

Life and Times of Hardit Singh Malik: A Theological–Historiographical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the life and legacy of Sardar Hardit Singh Malik from both historical and theological viewpoints. Malik was a trailblazing Sikh aviator, diplomat, and statesman during World War I. He lived by Sikh values such as *seva* (selfless service), *miri-piri* (balancing the spiritual and worldly), and *chardi kala* (resilient optimism). Using biographical sources and archival records, the study looks at how his Sikh identity influenced his work with imperial institutions, warfare, and diplomacy. The article pays special attention to his determination to continue wearing his turban despite institutional opposition viewing it as an act of cultural preservation and spiritual strength.

It points out that colonial histories often ignore non-European contributions and notes that there are now efforts to recognize Malik's legacy. It also explains that Malik's life cannot be reduced to just colonizer or colonized, but instead reflects a complex mix of loyalty, agency, identity, and global Sikh modernity.

Keywords: Historiography, World War I, Colonial Military History, Religious Identity, *Miri-Piri*, *Chardi Kala*, Royal Flying Corps, Postcolonial Studies

1. Introduction

The beginning of the twentieth century saw major changes worldwide. These changes were marked by new technologies, widespread conflict and expanding empires. Against this backdrop, Sardar Hardit Singh Malik's life (Fig. 1) stands out as an important example of how colonial history, religious identity, and modernity came together (Malik, 2020; Hardit Malik, 2025; UK Punjab Heritage Association, 2016a). Malik was born into a well-known Sikh family in Punjab. He became one of the first Indian pilots in the British Royal Flying Corps (Dasgupta, 2023; Hardit Singh Malik, 2026; Peepul Tree World, 2022) and later worked as a diplomat and public servant (Hardit Singh Malik, n.d.). His story helps us understand how people from colonized societies participated in imperial institutions while maintaining their own religious and cultural identities.

Malik's importance goes beyond his achievements in the military. As a Sikh, he kept his religious identity (Singh,

2004; Britannica, 2024), especially by wearing his turban, which was difficult in the strict environment of the British military (Hardit Singh Malik, n.d.a). This acceptance without giving up his beliefs shows both his personal strength and the empire's changing attitudes.

Examining how modern life and faith shaped his choices is important to understanding his story. Historians have often overlooked Malik's role in World War I (Patel, 2018), as colonial histories usually focused on Europeans and left out Indian soldiers and officers. Currently, more research and popular histories have started to highlight these forgotten stories. Such attempts place people like Malik in a broader global context (Barker, 2022; Mitchell, 2021; The Print, 2022).

The historical and theological analysis taken up in this study provides a fuller picture of Malik's life and times. This investigation draws on original accounts, biographies, and recent scholarly works to examine the continuation



Figure 1. Hardit Singh Malik in the uniform of the Flying Corps, c.1916 © Courtesy of Peter Bance Collection

of Malik's legacy. His story highlights the complex ties between faith, identity, and history. Because of this, he is still an important figure in Sikh studies and world history (Barker, 2023).

2. Research Methodology

This study takes a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach that brings together historiographical analysis and theological interpretation. It draws on both primary and secondary sources, such as biographical accounts and historical records. The materials include wartime archives, commemorative accounts, and recent journalistic reinterpretations. Together, these sources offer a well-rounded view of Malik's life and legacy.

The historiographical analysis looks at how Malik has been represented in different contexts and time periods. It examines colonial-era accounts to understand how Indian involvement in imperial military structures was portrayed. The study also reviews postcolonial and contemporary sources that aim to reclaim and reinterpret these histories. By comparing these sources, the analysis highlights biases, gaps, and changing viewpoints.

The theological investigation of the study draws on Sikh scriptural principles and ethical ideas, such as *seva* (selfless service), *miri-piri* (temporal-spiritual sovereignty), identity preservation, *chardi kala* (resilient optimism), and *dharma* (righteous duty) (Singh, 2019; Dhillon, 2021; Singh, 2023; Lal & Singh, 2025). These concepts help explain Malik's actions, especially his commitment to maintaining Sikh articles of faith while serving in a colonial military setting.

To identify common themes, such as identity, service, resistance, and representation, this study makes use of thematic coding. Several historiographical and critical theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Michel Foucault, Ranajit Guha, Paul Ricoeur, Edward

W. Said, and Hayden White, whose frameworks can be combined with theological analysis to produce a theological-historiographical study, has been selected for current analysis. By bringing together theological and historiographical perspectives, it provides a fuller understanding of Malik's life that goes beyond standard biographical analysis. This methodology maintains the research's rigour and relevance. It also helps uncover the broader significance of Malik's experiences.

3. Literature Review

The literature on Hardit Singh Malik spans historical archives, military histories, and contemporary reinterpretations. Early references to Malik are primarily found within British military records. Therein, he is noted as one of the first Indian aviators in the Royal Flying Corps (Barker, 2023; Dye, 2022). These accounts, though they acknowledge his achievements, often lack depth in their exploration of his cultural and religious identity. It reflects general colonial tendencies to homogenize non-European actors.

Later historical works on Indian participation in World War I have gradually expanded the scope of analysis. These highlight the contributions of Indian soldiers and officers. However, Malik's narrative remains relatively underexplored compared to infantry experiences. This gap underscores the need for focused studies examining individual figures in specialized domains, such as aviation (Royal British Legion, 2022; Nijhawan, 2016).

Current sources, including journalistic accounts and digital archives, have played an important role in reviving interest in Malik's life. These documents emphasize his pioneering role as a Sikh pilot and his insistence on wearing a turban. Thereby, framing him as a symbol of cultural resilience. Such portrayals align with broader efforts to decolonize history and recognize diverse contributions to global events (Malik, 2020).

From a theological perspective, scholarship is limited in its explicit connection of Sikh principles to historical figures like Malik. However, many studies on Sikh ethics and identity provide a useful framework for analysis. Concepts such as *seva*, *chardi kala*, *miri-piri* and *dharma* offer insights into how Sikh individuals navigate worldly responsibilities while maintaining spiritual integrity (Singh, 2021; Sidhu, 2025; Singh, 2019a; Singh, n.d.).

Commemorative narratives add another aspect to the literature. These provide personal and community perspectives on Malik's legacy. Such sources often highlight his role as a trailblazer and a global representative of Sikh values (Hardit Singh Malik, 2016; Malik, 2020).

In a nutshell, the literature exhibits a fragmented yet evolving understanding of Malik's life. While early depictions are constrained by colonial frameworks, current interpretations offer more nuanced perspectives. This study builds upon these developments, integrating theological analysis to enrich the historiographical discourse.

4. Results

The previous study sets the stage for understanding Sardar Hardit Singh Malik's life and legacy in a wider historical and theological context. Building on this, the results section brings together key findings from the study of archives, historical writings, and texts. These findings shed light on Malik's personal experiences and on the complex ways in which agency, identity, and historical representation interact in a colonial setting. By examining his life from multiple angles, this study goes beyond a simple biography. It aims to deepen understanding of how personal faith, involvement in institutions, and the way stories are told all connect. The next sections focus on three main aspects of Malik's life: the importance of his Sikh identity and faith, his agency shown through military service, and how historians have portrayed his contributions over time. Together, these aspects provide a more detailed view of Malik as both a historical figure and a figure whose story has been interpreted in different ways.

4.1 Identity and Faith

The analysis reveals that Malik's Sikh identity (Figure 2) was not a peripheral attribute but a defining force shaping his personal ethos and public actions. His insistence on wearing a turban while serving in the Royal Flying Corps represents a deeply symbolic act grounded in Sikh religious doctrine. Within Sikhism, the maintenance of *kesh* (unshorn hair) and the wearing of a turban are not merely cultural markers but sacred obligations that reflect discipline, dignity, and spiritual sovereignty (Singh, 2025a; Singh, 2017; The Sikh Rehat Maryada, 1994). Malik's refusal to abandon these principles, even under institutional pressure, underscores a profound commitment to faith that transcended professional convenience.

This act of resistance must be understood within the broader dynamics of colonial modernity, where non-European identities were often suppressed or reshaped to conform to imperial norms. Malik's persistence ultimately compelled the British military establishment to accommodate his religious practice, thereby marking a subtle yet significant shift in institutional attitudes. This moment can be interpreted as a form of negotiated inclusion, where the assertion of religious identity

created space for pluralism within an otherwise rigid system.

Furthermore, Malik's identity as a Sikh informed his moral framework and sense of duty. Sikh teachings emphasize *seva* (selfless service), *sarbat da bhala* (welfare of all), and ethical responsibility in worldly engagement (SGGS, 1983; Kaur, 2022). These principles appear to have guided Malik's approach to both his military career and later diplomatic roles. His life illustrates how religious identity can function as a source of resilience and ethical clarity, particularly in environments characterized by cultural dislocation and power asymmetry.

Importantly, Malik's experience also reflects the broader struggle of colonized individuals seeking to engage with modern institutions without relinquishing their cultural and spiritual heritage. His ability to integrate faith with professional life challenges reductive binaries between tradition and modernity. Instead, it demonstrates that religious identity can coexist with, and even enrich, participation in global, secular domains. In this sense, Malik emerges not only as a figure of personal conviction but also as a representative of a wider historical negotiation between faith and modern institutional life.

4.2 Military Service and Agency

Malik's military service during World War I exemplifies individual agency exercised within the constraints of a colonial framework. As one of the first



Figure 2. 2nd Lieutenant Hardit Singh Malik proudly wears his RFC 'wings' awarded on completion of his flying training; photographed in front of Balliol College, 1917.

Indians to serve as a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps, he entered a highly specialized and technologically advanced field that was, at the time, dominated by Europeans (Skitt, 2025; Royal British Legion, 2022; UK Punjab Heritage Association, 2016b). His participation in early military aviation highlights both his personal ambition and his willingness to engage with emerging modern technologies, positioning him at the intersection of colonial subordination and global innovation.

Rather than viewing Malik's service solely as an expression of loyalty to the British Empire, it is more analytically productive to interpret it as a strategic engagement with structures of power. For many colonized individuals, participation in imperial institutions offered pathways to recognition, skill acquisition, and social mobility. Malik's achievements in aviation can thus be seen as part of a broader pattern in which Indians sought to assert competence and equality within domains that had historically excluded them.

At the same time, his role was not devoid of ethical complexity. Serving in a colonial military during a global conflict raises questions about complicity and resistance. However, when viewed through the Sikh concept of dharma (Nesbitt, 2016; Lal & Singh, 2025), which emphasizes righteous action, courage, and duty, Malik's service can be understood as an effort to fulfill a moral obligation within the circumstances available to him. Sikh tradition has long valorized the saint-soldier ideal (Dahiya, 2015; Hegarty, 2023), wherein martial engagement is aligned with ethical purpose rather than mere aggression.

Moreover, Malik's presence within the Royal Flying Corps subtly disrupted prevailing racial hierarchies. His competence and professionalism challenged stereotypes about the capabilities of colonized subjects,

thereby contributing to a gradual reconfiguration of perceptions within imperial institutions (Figure 3). In this regard, his military career served both as a means of personal advancement and as a symbolic representation.

Ultimately, Malik's service exemplifies how agency can be exercised even within unequal power structures. His life demonstrates that colonized individuals were not merely passive participants in imperial history but active agents who navigated, negotiated, and at times reshaped the systems in which they operated. This perspective invites a more nuanced understanding of colonial military participation, one that acknowledges both constraint and possibility.

4.3 Historiographical Representation

The historiographical analysis of Malik's life reveals a complex pattern of omission, recovery, and reinterpretation that reflects broader dynamics in the writing of colonial history. Early historical accounts, particularly those produced within imperial frameworks, tend to marginalize figures like Malik, privileging European actors and narratives. This selective representation is indicative of a broader epistemological bias in colonial historiography, in which the contributions of non-European individuals are often minimized or rendered invisible (Dye, 2022).

Such omissions are not merely accidental but are embedded within structures of knowledge production that prioritize imperial perspectives. In this context, Malik's achievements as a pioneering aviator and his assertion of religious identity were either overlooked or treated as peripheral details. This marginalization contributes to a distorted understanding of history, one that underrepresents the diversity and agency of colonized peoples (Patel, 2018).

In contrast, contemporary historiographical efforts have sought to recover and re-center Malik's legacy. Scholars and public historians increasingly emphasize his role as a trailblazer in aviation and as a figure of cultural resilience (Hardit Singh Malik, n.d.). These reinterpretations align with broader movements to decolonize history by incorporating marginalized voices and challenging Eurocentric narratives. By foregrounding Malik's experiences, such accounts attempt to construct a more inclusive and representative historical record.

However, this recovery process is not without its challenges. There is a tendency in some contemporary narratives to elevate Malik into a symbolic figure, emphasizing his achievements in ways that may oversimplify the complexities of his life. This can result in a form of retrospective idealization, where nuance

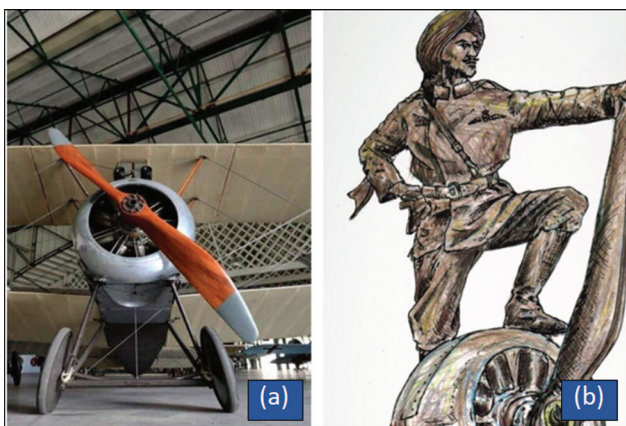


Figure 3. (a) An early single-engine military or reconnaissance airplane from the period of World War I. (b) A statue of a Sikh person wearing a turban and military-style attire, a tribute to pioneering Indian or Sikh aviators from the World War I era

is sacrificed for the sake of narrative coherence or inspirational value.

The findings, therefore, underscore the need for a balanced historiographical approach (Malik, 2020; Skitt, 2025). Such an approach would recognize Malik's significant contributions while also situating them within the broader socio-political and cultural contexts of his time. It would avoid both marginalization and romanticization, instead presenting Malik as a multifaceted individual navigating a complex historical landscape. In doing so, historiography can move closer to a more accurate and ethically responsible representation of the past.

5. Discussion of Results

The discussion of the results moves beyond descriptive interpretation to a more critical engagement with the deeper meanings embedded in Hardit Singh Malik's life and experiences. While the preceding sections established key patterns related to identity, agency, and colonial interaction, this section seeks to interpret these findings through both theological and historiographical lenses. Such an approach allows for a more layered understanding, situating the subject not only within historical processes but also within enduring frameworks of religious thought and scholarly interpretation (Figure 4). In particular, the discussion foregrounds how lived experience can serve as a site where doctrine is not merely preserved but actively embodied and rearticulated. The following subsections therefore explore three interrelated dimensions: first, The Histrographical and Critical Theorists: Framework and Analysis; second, the theological implications of Malik's actions within the Sikh tradition; and third, the historiographical reassessment of his legacy in light of evolving academic perspectives and methodological concerns.



Figure 4. Indian commemorative postage stamp issued in honour of Indian participation in the First World War, paying tribute to Sardar Hardit Singh Malik.

5.1 The Histrographical and Critical Theorists: Framework and Analysis

Bhabha's theory of hybridity and mimicry helps interpret Hardit Singh Malik as a Sikh negotiating multiple identities within the British Empire. Theologically, his steadfast adherence to Sikh principles amid colonial expectations demonstrates how religious identity remained resilient while engaging with imperial institutions, producing a complex yet authentic postcolonial self (Bhabha, 1994). Chakrabarty's critique of Eurocentric historiography enables Malik's life to be understood from indigenous Sikh intellectual traditions rather than colonial historical frameworks. His achievements illustrate how Sikh ethical values, spiritual discipline, and cultural agency challenge narratives that privilege European modernity as the sole measure of historical significance (Chakrabarty, 2000).

Foucault's concept of power and knowledge reveals how colonial institutions shaped representations of Hardit Singh Malik while simultaneously creating spaces for resistance. A theological reading highlights how Sikh principles of truth, justice, and moral courage empowered Malik to negotiate authority without compromising his religious identity or ethical convictions (Foucault, 1980). Guha's framework explains Malik's career within colonial structures where imperial dominance never achieved complete ideological control. His continued observance of Sikh identity demonstrates the enduring influence of Sikh theology, showing how religious commitment provided moral autonomy despite participation in British military and administrative institutions (Guha, 1998).

Ricoeur's reflections on memory and history illuminate how Malik's legacy has been remembered, interpreted, and occasionally overlooked. Theologically, Sikh remembrance (simran) reinforces ethical memory, encouraging historians to preserve not only factual achievements but also the spiritual values that guided Malik's public service and personal life (Ricoeur, 2004). Said's critique of Orientalism enables a reassessment of colonial portrayals of Hardit Singh Malik beyond exoticized representations of a Sikh officer. A theological perspective restores Malik's agency by emphasizing Sikh teachings on equality, dignity, and human freedom rather than viewing him through orientalist stereotypes constructed by imperial discourse (Said, 1979).

White's theory underscores that historical narratives are shaped by interpretation as much as by facts. Applying this insight to Malik's life encourages a theological–historiographical reading that integrates empirical evidence with Sikh ethical ideals, presenting his biography as a meaningful narrative of faith, leadership, resilience, and public service rather than a mere chronological record (White (1973).

Taken together, these theological–historiographical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for examining the life and legacy of Hardit Singh Malik. By integrating historical interpretation with Sikh theological principles, the study moves beyond a descriptive biography to explore how faith, identity, moral agency, and historical context shaped his personal and public life. This interdisciplinary approach offers a richer understanding of Malik's enduring significance within Sikh history, colonial India, and global historical discourse.

5.2 Theological Implications

The theological analysis of Sardar Hardit Singh Malik's life illustrates how Sikh principles can be actively embodied in complex and modern socio-political contexts. His experiences demonstrate that Sikh theology is not confined to doctrinal abstraction but is instead deeply rooted in praxis: lived, enacted, and continually negotiated across diverse circumstances. Central to this theological reading is the concept of *Miri-Piri*, which encapsulates the inseparability of spiritual devotion and temporal responsibility (Singh, 1996; Sidhu, 2025). Malik's participation in the British military, while maintaining an unwavering commitment to his Sikh identity, reflects this dual obligation (Hardit Singh Malik, n.d.a). Rather than perceiving these domains as contradictory, his life exemplifies their mutual reinforcement.

This synthesis is particularly significant in a colonial context, where religious identity was often subjected to pressures of conformity or marginalization. Malik's refusal to relinquish visible markers of Sikh identity, such as the turban, highlights the theological principle that spiritual discipline must remain intact regardless of external circumstances. In this regard, his actions resonate with the Sikh understanding of the body as a vessel for divine expression, in which outward form is intrinsically linked to inward faith.

Equally significant is the embodiment of *Chardi Kala* in Malik's life. Faced with institutional barriers and racial prejudice, his perseverance reflects a distinctly Sikh ethos of maintaining high spirits and moral courage even in adversity (Bhutani & Singh, 2023). This principle is not merely psychological resilience but a spiritually grounded orientation toward life, rooted in trust in the divine will (*hukam*) (Singh, 2025). Malik's ability to navigate exclusionary environments without succumbing to bitterness illustrates a profound internalization of this theological ideal.

Furthermore, his life challenges reductive narratives that position religious identity as an impediment to modernity or progress. Instead, Malik's example demonstrates that faith can serve as a source of strength,

ethical clarity, and adaptability. His engagement with global institutions, combined with steadfast adherence to Sikh values, underscores the universal applicability of Sikh teachings (Singh, 2021; Singh, 2019a). In this sense, his life becomes a site of theological reinterpretation, where tradition is neither diluted nor rigidly preserved but dynamically expressed.

Additionally, Malik's conduct reflects the Sikh emphasis on *seva* (selfless service) and *sarbat da bhala* (welfare of all) (Singh, 2025). His contributions to military and diplomatic spheres can be viewed not merely as personal achievements but as expressions of a broader ethical commitment to collective well-being. This aligns with the Sikh vision of an engaged spirituality, where devotion is inseparable from social responsibility (Singh, 2019).

In a nutshell, the theological implications of Malik's life affirm the vitality and relevance of Sikh principles in contemporary contexts. His lived example provides a framework for understanding how faith can guide action, sustain identity, and inspire resilience in the face of historical challenges.

5.3 Historiographical Reassessment

The historiographical reassessment of Sardar Hardit Singh Malik's life reflects broader shifts in the writing and interpretation of colonial and postcolonial histories. Earlier accounts, often shaped by imperial perspectives, tended to marginalize or selectively represent figures like Malik, emphasizing their roles within colonial systems while downplaying the complexities of their identities and contributions (Patel, 2018). Such narratives frequently framed colonial subjects in reductive terms, either as loyal functionaries of the empire or as peripheral actors lacking historical agency.

Contemporary scholarship, however, has increasingly moved toward more nuanced and inclusive approaches. Malik's life is now being re-examined through lenses that foreground hybridity, agency, and transnational experience. This shift aligns with developments in postcolonial historiography, which seek to recover marginalized voices and interrogate the epistemological assumptions underlying earlier historical accounts (Skitt, 2025; Barker, 2022). By situating Malik within both Sikh and global contexts, historians are better able to appreciate the multidimensional nature of his identity.

One significant aspect of this reassessment is the recognition of Malik as an active agent who navigated and, at times, subtly resisted colonial structures. Rather than viewing his participation in imperial institutions as mere complicity, recent interpretations highlight the strategic dimensions of his engagement. His success within these

systems is understood not simply as assimilation but as a form of negotiated presence, wherein cultural and religious identity was preserved and asserted (Bhutani & Singh, 2023).

At the same time, historiographical analysis must remain attentive to the risks of retrospective idealization. There is a tendency in some contemporary narratives to celebrate figures like Malik as unambiguous heroes, thereby overlooking the ambiguities and tensions inherent in their experiences. A critical approach requires careful examination of primary sources, contextual awareness, and sensitivity to the limitations of available evidence. This ensures that historical representation remains grounded and avoids the pitfalls of romanticization.

Moreover, the reassessment of Malik's life contributes to broader discussions about representation and diversity in historical writing. It underscores the importance of including non-Western perspectives and recognizing the contributions of individuals who operated across cultural boundaries. In doing so, it challenges dominant historiographical frameworks and encourages a more pluralistic understanding of the past.

Finally, Malik's evolving historical portrayal reflects shifting societal values, particularly regarding multiculturalism and identity. As contemporary societies grapple with questions of inclusion and belonging, historical figures like Malik acquire renewed relevance. Their stories offer insights into the possibilities of coexistence and the negotiation of difference within complex social systems.

Thus, the historiographical reassessment of Malik's life not only enriches our understanding of his individual legacy but also exemplifies the dynamic nature of historical inquiry itself. It highlights the need for continual re-evaluation, critical engagement, and openness to diverse perspectives in the writing of history.

5.4 Limitations of the Research Study

This research methodology, followed in this study, has some limitations, such as a qualitative, interpretive design may introduce researcher subjectivity, particularly in theological readings of historical actions. Besides, reliance on colonial and postcolonial archives risks reproducing existing biases and gaps in the record. Moreover, source selection from biographies and journalistic reinterpretations may lead to uneven reliability of the evidence. Furthermore, the interdisciplinary integration of historiography and theology can blur analytical boundaries, increasing the risk of anachronistic interpretations. Similarly, thematic coding, while useful, is inherently interpretive and may vary across researchers, affecting consistency. Finally, the absence of quantitative

triangulation limits generalisability, making the findings more context-specific than broadly applicable to wider historical or comparative studies.

6. Conclusions

The theological–historiographical analysis of Hardit Singh Malik's life offers a nuanced understanding of his contributions and legacy. As a pioneering aviator and diplomat, Malik navigated the complexities of colonial structures while maintaining a strong sense of religious identity. His life exemplifies the dynamic interplay between faith, modernity, and historical context.

The study highlights the importance of integrating theological perspectives into historical analysis, providing deeper insights into the motivations and values that shape individual actions. Malik's adherence to Sikh principles, particularly in maintaining his identity within a colonial military framework, underscores the enduring relevance of religious ethics in modern life.

From a historiographical standpoint, the research reveals both the limitations of colonial narratives and the potential of contemporary scholarship to recover marginalized histories. Malik's story serves as a reminder of the need for inclusive and critical approaches to historical writing.

Ultimately, Malik's legacy extends beyond his individual achievements, representing the broader contributions of Sikh individuals to global history. His life challenges simplistic narratives of colonization, demonstrating the agency and resilience of those who navigated its complexities. By examining his life through both theological and historiographical lenses, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of his significance and enduring impact.

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for editorial purposes, including language refinement, grammar correction, stylistic improvement, and the enhancement of clarity and coherence. These tools were not used to generate the research ideas, theoretical framework, analysis, interpretation, arguments, or conclusions presented in the manuscript. All intellectual content, conceptual development, methodological decisions, and scholarly interpretations remain the sole responsibility of the author.

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Appendix A

Sardar Hardit Singh Malik (1894–1985): Pioneer Aviator, Statesman, and Global Diplomat

Hardit Singh Malik stands as one of the most remarkable Indian figures of the early twentieth century: a man who bridged the worlds of war, sport, and diplomacy with uncommon distinction (Hardit Singh Malik, n.d.). Born on 23 November 1894 in Rawalpindi (then part of British India), Malik hailed from a prominent Punjabi family. Educated in England from a young age, he attended Eastbourne College before studying history at Balliol College, Oxford, where he graduated in 1915 and earned distinction in golf (Malik, 2020).

Early Promise: Scholar, Sportsman, and Cricketer

While at Oxford and beyond, Malik demonstrated notable athletic ability. He played first-class cricket for Sussex and Oxford University, later participating in tournaments in India. Across 18 matches, he scored over 600 runs, including a century, reflecting both discipline and competitive spirit: traits that would later define his wartime service and public career (Hardit Malik, 2025).

Breaking Barriers in the First World War

Malik's most enduring legacy began during the First World War, when he became one of the first Indians to serve as a pilot (Figure 1) in the Royal Flying Corps (Barker, 2022). Initially denied entry, he persisted, serving first with the French Red Cross and later gaining acceptance into the RFC through the intervention of his Oxford mentor.

Commissioned in April 1917, Malik flew combat missions over the Western Front and Italy, piloting aircraft such as the Sopwith Camel (Barker, 2023). As an observant Sikh, he wore a specially adapted helmet over his turban, a unique sight that earned him the nickname "Flying Hobgoblin." His service was marked by courage and resilience: he was credited with two aerial victories (though he claimed more) and survived a near-fatal crash after being shot down in combat (Hardit Singh Malik, n.d.a). Despite injuries and the challenges of



Figure 1. Sardar Hardit Singh Malik standing beside an early aircraft, dating from the period of World War I

discrimination, he remained one of the very few Indian pilots to serve in active combat during the war.

From War to Governance

After the war, Malik briefly considered continuing in the Royal Air Force but chose instead to join the Indian Civil Service in 1922. His administrative career progressed steadily, with postings in Punjab and later in international trade roles (Hardit Singh Malik, n.d.). During the 1930s, he served as Trade Commissioner in London, Hamburg, and North America, gaining experience in economic diplomacy.

Notably, Malik (Figure 2) contributed to the early development of Indian military aviation. As one of the few Indian veterans of aerial combat, he advised the Sandhurst Committee, helping shape the selection of the first Indian officer cadets for pilot training: an initiative that would eventually lead to the formation of the Indian Air Force.

Malik was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in January 1938 and was appointed a Companion of the Order of the Indian Empire (CIE) in June 1941. In April 1944, Malik became the Prime Minister (dewan) of the powerful salute principality of Patiala, under Maharaja Yadavindra Singh, serving until Indian independence in 1947 (Hardit Malik, 2025).

Diplomatic Leadership in a Changing World

Following India's independence, Malik transitioned seamlessly into the newly formed Indian Foreign Service. In 1949, he was appointed India's first High Commissioner

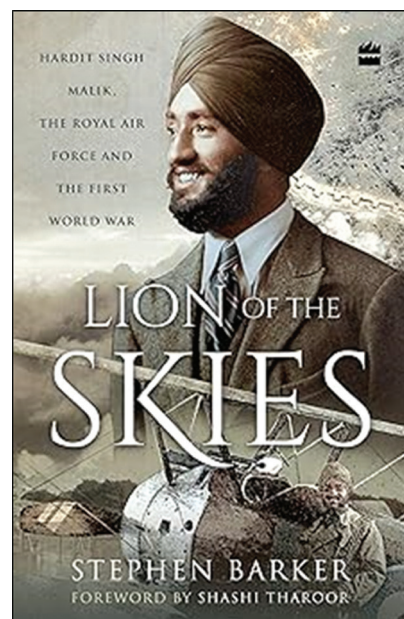


Figure 2. Cover page of the biography of Hardit Singh Malik, authored by Stephen Barker

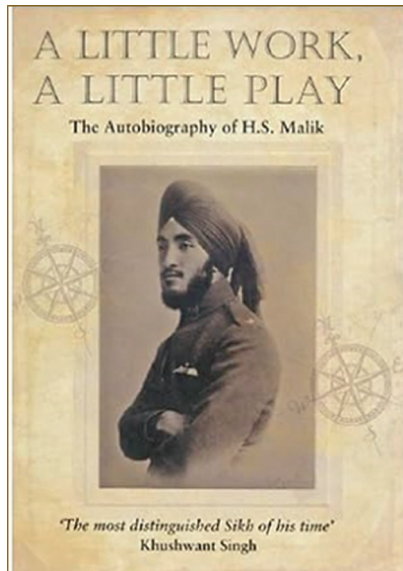


Figure 3. Cover page of the autobiography of H. S. Malik by a celebrated author, Khushwant Singh

to Canada, marking a significant milestone in Indo-Canadian relations. He later served as Ambassador to France during a critical period that included the peaceful integration of French-held territories such as Pondicherry into India (Malik, 2020).

His diplomatic excellence earned him international recognition, including one of France's highest honours,

the Legion of Honour, awarded by the President of France, René Coty.

Later Years and Legacy

Malik retired in 1957 but remained active well into his later years. In recognition of his pioneering contributions to aviation, he was granted the honorary rank of Group Captain in the Indian Air Force in 1975. He passed away in New Delhi on 31 October 1985 at the age of 90.

His life story, later captured in his memoir *A Little Work, A Little Play*, (Figure 3), offers a rare glimpse into a transformative era of history. From the battlefields of Europe to the diplomatic corridors of the postcolonial world, Hardit Singh Malik's journey reflects courage, adaptability, and a steadfast commitment to public service.

Conclusion

Sardar Hardit Singh Malik remains a trailblazer in multiple domains: a pioneering aviator who defied racial barriers, a capable civil servant, and a distinguished diplomat who helped shape India's global presence. His life is not merely a biography of achievements, but a testament to perseverance and vision in the face of profound historical change.

Biographical Statement of Author(s)

Devinder Pal Singh, born in October 1956, received his M.Sc. (Physics) degree from Panjab University, Chandigarh, India, in 1978. He was awarded a Ph.D. by Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, India, in 1986. In 2000, he undertook a diploma course in Sikhism from Sikh Missionary College, Ludhiana, Punjab, India.



He served the Punjab Education Department from 1978 to 2008 and retired as an Associate Professor. Since his retirement, he has been working as an Educational Consultant to various Secondary Institutions in Canada. He also served as the Director of the Center for Understanding Sikhism⁷ in Mississauga, Ontario, Canada, from 2019 to 2026.

An Indo-Canadian scientist, educator, author, Sikh theologian and a TV host, Dr. Singh has published about 100 research papers in Acoustics (Physics). Besides, he has

published 24 books and about 1,000 general articles on topics related to Science, Environment, and Sikh theology. He is an Editorial Advisory Board Member for prominent journals, including *The Sikh Review* (Kolkata, India) and *Studies in Sikhism and Comparative Religion* (New Delhi, India). Currently, he serves as a Professor of Religious Studies at the Arihanta Institute in San Jose, California, USA. Explore his profile here.

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