Sikh kirpans in California schools: The social construction of symbols, legal pluralism, and the politics of diversity

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The kirpan is the symbol crystallising the fact that when a Khalsa joins this army, he or she has left behind the docile environment of subservience and subordination and has joined the proactive and caring world of the fearless, brave and courageous defence force of Guru Gobind Singh. Traditionally, a Sikh should never use the Kirpan in anger or for a malicious attack. However, a Sikh may use it in self-defence or to protect a person in need. School staff and parents were very concerned, and the student was required to attend school under police supervision until the court decision was reached. In September 2008, Montreal police announced that a 13 year old student would be charged after he allegedly threatened another student with his kirpan. Denmark. We examine four cases of Sikh-led social activism that illustrate the spirit of miri piri – the integration of the spiritual and the political in the act of resistance against injustice. Karen Leonard is Professor of Anthropology at the University of California at Irvine. She is the author of The South Asian Americans (Greenwood P, 1997); Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans (Temple UP, 1992), currently in its second paperback reprint; and Social History of an Indian Caste: The Kayasths of Hyderabad (U of California P, 1978), as well as of nearly seventy articles on many topics, including "South Asian Leadership of American Muslims," forthcoming.