharma, *Neo-Hindu Views of Christianity*.
- ²¹ Harris, *Private Lives*, 174.
- ²² Sen, *Migrant Races*, 3.
- ²³ Mukherjee, *Nationalism, Education and Migrant Identities*, 65-78.
- ²⁴ Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man', 128.
- ²⁵ Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 23-4.
- ²⁶ Lynch-Watson, *The Saffron Robe*, 35-6
- ²⁷ Kelso, 'Sadhu Sundar Singh', 77.
- ²⁸ Emmet, 'Miracles', 310-11.
- ²⁹ Parker, Sadhu Sundar Singh, 85
- ³⁰ Emmet, 'Miracles', 314-15.
- ³¹ Parker, Sadhu Sundar Singh, xiv.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 1-3.
- ³³ For example, Burton, *Burdens of History*; Ramusack, 'Cultural Missionaries'; Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden*.
- ³⁴ Singh to Parker, 26 December 1919, Singh Papers.
- ³⁵ Singh to Parker, 12 January 1920, Singh Papers.
- ³⁶ Thompson, *Sadhu Sundar Singh*, 159.
- ³⁷ Heiler, *The Gospel of Sâdhu Sundar Singh*, 15.
- ³⁸ Streeter and Appasamy, *The Sadhu*, 42.
- ³⁹ Lynch-Watson, *Saffron Robe*, 117; Goodwin, *Sadhu Sundar Singh in Switzerland*, 5.
- ⁴⁰ Sharpe, 'Sadhu Sundar Singh and his Critics', 63.

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- ⁴¹ Singh to Parker, 1 March 1920; 4 April 1920, Singh Papers.
- ⁴² ‘Indian Ascetic’s Visit’, *Scotsman*, 19 April 1920, 10.
- ⁴³ ‘Sadhu Sundar Singh in a London Pulpit’, *Madras Mail*, 9 April 1920, 6.
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- ⁴⁶ ‘Our London Correspondence’, *Manchester Guardian*, 30 April 1920, 8.
- ⁴⁷ Home, ‘An Indian Mystic’, *Spectator*, 27 March 1920, 416-17.
- ⁴⁸ P. M. Drury to Singh, 15 February 1920; L. V. Turner to Singh, 15 February 1920, Singh Papers.
- ⁴⁹ Turner, ‘India’s Apostle to the West: Sadhu Sundar Singh’, *Chronicle of the London Missionary Society*, (April 1920), 82.
- ⁵⁰ C. Turner to Singh, 12 Feb 1920, Singh Papers.
- ⁵¹ Edwin Spring, a pastor in Gloucester, had also heard of Singh through a friend in India and wrote admiringly to Singh; E. H. Spring to Singh, 9 March 1920, Singh Papers.
- ⁵² Urbanus, ‘Round-About Papers: The Sadhu Sundar Singh’, *Church Times*, 12 March 1920, 267.
- ⁵³ L., ‘Sadhu Sunder Singh in Dr Jowett’s Pulpit’, and M. A. S., ‘Christian Endeavourers at the Metropolitan Tabernacle’, *British Weekly*, 8 April 1920, 29.
- ⁵⁴ Appasamy, ‘A Biographical Introduction’, in Goodwin, *Sadhu Sundar Singh in Switzerland*, xv.
- ⁵⁵ Heiler, *The Gospel*, 87.
- ⁵⁶ Quoted in ‘Sadhu Sundar Singh in England’, *United India*, 10 March 1920, 382-3.

⁵⁷ Streeter and Appasamy, *The Sadhu* was reprinted in 1922, 1923 and 1926. A new edition was published in 1987 by Delhi publishers, Mittal. For a brief review, see ‘A Christian Indian Mystic’, *Saturday Review*, 18 June 1921, 508.

⁵⁸ Goodwin, *Sadhu Singh in Switzerland*, 2.

⁵⁹ ‘Sadhu Sundar Singh’, *Manchester Guardian*, 20 July 1922, 11.

⁶⁰ Singh, *Meditations*, v.

⁶¹ See Cox, ‘From the Empire of Christ to the Third World’.

⁶² Singh, *With and Without Christ*, 50-1.

⁶³ Zahir, *A Lover of the Cross*; Oskar Pfister, ‘Sadhu Sundar Singh’s Evident Untruths. A Warning and Appeal’ in Sheldon & Fife Family Papers. The papers include correspondence between Fife and Heiler seeking information in India to dispute some of Pfister’s claims. See also Sharpe, ‘Singh and his Critics’.

⁶⁴ ‘Sadhu Sundar Singh in a London Pulpit’, *Madras Mail*, 9 April 1920, 6.

⁶⁵ ‘Religion and Theology’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 2 August 1934, 543.

⁶⁶ Andrews, *Sadhu Sundar Singh*, 13-14.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁶⁸ Thompson, ‘Life of a Saint’, *Observer*, 5 August 1934, 4.

⁶⁹ Thompson, ‘Three Books on India’, *Bookman*, September 1927, 323.

⁷⁰ Goodwin, *Sadhu Sundar Singh in Switzerland*, 29, 36.

⁷¹ ‘An Ambassador of the Indian Church: Sadhu Singh’, *Chronicle of the London Missionary Society*, September 1922, 205.

⁷² *British Weekly*, 10 October 1929; *Daily News*, 16 October 1929, CBMS Archives.

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⁷⁴ ‘An Indian Christian Mystic’, *Manchester Guardian*, 26 April 1933, 8; ‘Sadhu Sundar Singh’, *The Times*, 25 April 1933, 9; press cutting with no title or date, presumably *Daily Mail*, April 1933, Bishop E. Curtis collection; CBMS Archives, April 1933 and May 1934.

⁷⁵ Angus, ‘University Sermon’, *Cambridge Review*, 19 February 1949, 413-4.

⁷⁶ Lindskoog, *Surprised by C. S. Lewis, George MacDonald & Dante*, chapter 12.

⁷⁷ For example Sharpe, *The Riddle of Sadhu Sundar Singh* and Dobe, ‘Faqirs in the Colony: Rama Tirtha, Sundar Singh and Comparative Sainthood in the Punjab (1849-1929)’, unpublished PhD thesis, Harvard University, May 2007.

⁷⁸ Powell, ‘Processes of Conversion’, 51.

⁷⁹ Söderblom, ‘Christian Mysticism in an Indian Soul’.

⁸⁰ Goodwin, *Sadhu Sundar Singh in Switzerland*, 36.