

Metropolis hosted seminar on Sikh Diaspora
November 14, 2007
Toronto, Ontario
Riaz J. Kara

On November 14, 2007, CERIS – The Ontario Metropolis Centre hosted visiting scholar Harpreet Kaur and her presentation, *Diaspora Nationalism – A case study of Sikhs*. Kaur, a PhD Candidate, has travelled extensively throughout North America conducting interviews with the many transnationals who have left the Punjab and settled in Canada and the United States. She argues that the Sikh Community was, a) pushed into a nationalist struggle by an imperialist British Government; b) motivated to create a separate home for themselves within the Punjab and c) destined to be a diasporic community if they were to vacate the Punjab.

While Kaur used the commonly accepted definition of diaspora, she did provide useful information on the specific characteristics of the Sikh Diaspora. “The diaspora in Sikhism is according to one school of thought as old as the religion itself-starting with Guru Nanak's *Udasis*. Sikhs are known for their adventurous and enterprising spirit and being [part of a] diaspora involves all of it.” Therefore, she claims, the diasporic initiative was something that was intrinsic to the Sikh Community.

In conversation on the hotly-debated Khalistan topic as well as the riots which broke out in 1984, Kaur argues that the Sikhs in the Punjab province are less politically involved in the separatist cause than is suspected. In fact, the North American Sikh Community, for example, is and has been a proponent of a separate Sikh state for the better part of two decades. “Harpreet's argument, that Sikh political separatism is practically non-existent in Punjab, but kept alive in the North American diasporic community, is quite intriguing and provocative, but it is well-documented in a wide range of source materials, including archival work, oral history and analysis of popular culture,” noted CERIS’ Dr. Patricia Wood. This seems to follow from the logic that the homeland is romanticized by the diasporic community and often, the older members of the Diaspora teach their youngsters of their *home*. In fact, Kaur’s interviews with young Canadians and Americans crystallized the idea: they were far more militant and political in their views of the Punjab as an idealized homeland and most especially on the topic of the need for Khalistan.