Although heuristically useful, the homeland-diaspora construct is problematic. These categories provide a one-dimensional view across space and time, and therefore fail to account for the depth, robustness, and diversity evident throughout global communities. Scholars have employed these categories to understand various collectives, despite the fact that they often fail to accurately represent the conceptions of the communities under analysis. This essay looks through the lens of the Sikh tradition to make a general critique of the homeland-diaspora paradigm. I call attention to basic problems that emerge in the uncritical acceptance of this construction, and in doing so, I argue that we need to develop more historically precise and culturally nuanced frameworks that fit the specific needs of specific communities. I assert the importance of approaching this study as a process—diasporization—which offers us an opportunity to better account for the historical development of communities. I also touch on evidence from early Sikh writings that challenge the assumed universal applicability of these categories. In its broadest form, this essay aims to underline the importance of reflecting critically on the terms and categories we use to understand the world. This essay purposefully raises more questions than it answers, particularly because I hope to open new conversations, ideas, and directions for our future studies.

Punjab and Sikh share an inextricable connection. The founder of the tradition, Guru Nanak (d. 1539 CE), was born, raised, and settled in

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1 The term ‘Sikhi’ is the Punjabi word for the Sikh tradition. The more commonly used English term—‘Sikhism’—is a later construction imposed by colonialist and orientalist observers. I realize that both terms are constructed, yet the native category of ‘Sikhi’ circumvents a number of the problematic assumptions that inform the construction of
Punjab, and a number of his successors established cities and townships in the region. A plethora of Sikh literature has been produced within the region (Punjab) by natives of the region (Punjabis) in its lingua franca (Punjabi). Early modern and colonial writings highlight the close linkage between the Sikhs and Punjab, a relationship that experienced a sharpening through the rise of communalization and modern nationalism during the colonial period. The increasing conflation of religious and regional identities played a prominent role in the Sikh demands for an independent nation-state in the twentieth century, and an analysis of this discourse reveals a deep conviction that Punjab serves as the ‘homeland’ of the Sikhs. Without a doubt, Punjab and Sikhs maintain a close connection, and countless scholars, politicians, and journalists have characterized the region as ‘the Sikh homeland.’ However, the uncritical usage of the category ‘homeland’ has failed to sufficiently account for a number of key issues.

First, modern scholarship tends to deploy the category of homeland without clearly delineating the contours of Punjab. As J.S. Grewal has demonstrated, Punjab was conceived variously in the early modern period, and these conceptions were informed by diverse considerations (e.g., political, social, cultural, geographical). One must remember that territorial boundaries were not as rigid or sharply demarcated in early modern South Asia as they are today. Moreover, the political flux in Punjab since the second century BCE has led to a constant re-imagination of political boundaries, and these re-mappings complicate assumptions

‘Sikhism.’ While western scholars typically refer to the tradition as ‘Sikhism,’ I prefer the term ‘Sikhi’ and will use it regularly throughout this essay.

2 For an account of these cities and townships, see J.S. Grewal, The Sikhs of the Punjab (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 42–81.

3 A simple footnote could not capture all the literature that fits within this paradigm. For further information on this, see Sant Singh Sekhon and Kartar Singh Duggal, A History of Punjabi Literature (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1992).

4 For a discussion of these phenomena, see Gyanendra Pandey, The Construction of Communalism in North India (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

5 Interestingly, this is not just a sentiment shared by Sikhs. For example, Nehruvian secularists considered Punjab to be a “problem” due to a conflated sense of religious dominance (Sikhi) within a particular region (Punjab) during the process of Indian state formation in the mid-twentieth century. This reading informed the treatment and division of Punjab during this period. With regard to Sikh perspectives on territoriality, Darshan Singh Tatla’s work focuses on modern nationalism and the increasing conflation between Sikh and Punjabi identities in the twentieth century. Darshan Singh Tatla, The Sikh Diaspora: The Search for Statehood (London: UCL Press, 1999).

6 For Grewal’s perspectives, see Social and Cultural History of Punjab (New Delhi: Manohar, 2004).