

# INTERROGATING RACECRAFT

## A Critical Analysis of the 'Model Minority' and Sikh Subjectivity in Canada

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### Introduction

In the past 20 years the percentage of Sikhs in Canada has more than doubled, now constituting one of the largest non-white groups in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2022). Sikh organizations continue to be involved in informal political organizing and Sikhs currently make up 4.3% of the federal House of Commons. Why then, has there been a lack of consideration of Sikh life within Canadian political science scholarship? I aim to rectify this gap by asking the following research questions:

- Q1: What is the 'Sikh Canadian' subject position as created in and imposed by the context of formal Canadian politics?**
- Q2: What are the implications of that constructed identity?**

Building off analysis from Prashad (2000), I hypothesize that Sikhs in Canada have been constructed as a 'model minority'. The 'model-minority' is a mythologized paradigmatic construction of Sikhs as racialized outsiders who fit into Canada's landscape because they successfully assimilate, performing well academically, socially and economically. I argue this identity-formation happens through state racecraft. Racecraft describes processes of "human action and imagination...[which] are collective yet individual, day-to-day, yet historical and consequential" (Fields & Fields, 2012, pp.18-19) that create and re-create race. I'm looking for the processes or structures that shape a specific idea of what being 'Sikh Canadian' means. Then I'll ask why that version of 'Sikh Canadian' identity is significant and worth studying.

### Methodologies

**Auto-ethnography:** As a Sikh woman myself, this methodology allowed me to insert my personal histories and emotions from being a model minority as evidence, disrupting Sikhs' historic and contemporary exclusion from political science.

**Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA):** I analyze the language used by three prominent federal Sikh politicians: Jagmeet Singh from the NDP, Harjit Sajjan from the Liberal party, and Tim Uppal from the Conservatives over an 8-year period from 2015 to 2023. I gathered personally endorsed official party statements, Hansard Transcripts, social media statements, and transcribed video statements as my data pool. Using an open coding approach, I centred structures of power in my thematic analysis to ascertain how their language functioned as discourse that prescribed a politics of Sikh identity. These figures clarified my focus on the Canadian state, and by virtue of their roles, are authoritative Sikhs in Canada.



# THE 3 REGISTERS OF THE 'SIKH MODEL MINORITY'

## Multiculturalism

Canadian multiculturalism remains a tool of settler colonial racialization as a paradigm that sees the French and English as its 'real subjects' (Thobani, 2007). Racialized immigrants thus occupy a stratified hierarchy between whiteness and Indigeneity that upholds racial categorization and Indigenous dispossession while blanketing those structural processes with the language of ethnicity and culture (Bannerji, 1996).



Jagmeet Singh

In his statements Singh:

- a) equivocates** his Sikh identity with traditional markers of whiteness and Canadianness;
- b) transposes** Sikh religious praxis onto core Canadian values including multiculturalism itself; and
- c) personally negotiates** his Sikh identity to relate to French Canadianness.

The model minority is crafted as an identity category under a multicultural rubric that operates on hierarchy. Singh's iteration of the Sikh model minority affirms Sikh belief in multiculturalism's role as the mask for race-thinking. This forecloses the possibility of thinking about structural racism, colonialism, and White supremacy from a true, unadulterated version of the culture, history, religion and politics that Sikhs inherit.

## Securitization

Processes of securitization construct the rules of the game for racialized citizens by outlining the terms of inclusion they must meet to be a part of the Canadian polity (Dhamoon, 2013). This logic gives the state the power to circumscribe individuals' participation in the national imaginary. Thus, these terms of inclusion support the consolidation of the Canadian state and its sovereignty over Indigenous lands and bodies.



Harjit Sajjan

In his statements Sajjan deploys both:

- a) dynamics of inclusion** that acknowledge other model minorities as good citizens with human rights; and
- b) dynamics of exclusion** that dehumanize 'radicals' who believe in ideology as threats to the nation state.

These dynamics support the concept of the model minority as an actualized form of regulated inclusion. Sajjan invites Sikhs to demonstrate they are good and responsible Canadians, deserving of inclusion, by taking up the model minority identity. His built community of model minorities acts like a club of examples. Securitization processes craft the model minority by dividing the world into us/them. Thus, Sikh politics is re-sculpted from its critical political roots into a cultural construct that is 'mainstream' because it is amenable to settler colonialism.

## Capitalism

Race is an instrument of political economy that manufactures the material conditions of power by organizing labour and resources across people. Reducing the model minority to a spectre of White supremacy obscures the backdrop of a dominative political economy that delineates who is 'model' in the first place (Tran, 2013). The model minority subject is thus economized, personifying capitalism and capitalist relations of labour.



Tim Uppal

In his statements Uppal paradoxically:

- a) motivates** his political economy with the idea of the model minority as economically deserving; and simultaneously
- b) disconnects** his Sikh identity from any particular performance of politics by reframing Sikhi as a faith.

Capitalism transforms characteristics that are necessary for production and accumulation (labour valuation, consumption, resource extraction etc.) into worthy natural attributes of the model minority subject. Uppal's reference to those factors in his politics reifies that concept. However by disconnecting his Sikh-ness as faith from his politics, Uppal's performance is more nefarious in disaggregating race and identity from political economy. Sikh religious beliefs are divorced from their purpose in guiding everyday action and politics and thus Sikhs can legitimize capital-driven process of settler colonialism.

### Implications

The Sikh model minority is a 'crafted' identity. Its boundaries are discursively made through structures of multiculturalism, securitization and capitalism. Those boundaries ripple outward from authoritative figures within the Canadian state onto the broader Sikh Canadian community. These case studies also show how the model minority identity is a critical yet constantly evolving component of a settler colonial racial capitalism. The system is invested in incentivizing the participation of racialized individuals and thus affords social, emotional, economic and political benefits to people who are made to believe they are 'naturally' or biologically smarter, more hardworking. In reality, they are simply more aligned with the state's interests.

Sikhs who uncritically accept the model minority are complicit in settler colonialism and Indigenous dispossession (Upadhyay, 2016). The model minority position effectively functions as a contract: gaining recognition, rights protection and freedom to exist comes with the price of remaining silent on issues of ongoing colonial violence. This includes settling on Indigenous land, uplifting the Canadian state, and believing in liberal progress. The state crafts the model minority identity as a facade for proving how racism and colonialism in Canada is in the past, not present.

The Sikh political praxis advanced by the model minority is not true to its critical political roots. Namely, aspects of Sikh politics and identity are being curtailed by multiculturalism, securitization and capitalism as structures of state racecraft. A genuine Sikh politics may gesture towards solidarity with Indigenous nations, organizations, and academics.

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