



The Nation's Tortured Body: Violence, Representation, and the Formation of a Sikh "Diaspora"

By Brian Keith Axel



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In *The Nation's Tortured Body* Brian Keith Axel explores the formation of the Sikh diaspora and, in so doing, offers a powerful inquiry into conditions of peoplehood, colonialism, and postcoloniality. Demonstrating a new direction for historical anthropology, he focuses on the position of violence between 1849 and 1998 in the emergence of a transnational fight for Khalistan (an independent Sikh state). Axel argues that, rather than the homeland creating the diaspora, it has been the diaspora, or histories of displacement, that have created particular kinds of places—homelands.

Based on ethnographic and archival research conducted by Axel at several sites in India, England, and the United States, the text delineates a theoretical trajectory for thinking about the proliferation of diaspora studies and area studies in America and England. After discussing this trajectory in relation to the colonial and postcolonial movement of Sikhs, Axel analyzes the production and circulation of images of Sikhs around the world, beginning with visual representations of Maharaja Duleep Singh, the last Sikh ruler of Punjab, who died in 1893. He argues that imagery of particular male Sikh bodies has situated—at different times and in different ways—points of mediation between various populations of Sikhs around the world. Most crucially, he describes the torture of Sikhs by Indian police between 1983 and the present and discusses the images of tortured Sikh bodies that have been circulating on the Internet since 1996. Finally, he returns to questions of the homeland, reflecting on what the issues discussed in *The Nation's Tortured Body* might mean for the ongoing fight for Khalistan.

Specialists in anthropology, history, cultural studies, diaspora studies, and Sikh studies will find much of interest in this important work.



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Editorial Review

Review

"Historical anthropology at its best, *The Nation's Tortured Body* explores the history and politics of the Sikhs in a complex, and contested, transnational context. Axel's book evocatively charts the ways in which the crossing and marking of boundaries have shaped the foundational identities of a diasporic community, providing a graphic illustration of the multiple meanings of the idea of 'homeland' in our contemporary postcolonial world."—Nicholas B. Dirks, Columbia University

"This groundbreaking study of the Sikh diasporic world is also a brilliant ethnography of violence and loss. Tacking deftly between the politics of images and the imagination, Axel shows how the iconic social categories produced in the colonial encounter shape the struggle over the politics of place, person and body in contemporary India. This book will surely change the ways in which we see how colonialism, diaspora and the politics of separatism inform the formation of modern subjects with mobile loyalties."—Arjun Appadurai, University of Chicago

From the Back Cover

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About the Author

Brian Keith Axel is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Swarthmore College. He is the editor of *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and Its Futures*, also published by Duke University Press.

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