

BECOMING MEN IN A MODERN CITY: MASCULINITY, MIGRATION  
AND GLOBALIZATION IN NORTH INDIA

By

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Submitted to the

Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences

of American University

in Partial Fulfillment of

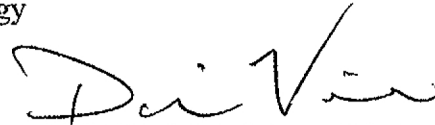
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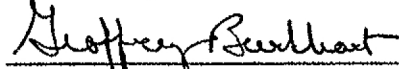
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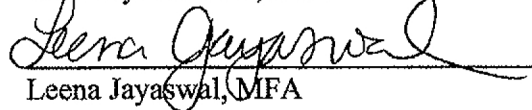
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August 15, 2012

Date

2012

American University

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## DEDICATION

To my dear friend Abhishek Sharma

and

to Chandigarh, the city I grew up loving,  
where I always find myself at home.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the formation of contemporary Punjabi Sikh masculinity in North India. Through fifteen months of fieldwork carried out in Chandigarh, the capital city of Punjab, I look at how young Punjabi men belonging to landowning Jat Sikh families develop notions of masculinity and migration. In addition to the traditional gender norm Punjabi men are expected to follow such as getting an arranged marriage, having kids, and supporting their families, most of the men I interviewed characterized successful masculinity as the ability to migrate abroad and become transnational citizens.

Over the last three decades the trend towards transnational migration has grown exponentially among Punjabi Jats. Punjabi families view migration as the quickest path to financial prosperity and middle class status. Countries with large concentrations of diasporic communities such as Canada, the United State, United Kingdom and Australia often top the list of preferred destinations for Punjabi migrants. In addition to seeking better educational and employment opportunities abroad, the Punjabi Sikh desire to leave India is partly rooted in ongoing economic and political marginalization experienced by the Punjabi Sikh community within India.



In this dissertation, I chronicle the experiences of young Punjabi men who give up farming and move to Chandigarh to gain the language and technical training necessary to apply for a study abroad as well as skilled worker visas. Their families were actively involved in making the decision send their sons abroad, at times selling parts of their land to finance HIS educational training and to access other migration related services in Chandigarh. The family supports their son's aspirations in hopes of realizing the benefits later of transnational migration through remittances and migration opportunities for other family members.

Chandigarh, a city known for its modernist architecture and its postcolonial legacy, is perceived by the young men as a knowledge society where they can learn English and other technical skills that would help enhance their migration opportunities. The city represented a temporary destination in these men's over all journeys out of India. My research examined the time they spent in Chandigarh, ranging anywhere from four months to three years. I started by exploring how the young men interact with the unfamiliar landscape of the modernist city.

For most of these men, the move to Chandigarh was their first time living away from their families. This transition from the village to city offered new opportunities for fraternal bonding, exploring their sexualities and developing a sense of masculine selfhood. These men often spent their free time hanging out in the Chandigarh main shopping plaza and watching Punjabi films and idolizing their favorite Punjabi heroes. I looked at how the men underwent a series of coming of age rituals as part of the overall process of becoming a man. I discovered that for most of the young men, the reason their

definition of successful masculinity hinged on being able to migrate abroad was because it allowed them the type of independence and financial success that they felt they could not attain by staying in India.

In defining contemporary notions of successful Punjabi masculinity as characterized through mobility and transnational migration, this dissertation also offers a more nuanced understanding of gender relations in migration and migration related processes. I conclude by arguing that access to transnational mobility provides Punjabi Jat men with disproportionate amount of power in Punjabi society, as these men enjoy caste and gender-based privileges that include being able to move between rural, urban and transnational spaces in ways that are largely foreclosed to women.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to begin my thanking all my family, friends and colleagues for their ongoing encouragement and support throughout my doctoral studies. To my advisor Dr. David Vine I want to say thank you for believing in me and for your consistent guidance, wisdom, feedback and support both personally and professionally. To Dr. Geoffrey Burkhardt and Professor Leena Jayaswal, thank you for your direction, advice and support throughout the process of researching and writing this dissertation. I also want to thank Dr. Debarati Sen for your feedback and guidance. To my dad, thank you for your invaluable advice and support. To my mom, thank you for your encouragement and for being such powerful role model.

I would like to thank the following individuals for their guidance and feedback throughout the research process and on various drafts of this dissertation: Dr. William Leap, Dr. Inderpal Grewal, Dr. Doris Jakobsh, Dr. Nicola Mooney, Dr. Margaret Walton-Roberts, Dr. Radhika Chopra, Prof. Shohini Ghosh, Dr. Shalina Mehta, Dr. Kamool Abbi, Dr. Rajinder Dudrah, Dr. Virinder Kalra, Dr. Brett Williams and Dr. Cymene Howe. I also want to thank Point Foundation and my mentor Jeff Pluth for supporting me throughout my doctoral studies. I would like to thank Jamia Millia Islamia University's AJK Mass Communication research center in New Delhi for supporting the research for Chapter 5 of this dissertation and for giving me access to their library and archival materials.

This research would not have been possible without the help of following individuals: Gaurav Sangwan, Robb Selander, Karamjeet Singh Brar, Sumit Baudh,

Gaurav Sogi, Satinderjeet Singh and Ramal Sood. Thank you to my dear friends Michelle Marzullo, Conner Krone, Dylan Kerrigan and Anndell Quintero for reading my rough drafts and giving me valuable feedback. Thank you to my brother Sunny Gill for your support throughout the writing phase of this dissertation. To my partner Nick Geboy, thank you for your love, patience and encouragement while I undertook the insurmountable task of writing a dissertation. I also want to thank my dear friend Abhishek Sharma with whom I rediscover Chandigarh and to whom I dedicate this ethnography. Thank you for being my companion throughout fieldwork. I will always remember our lengthy discussions about Chandigarh during our strolls through Sector 17.

Above all, I want to thank all of my research participants and their family members. Thank for sharing your stories, memories and experiences.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Border Crossings

Traveling down the Grand Trunk Road, hundreds of trucks carry various agricultural goods cross the Wagha border daily. The only on-land border crossing between India and Pakistan, Wagha border lies 30 kilometers outside of Amritsar city, the cultural hub of Punjab where the Sikhs' holiest shrine, the Golden Temple, is located. Upon crossing the border and entering India, truck drivers are greeted with a faded signboard that reads: "Welcome to Punjab." The signboard also features a collage of colorful hand-painted images including a drawing of a turbaned Sikh man dressed in festive bhangra (Punjabi folkdance) attire. He is holding a *tumbi*, a string instrument that looks like a miniature ukulele. Next to him is an image of a woman wearing *salwar kameez*, knee length tunic and baggy pants, a traditional Punjabi outfit worn by women all over north India. She is churning milk into butter. Around the two figures are drawings of livestock, of various crops grow in Punjab and of a farmer driving a tractor.

These images cultivate a sense of cultural identity that is entrenched in agrarian life where men farm their land while women spend their days attending to domestic work. Juxtaposed against this collage of colorful images, and on the right side of the signboard, are religious symbols of the four major religions in North India, the Sikh *Ik Omkar*, the Hindu *Om*, the Islamic crescent moon and five-rayed star, and the Christian cross. The symbols are interwoven into one image. The text in the center reads (in

Punjabi): “Inherited from gurus, mystics, saints, and martyrs, the luscious green landscape of Punjab welcomes you.” This assembly of text and images projects a multifaceted regional identity that is entrenched in complex ethnic and religious histories, yet it is also aligned with the post-independence discourse of modern nation building and the first Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru's vision for the country to be a secular democracy.

Even though the greeting on the signboard implies that Punjab begins at this border, the signboard is more accurately an indicator of where one version of Punjab ends and another begins. During the 1947 Partition of British India and the princely states, the greater Punjab region was split into two halves, divided into the modern-day nations of India and Pakistan: West Punjab (officially referred to as the Punjab province of Pakistan), and East Punjab (officially referred to as the Indian State of Punjab). Though this border neatly separates the East Punjab from West Punjab, contemporary Punjabi identity remains a muddled mixture of cultures from both sides of the border, as well as the memories of historical events, past grievances, conflicting belief systems, shared traditions and humanity, the essence of which this signboard claims to capture.



1: Signboard at the Wagha Border in Punjab, India (2009 photo by author)

Given the complex histories of the region and its inhabitants, this dissertation explores the formation of contemporary Punjabi Sikh masculinity in India. Through fifteen month long ethnographic research I conducted in Chandigarh, the capital city of East Punjab (referred to hereafter as the State of Punjab or simply as Punjab), I look at how young Punjabi men who belonging to the landowning Jat Sikh families develop notions of masculinity and learn how to be men. In addition to traditional norms society often expects men to follow such as getting a job, getting married and having a family, most of the young men I met and interviewed characterized *kaamyab insaan* (successful men) as being able to move across national borders, migrating abroad and becoming transnational citizens.

Large scale transnational movement and migration from Punjab dates back to the colonial period during which many non-landowning men left Punjab and Indian subcontinent to work laborers abroad. However as the region is transformed through the changes accompanying the late 20<sup>th</sup> and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century globalization, which facilitates the movement of people, images and capital across national borders, the trend towards migration has grown exponentially among landowning Punjabis as well. Upper caste Jat families in Punjab see transnational migration as the quickest path to middle class status for their families often defined through material consumption associated with urban modern India (Mooney 2011). Countries in Europe and North America as well as Australia are often on the top of list of preferred destinations as regions with large concentrations of diasporic communities. Similar to other South Asian migrants from the subcontinent, Punjabi migrants overwhelmingly pursue skilled worker visas, study visas and transnational family networks to access migration circuits. However unlike the non-Sikhs migrating out of India for educational or professional opportunities, among the young Punjabi Sikh men the desire to leave India is also partly rooted in the ongoing sense of ethnic, economic and political marginalization harbored by the Punjabi Sikh community in India (Chopra 2010, Mooney 2011).

This sense of marginalization, which I explore later in this chapter, is especially salient among rural landowning Punjabis and their families who continue to suffer under the neo-liberal policies of current Indian government. While they belong to a long lineage of landowners and framers, over the last decade the young Punjabi men whose

experiences I chronicle in this dissertation have increasingly given up farming to move to Chandigarh to gain the language and technical training necessary to apply for a study or work visa abroad. In most cases, Punjabi families are actively involved in making this decision to send their sons abroad, often selling parts of their land to finance their son's education in Chandigarh and migration abroad, with the hopes of realizing the benefits of moving abroad through remittances and further migration opportunities for other family members. Chandigarh, a city known for its modernist architecture is unlike any other Indian city, is perceived by Punjabi families as a knowledge society where the men can learn English and other technical skills that would make them attractive candidates for a foreign visa. Chandigarh serves as a temporary destination or a pit stop on the men's journeys out of India.

My research looks at the time they spend in Chandigarh ranging anywhere from four months to two years. Even though their move to Chandigarh is motivated by the ultimate goal of migrating abroad, migration itself is not the central focus of this dissertation. Instead I treat migration as a distant dream motivating the young men's actions. This dissertation looks at how the young men prepare themselves to undergo this contemporary rite of passage into transnational manhood.

I begin by exploring how young men interact with the foreign and unfamiliar landscape of the modernist city. For most of these men, the move to Chandigarh is the first time living away from their families and villages. Through interviews and long-term participant observation, I explore how the transition from the village to the city offers

new opportunities for fraternal bonding, exploration of sexualities and developing a sense of masculine selfhood. The young men classify these experiences through series of unofficial coming of age rituals that are part of the overall process of “banda ban jaana” (becoming a man). They spend their days attending private coaching institutes, hanging out in the city’s main shopping plaza and watching Punjabi movies and idolizing their favorite Punjabi heroes, who are often seen as embodying the type of successful lives that they young Punjabi men desire for themselves. Despite their newfound autonomy, their lives in Chandigarh are still a rehearsal for the upcoming financial and personal independence that living abroad is perceived to offer. While in Chandigarh they have to rely on their families for financial support, to pay for housing, food and tuition fees as their traditional upper-caste status limits them from taking on working class jobs within India.

The central question this dissertation explores is how dominant masculinity is defined among Punjabi Sikh men. How has the traditional definition of Punjabi masculinity, which in the past was often classified through glorifying rural and agrarian experiences, changed with the increasing trend towards transnational migration and the desire for a life defined by middle class modernity and consumption? Lastly, what are the privileges Punjabi Jat Sikh men enjoy, from which Punjabi women and men from non-Jat castes are excluded?

### Theorizing Masculinities

Masculinity is socially constructed within specific historical and cultural contexts of gender relations and representations. Even though there exists a body of ethnographic literature focusing on and privileging men's experiences over women's experiences,<sup>1</sup> it is only recently that anthropologists and sociologists have shifted their attention to critical explorations of men's lives and masculinity (Adams and Savran 2002, Cornwell and Lindisfarne 1994, Gutmann 2007 [1996], Kimmel 2008, Lancaster 1992, Pascoe 2007). Anthropologist Matthew Gutmann in his essay "Trafficking in Men: the Anthropology of Masculinity" explains, "there are four distinct ways that anthropologists define and use the concept of masculinity and the related notions of male identity, manhood, manliness and men's roles" (1996:386). There is the general interest in masculinity looking broadly at "anything men think and do," as opposed to the more nuanced approach that Gutmann advocates in his research on Central American masculinities where he looks at what "men think and do to be men" (2007 [1996]). Gutmann points out that among anthropologists studying masculinity there seems to be a tendency to quantify masculinity by focusing primarily on how "some men are inherently or by ascription considered 'more manly' than other men" (1997:386). Lastly, there seems to be the tendency among the anthropologists studying masculinities to, notes Gutmann, "emphasize the general and central importance of male-female relations, so that masculinity is considered anything that women are not" (1997:386).

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<sup>1</sup> See Behar and Gordon's (1995) critique of anthropology and discussion of feminist approaches to ethnography.



While defining masculinity simply as “what men think and do” runs the risk of reproducing the reductive notion that gendered behavior is biologically determined, fixed into dominant categories of male and female (Fausto-Sterling 1995, Martin 1991), I follow Gutmann (2007 [1996]) in my approach to understanding masculinities, by focusing specifically on what young Punjabi men say and do to enact and affirm their masculinities. Approaching masculinity as something that these men were not simply born with but acquired through their lives, along with the power and privileges attached to being a man in India, allows us to gain a [more] complex understanding of masculinity as a social category that often operates in tandem with other social categories of difference such as caste, ethnicity, race and sexuality.

### Masculinity as a Social Status

Becoming a man can be thought of as trying to achieve a certain dominant status of manhood (Gilmore 1990), which for many young Punjabi men operates as a powerful motivator that factors in their and their family’s decisions, not only of migration but also of education, work and marriage. Anthropologists and sociologists studying masculinity have called the embodiment of that dominant status “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 1995, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, Gutmann 2007 [1997], Hearn 2004, Pascoe 2007). Building on Gramsci’s notion of “hegemony” (1929 – 35:333) where hegemony speaks to “the dominant ideas and practices that are so pervasive as to constitute common sense for member of society, and through which elites gain the popular consent necessary for continued rule,” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992), hegemonic masculinity is

understood as the type of practices enacted and embodied by men who are on the top of the social hierarchy (Gutmann 2007 [1996]:19).

The hegemony of a select group of men ensures their power and control over broader society, often at the cost of subjugating women and other sexual and gendered minorities. As sociologist C. J. Pascoe notes, “very few men, if any, are actually hegemonically masculine, but all men do benefit, to different extents, from this sort of definition of masculinity” (2007:7), a form of benefit sociologist R. W. Connell refers to as the “patriarchal dividend” (1995:41). In my research, I too discovered that many of the young men I interviewed who were in positions of power or belonged to high caste or class statuses might not have actively engaged in acts of active dominance, yet they were often complicit in reaping the benefits and rewards of patriarchy. Being able to move to Chandigarh or migrate abroad, being able to live their lives unsupervised, their freedom and mobility were perhaps some of the greatest benefits and rewards of being a man they enjoyed and often took for granted.

Connell argues that certain hegemonic masculinities have now been globalized as global forces increasingly shape the making of masculinity (1998:10). Connell and James Messerschmidt explain,

Hegemonic masculinity at the regional level is symbolically represented through the interplay of specific local masculine practices that have regional significance, such as those constructed by feature film actors, professional athletes, and politicians... A regional masculinity, then, provides a cultural framework that may be materialized in daily practices and interactions (2005: 849-850).

To understand masculinities in specific local and regional contexts, we need to think in transnational and global terms (Pease and Pringle 2001:9). This dissertation places a central emphasis on understanding the gendered dynamics of globalization, especially transnational migration.

Women and men are likely to experience migration in different ways (Benhabib and Resnik 2009). Following Raymond Hibbins and Bob Pease (2009), I explore how patriarchal ideologies are reproduced in regional histories as well as transnational and diasporic representations of popular Punjabi culture. I do this by looking at how Punjabi men reaffirm, reconfigure and or even challenge these ideologies in the process of migration and settlement. The young Punjabi men I interviewed in my research regularly alluded to models of transnational and diasporic masculinities popular in Punjabi cinema and news media, which they saw themselves working towards achieving in the future.

As I explore further in Chapter 4, popular representations of successful masculinity in Punjabi cinema are frequently characterized by the ability to migrate abroad, be financially successful, maintain family values, be able to send remittances, provide their parents (back in the village) with a comfortable middle-class life, and invest in the regional and cultural development. When I asked the participants of my research for examples of the types of men they idolized, many overwhelmingly cited heroes of Punjabi films.

Punjabi films (as well as Hindi films) over the past decade have regularly glorified the diasporic communities' experiences. At the film's center is frequently a

young Punjabi man who seems to move seamlessly between transnational and regional locations and identities. He often embodies the best of both worlds: a successful U.S. doctor who is willing to enter an arranged marriage to please his traditional parents; a Canadian hockey player who trades in his motorbike for a tractor to farm his ancestral land in Punjab; a proud Punjabi farmer who travels to England to reclaim his long lost love, in the process teaches the members of the diasporic community the importance of retaining their cultural *sabhyachar* (values) and their *Punjabiyyat* (sense of being Punjabi)<sup>2</sup>.

Punjabi women and their achievements are rarely celebrated in a similar manner both on screen and in real life. Unlike the men in their lives, the Punjabi women I met and interviewed were not allowed by their families to move to a city like Chandigarh or migrate abroad unsupervised. Rumors and sexual innuendoes are often used against single women as a way of disciplining South Asian women's bodies and controlling their sexualities (Walton Roberts 2005). Punjabi women's journeys abroad often follow very different paths from the journeys of Punjabi men. While men regularly emigrate on their own on study or work visas, women are often sent by their families as brides to Non Resident Indian (NRI) husbands through transnational arranged marriages (Mooney 2006). Having to rely on their husband or in-laws to activate transnational mobility leaves

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<sup>2</sup> Srijana Mitra Das provides a useful definition of *Punjabiyyat*. "It refers to a commonly held, all-encompassing view of Punjabi culture, society and being Punjabi as an individual. The term thus refers to larger structures of social or community organizations [such as kinship networks, caste identities, religious beliefs and practices, understanding of gender roles, etc.] as well as to individual Punjabi values [such as bravery, resilience, honor, heartiness]" (2006:468-469). Also see Pritam Singh (2010) for a detailed discussion on the topic.

them venerable to emotional and often physical abuse and exploitation where parents of the NRI husband expect lavish dowries. Even within South Asian diasporic communities, women's lives are carefully monitored and controlled by the men in their families as their bodies and sexualities become emblems of national traditions and morality (Gopinath 2005:18).

Paralleling the growth in Punjabi migration are also some increasingly disturbing social trends including dowry-related violence and murders, NRI husbands abandoning their wives, women being used as channels for the men in their families to also emigrate and the overall preference for sons over daughters within Punjabi families. These trends reveal a society where men are increasingly in positions of power, in which most social institutions benefit men, further solidifying male dominance and authority. While remaining mindful that globalization and migration to “the West” does not necessarily lead to more gender equity (Walton-Roberts and Pratt 2005:173, Kaplan and Grewal 1999, Shutte 2000), in North India the processes related to the two seems to largely privilege Punjabi men over Punjabi women.

The worsening gender imbalance in Punjab where the male to female ratio has slid to 876 females per 1000 males<sup>3</sup> is perhaps the most visible consequence of male hegemony and patriarchal supremacy within the region. However when the topic of son preference is discussed in Indian media and political arenas, male hegemony and patriarchy are rarely cited the sources of the problem. Instead, as sociologist Navtaj

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<sup>3</sup> Figures reported in the 2001 nationwide census (Bhandari and Kale 2009:79).

Purewal points out, Indian news media and governmental policy often characterized female feticide as an exclusively “modern” phenomenon, shifting the blame to economic development and modern medical technologies, which makes it easier to perform sex-selective abortions (2010). Purewal argues that any debate on the solution of this growing problem should also examine male hegemony and “the multitude of social processes and institutions that surround the desire for sons” (2010:ix).

While overall this dissertation takes a critical approach to patriarchy and male hegemony in India, I also realize that patriarchy operates unevenly even within given places and cultures (Kaplan and Grewal 1999, Walton-Roberts and Pratt 2005). Cultural geographers Margaret Walton-Roberts and Geraldine Pratt write, “Patriarchal practices develop specifically and unevenly in combination with other social relations,” such as the caste system in India (2005:175). Walton-Roberts and Pratt argue for the need for a more pluralistic and “context-specific” understanding of patriarchy in India. They quote cultural theorist Homi Bhabha who writes: “Patriarchy in India, for instance, intersects with poverty, caste, illiteracy; patriarchy in liberal America is shored up, among other things, by racism, the gun culture, desultory welfare provisions...” (1999:81).

Building on Purewal’s intervention and the need for a context-specific understanding of masculinity and patriarchy in North India, this dissertation attempts to shine a critical light on Punjabi men’s lives. While gender inequality and Punjabi women’s experience are not the central focus of this dissertation, I hope to add to our understanding of the different ways in which men in India benefit from patriarchy and

male hegemony in India. Being able to move and migrate across regional and national boundaries I believe is one of the greatest advantages that Punjabi men enjoy, from which Punjabi women are largely excluded.

### Performing Masculinities

Approaching the study of masculinities as what men say and do to be men also requires an exploration of the quotidian discourses and performances of masculinity and how specific practices related to being a man are rehearsed and affirmed (Gutmann 2007 [1996], Hertzfeld 1985). Despite citing a singular hegemonic model of successful masculinity typified by transnational mobility, in their day-to-day lives the young Punjabi men I interviewed were constantly disputing and redefining the guidelines of how men should act and enact their manhood. Beyond simply asking them about the type of men they wanted to become, I also observed how different groups of men in Chandigarh embodied and performed different masculinities that drew upon local and regional traditions.

Even under the current conditions of globalization and the global circulation of images and bodies, gendered identities and representations are often culturally coded (Benhabib and Resnik 2009). Transnational representations of masculinities lose their significance if specific regional cultural logics are not considered. As I explore in Chapters two and three, for young Punjabi men who move to Chandigarh and eventually emigrate abroad, their masculine identities continue to remain deeply embedded in their rural past and agrarian heritage. Even when confronted by the foreign landscape of the

city the logics of modernist architecture developed with its teleological view disconnected from the region's past, young Punjabi men frequently claim belonging by celebrating their rural past and agrarian heritage, and not by forgoing it.

Anthropologist Radhika Chopra observes that adolescent Punjabi boys learn masculinity by working with their fathers in their fields and within peer groups, hanging out in the village streets (2004:57). In these public enactments of gender and gender development, the body of the Punjabi farmer and the markers of physical work on the body signify a specific middle class Jat farmer and landowner masculinity, one where men are produced through the act of farming and the cultivation of land (Chopra 2004: 44-47). On the farm, notes Chopra "driving the tractor is an act in which masculine hierarchy is articulated" (2004:46). In the Punjabi countryside the Jat farmer and landowner often informs the template according to which young boys and men measure their masculine selves.





2: Formation of Punjabi Masculinity Through Farming (2009 photo by author)

Because Chandigarh was consciously conceived without a connection to the region's agrarian past, Chandigarh does not resemble other urban or rural areas in Punjab or Haryana. The middle-class English speaking residents of Chandigarh, especially the bureaucrats and businessmen who settled in the city when it was first developed, often maintain an attitude of elitism and snobbery towards the migrants moving into their city from rural parts of Punjab. One of my neighbors named Gaurav, a real estate agent who grew up in Chandigarh and studied for six years in Australia called the Punjab men moving to Chandigarh from the countryside "*kilas*." A *kila* is a unit of measurement comparable to an acre. "They come here with a very *pandu* [rural] mentality. Whenever they need something, like a new motorbike, a car, or a ticket to Canada, their parents sell

off a *kila* and give them the money, ‘here *puttar-ji* [son], go have fun’,” Gaurav once complained, annoyed by their growing presence in the local nightclub he frequented with his friends.

Chandigarh is one of seven Union Territories in India controlled by the federal government. Residents of Chandigarh often pride themselves on maintaining an orderly city governed by an entity independent of the state governments of Punjab and Haryana. Young men who move to Chandigarh from rural Punjab not only have to contend with the city’s foreign landscape, but also deal with competing claims for belonging from the young men who were born and grew up in Chandigarh. Having studied in superior schools and colleges and being able to speak English allowed the residents of Chandigarh to claim, as my neighbor termed a “cosmopolitan status,” which the men from rural Punjab envied and desired simultaneously. Men from Chandigarh often regarded themselves as more “modern,” more masculine and more successful than men from rural Punjab.

Given the claims for belonging over Chandigarh by neighboring States of Punjab and Haryana, I also look at how rural Punjabi men who grew up working in the fields and glorifying agrarian models of masculinity contend with the orderly existence within this modernist city. As I discovered during fieldwork, it is often within the day-to-day performances of masculinity that young men challenge the masculine status quo in Chandigarh. Through public celebrations of their agrarian past, such as getting drunk and performing bhangra on the streets of Chandigarh, getting into brawls and sometimes even

sword fighting and breaking traffic rules and regulations, the young men transgress social norms and expectations.

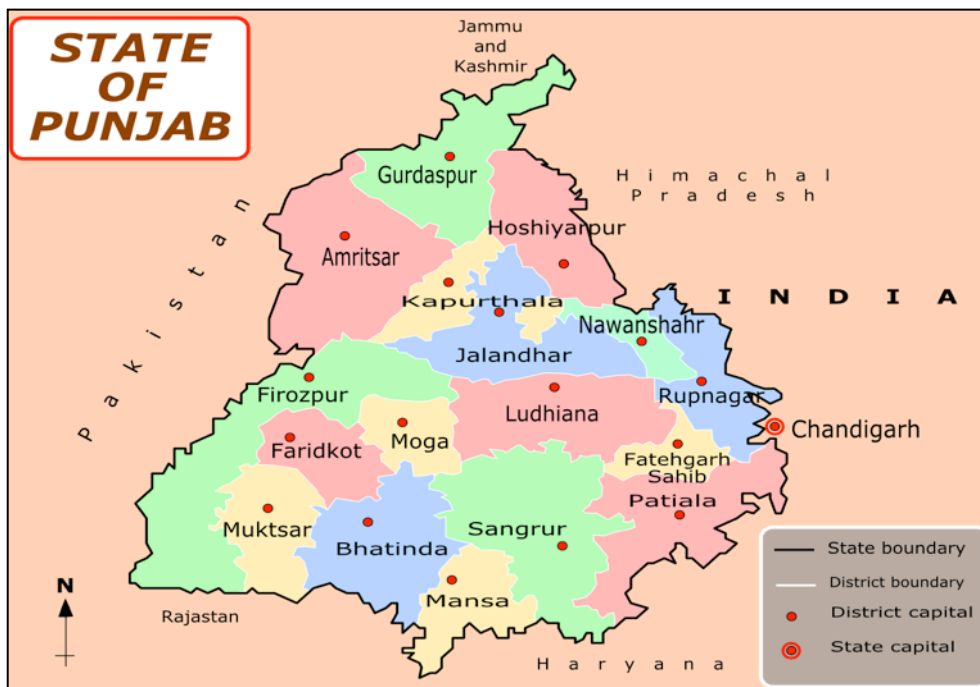
For both groups of men, the streets of Chandigarh provide a public domain where masculinity is embodied and enacted; representing what sociologist Michael Kimmel calls “Guyland” (2008). As Kimmel explains:

Guyland is the world in which young men live. Its is both a stage of life, a liminal undefined time span between adolescence and adulthood that can often stretch for a decade or more, and a place, or, rather, a bunch of places where guys gather to be guys which each other, unhassled by the demands of parents, girlfriends, jobs, kids, and the other nuisances of adult life. (2008:4)

Often in the absence of adults, young men turn to each other for affirmation of their masculinities and initiations into manhood. On weekends, dance clubs and discotheques in Chandigarh often do not allow single men to enter without being accompanied by women, or they charge exorbitant entrance fees. Instead of going to a club, young men in Chandigarh go on *gerdis* (rounds), a practice that entailed drinking alcohol and driving aimlessly through the streets of the city. As I discovered during fieldwork, the practice of *gerdi marna* (to make rounds) offered an exclusively male space where many of the fraternal rituals of male bonding, coming-of-age and discussions of sexuality took place.

Women are conventionally excluded from the activities of Guyland whether they include drinking in public, performing bhangra, driving around the streets of Chandigarh at night, or moving to Chandigarh and emigrating abroad unsupervised. Also excluded are working class men who cannot afford to live in Chandigarh or afford to go out

drinking every weekend. As Kimmel notes, “Guyland... rests on the bed of middle-class entitlement, privileged sense that you are special, that the world is there for you to take” (2008:10-11). The young men in Chandigarh, both the Jats who moved here from rural Punjab and those like Gaurav who grew up in the city seem to embody the gendered and class entitlement that Kimmel describes very effectively.



3: District Map of the State of Punjab

### Formation of Historical Punjabi and Sikh Masculinities

The word “Punjab” is a combination of two Persian words *Panj*, which means five and *Aab*, which means river – Punjab being the land of five rivers. These rivers have

flowed through this region for centuries, providing the primary source of irrigation for its fertile lands. On the banks of these rivers flourished the ancient Indus Valley civilizations evidenced by some of the earliest archeological records of life on the subcontinent.<sup>4</sup> The region also served as a pathway between Persia and India, and experienced ongoing invasions led by Alexander, Genghis Khan and finally the founder of the Mughal Empire, Emperor Babur gained who controlled of the region the in mid-16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> Around the same time period, the Sikh faith emerged in Punjab under the direction of its founder Guru Nanak Dev (1469 -1539) and his successor Guru Angad Dev (1504-1552). Resisting the Mughal influence, Sikhism played a defining role in forming regional Punjabi identity (Singh 2006 [1952], Singh 1999, Singh and Thandi 1999). The Sikh Gurus designated Punjabi the sacred language of religious texts and teachings, adapting the written script from Urdu and Sanskrit into Gurumukhi (Jakobsh 2011, Singh 1999). As religious and literary texts were written and circulated in the Gurumukhi script they helped cultivate a sense of distinctive linguistic identity with Sikhism as its *de facto* religion, which is still prominent in contemporary Punjab.

While the earlier Sikh Gurus were saints and mystics whose followers largely included the local farmers and peasants, the Sikhs later transformed themselves into a community of warriors to defend against Mughal invasion and resist forced religious conversions. As historian Louis E. Fenech notes:

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<sup>4</sup> See Lahiri (2006) for more on the discovery of Harappa in Punjab region.

<sup>5</sup> See Alam (1986) and Wolpert (2009:130-191) for more on Mughal Empire in North India.

The martyrdom of Guru Arjan, the fifth Guru, led to the militarization of the Sikh community in 1606, while the martyrdom of his grandson, the ninth Sikh Master, Guru Tegh Bahadur, in 1675 was the event which precipitated the creation of the Khalsa, the elite, militant order formed in 1699 by the tenth and last Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh (1666 – 1708) (2000:2).

In addition to a history of martyrdom informing the construction of an inward faith and religious conviction, with forming the *Khalsa* (brotherhood of the pure), Gobind Singh also transformed the outward physical appearance of the Sikh body by designating the five Ks<sup>6</sup>, the five articles of faith that Sikhs must wear as visible symbols of their religious identity (Jakobsh 2011, McLeod 2000). In addition the five Ks, the Sikh turban, worn largely by Sikh men and not Sikh women, also became a gendered symbol of the Sikh masculinity visually distinguishing Sikh men from Hindus and Muslims (Hershman 1976, Uberoi 1996). The warrior ethos is still a prominent feature of the Sikh masculine consciousness in North India where the turban is often seen as an indicator of hyper-masculinity and Punjabi Sikh men are regularly stereotyped in media and popular representations as physically powerful and aggressive (Kalra 2009).

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<sup>6</sup> The five Ks include: *Kesh* (uncut hair), *Kanga* (a wooden comb), *Kara* (a metal bracelet), *Kachera* (cotton undergarments) and *Kirpan* (curved sword or dagger)



4: *Amritdhari* (baptized) Sikh Man with Unshorn Hair and Turban (2009 photo by author)

Following the designation of the Khalsa, Gobind Singh's two elder sons died in battle while his two younger sons were assassinated by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb's army, leaving behind a legacy of religious sacrifice and tradition of martyrdom that is still recalled as essential elements of Sikh history. Stories of Gobind Singh's David-like bravery and perseverance against Goliath-sized Mughal army permeate Sikh historical iconography and are recited regularly in Sikh temples as an exemplar of the types of masculinity all Sikh boys should strive to achieve.

What the figure of Gobind Singh represents to the construction of Sikh masculinity is analogous to the significance of Emperor Ranjit Singh in forging a distinctive Punjabi masculinity. Following the time period of the Sikh Gurus, the Sikh empire was further solidified in 1799 under Ranjit Singh's direction (Singh 1999, Singh 2010). The emperor's reign, as Sikh historian Pritam Singh points out "was a moment of crowning glory in the evolution of a distinctive Punjabi identity" (2010:1). Under Ranjit Singh, Punjab remained a sovereign state while the British Army advanced its control over other areas of the subcontinent. Tales of the one-eyed emperor, his bravery, his conquests and the empire he accumulated, and the 18 wives he married are also ubiquitous in Punjabi folklore and historical consciousness (Griffin 1976:107, Singh 1999, Singh 2010). While Gobind Singh's images are often featured prominently within the living rooms of Punjabi families reminding them of religious conviction and commitment to the faith, Ranjit Singh's portraits frequently line the walls of



predominantly male spaces such as gymnasiums and fitness centers through Punjab, celebrating the masculine strength and dominance his figure represents.

Following Ranjit Singh's death, the British army's annexation of Punjab in 1849 marks the next turning point in the region's history. Upon gaining control of the region, the British army recruited Sikh soldiers to expand and strengthen its hold over India. Unlike the Mughal emperors who regularly forced Sikhs to undergo religious conversions by trimming their beards, the British officers earned Sikh loyalty by forming exclusive regiments in which Sikh men were allowed to practice their religion and retain their unshorn hair and turbans (Cohn 1990, Kalra 2005:83, Singh 1999). Anthropologist Bernard Cohn considers in detail the role of Sikhs in the British Indian army arguing, "the current significance of the distinctive turban of the Sikhs was constructed out of the colonial context" (1990:110). To the British army, the turbaned Sikh body signaled an embodiment of certain masculine power and strength, which they nurtured and harvested by allowing the Sikh soldiers to continue following their faith. "Their wildness, controlled by the turban and their fierceness, translated into dogged courage and stolid 'buffalo'-like willingness to obey and follow their British officers," notes Cohn (1990:110).



5: Sikhs in the British Army (Photo Courtesy of Swarn S. Khalon)

Given the historical significance of the Sikh turban in identifying and representing Sikh men, the turban (as opposed to the five Ks) has become the visible symbol of Sikh faith (McLeod 1999). Unlike the five Ks that are worn by Sikh men and women, the Sikh turban is a gendered symbol as it is worn almost exclusively by Sikh men and rarely by Sikh women in India. For women to wear the Sikh turban, as scholars have noted, is considered transgressive within mainstream Sikh orthodoxy and in some instances, Sikh women have even used the turban as a feminist statement promoting gender equality in their communities (Jakobsh 2003, Mahmood and Brady 2000). While Sikh men enjoyed a preferential place within the British Army, the colonial strategically de-sexualized and de-masculinized many non-Sikh men marking them as “effeminate” (Sen 2003, Sinha 1995). Though Punjabi Sikhs also played an active role within the Indian independence movement, their allegiance to the British army and their perceived willingness to become docile colonial subjects is still recalled as an act of betrayal by non-Sikh Indians whose subjugation under colonial rule was far more severe.

The Partition of 1947 marked the most significant transformation in Punjab’s history, dividing the region in two. Mass migration preceded the Partition across the newly drawn borders; Sikhs and Hindus to East Punjab in independent India, and Muslims to west Punjab in newly formed Pakistan. Over 100,000 Hindu, Sikhs and Muslims lost their lives in the communal violence that accompanied the largest migration in human history and more than 10 million people were displaced from their ancestral

homes (Zamindar 2007). Partition was a devastating event, leaving long-lasting scars in the memories of Punjabis living on both sides of the border (Mooney 2011:166).

Following Partition, the Indian government reorganized regional territories throughout the subcontinent into distinct states on a linguistic basis, giving each state local autonomy and representation within the Indian parliament (French 2011: 1-33, Stern 2003, Wolpert 2009). However, the Indian government initially denied the dominant political party in Punjab, Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), the creation of a Punjabi speaking state with a Sikh majority. Punjab continued to be a bi-lingual state leaving the Sikhs feeling excluded from the nation-building project. It took another ten years of political ambiguity and further partitioning of Punjab in 1966 into the adjoining states of Haryana and Himachal Pradesh before SAD was given control over the State of Punjab (Grewal 1998[1990], Singh 1999). Meanwhile the central government continued to control Chandigarh, the newly built capital that was initially promised to Punjab that Punjab now had to share with the adjoining State of Haryana.

In the 1970s, failures of the Green Revolution (Shiva 1991) and the discriminatory policies of the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's government towards Punjabi farmers intensified the sense of betrayal and resentment Sikhs felt as a religious and ethnic minority within India (Mooney 2011, Pettigrew 1995, Wallace 1986). In 1973, SAD voiced its grievances against the central government in the Anandpur Sahib Resolution. Topping their list of demands was that control over Chandigarh be fully transferred over to the State of Punjab. These demands were largely overlooked until the

early 1980s when the charismatic religious leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale called on Indira Gandhi's administration to implement the resolution (Wallace 1986). Gandhi, having returned to power in 1980 after a period of political uncertainty, used the resolution to portray SAD as a separatist party led by the "terrorist" leader Bhindranwale. On June 5<sup>th</sup> 1984, under the name Operation Bluestar, Gandhi ordered military action against Bhindranwale and his associates who had taken refuge in the Golden Temple (Tully and Jacob 1986).

### Marginalizing Sikh Masculinity

Bhindranwale and his associates were killed and the temple was badly damaged. Operation Bluestar led to Gandhi's retaliatory assassination by her Sikh bodyguards on October 31<sup>st</sup>, which was further followed by riots and mass killings of Sikhs living in Delhi and several other North Indian cities. These tumultuous events of 1984 transformed life dramatically for Sikhs in Punjab and all over North India (Chopra 2010, Das 1985, Helwig 1987, Pettigrew 1995). These events added to the Sikh community's sense of marginalization and persecution as a religious minority in a nation increasingly divided along regional and sectarian lines (Mooney 2011). Bhindranwale's death, and the circumstances surrounding the attack on the golden temple turned him into a martyr as his image became synonymous with the demands for separate Sikh nation of Khalistan (Axel 2001, Chopra 2010, Mahmood 1996). The events of 1984 also mobilized diasporic support for the insurgency that ensued over the following decade during which the state police assassinated thousands of Sikh men under the pretense of curbing terrorism (Axel

2001, Chopra 2010, Dhillon 2006, Mooney 2011: 170, Singh 1992). The decade of violence that followed the events of 1984 are commonly referred to as the “blackout” period in the region’s history. The local government in Punjab enforced nightly curfews and the fear of violence brought cultural and social life in the region to a standstill. The trauma and suffering experienced during this time period was still fresh in the minds of many Sikhs I met and interviewed while conducting fieldwork.

The events of 1984 also played a defining role in the contemporary construction of Sikh and Punjabi masculinities. In the years following 1984, thousands of young Sikh men, having fit the government’s profile of Sikh militants, became victims of abductions and assassinations during encounters with the Punjab police (Chopra 2010:78, Dhillon 2006, Mahmood 1996). Mooney notes, “charges were invented against Sikh men so that they might be imprisoned, tortured, and even killed, regardless of their being active in the militant movement, and often because their relatives were in some position of social leadership” (2011:170). At the same time, the militant groups mandated that all young Sikh men living in Punjab grow their hair long and wear turbans in a show of solidarity with the separatist movement.<sup>7</sup> Many Sikh men living in the diaspora also readopted unshorn hair and turbans out of their own volition in support of the militants’ cause and a separate Sikh homeland (Chopra 2010:96).

During this period, the male Sikh body became the symbolic battleground on which struggles for religious freedom and justice were fought while contemporary Sikh

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<sup>7</sup> A point made by sociologist Gurpreet Bal, whom I interviewed during fieldwork at Guru Nanak Dev University in Amritsar.

masculinity came to once again be characterized by a sense of danger and loss (Chopra 2010). Within broader national consciousness, the figure of the turbaned Punjabi Sikh man came to embody what Pascoe refers to as “marginalized masculinities” (2007:7). Though Pascoe uses the term to describe the simultaneous hyper-sexualization, fear and subjection of young African American men in American high schools as men “who may be positioned powerfully in terms of gender but not in terms of race” (2007:7), the term applies aptly to describe Punjabi Sikh men who are also stereotyped as hyper-masculine and physically intimidating, yet they have endured repeated persecutions for their ethnicity and religious faith.

In the years following the events of 1984, Sikh men were not only feared and targeted by the state police but many Sikh parents in Punjab also worried that the presence of young men in their family might threaten the security of the entire family (Chopra 2010:63-68). To escape political violence and persecution, many Punjabi parents sent their sons out of the country through diasporic family networks and by arranging transnational marriages (2010:66-86). Many Sikh men also fled India as refugees seeking political asylum in countries like Canada, United Kingdom and the United States of America.

Even though it was the series of events in 1984 that catapulted the region into the violence and chaos that followed, the motivation behind the militancy was not only about religious freedom and autonomy. The Punjabi resentment and discontent towards the Indian government grew from the economic and agricultural crisis of the 1970s and the

1980s that resulted from the failures of the Green Revolution (Mooney 2011:167, Pettigrew 1995, Shiva 1991). As anthropologist Joyce Pettigrew notes, “the story of the rise and fall of the guerilla movement is essentially and materially a story of what happened to a community of farmers as they experienced the effects of a process of economic change known as the Green Revolution” (1995:55). Punjab was already suffering from a decade of rising agricultural costs, insufficient irrigation, a steady decrease in yield and rise in debt combined with the environmental devastation that resulted from the technologies of the Green Revolution. Sikh militancy pushed the regional economy into further collapse setting off an exodus from Punjab that one can argue is still ongoing. As Mooney explains, many landowning Punjabi families used transnational migration to “resist, subvert, reiterate and commemorate their marginality” (2011:33). Even though the Punjabi families I spoke with listed a multitude of reasons for emigrating, lack of opportunities within India and the distrust of the government both on state and national levels often topped the list.

In the early 1990s India witnessed a major transformation in its political economy. As the nation’s leaders opened the country up to economic liberalization, India emerged as a key player within the global economic landscape (French 2011, Mazarella 2003, Nayar 2009). In Punjab, the militancy subsided in 1993 as major militant groups were either destroyed by the state police or gradually lost local support for their cause (Dhillon 2006). The region's economy and social life has since recovered. Although there has not been a large-scale attack for almost a decade, members of the alleged terrorist



group Babbar Khalsa that led various regional and international operations<sup>8</sup> is still sporadically active in the region engaging in unlawful activities from time to time.

In May of 2005, Babbar Khalsa claimed responsibility for two bomb attacks in New Delhi theaters screening the Hindi film *Jo Bole So Nihaal* whose depictions of Sikhs characters some members of the Sikh community found objectionable. In 2009, the year I conducted fieldwork, several incidents took place including two assassinations of local politicians involving Sikh militants and a shootout between the Punjab Police and Balbir Singh Bhootna, a Babbar Khalsa operative on August 25<sup>th</sup>, during which Bhootna was apprehended. Upon searching Bhootna, in addition to finding firearms the police also discovered stickers, t-shirts and posters featuring the slain leader Bhindranwale, along with pamphlets promoting the pro-Khalistan movement.

Though it has been nearly three decades since Bhindranwale was killed during the 1984 military action, his martyred figure has acquired similar masculine significance comparable to that of Gobind Singh and Ranjit Singh. For terrorist groups such as the Babbar Khalsa, the reproduction of Bhindranwale's image serves as vital currency to support its illegal operations to resuscitate the separatist fervor and the insurgency. Many Sikh temples and religious organizations in Punjab regularly memorialize the leader's image by placing it next to images of major historical and religious figures. As Chopra very succinctly notes, for Sikhs all over Punjab and in the diaspora, Bhindranwale reminds them of the assault on the community's collective honor and memorializing his

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<sup>8</sup> Responsible for the Air India Flight 182 bombing of June 3, 1985.

image serves as a way of “commemorating the hurt” Sikhs experienced in 1984 (2010:11-39).

Memories of past events, the loss of home and family experienced during the 1947 Partition, and the hurt and trauma experienced by Sikhs in 1984 all inform the sense of regional identity shared by my research participants as well as how they viewed their relationship with the Indian nation state. Khalistan is no longer the exclusive site of Sikh marginalization, explains Mooney (2011:32). For Punjabi Sikhs’ feelings of marginality also stem from the steady decrease of economic support for rural agricultural communities by the Indian government, while urban centers of the city have experienced unprecedented growth in economic investment and infrastructure. Punjabi farmers never fully felt the sense of nationalism and allegiance towards the modern Indian nation and are likely not to share the same sense of optimism as Indians living in urban areas such as Delhi, Mumbai and even Chandigarh about India’s rise to a global superpower (Mooney 2011). Instead for many who have already moved abroad or have family members living abroad, their allegiance is limited largely to Punjab, their homeland, and to the growing diasporic community that is interconnected through technologies of globalization and is increasingly influential in the political, cultural and economic affairs back home in Punjab.



6: Bhindranwale Commemorated on a Poster in a Sikh Temple in Punjab (2009 photo by author)



7: Bhindranwale's Image Circulated on Bumper Stickers in Punjab (2009 photo by author)

### Contemporary Punjab

In contrast to the histories of displacement and marginalization, there also exists a simultaneous spirit of perseverance, survival and celebration of life among the region's resident and prevalent in popular Punjabi culture. The State of Punjab is comprised of 12,278 small villages where farming and agriculture makes up the economic backbone for over 66% of the state's population (Bhandari and Kale 2009). There are also 14 major cities in Punjab including Chandigarh and 157 smaller towns inhabited by the remaining 34% of the population (Bhandari and Kale 2009:8). Agriculturally rich and fertile, Punjab encompasses only 1.5% of India, yet each year it produces nearly 22% of wheat, 13% of cotton and 12% of rice consumed in the country. Despite the Green Revolution's failures, farming continues to sustain a productive economy and standard of living that is better than most states in the country. Punjab also has a relatively high literacy rate of almost 70% and a relatively low unemployment rate compared to other parts of India (Bhandari and Kale 2009:59-83).

Sikhs are the dominant religious group in Punjab, making up nearly 60% of the region's population, the remaining 40% are mostly Hindu, with some Muslims and few Christians (Gupta 2008). During the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and later under the British Raj, Punjabi Sikhs became entrenched in agriculture and the agrarian economy, while many Punjabi Hindus integrated themselves into merchandise, industrial and the service sector economies (Singh 1999). Land wealth and ownership over time became the dominant system of stratification and developed into the current caste system prevalent in

Punjab (Mooney 2011). Unlike the traditional Indian caste system that is based on religious categories specified in ancient Hindu texts<sup>9</sup>, the social hierarchies and caste distinctions among the Punjabi Sikhs are not justified as part of their religion (Jakobsh 2012, McLeod 2007, Mooney 2011). Pettigrew, in her study of the political system of the Jat Sikhs writes:

The social organization and the value system especially of rural Punjab, differs from that of Hindu India. The prevailing form of social co-operation and the type of political solidarity bear no reference to ‘caste’ and to rules of purity and pollution, but rather to the family unit and the values pertaining to that unit, namely honor, pride and equality, reputation, shame and insult. (1975:4)

At the onset of Sikhism, the Sikh Gurus had abolished caste-based hierarchies and instructed their followers to do the same through the egalitarian practice of *langar*, a communal meal prepared and eaten by all who visit the Sikh temple irrespective of their social standing (Jakobsh 2012: 23, Mooney 2011:65). Local caste divisions in Punjab grew based on land wealth, as a way of distinguishing the landowners (the Jats) from non-landowners, and have intensified over time (Jodhka 2004, McLeod 2007, Mooney 2011:163). While the Jats in Punjab are largely Sikhs<sup>10</sup>, non-Jats include both Sikhs and Hindus who belong to one or more of the following castes and sub-castes: *Khatris* and *Aroras* (merchant castes), *Ramgharias* (carpenter castes), *Ghummiars* (potter castes), and

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<sup>9</sup> See Stern (2003) and French (2011) on caste and caste system in India.

<sup>10</sup> Jat is also a caste designation commonly associated with landowners in the neighboring state of Haryana who are largely Hindus. My research participants referred to them as “Haryanvi Jats” or “Haryana ka Jaat” (a Jat from Haryana). Unlike the men from Punjab, the men I met from Haryana (many of whom had moved to Chandigarh for better employment opportunities) did not share the similar sense of political marginalization and desire to emigrate as Jat Sikhs.

*Mazhabis* and *Chamars* (sweeper castes and manufacturers of leather goods) (Jodhka 2004, McLeod 2007, Sandhu 2009).

As landowners, Jats have been instrumental in rural peasantry and dominate the agrarian landscape of Punjab. Writing on the Jat's preeminence in the region Mooney notes, "as members of the regionally dominant caste, Jats are particularly implicated in the persistence of un-Sikh notions of hierarchy and exclusivity" (2011:163). Jats are featured prominently in Punjabi cinema, music and popular culture (Gill 2012, Mooney 2011). Jats also dominate Punjabi politics and enjoy support within the SAD's party leadership and Shriomani Akali Gurudwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), the primary Sikh religious organization. Both SAD and SGPC are based in Amritsar and exert a considerable influence in regional and national politics.

Having suffered some of the greatest financial and emotional losses in the 1970s and the 1980s Mooney notes, "Jats are particularly implicated with Sikh marginality... and are said to have been central to the Khalistan movement and formation of its goals" (2011:167). Though they enjoy majority status within the region, the inadequacies of regional economy, the perceived lack of economic opportunities in urban areas of the country and the rising land prices coupled with the seductions of western materialism and consumption have led many Jat families, especially Jat men, to seek a different life abroad (Mooney 2011). Despite the promises of a "shining" India and the infrastructure

of opportunity<sup>11</sup> emerging within 21<sup>st</sup> century global capitalism in India (Brosius 2010, French 2011, Nisbett 2010), there seems to be an unshakeable belief among many young Jat men I met during fieldwork that one can only be successful by migrating abroad.

Despite Sikhism being an intellectual tradition that advocates gender equality—the Sikh gurus’ insisted that men and women were equal—historically as Sikh studies scholar Doris Jakobsh notes, “the ethos dominating the developing Sikh community was clearly patriarchal, hierarchical, and masculine” (2003:43). Sikh ideals differ from practice. Sikh men have regularly laid claims to religion, interpreting and historicizing Sikhism in “overwhelmingly masculinist ways” (Mooney 2011:57, Brady and Mahmood 2000, Jakobsh 2003, Singh 2005). Male hegemony within the religion is also procured though the glorification of the Sikh turban in Sikh history and iconography, which despite not being included with the five Ks, has become the visible representation of Sikh identity and faith (Brady and Mahmood 2000, McLeod 1999, Singh 2000).

Family is the nucleus of social life in Punjab. Punjabi families often live in patriarchal, patrilocal extended households with multiple generations living under the same roof. The familial land is cultivated and inherited by men in each family, while women are given land and/or money in their dowries. The practice of arranged marriages and caste endogamy throughout North India ensures that the caste-based and class-based stratification remains intact. Inter-caste and inter-ethnic marriages are largely forbidden in traditional Punjabi families, while love marriages regardless of caste or ethnicity can

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<sup>11</sup> A term used by writer Katherine Boo (2012) to describe the growing economic opportunities available to many urban middle-class Indians as the nation becomes a global superpower.

result in ostracism from family as well as the larger community. The restrictions around inter-caste and love marriages are particularly pronounced among the Jat Sikh community in Punjab. Mooney explains, “gender relations are infused with, oriented against, and expressed through discourse of men’s *izzat* (honor, respectability, reputation) and women’s *sharam* (modestly, humility, sexual propriety)... both concepts guided by male interest” (2011:58).

Exploring the gendered dimensions of the concept of honor within Indian society, sociologist Steve Derne has written that Indian men “have constructed a focus on honor that advances their own interests... Men claim that the threat of dishonor is only a modest restriction of their own action, while it tightly limits women’s freedoms” (1995:30). Honor is also an important ideal in Sikh families in Punjab as well as within diasporic communities (Jakobsh 2012:77), while its repudiation is shame or “loss of face” and must be avoided at all costs (Mooney 2011:58). The two concepts play a crucial role in the process and practices related to migration, often by policing women’s sexuality and mobility and dictating the conditions of migration – who gets to move abroad, and how.

#### National Borders, Transnational Movement

During my first visit to Amritsar, I stayed with the family of Jaswant Singh Sandhu, a middle aged Jat Sikh man who works as an Indian customs officer on the Wagha border. A tall, intimidating figure with a flowing grey beard and a neatly tied navy blue turban around his head, Jaswant took *amrit* (initiation) after witnessing the Indian military’s attack on the Golden Temple in 1984. The walls of Jaswant’s modest



two-bedroom government flat are covered in pictures of the Golden Temple. Devout followers of the faith, his wife and his two daughters have also taken *amrit* and begin each day by reciting the *Japji Sahib*, a collection of hymns written by Guru Nanak Dev. Jaswant enthusiastically played tour guide, introducing me to different sites in Amritsar including the Golden Temple. He showed me the underground bunker from where Bhindranwale and his associates engaged in retaliatory attack against the army troops. He proudly pointed out the bullet holes on the back wall of the dark bunker and on outer façade of the temple, retained as part of the temple reconstruction to remind visitors of the traumatic event. He even made arrangements for me to travel to the Wagha border to see the flag-lowering ceremony. The ceremony occurs daily before dusk and includes an elaborate performance of parades, salutes and handshakes between members of the Indian and Pakistani border security forces.

When we arrived at the Wagha border that spring afternoon, an energetic audience had already gathered to view the event. Young men on both sides of the border chanted slogans that drowned out the soldiers' footsteps and the sounds of the parade. Though the ceremony is meant to symbolize brotherhood and friendship between the two nations, the climate surrounding this peace-promoting ceremony was often competitive, with energetic displays of nationalism and one-upmanship. While the ceremony and the border crossing fascinated me, Jaswant appeared largely unimpressed by the performance and the place. He lacked the kind of enthusiasm he had while showing me around the Golden Temple and dismissed the ceremony as "ainvaye hi hai" (insignificant). I later

learned that even after living 30 kilometers away from the Wagha border for most of their lives, no one in Jaswant's immediate family had ever crossed the border. In fact, Jaswant's eldest daughter would be the first family member to travel out of the country, as Jaswant had recently agreed to a marriage proposal from a Sikh family living in Southall, England. After marriage Jaswant's daughter would leave her parents house in Amritsar and move to England to live with her husband and her in-laws.

While telling me about the details of his daughter's upcoming marriage and the subsequent migration, Jaswant proudly announced, "She can fly directly from Amritsar! We also have an international airport here, and there are direct flights from Amritsar to London going daily." I had known about the airport though I had not contemplated its significance within the region. After Jaswant mentioned the international airport, I became more attuned to how the local government and businesses were re-branding the identity of this historic city through this newly acquired symbol of globalization. Billboards lining even the dustiest and most decrepit streets of Amritsar promoted the international airport, often accompanied by an image of a plane taking off. The advertisements referred to Amritsar as an "international city," not only as a travel destination for foreign tourists, but for "NRIs" (non-resident Indians) and Punjabis living in the diaspora. The city provides new possibilities for transnational mobility and travel.

Named after the fourth Sikh Guru, Guru Ram Das Jee international airport represent the border crossings of the 21st century, where upon arrival, one is greeted with its own signboards welcoming passengers into the region. Though the creation of an

international airport is not a deliberately political act, the international airport and its name is not without historical and political implications. Linking the region directly to the outside world, the international airport eliminates the need for having to travel to the nation's capital of New Delhi where the second nearest Indira Gandhi international airport is located, named after the despised leader. Symbolically, acquiring an international airport not only makes the physical journey of traveling in and out of Punjab easier for emigrants and returning NRIs, helping foster an on-going connection to their homeland, its location also allows travelers to set the terms of their journeys and their connections by giving them the option of bypassing the nation and linking them directly to the region.



8: Symbols of Transnational Migration within Punjab (2007 photo by author)

### Recent Histories of Migration

Migration, as anthropologist Gina Perez explains, “whether voluntary or involuntary, is fundamentally about power relations – between countries, economies, and individuals – and it raises important questions about the nature and scope of power hierarchies, including those of race, class, gender, equality and nation” (2004: 7). In addition to ongoing land redistribution, ethnic disputes and political turmoil, the histories of transnational migration and diaspora feature prominently in defining contemporary Punjabi identity. As globalization increasingly allows for the movement of people and images across national boundaries, transnational migration plays an increasingly important role in the day-to-day lives of Punjabis living in India and in the diaspora, as well as their relationship with the nation state (Axel 2001, Ballard and Ballard 1977, Bhachu 1986, Brah 1996, Chopra 2010, Mooney 2011, Singh and Tatla 2006, Singh and Thandi 1999, Tatla 1999, Walton-Roberts 2004, Walton-Roberts and Pratt 2005).

The migration of Punjabis to western countries and the events and processes that led to the formation of a Punjabi/Sikh diaspora dates back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Following the British annexation of Punjab, Emperor Ranjit Singh’s 13-year-old son Duleep Singh was exiled to England in 1853 (Axel 2001). As anthropologist Brian Axel notes, “as a visual sign, Duleep Singh facilitates a new process of subjectification, constituting at once an anterior point – a time that preceded the emergence of a diaspora – and possible futures” (2001:78). During the colonial system of indentured servitude, non-landowning Punjabi men, along with South Asian men from other parts of the

subcontinent were sent to different parts of the world, including countries in Europe, East Africa, the Caribbean, and North America (Brah 1996).

Their presence as “strange” outsiders in countries like Canada and the United States often resulted in their categorization as the radicalized other, frequently lumping all South Asian men into one ethnic category of “Hindoos” (Leonard 1992, Shah 2011). Punjabi Sikh men also traveled to different parts of Europe as members of the British Army. Regiments of Sikh soldiers fought alongside British soldiers in countries in Europe and the Middle East during both World Wars (Singh 1999). After Indian independence, many Sikhs transitioned into high-ranking position within the Indian army, making up nearly 20% of the Indian armed forces. Aside from farming, army service continued to be a coveted profession among Punjabi Sikh men in post-independence India (Mooney 2011:171, Singh 1999).

The movement of working class migrant labor, often men from rural Punjab seeking new economic opportunities outside of the India, continued even after British left India through the 1960s and the 1970s (Chopra 2010:88). For many of these men, the decision to leave India was often necessitated by economic desperation and labor migrations rarely included Punjabi women and men from landowning families. Upon arriving in foreign countries, migrants often worked under harsh conditions with little compensation in agricultural, lumber or construction industries. Anthropologist Karen Leonard, in her ethnography *Making Ethnic Choices*, details the experiences of one such migrant community in central California, where Punjabi men who arrived there in the

1950s married women of Mexican descent, producing bi-ethnic families who identified as Hindu Americans (1994).

Following the events of 1984, the Punjab region witnessed another wave of politically motivated migrations by young Punjabi men Chopra refers to as the “sent away boys” (2010: 66). As daily life in Punjab was transformed by the trauma of 1984 and violence that followed, Chopra notes, “young men increasingly became targets of state terror, or were influenced by the militancy” threatening the family’s safety (2010:63). Many men fled the country illegally and sought political asylum in the countries in Europe and North America. Even greater numbers of young men were sent abroad by their parents through transnational kinship networks and arranged marriages into Punjabi families living in the diaspora (Chopra 2010).

Whereas prior to the events of 1984 Punjabi laborers often led the migration and their wives and families followed, within these unpredictable times when emigration was seen as necessary for the survival of the entire family, gender roles were often challenged in unconventional ways. For instance, as Chopra explains, many young men were sent abroad as *ghar jamais* (live-in son-in-laws), forcing men into muted categories, “effeminized by the loss of their dominion” (2010:68-69).

The experiences of men who fled India illegally and sought political asylum varied widely from the men who migrated through kinship networks. Chopra notes that many asylum seekers have continued their political activism within diasporic communities, observing the bodily style of the militancy (blue and saffron turbans,

flowing unshorn beards) and lobbying their dissent against the Indian government (Chopra 2010:107). Transformed by the traumas and loss of the 1980s, for many Punjabi refugees their homeland remains a pathologized space from which they have been exiled (Chopra 2010:103). On the other hand, the men who migrated through kinship networks do not share similar feelings of animosity towards the Indian government and often re-visit the country frequently. They fit easily into the NRI category and are eligible to claim citizenship in India.

The events of 1984 added to Punjabi Sikhs' already growing sense of ambivalence towards the Indian government's (in)ability to represent their interests, making emigrating "the most reliable solution to the threats of economic, political and religious marginalization" (Mooney 2011:170). Though militancy has ended and foreign countries stopped granting asylum to political migrants in the mid-1990s, both legal and illegal forms of emigration out of Punjab and to countries like the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and the United States have continued at an ever-increasing pace (Mooney 2011: 169-172, Walton-Roberts 2005).

### Contemporary Migration from Punjab

Everyday conversations among young Punjabi men are filled with local colloquialisms and witticisms referencing transnational migration. Commonly used expressions such as "Kabootar baazi" (to play the game of pigeon) and "Khamb lag gaye" (to grow wings) suggest the degree to which transnational migration is part of the

daily linguistic discourse as well as central to the narrative of dominant and successful masculinity.

Transnational migrations and the diasporic communities are often featured prominently in Punjabi cinema and visual culture. Visual media plays an important role in connecting audiences in Punjab with members of diasporic communities. Often filmed in transnational locations and featuring rural and diasporic characters, Punjabi films provide audiences in India with an idealized glimpse into what life is like in the diasporic community. One of my research participants humorously refers to Punjabi films as “three-hour tours of abroad,” that simply glorifies migration and the diaspora. On the other hand, for diasporic audiences Punjabi films often serve as perennial reminders of life back home in their villages, drawing on the diasporic audiences’ sense of nostalgia for the past.

Discourses around migration and life abroad are often contradictory. On one level, young men regularly refer to areas with large diasporic populations (Surrey and Mississauga in Canada, Southall and Birmingham in England and Yuba City in the United States) as just an “extension of Punjab” or a “second Punjab.” On another level, abroad is also thought of a foreign place where one would be confronted with unfamiliar people, languages and customs. The young men I spoke to in Chandigarh discussed the journey abroad with an underlying heroic ethos that evoked the dangers and excitement of the new world. Being able to successfully undertake and survive that journey was a testament to one’s masculinity. Some men fondly recalled stories of the first few people



in their villages who moved and settled abroad in the 1970s and 1980s, often glorifying their experiences and commending their bravery in taking on unseen challenges that awaited them in the foreign land.

However, unlike the labor migrations in the 1970s and the 1980s, which were often opportunistic and undertaken haphazardly by the men in Punjabi families, today migration is an event that is actively sought and strategically planned by the entire family (Mooney 2011, Chopra 2010). “Families strategize to enable emigration, taking loans to finance migrant journeys, for example, activating networks to acquire travel papers, and, most of all, activating transnational family networks” (Chopra 2010: 113). Unlike the early labor migrants who often embarked on journeys not knowing where they would end up, among the young men I interviewed there was a universally-recognized hierarchy of destinations with Canada and the United States topping the list, followed closely by Australia, England, New Zealand and Denmark. It is no coincidence that these countries have a sizable diasporic community and friendly immigration policies that often ensure a seamless path to permanent residency and citizenship, unlike the countries in the Middle East and Gulf regions which do not offer citizenship rights to labor migrants (Vora 2008).

Decisions about how and when one might emigrate, and which son or daughter to send first, are often made early on by the Punjabi parents. These decisions also determine how much schooling each sibling receives to enhance his or her opportunities to migrate (Chopra 2005, Chopra 2010). Mooney refers to this strategic phenomenon as “migration-aimed-education” (2010:171). Chopra notes that Punjabi parents often invest heavily in

the eldest daughter's education and dowry to ensure that she would make an attractive bride for an NRI husband (2010:61). Upon migrating, sisters are often expected to sponsor their brothers, thus providing a way for the men in the family to migrate as well (Chopra 2010:61). In families with multiple sons, the eldest sons are often held back in schooling and taught farming with the expectation that they would look after their family's property and land while the younger sons are sent to educational institutions in cities like Chandigarh to gain the language and technical skills that would enhance their opportunities to emigrate. Upon migrating and settling abroad, family members are expected to remit money home, helping retain and improve the family's fortune (Chopra 2010:55) and invest in the region's economy (Dusenbery and Tatla 2009, Walton-Roberts 2004).

Enabled through transnational kinship networks and sustained by the technologies of globalization, migration from Punjab is no longer a one-way journey out of the country but a circular process where visiting and remitting money home is just as important a feature in the narrative of being successful and moving abroad to begin with (Chopra 2010:113). Chopra explains, "migration is therefore a process that fosters and nourishes kinship links, while creating new ones through marriage, work, even childcare" (Chopra 2010:113). Circular migration, and the flow of people and capital that accompany the process, provides a "flexible survival strategy" in a global economy, enhancing migrants' socio-economic status (Duany 2001, Perez 2004:13). The creation of categories like OCI (Overseas Citizenship of India) and PIO (Persons of Indian Origins) by the Indian

government in 2003, which most legal migrants living in European and North American countries are now eligible for helps legitimate transnational claims of citizenship and belonging.

While anxieties about marginality add to Punjabi Sikhs' desire to leave India, for most Punjabi families migration promises, "class-based progress, material comforts and utopian aspiration of modernity" (Mooney 2011:32). Within increasingly competitive urban environments in India with a rapidly growing middle class, good education alone no longer ensures employment (Brosius 2010, Mooney 2011, Nisbitt 2009). "India represents a set of limitations that middle class Jats seek in ever-increasing numbers to escape by emigrating," notes Mooney, and migration is their "accelerated ticket to urban middle class" (2011:159). Mooney goes on to explain that over the past decade, migration and vocation abroad has surpassed even a military career in terms of prestige. "Migration is now the singular stuff of Punjabi dreams of family progress," concludes Mooney (2011:170).

#### Steps and Stops Along the Way

For Punjabis seeking to emigrate abroad there are two other avenues for migration: through transnational kinship networks, which often entails arranged marriages or family reunification programs, or by applying for student or work visas that would lead to permanent residency and ultimately citizenship in the host country (Walton-Roberts 2004). While significant attention has been paid to the role of family networks in facilitating transnational migration (Chopra 2010, Mooney 2011), my

research focuses primarily on the experiences of young men who pursue the latter route. To gain the educational and work experience necessary to qualify for study or work visas, many young Punjabi men (and some women) move to Chandigarh to learn enough English to pass their IELTS exams and gain the technological or vocational skills that would qualify them as a candidates for employment in foreign countries. Chandigarh, as a modernist city and a perceived knowledge society, represents yet another stop along the way, another transit point and another border they must cross while journeying to their new lives abroad.

### Summary of Chapters

In this chapter, I have situated the contemporary understandings of Punjabi masculinity within broader regional histories of displacement and migration that have been ongoing since the annexation of Punjab (1848 – 1849) by the British Army during the colonial period in Indian history. I also examine the wave of Sikh emigration out of the region that followed the monumental events of 1984, the Indian military attack on the Golden Temple and its aftermath. Building on the works of various anthropologists who have written about this time period, I explain how the event of 1984 added to Punjabi Sikh's ongoing sense of marginalization as a religious minority that is still echoed in my participants' reasons to leave India and seek a different future elsewhere. I focus specifically on how the political violence and persecution that followed the events of 1984 transformed the figure of Punjabi Sikh men into the symbol for the struggle of an

independent Sikh nation, a marginalized figure that gained its current significance from being simultaneously threatening and threatened by the state.

In Chapter 2, I begin by exploring Chandigarh's modernist legacy and how Punjabi migrants define modernity differently from conception of the concept prevalent in the city's architecture and landscape. I also provide a layout of my methodology, my approach to ethnographic research and describe in more detail the main participants of my research. I also provide detailed descriptions of the primary locations within Chandigarh including the City Center in Sector 17 where I gathered my data, and the gendered associations and meanings assigned to these locations by the young men whose experiences I chronicled in this ethnography.

In Chapter 3, I map out the lives of rural Punjabi migrants against the modernist architecture of Chandigarh. Given the influx of young men moving to the city to gain the language and vocational training they need to migrate abroad, I examine how their presence conflicts with the carefully planned and regulated landscape of the city. I use the tension between Nehru and Le Corbusier's vision of Chandigarh and the how the city is conceptualized through Punjabi migrants' imagination to explore competing and conflicting ideas about who the city belongs to and what the city represents. I argue that ultimately in this moment of global interconnectivity, Chandigarh serves as a departure point, yet another border, which the emigrants must cross before proceeding to their transnational destinations.

In Chapter 4, I explore popular representations of masculinity in regional Punjabi cinema. I use selections of films I watched with my participants, some in the cinema halls and others at home on television to show how the heroes of Punjabi films are often depicted as rural Punjabi farmers belonging to the landowning Jat caste. The performance of their masculinity is often typified by their ability to move between different rural, urban and transnational spaces. I build on interviews with Punjabi filmmakers based in and around Chandigarh on what motivates their creative decisions and the popular depictions of the diasporic community in Punjabi cinema. I conclude by exploring how the participants of my research developed notions about successful masculinity based on what they see on screen.

In Chapter 5, I conclude by looking at what happened when young men fell short of living up to the film heroes they admired. Even the ones who pass their IELTS exams and are able to emigrate struggled to find adequate employment and support upon arriving in new unfamiliar cities like London, Sydney and Toronto. I end with a vignette of what life was like for one of my participants who moved to Wolverhampton, England where he is currently working various low-wage construction jobs while struggling to do well academically and is living under continuous fear of not obtaining permanent residence before his study visa expires and being sent back to India.

#### Contribution to South Asian Masculinities

Historically attention towards the lives of western, mostly white, straight men has dominated discussions within masculinity studies. However in the last couple of decades,

numerous ethnographies have explored the lives of men in non-western contexts, complicating our understanding of masculinity and men's lives and how they relate to other aspects of social life such as education, work, marriage, sexuality, religion, and nationhood (Almeida 1996, Gutmann 1996, Herdt 1981, Hertzfeld 1985, Lancaster 1994). Yet the lives of men in South Asia and the topic of South Asian masculinities remain largely unexplored and under theorized. Apart from the contributions of Radhika Chopra (2004, 2006, 2010) who has explored rural Punjabi masculinity, the works of Caroline and Filippo Osella (2004, 2006) who have explored the lives of men in South India, and an anthology by anthropologist Sanjay Srivastava (2003) which focuses largely on urban masculinities, little exists on the topic of South Asian masculinities. My hope is that this ethnography will help fill some of the gaps in our knowledge of South Asian masculinities in an urban North Indian landscape, and helps us understand how gender relates to regional and transnational forms of mobility under current conditions of globalization, which produces new modes of being and belonging.

## CHAPTER 2

### CHANDIGARH

#### Encountering Modernity and Post Modernity

Upon arriving in Chandigarh, a quiet city located 250 kilometers north of the Indian capital New Delhi, I spent several afternoons walking around the Sector 17 City Center. Referred to simply as the “Sector 17 Market” by locals, the City Center is an outdoor shopping complex featuring brand-name showrooms, fast food restaurants, a cinema hall and a fountain around which groups of young men and women gather to socialize throughout the day, especially in the evenings and on the weekend. Located in the center of city, Sector 17 is often called the “heart of Chandigarh” by city residents and on tourism brochures. Sector 17 is one of only two non-residential sectors in Chandigarh, which is made up of 55 rectangular sectors<sup>12</sup> neatly laid out on a rectangular grid. In addition to the shopping complex, Sector 17 also houses the local district court offices, parade ground, small football stadium, the city’s main fire station and the public library along with various government offices of the states of Punjab and Haryana, of which Chandigarh is the joint capital.

Famous Franco-Swiss architect Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, better known as Le Corbusier along with his team of architects and urban planners designed Chandigarh. They envisioned the City Center as the “pedestrian friendly” epicenter of social life, unlike the remaining sectors in Chandigarh that were planned in a way that would allow

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<sup>12</sup> The Sectors in Chandigarh range from 1 – 56. Sector 13 was left out of the city’s master plan because the architects and urban planners considered 13 an inauspicious number.



uninterrupted flow of automobile traffic (Prakash 2002:48). Spread out over 240 acres, the City Center is paved entirely with cement and raised almost a foot above street level to deter vehicles from driving across it. There is only one road that runs through the City Center, and it is built on an overpass to avoid disrupting the pedestrian friendly experience in the area.

One afternoon, as I was walking across the central piazza of the City Center, I came across a flurry of activity. A group of mostly non-Indian young men and women were assembling a large concave structure made out of bamboo poles and jute. The structure resembled the skeletal remains of a shipwrecked arch, lying on its side. Barricaded behind a rope circling the structure and the group of foreigners assembling it, was an ever-present congregation of inquisitive onlookers that grew and shrank in size throughout the day. On one end of the rope stood a pudgy middle aged policeman dressed in his moss-green uniform with a bushy moustache. He was holding a baton in one hand and occasionally yelled at the onlookers to remain behind the roped off area. Despite the occasional heckles from the crowd in heavily accented English, trying to engage the foreign students in a conversation, the group inside the roped off area worked quietly and industriously, ignoring the crowd that had formed around them and conversing only among themselves.

I walked over to read the signboard propped up next to the policeman, which quoted (in English) Nehru's mandate for Chandigarh to be a "modern city" – "a city

unfettered by the traditions of the past, a symbol of nation's faith in the future."<sup>13</sup> From the signboard I also learned that foreigners assembling the structure were students from the University of Washington, Seattle, visiting on a study abroad program working in collaboration with the Chandigarh College of Architecture. The structure made entirely of bamboo and jute was meant to "provoke a dialogue about the significance of architecture in the modern city and its place in the age of globalization," the text on the signboard read. It went on to explain that the students were using bamboo and jute as building materials because both are fairly cheap and readily available in North India. Their lightness and flexibility offered a "stark contrast" to the cold concrete rectangular buildings that dominate the Chandigarh's landscape.

Over the next two days I returned from time to time, monitoring the installation's progress. After three days, the final structure did not appear significantly different from the heap of poles the students had started out. As I pulled out my camera and started taking some pictures, three young men in their early 20s gathered near me, carefully observing me photographing the structure. As soon as I lowered my camera, one of the three men enthusiastically asked (in Punjabi), "Excuse me brother, can you tell us, is there going to be a *mela* [fair] here?"

It took me a few moments to comprehend the young man's question. When I finally understood what he was saying, I was somewhat amused by his innocent and optimistic query. On one hand, the potential for this structure to be a *mela* made sense. Complete with tents housing local food vendors and merchants selling tchotchkes,

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<sup>13</sup> First quoted by Norma Evenson in *Chandigarh* (1966). Though Nehru's quotation frequently appears on promotional materials and in magazine article on Chandigarh, there is no written record of the original quotation. It seems to only exist in the city's oral history (Prakash 2002:156).

bhangra dancers and maybe even a Ferris wheel, *melas* are perhaps the most popular forms of public gatherings and cultural celebrations throughout Punjab (Mooney 2011:189-190). They often appear spontaneously in densely populated areas lasting a month or two before moving on to another location. It would not be unreasonable to expect a *mela* to appear in the middle of the City Center, the heart of region's capital. Yet on the other hand, the prospect of a temporary and haphazardly assembled fair suddenly appearing in the heart of this meticulously planned City Center might constitute an outright assault on Le Corbusier's ambitions and Nehru's dream for a modernist city, unburdened by the surrounding region's traditions and history.

At last, I turned to the three men and replied "No." I tried explaining the installation as best I could, as I understood it from reading the signboard, but my explanation came out as abstract as the structure itself. "It's a post-modern response to Chandigarh's modern architecture," I told them. They stared at my face blankly nodding their heads out of politeness. After my failed attempt to explain postmodernity in Punjabi to the three men who only understood few words of English, they asked me if I had also come from abroad and if I was working with the students installing the structure. Yes and no, I replied. I was also visiting from the United States of America, from a university in Washington DC (different from Washington State) and though I too was here as a student, I was not the part of the group responsible for the installation. For the time being, I left out another key feature that distinguished me from the architecture students, the fact that I am an anthropologist and am interested primarily in the city's inhabitants, not its buildings. I wanted to know what people living in Chandigarh, those gathered around the

architectural structure thought of the unusually European look and feel of this modernist city.

The three young men introduced themselves as Palli, Davinder and Ranbir<sup>14</sup>. Born and raised in different villages in Punjab, the three met and became friends upon moving to Chandigarh few months prior to our meeting. All three had moved to Chandigarh to learn English and study for their IELTS exams. International English Language Training System (IELTS) is the standardized examination that emigrants must generally pass before applying for a study or skilled work visa abroad in English-speaking countries. Citing a lack of time, the three men returned to their English language institute with the promise of meeting me at a later time. I handed them my card with my local cell phone number scribbled on the back, asking them to call me when they had the time to chat.

I begin this chapter with a recollection of this moment in Sector 17 City Center not simply because it was where I first met the three young men who became my primary participants in my research, but it is also where Chandigarh (the main setting of this ethnography) first features as a prominent actor in exploring and understanding the main themes of this dissertation – masculinity and migration. What role does Chandigarh play in the migration from the region? What does the modernist city represent in the age of globalization?

The foreign architecture students' installation seems to suggest a response that lies within their radical re-envisioning of the city's cold and concrete modern forms. However it is not difficult to imagine a similar scenario playing out almost sixty years

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<sup>14</sup> Not their real names. To ensure their anonymity, I have assigned pseudonyms to all of my research participants.

ago in the early 1950s when Chandigarh was being developed; Le Corbusier and his team busily drawing plans for what they thought the city should look and feel like, meanwhile never acknowledging the presence of local villagers congregated in the distance, standing outside of the barricades, who too had their own opinions on the topics of aesthetics, functionality, belonging, and what it means to be “modern.”

Conceived in the 1950s, Chandigarh once embodied the aspirations of the modernist movement in architecture that influenced much of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century urban design and development in Europe and the West. Nehru envisioned Chandigarh as the city of the future that would usher the country into a new direction. Yet present-day Chandigarh remains buried under the weight of its postcolonial legacy. While the globalization of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century <sup>15</sup> enables new possibilities of movement and development in the region and across the sub-continent, Chandigarh landscape remains restricted to Le Corbusier’s myopic vision of what a modern city can and should look like.

Yet the city figures prominently in the overall experiences of young Punjabi migrants like Palli, Davinder and Ranbir precisely because of its perception as an unconventional modern city. Because of its modernist and postcolonial legacy, Punjabi families perceive Chandigarh as an educational hub within the region, where they can send their sons to gain the education and skills needed for geographical, economic and social mobility. Chandigarh is also a preferred temporary destination, a stepping stone for

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<sup>15</sup> While the late 20<sup>th</sup> and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century globalization, a phenomenon broadly characterized by the global circulation of idea, images, goods, and persons, often involve processes that are decentered from specific territories and occur in the global space (Appadurai 1996, Inda and Rosaldo 2002), my use of transnational refers to circulatory processes that are anchored in and transcend one or more nation-states (Grewal 2005, Perez 2004).

transnational migrants because many of the abundance of migration related services that have become available in the last ten years as part of the growing “immigration industry”. Tied to Chandigarh’s perception as a modernist city, migrants and their families also perceive immigration-related service providers and services available in the city as more legitimate than the ones available in other urban areas in Punjab. However, as I explore in this chapter and the next chapter, the architect and the migrants’ definitions of what it means to be “modern” differ radically. Before underscoring the role Chandigarh as a temporary destination plays in the experience of how young Punjabi migrants develop their sense of masculinity, I begin by first exploring the conception of Chandigarh as modernist city.



9: The Postmodern Installation by Architecture Students (2009 photo by author)



10: Signboard Quoting Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (2009 photo by author)

### The Architect's Chandigarh

Spread over 114 square kilometers (44 square miles) and roughly the size of San Francisco, Chandigarh is a city located on the borders of Punjab and Haryana, the two states for which it serves as the joint capital. Unlike traditional state capitals, Chandigarh maintains its autonomy from the state governments of both Punjab and Haryana as one of the seven Union Territories within the nation that are controlled and operated by the Central Government of India. The northern end of Chandigarh also borders with the state of Himachal Pradesh, where the first ranges of the Himalayas begin. Sixty year ago these foothills formed a picturesque backdrop to the city's landscape and inspired Corbusier's conceptual choices for the city's Master Plan. However today the hills are largely invisible, hidden behind the thick layer of smog that lingers perennially over the city. The

hills only make an appearance for few hours following the monsoon rains when the air is cleansed of pollution.

Named after one of the existing villages in the area that had a temple dedicated to the Hindu goddess *Chandi*, Chandigarh was developed in the 1950s after the partition of British India into the nations of India and Pakistan in 1947, during which Punjab lost its pre-independence capital Lahore. Bruised and battered from communal violence that accompanied the mass migration of people across the newly drawn boundaries that claimed thousands of lives and displaced millions, the prospect of building a modern city from scratch was seen as a crucial first step towards the region's recovery and a new beginning for the newly independent nation (Kalia 1999 [1987], Prakash 2002). As P.L. Verma the chief engineer of Punjab explained, none of the existing cities in Punjab "possessed sufficient magnificence and glamour to make up for the psychological loss of Lahore suffered by the strife-stricken but proud Punjabis."<sup>16</sup> The region's government needed a new capital with a functioning infrastructure and hence the idea of Chandigarh came into fruition.

While the impetus behind building the new city was to provide Punjab region with a new capital, the conception of Chandigarh came to embody an even grander purpose of symbolizing Nehru's desire for a city of the future, a city that would represent the promises and potentials of a modern, prosperous and independent nation, unburdened by the region's past. Thus Chandigarh's identity from its very inception was that it had to be a "modern city". As architect Vikramaditya Prakash points out, "modernity, in the

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Prakash (2002:7)



Nehruvian lexicon, meant that the aggressive effort to catch up with the West” (2002:3).

Prakash goes on to explain,

The modernism of the postcolonial Nehruvian state, then, was the reciprocal response of the colonized, the self-empowering act of dissolving contradiction by simultaneously rejecting and appropriating the unsolicited gifts of colonized. For Nehru, the repudiation of the colonizer did not also entail the repudiation of the promises of the colonial enterprise...Modernism, thus, was a mimicry of the colonial project, of the aims and aspirations of colonization, imitated and re-legitimized by the English-educated, Indian elite. (2002:11)

Following the accidental death of Matthew Nowicki in 1950, the American architect who was initially assigned the task of designing Chandigarh, Albert Mayer, Nowicki’s partner on the project also withdrew.<sup>17</sup> A second team, led by Le Corbusier, the man frequently credited for pioneering the modern movement within European architecture took over the project and authored the Master Plan for building Chandigarh (Kalia 1999 [1987]: 70-120).<sup>18</sup> Defined by the Master Plan, Chandigarh’s identity remains characterized by specific European interpretations of modern urban life despite the style and philosophy being later rejected by architects and styles that succeeded the modernist movement.

Le Corbusier’s team, which included his cousin Pierre Jeanneret, his colleague Maxwell Fry and Fry’s wife Jean Drew assisted by a team of nine Indian architects and urban planners, designed most of the public buildings and monuments in Chandigarh (Prakash 2002:13). Jeanneret, Fry and Drew also designed buildings on the Punjab University campus in Sector 14, as well as another smaller shopping center, Kiran

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<sup>17</sup> See R. Kalia “The Meyer Plan” (1999 [1987]: 45-69)

<sup>18</sup> Even though elements of modern architecture have since been employed by several Indian architects and urban planners and are found in cities throughout the subcontinent, Chandigarh remains the only city planned according to the master plan authored by Le Corbusier.

Cinema hall and housing quarters for government employees in Sector 22, which formed the archetype for Chandigarh's residential sectors (Joshi 1999).

Chandigarh's neatly planned streets are devoid of the disorder and chaos commonly found in most Indian cities. As Prakash points out, "one of the significant and overwhelming characteristics of Chandigarh is that it is not a visibly Indian city" (2002:33). He observes,

One feels this everywhere, in the streets that lack in "Indian" intimacy in their scale, in the details of the architecture that is stark and clean, and most of all in the urban order that is rectilinear, neatly organized by sectors and house numbers. Traffic flows in an orderly pattern and there are no wandering cows. All the shops are defined by "frame control" – no profuse ornamentation; identical heights, similar windows. And most of the houses in the city, both those built by the state and those privately developed, follow strict, minimalist rhythms (2002:33).

Prakash goes on to assert that many Indians consider Chandigarh to be "un-Indian" largely because it is "self-consciously constructed as a 'modern' city" (2002:33). Despite the rejection of modernist aesthetic even by many of the city's residents, Chandigarh's government and planning commission has carefully controlled the appearance of any new commercial buildings built in the city, uniformly applying the sensibilities of the modernist tradition.

For Le Corbusier, Chandigarh provided an opportunity to conduct his experiment in modern urbanism and functionalism, creating a new city from scratch based on a single master plan, a model for radically different social practices (Le Corbusier 1957). Underlying his philosophy for Chandigarh was the notion that a city should be planned keeping four objectives in mind: housing, work, recreation and traffic. Chandigarh is zoned accordingly and distributed and organized into identical yet mutually exclusive

sectors laid out on a grid. For modernist movement, the geometrical characteristics of the grid were essential to a functioning society, exemplifying the urban existence, distinguishing civilized from primitive, and human from non-humans (Taylor 2001:26). According to Le Corbusier, straight lines and the grid imposed strict disciplinary practices needed for all functioning societies (Taylor 2001:27). Within this logic, Chandigarh was to lead the region in the “march towards order,” a region with anything but an orderly past.

Writing about Chandigarh’s conception, the prominent Indian architect Charles Correa eloquently summarized the city’s relationship to the surrounding region as a city born “without an umbilical cord in the harsh plains of Punjab” (1987: 197). While the architecture of Chandigarh — monotonous and cold concrete buildings, the restraint and discipline of living on a grid — is certainly in stark contrast with the vibrant and boisterous landscape of the surrounding Punjab region, to Punjabi Sikhs Chandigarh also represents the elusive offspring of post-independence Punjab region and its tumultuous relationship with the Indian nation. Disagreements over Chandigarh’s custody that played a central role in the Sikh community’s discontentment in the 1960s and the 1970s are ongoing among regional politicians. Even though Punjab Sikhs claim Chandigarh to be a part of Punjab, Chandigarh has rarely figured prominently in Punjabi cultural consciousness.

In a conversation on the topic, columnist Randeep Wadhera who lives in Chandigarh and writes for the local Tribune newspaper explained to me that, “unlike Amritsar and other cities and villages throughout Punjab, Chandigarh has never been part

of Punjabi films or Punjabi literary tradition for that matter.” He went on to comment “Chandigarh is an odd one out! It’s not a Punjabi city. It’s a transplanted from the west and often Punjabis don’t really know what do with it.” Wadhera also acknowledges that over time this difference has led to a “general difference in cultural attitude in Chandigarh’s residents and people from Punjab,” where many of the city’s residents maintain an elitist attitude, dissociating themselves from the migrants flocking to the city from the surrounding rural areas.

Writing about Brasilia,<sup>19</sup> a modernist city similar to Chandigarh, Holston notes that modernism is discursively grounded in the prospect of good governance of society using “architecture and city planning as an instrument of social change and management” (1989:12). Holston notes that modernist architecture “claims to be an international movement that advances development by building new kind of cities which in turn transform daily life” (1989:10). Underlying modernists’ minimalist premise is the rejection of bourgeois lifestyle and the desire for more egalitarian and utopian ideals. The problem with modernist movement in architecture, as Holston points out, is that it takes a teleological view of history (1989:8). The fundamentals of modern architecture and urban planning are founded on de-historicization and de-contextualization in which only the “imagined future is posited as the critical ground in terms of which to evaluate the present” (Holston 1989:9). “The teleological view of history dispenses with a consideration of intervening actors and intentions, of their diverse sources and conflicts,”

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<sup>19</sup> Brasília, the current capital of Brazil, was also planned and developed in the late 1950s by architect Oscar Niemeyer who belonged to the modernist tradition and was strongly influenced by Le Corbusier.

as Holston explains, “thus, modernism’s relation to history is strangely disembodied” (1989: 9-10).

On one level Chandigarh, a city built as the prototype for Le Corbusier’s modern utopia, today has come to symbolize the failures and limitations of the modern movement: the notion of a city built according to a single Master Plan, the coldness of its forms, the monotony of its façade, a city designed for cars and not pedestrians, a city disconnected from the region’s past. As Holston succinctly notes, modernist cities with their obsessive emphasis on regulation, standardization and control often “produce anonymity among its residents, not equality” (1989:24). Yet simultaneously for the migrants arriving in Chandigarh, its modernist legacy does not represent an urban planning failure but a path to a promising future.

Despite the intentions of its architects and urban planner, cities are made and remade by its residents, its citizens (Holston and Appadurai 1996, Sassen 1994). As Holston and Appadurai note, “cities (including their regional suburbs) are especially privileged sites for considering the current re-negotiations of citizenship,” (1996: 187-188) in an era of globalization where the notion of citizenship is constantly being redefined along with the role of nation-states in its citizen’s lives (Ong 1996, 1999). Similarly, migrants who arrive in Chandigarh looking to access migration-related services too redefine the city, economically by creating a demand for new services, and more importantly culturally, by rendering the city through a rural lens and challenging the conventional definitions of what it means to be “modern.”



11: Sector 17 City Center – Central Piazza (2009 photo by author)



12: Sector 17 City Center (2009 photo by author)



13: The Secretariat Building Designed by Le Corbusier (2009 photo by author)



14: Government Museum and Art Gallery in Chandigarh (2009 photo by author)



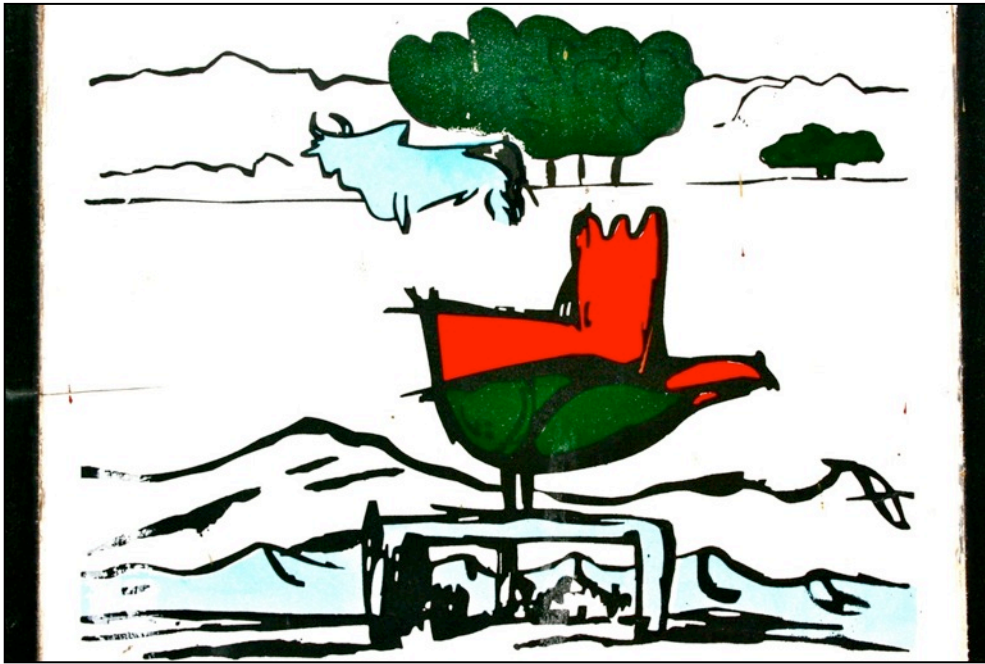


15: A Punjabi Farmhouse with an Eagle Shaped Water-Tank (2009 photo by author)



16: A Newly Renovated Bungalow Next to One Built in the 1960s (2009 photo by author)





17: A Replication of Le Corbusier's Early Sketches of the Region (2009 photo by author)



18: A Replication of Le Corbusier's Human-Scale Measurements (2009 photo by author)

### Chandigarh as the North Indian Knowledge Society

Chandigarh consistently ranks the highest for its quality of life out of all the Indian cities on the Human Development Index. It is also the city with the highest per capita income in the nation, Rs.119240 (US\$2328) in 2008-2009, and the highest rates of literacy (81.9%)<sup>20</sup>. For the upper and middle class residents who settled here shortly after the city was developed, these figures signal the success of modern urban planning. However to an anthropologist, they also raise new questions including who gets to live in Chandigarh? Who is excluded from these figures?

Originally planned for 500,000 inhabitants (Kalia 1999 [1987]:5), Chandigarh's population according to the 2011 census<sup>21</sup> has nearly doubled to 960,787. Over the past two decades Chandigarh's surrounding areas have developed into several satellite towns including, Mohali, SAS Nagar and Zirakpur in the state of Punjab and Panchkula and Mani Majra in the state of Haryana to accommodate the growing population and influx of migrants to the region from all over the country. The combined population of Chandigarh and its surrounding areas now exceed 2 million residents. Recent census data suggests that by the year 2015, the combined population of Chandigarh and its surrounding areas will rise above 3 million, with an anticipated addition of 1.3 million new migrants moving to the area in search of work and/or educational opportunities (Agrawal 2002:284). Not all migrants who move to Chandigarh come from Punjab. Many come from central and south India, and are part of the internal migration motivated by

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<sup>20</sup> Statistical information extracted from an official report on "Analysis of Economic Growth in Chandigarh" available on Chandigarh's official website: [<http://chandigarh.gov.in>]

<sup>21</sup> Results of the 2011 census are published in the office report titled "Provisional Population Totals" available on Indian on Census of India's website: [<http://censusindia.gov.in/>]

economic opportunities. Unlike the young Jat men from Punjab who fall into the category of international migrants, for whom Chandigarh is a temporary stop along the way, most of the working class Indian internal migrants who move to the region end up settling in or more often around Chandigarh with their families.

Developed outside of Chandigarh's administrative boundaries, the satellite towns of Mohali, Panchkula, SAS Nagar, Zirakpur and Mani Majra imitate (often poorly) Chandigarh's architectural and urban planning sensibilities. Yet they do not have in place or do not enforce the same regulations that imposed within Chandigarh by city's government. Maids, cleaners, drivers, service sector employees and lower level government employees often commute daily into Chandigarh to work for or serve the more affluent bureaucrats, businessmen and other upper-middle class residents living in the center of the city. Also starkly visible in the satellite towns are the urban poor living in slums and shantytowns that are part of the landscape in most Indian cities except Chandigarh. Commenting on Chandigarh's population growth, cultural geographers Margaret Walton-Roberts and Geraldine Pratt note:

Chandigarh epitomizes India's socio-economic duality, simultaneously manifest in business sectors filled with computer training centers, private banks, immigration consultants and other services directed at increasingly globally mobile consumers; and instant ramshackle shelters at the edges of the city for those who flock from the neighboring poverty-stricken states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (2005:177).

Pushing the poor out to the margins (several small villages were destroyed and their residents displaced to make way for the new capital)<sup>22</sup>, and the existence of satellite

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<sup>22</sup> See page 690 in Jackson and Bandyopadhyay (2009) for a map and names of destroyed villages.

towns as Holston points out, “reproduced the distinction between the privileged center and dis-privileged periphery... which modernists wanted to deny” (1989:24).

While Chandigarh once symbolized Nehruvian aspirations for a the new nation, today the city is all but overlooked by national level politicians who have largely reverted to celebrating the region’s rural past as the source of authenticity and expression of indigenous identities. In addition to its functioning infrastructure and high quality of life, the restrictions imposed on the city as part of the Master Plan have tamed some of the development boom currently being experienced in other North Indian cities, often driven by multinational business and private corporations.<sup>23</sup> Instead much of the neoliberal investment and development is taking place in the satellite towns surrounding Chandigarh where low cost housing and farmlands are increasingly being turned into gated residential communities, glamorous regional headquarters for multinational technology companies, and exclusive shopping malls and multiplex cinemas encouraging material consumption and promising the lifestyle associated with the growing middle class in India.<sup>24</sup>

Chandigarh is also attractive to young men and women, both Jats and non-Jats from the surrounding regions because the city along with its satellite towns is also home to a booming Information Technology (IT) industry and Business Process Outsourcing (BPO),<sup>25</sup> referred to simply as the “Call Center” industry. Their decision to move to

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<sup>23</sup> For instance, in 2010 the Chandigarh government stalled a 53-acres luxury high-rise project proposed by Tata Corporation, one of the largest Indian multinational corporations, to be built along the western border of the city despite gaining approval from the Punjab government.

<sup>24</sup> See Borsius (2010) for a detailed discussion on the growing middle class in urban India.

Chandigarh is often motivated by their and their families' perception of Chandigarh as part of the emerging Indian "knowledge society" (Nisbett 2009: 7-19). In a similar study of Bangalore, a South Indian city transformed by the booming Information Technology (IT) industry, anthropologist Nicholas Nisbett uses the concept of "knowledge society" to explain the "changes in human society emerging through the growing use of information, and of information and communication technologies in mediating society, economy and global culture in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (2009:7).

In addition to these regional economic actors Chandigarh is also home to the regional Punjabi film and television industry and most notably a thriving immigration industry. Encapsulated within the immigration industry are various small immigration consultants, privately owned language and test preparation centers and large global resettlement agencies that claim to provide a one-stop shop for all of the needs of perspective migrants seeking to study and relocate abroad. Chandigarh's European landscape, the emphasis on form and functionalism, the middle class life of its residents and the stress on English medium education all adds to the city's allure of it being a "un-Indian city," as one of my research participants referred to it as "almost like abroad."

Chandigarh provides an unusual yet useful location where I examine the themes of migration among young Punjabi men. Following anthropologists James Holston and Arjun Appadurai who explain that cities are places "where business of modern societies gets done, including that of transnationalization" (1996:189), I look at how the modernist

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<sup>25</sup>Also referred to as ITES-BPO (Information Technology Enabled Services – Business Process Outsourcing).

landscape of Chandigarh against which transnational processes of migration and global capitalism play out. Holston and Appadurai observe that, “in the era of mass migration [and] globalization of the economy...cities represent the localization of global forces as much as they do the dense articulation of national resources, persons, and projects” (1996:189). Chandigarh makes an interesting case study not only because it represents, from its very conception, a microcosm of where regional, national and global ways of being converge, because for Punjabi emigrants it is an in-between space – neither the point of origin, nor a destination – yet necessary nonetheless in the overall journey to a more prosperous middle class future characterized by transnational mobility, material consumption and middle class status. The young Punjabi men see their stay in Chandigarh as a rehearsal for their upcoming lives in western countries like England, Australia, Canada, Denmark, and the United States.

In looking at Chandigarh as a temporary stop along the way to their ultimate destinations, I also closely examine who gets to embark on these journeys. Who gets to move to Chandigarh and ultimately emigrate abroad? Migration is often a deeply gendered process (Benhabib and Resnik 2009; Epps, Valens and González 2005). In exploring the gendered dynamics within migration from Punjab, I look at how Punjabi men are allowed to be mobile and migrate first to Chandigarh and then abroad, while Punjabi women’s movements are often restricted, and their bodies often policed by the men in their families.

Ultimately, this dissertation seeks to understand the experience of transnational male migrants arriving at the first stop on their journeys – Chandigarh, where they spend

time dreaming and preparing for what their lives might be like upon reaching their final destination, the diaspora. I explore what “being modern” means to them, a process that is often characterized by a sense of mobility between rural, urban and transnational spaces. Whereas the city’s architecture is deliberately meant to deny its residents a connection to their past and regional traditions, I observe how young Punjabi men claim belonging within the city’s landscape by deploying what anthropologist Nicola Mooney calls a “rural imaginary” (2011:174-179), through very public celebrations of their agrarian heritage. Seen from their perspective, it would be entirely possible and not out of the ordinary for a *mela* (fair) to suddenly appear in the middle of Sector 17 City Centre.

### Participants

The initial focus of my research, as defined in my dissertation proposal was to study the production and circulation of regional Punjabi language cinema. As I started exploring the lives of young men who make up the largest cinema going audiences in North India, my interests shifted to looking at the topics of gender and migration. Though the popular themes within regional cinemas still remains a key feature within this ethnography, the intersecting themes of mobility, migration and masculinity now form the dominant themes around which I examine the lives of my research participants and around which this dissertation is organized.

The primary participants of my research included young Punjabi men like Palli, Davinder and Ranbir who moved to Chandigarh from rural areas of Punjab. I interviewed around 30 young men, most unmarried, between the ages of 18 and 29. Most of them were Jat, a caste identity associated with affluent landowning farmers in Punjab (Mooney

2011, Sandhu 2009). Most of the men belonged to Sikh families, and their parents supported them financially during their stay in Chandigarh. For the majority of the men I met and interviewed during my fieldwork, their primary motivation in moving to Chandigarh was to gain technical skills and learn enough English to pass their International English Language Training System exams with an adequate score.<sup>26</sup> As a recruiter for a test prep center explained to me,

IELTS is the first hurdle in the application process to study abroad. The more bands you score on your IELTS, the better your chances are to move to a more desired country. You need a minimum of 5.5 bands to qualify for British visa, 6 bands for Australian, 6.5 bands for Canada and 7 bands for America.<sup>27</sup>

While IELTS is often the only requirement for most student visas that ranges anywhere from three to four years, a work visa also requires two to three years of work experience in the IT or IT-related fields. Many men applying for work visas also move to Chandigarh to acquire training in the IT field, and the two to three year work experience needed for most skilled worker visa applications.

The length of time the young men I interviewed spent in Chandigarh ranged anywhere from three to four months to three to four years. They arrived in Chandigarh with few belongings, living in paying guest accommodations (commonly referred to simply as PG's) that have proliferated throughout the city and the surrounding areas with often two or three men sharing a single room. None of these men had a job in

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<sup>26</sup> In addition to IELTS, Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is another exam used to test for language proficiency.

<sup>27</sup> The overall band score ranges from 1- 9. The requirements explained by the recruiter are not official requirements. In fact each university within a given country has its own requirements, varying institution by institution. A complete list can of what these are can be found on IELTS official website: [<http://www.ielts.org/>]



Chandigarh. They relied on their parents as their only source of income. When they were not attending classes, many spent their time hanging out in Sector 17 City Center.

Through informal interviews and participant observation, which often took the form of simply hanging out and spending time with them in Sector 17 or at their PG and listening to their conversations, I tried to gain a sense of what their lives were like back in their villages, in Chandigarh, and what they thought their lives would be like upon emigrating. In exploring the relationship between gender and migration, I learned that Punjabi media and popular culture frequently characterize successful models of Punjabi masculinity with being mobile and being able to move between different rural, urban and transnational spaces. In moving from their villages to Chandigarh, I look at how young Punjabi men negotiated the unfamiliar landscape of the modernist city. I also looked at how the young migrants contended with the urban utopia and its strict mechanisms of governance and control having grown up in Punjabi villages and with largely feudalistic systems of governance. Lastly, I tried to get a sense of the different steps these men took and the strategies they employed in claiming belonging with Chandigarh and in preparing to migrate abroad and planning for their upcoming future.

I also, often informally, interviewed family members of many of young men I met during my fieldwork. While some families were living in Chandigarh and I visited them regularly, on occasion I traveled to the villages of three of my participants to meet and speak to their families. In my conversation with Punjabi parents, I tried to get a sense of how sons are often treated differently from daughters within traditional Punjabi families, along with how they make decisions about migration, work, marriage and

inheritance. With families living in the village, I also tried to get a sense of how parents imagine their sons' lives in Chandigarh and abroad.

Lastly I conducted formal interviews with locally influential individuals in positions of power such as producers of Punjabi films, university professors, writers and journalists, representatives from regional religious and cultural organizations as well as instructors and recruiters running the local test prep centers. Through our conversations, I tried to gain a broader cultural and historical perspective on Punjabi migration, gender, regional development and the effects of globalization. I also used these opportunities to also share my own findings and receive feedback from this group of individuals who often guided my research in directions I would not have explored on my own.

### Setting

Within Chandigarh, there were two public sites that are particularly significant to this ethnography. There was the original City Center within Sector 17, developed as a part of Le Corbusier's Master Plan for the city. This site is significant because many of the migrant men from Punjabi hung out here. Also many of the IELTS test prep centers where the participants of my research studied were located in Sector 17. When not attending classes or training sessions, these men spent their time walking around in the City Center admiring the brand-name showrooms in the shopping complex or watching Punjabi films at Neelam Cinema, a mid-century art-deco cinema hall that was built when the City Center was developed. The once gleaming and beautiful façade of the cinema hall is today in desperate need of repairs with outdated projection technology and limited film offerings. Despite its dilapidated condition, the young Punjabi men frequented

Neelam Cinema regularly because it showed the latest Punjabi films and the tickets were relatively affordable – Rs. 60 (US\$1.20) for a lower stall seat and Rs. 90 (US\$1.70) for a balcony seat. In addition to featuring a large outdoor public space, the presence of the local bus terminal nearby also made the City Center at Sector 17 an attractive hangout spot for young men who moved to Chandigarh from rural Punjab and often relied on public transit as their primary form of transportation.

The City Center in Sector 17 not only appealed to young Punjabi emigrants, but also the local university students and young professionals (men and women) working in the call center industry and residing in Chandigarh and surrounding satellite towns. Following my initial introduction to Palli, Davinder and Ranbir I spent the first four months of my fieldwork hanging out in Sector 17, conducting interviews with students studying at IELTS coaching centers. I also attended recruitment seminars offered by the immigration consultancy agencies and conducted interviews with the recruiters and other staff members who worked at these institutions. I regularly accompanied young men to Neelam Cinema to watch the latest Punjabi films followed by casual conversations at a restaurant nearby where I asked the men questions about the representations and themes depicted on screen.

Another public site of significance, where I spent some time interviewing young men born and raised in Chandigarh is the “DLF City Centre” located in the newly developed Rajiv Gandhi Chandigarh Technology Park (RGCTP) located on the far eastern periphery of the city. Spread out over 111 acres and referred to simply as “Technology Park” by locals, RGCTP was developed in the early 2000’s and inaugurated

in 2005. In addition to the DLF City Centre, Technology Park also houses 37 multinational information technology companies including Infosys, India's largest multinational technology company with headquarters in Bangalore.

Unlike the modernist and utopian sensibilities of Sector 17, Technology Park embodies the neoliberal aspirations of an emerging, globally interconnected, Indian economy (Brosius 2010, Nisbett 2009). Since it is located outside and away from the center of the city, buildings within Technology Park are exempt from having to follow the minimalism and rigidity of the modernist aesthetic. Instead the buildings in Technology Park appear futuristic with extensive use of glass and aluminum in their facades, contorted and curved in unexpected ways, and at times resembling spaceships from a popular science fiction movie. Instead of a pedestrian friendly outdoor shopping complex, the DLF City Centre in Technology Park, developed by the private real estate developer DLF Limited, is an air-conditioned shopping mall featuring upscale brand names stores, chain restaurants, a multiplex cinema and a posh cocktail lounge. Unlike the City Center in Sector 17, the DLF City Centre is not easily accessible by public transportation. Instead we often drove or took an auto rickshaw to reach DLF City Centre where one has to pay a small fee to park his or her vehicle in the multilevel parking garage concealed underneath the building in which the mall is housed.

Where Sector 17 City Center was frequented by Punjabi migrants, local student and working class men and women from surrounding areas, the DLF City Centre attracted a more affluent, upper-middle class clientele, including many young men and women who worked in the surrounding offices in Technology Park. We also watched one

of the Punjabi films I discuss in Chapter 4 at the DT multiplex cinemas in DLF City Centre, where the cost of tickets is three to four times the cost of tickets at Neelam Cinema. While Neelam Cinema only has one screen, while the multiplex simultaneously features six or seven films in Hindi, Punjabi and English and offered a more westernized viewing experience.

In addition to these two specific sites, I spent much of my time conducting interviews with young men living in Sector 22. Adjacent to Sector 17 and Sector 21 (where I lived,) Sector 22 was developed as a prototype of residential sectors in the modernist city, featuring a mixture of government and private housing, a smaller shopping center and the Kiran Cinema, another mid-century art deco movie theatre designed by Maxwell Fry himself (Joshi 1999). Fry's wife, Jane Drew, designed the government homes that still serve as residential quarters for mid-level government employees (Joshi 1999, Prakash 2002). Nearly half of the men I interviewed for my research, both migrants from rural Punjab and those who were born and raised in Chandigarh lived in Sector 22 or I met them while hanging out in Sector 22. The City Center in Sector 17 and the DLF City Centre in Technology Park were sites where I observed the public lives of city's residents, while Sector 22 seemed as a space where I gained entry into their domestic lives.

In the evenings, I regularly accompanied my research participants on *gerdis* (rounds), driving aimlessly through the streets of Chandigarh. During these practices and the conversations that occurred while driving around, I gained an understanding of how masculinity is enacted through physical mobility, as I moved beyond what these men said

and believed about being men to see what they actually did to be men. Hence the streets of Chandigarh, and driving through them, became an important mobile site where I engaged in participant observation and where many conversations about migration, masculinity and success took place.



19: Sector Map of Chandigarh (Available on Chandigarh Administration Website: <http://chandigarh.gov.in/>)



20: DT City Centre in Rajiv Gandhi Information Technology Park (2009 photo by author)



21: Buildings in IT Park Breaking From the Modernist Tradition (2009 photo by author)

### Timeline and Methodology

I gathered data using conventional methods of ethnographic research that included formal and informal interviews, long-term participant observation and focus group discussions. I spent a year in India conducting fieldwork, from January – December 2009. I returned to India for three months during the summer of 2010 to conduct follow-up interviews. I recruited some of my research participants through formal methods of distributing flyers at various educational institutions and training centers and in the Sector 17 City Center and in shopping center in Sector 22. However, I ended up meeting a majority of the participants in my study through the network of friends and acquaintances I had developed upon arriving in Chandigarh.

I conducted forty-six formal interviews and five focus groups ranging in length from one to two hours. I recorded all of my interviews and focus groups using a digital recorder, which I later translated and transcribed. Informally, I spoke to as many men and women as I could about my research whenever I had the opportunity. I noted many of these exchanges in 4 x 6 inch notebooks, which I carried with me everywhere I traveled. Also recorded in these notebooks are numerous memos that I wrote during fieldwork, some directly related to my research, some tangential to the topic I was exploring while several of the memos are simply observations of daily life in Chandigarh and the surrounding region. I also collected relevant newspaper articles from one of Chandigarh's daily newspapers, the Tribune. I did some archival research about Chandigarh's history in the Punjabi university library. The articles and documents I found in newspapers and in the archives helped me contextualize my understandings of gender and migration within



broad political and cultural arenas of social life in South Asia and in South Asian diasporas.

Most of my interviews were conducted in Punjabi, some in English and a couple of them were conducted in Hindi. Having lived in the Chandigarh throughout childhood my native fluency in Punjabi and Hindi helped cultivate a sense of intimacy and trust with my research participants. I also learned several vernacular expressions and phrases in Punjabi referencing specific discursive ideologies about gender and migration. In my analysis, I tried to translate them into English and make them intelligible for non-native audiences, however I do so with the awareness that the culturally specific discourse that some of the phrases evoke cannot be fully and effectively conveyed regardless of the quality of the translation.

I have changed the names of all of my participants to protect their identity and ensure anonymity. I have also disguised some of the locations by altering minor details. The progression of some of the events, as they appear in the dissertation are not necessarily in chronological order and are instead grouped together according to themes. I have combined my conversations with two of the main participants, Palli and Ranbir with comments made by two additional interviews I conducted with two separate men with similar life-history details. I only combined responses to my questions and interview segments that were similar in theme, collapsing them into one cohesive narrative for the purpose of maintaining clarity, a practice used by other ethnographers including Matthew Gutmann (2007:31-32).

I was careful not to misrepresent any of my participants and kept citations of interview transcripts and translations as accurate as possible, cutting only repetitious sentences. All of the interviews, places and institutions are real. Whenever possible, I based my analysis on interview transcripts. During one of my interviews my audio recorder stopped working and there are couple of interviews where the background noise rendered the interview inaudible. In these three instances, the details of our conversations have been reconstructed from written field notes and memory. While memory is not a perfect substitution for an interview transcript, I have tried my best to reproduce the conversation as accurately and faithfully as possible.

Lastly, I often carried a digital camera and took pictures of signs, buildings and various places and objects to help me recall specific details from my time in the field. I have included a select number of the images at the end of each chapter to provide the reader with the sense of different locations I discuss with in this dissertation. I did not include pictures of my research participants unless they gave me the permission to do so. I employ these photographs not simply as illustrations of my text, but often as an inspiration for what I write, allowing the visual details and memories to guide the storytelling process. By using photography as a visual medium of communication and representation, I also hope these images will enhance the sensory experience of reading ethnography (Pink 2006).

#### NRI – Ethnographer

I met a number of my research participants through Palli, the young man who approached me in the Sector 17 City Center while photographing the postmodern

architectural installation. Despite having explained to him my research agenda and my role as an ethnographer, Palli often introduced me to his friends simply as an “NRI,” omitting my role as a researcher. Palli and his friends referred to me as just another migrant, who belonged to Punjab and lived in Washington D.C. and was visiting home. Though I made a point to explain to each research participant my intentions and the ultimate goal of my research, I also realized that being an NRI, and having grown up in Chandigarh (where my grandfather still lives), gave me an advantage as I was treated as often treated as an “insider” from the onset. I was seen as someone who is not entirely a foreigner, someone who belongs to the region and understands local customs and practices, a position most ethnographers work hard to achieve.

When the topic of my research would resurface, Palli, his friends and their family members would commend me for “advancing Punjabi culture,” placing me in essentialized tropes of *bahron aaya* (foreign returned), *pardahku* (studious), *mehnati munda* (hard working young man). Though they never mentioned this explicitly, a few of the young men expressed genuine excitement that someone from their own community who spoke the same language as them wanted to document their lives. On few occasions, I got the sense that some of the men felt compelled by their peers to participate in my research study, which I tried my best to discourage. Palli and his friends saw me as fitting the model of successful masculinity that they themselves hoped to one day attain.

During our earlier conversations, Palli and his friends would ask me to describe Washington D.C. as they listened intently to even the most mundane details of my daily life back in the United States of America. “I heard you call the police if the *master-ji*

[teacher] slaps you, you can even have him arrested,” said one young man, referring to the common practice of corporal punishment widely used in Indian educational institutions. “I heard Americans start driving at the age of sixteen, and their parents buy them a new car on their sixteenth birthday,” asked another, before inquiring about the make and model of the car I myself drove. “I heard guys and girls often cohabit even before they’re married without their parents objecting,” a Punjabi mother once said in a scandalized tone before she demanded to know my marital status and living arrangements.

At first I responded as openly and honestly as I could, trying to paint for them a picture of what my university, my apartment, my car and my day-to-day life looked like. I tried to repudiate misconceptions and stereotypes of the United States. Soon I also realized that young men often used the descriptions I divulged to measure their own lives against. At times they would express their frustrations and disenchantments with the lack of opportunities and facilities available in India whenever I talked about life abroad. Over time, I grew cautious of not idealizing my personal experiences as an NRI thereby reaffirming their conviction that one had to emigrate to be successful.

Being in this position of NRI-ethnographer, at times, created a hierarchical power dynamic between us that I had to continuously negotiate, at times more successfully than others, through the entire duration of my fieldwork. I deliberately avoided fitting into the stereotypes of Punjabi NRI’s who are often depicted in Punjabi films as flamboyantly dressed, unable to speak Punjabi properly and seen as driving luxury cars and displaying their foreign acquired wealth. I did not have to work hard at achieving. I am a fluent

Punjabi speaker and used it as my default language unless my research participants indicated another language preference. Living on a student budget, I did not own expensive designer clothes, I lived in a modest, sparsely furnished two-bedroom apartment in my grandfather's house and I rode around on an old *Bajaj sooty* (mini-scooter) which never exceeded 40 kilometers (roughly 25 miles) per hour, for which I was regularly and jokingly ridiculed.

I treated all of my research participants and their family members with respect, letting them define what masculinity, modernity, migration and success meant to them while, reserving all opinions and judgments even at times when we disagreed. As I got to know young men like Palli, Davinder and Ranbir, I realized that had it not been for the series of circumstance following the Partition that my grandparents settled in Chandigarh in the 1963, and my parents emigrated to California in 1989, I could very well be in the same position as the young men I was now interviewing for my research. This realization helped me see my participants with a sense of empathy while remaining critical of the patriarchal notions of masculinity and male dominance these men embodied. It also helped me develop intimate bonds with the people I met during fieldwork, with whom I shared a similar cultural past.

## CHAPTER 3

### BECOMING MEN IN CHANDIGARH

#### Migrants' Chandigarh

A few days after our initial meeting in the central piazza of the City Center, I received a phone call from Palli asking me to meet again. Conveniently, my apartment was a fifteen-minute walk from Sector 17, making the City Center an ideal location for scheduling meetings and conducting interviews. As I made my way back to the City Center, I saw Palli, Davinder and Ranbir sitting idly on a bench underneath a tree not far from where I had last seen them. As I approached the three men, Palli recognized me from a distance and got up to shake my hand. A tall and lanky man in his early 20s, Palli was dressed in blue Levis, a grey Puma hoodie and Nike sneakers. As he spoke, I noticed that his front tooth was chipped slightly, giving him a somewhat mischievous look to match his charismatic personality. He spoke Punjabi with a pronounced rural accent that urban residents often stereotype as being louder, coarser, and more animated than urban accents.

Ranbir, the most stylish of the three men, was also in his late teens. His shiny black hair was gelled up into spiked tips that rose from his scalp like the spines of a porcupine. He wore aviator style sunglasses with the words “*Red Bay*” inscribed on one of its lens, presumably imitating the popular American brand *Ray Ban*. A thin gold chain with a shiny *khanda* dangled from his neck. A circular secular symbol incorporating intersecting swords and a dagger, the *khanda* represents the *Khalsa* coat of arms and is ubiquitous in Sikh iconography along with the *Ik Onkar*. Ranbir’s light complexion, his

hazel colored eyes, his well-defined jaw and sculpted features made him look like a Bollywood actor. However his striking appearance was diminished slightly by the presence of adolescent acne scars covering his cheeks. Palli jokingly referred to Ranbir as “*saada* [our own] Shergill,” after the popular Punjabi actor Jimmy Shergill known for his boyish on-screen persona.

Sitting on the bench next to Ranbir, Davinder was a turbaned man in his late teens. Even though he was shorter than Ranbir, his meticulously tied turquoise turban, which pointed upwards, made him appear taller. Dark wavy hair sprouted sparsely from his upper lip and chin. Davinder was the only one of three men who tied a turban and had retained his unshorn hair, whereas Palli had grown up as a *mona* (shaven) Sikh<sup>28</sup> and Ranbir had recently trimmed his hair, forgone his turban and started shaving few months before moving in Chandigarh. In contrast to Palli’s extroverted personality, Davinder was shy and reserved. He only spoke when he was spoken to. Most of the time he would listen quietly, letting the other two men do most of the talking.

Palli was the most outspoken of the three men and dominated most of our conversations. As we talked, we were regularly interrupted by other young men his age who would stop by from time to time to greet him. He informed me that he had been living in Chandigarh for six months. The youngest of three siblings, Palli belonged to a middle class family of farmers. In addition to owning land, which was being looked after by his father and his elder brother, his family also owned several *thekas* (local liquor shops) around his village. Palli grew up in a small village named Kaonke Kalan, a three-

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<sup>28</sup> Also referred to as “*cut surd*”

hour bus ride from Chandigarh. “It’s just after you pass a town named Jagraon, near the Sikh temple Mehdiana Sahib,” he told me enthusiastically, searching my face for signs of familiarity. I had neither heard of the village nor the Sikh temple. I only knew of Jagraon from having driven through the town while traveling to another part of Punjab. Over time, as I developed a close friendship with Palli, I would visit his village on couple of occasions and had the opportunity to meet his entire family.

In next six months, I received several spontaneous phone calls from Palli asking me to join him and his friends in the City Center. Even though Davinder and Ranbir were also present during most of these meetings, a rotating circle of other young Punjabi men regularly accompanied us. Most of these men had also moved to Chandigarh for language and vocational training that would lead to possibilities for transnational migration. The group of young men with whom Palli hang out in Sector 17 ranged in number anywhere from one or two to at times seven or eight. Palli had befriended most of these men upon moving to Chandigarh (either at his IELTS coaching center or through his roommates and friends). Palli often addressed his friends as *veer* (brother), suggesting a sense of camaraderie rooted in the similar agrarian background and the shared experience of having moved to Chandigarh in pursuit of the similar dream of migrating abroad. He rarely used the term to address men from non-Punjabi backgrounds, especially men older than him, for whom he reserved more formal terms such as “sir” or “mister.”

When scheduling a meeting, Palli would often suggest that we convene near the fountain in the central piazza of the City Center. Designed by M. N. Sharma, the chief Indian architect on Le Corbusier’s team, the fountain is yet another embodiment of the



abstract forms modernist architects privileged over symbolism and iconography. Erected from a rectangular water chamber inset about 10 feet into the ground, it features a thin bare concrete wall with a large circular hole through its middle. On top of the wall is an abstract sculpture of a bird spitting water from its beak into the chamber below. The fountain's dull facade blends seamlessly into the gray concrete building in the City Center. However for Palli, Davinder and Ranbir, the architectural significance of this structure held little relevance. Palli often referred to the fountain as "cookardan walla fuhara," which crudely translates to "fountain with the roosters," associating the sculpture with symbols of agrarian life within in Punjabi villages. Similarly, the City Center's central piazza has a couple of banyan trees with concrete benches surrounding its trunks. The three men referred to the benches as a *sath*, a Punjab term traditionally used to describe the outdoor public area in Indian villages where official meetings are convened.



22: Sector 17's Iconic Fountain (2009 photo by author)

By deploying these linguistic and symbolic practices that are traditionally associated within agrarian settings, Punjabi migrants like Palli, Davinder and Ranbir often reimagined the landscape of the modernist city through a rural lens; a practice that Mooney refers to as “imagining the rural” (2011:184). Mooney explains that by drawing on rural tropes and imagery of village life, Punjabi popular culture often foregrounds and celebrates rural Punjabi traditions as essential to contemporary Punjabi identity. “These representations, perhaps paradoxically, present village life as timeless and unchanging but at the same time are rooted in and reinforce the transitory and ephemeral nature of village life for urban and transnational Jats” (2011:185). Palli, Davinder and Ranbir drew on these representations as an ongoing source for cultural authenticity and “rural pride,” as strategic ways of negotiating their place as an outsider within Chandigarh.

Punjabi migrants' use of the rural imaginary as a source of an authentic identity and a strategy for claiming belonging was not only limited to Chandigarh. The young men I interviewed for my research often also rendered transnational migration processes and conceptualized their diasporic communities through a similar rural lens. For instance, a young man named Manpreet whom I met towards the end of my fieldwork and had later befriended on Facebook.com, tagged me in a photograph that featured an image of a plane taking off with passengers and cargo sitting on its roof. Written in Punjabi along the side of the plane were the words "Punjab Airlines," and a caption below that read "Canada, Canada, come Canada come... which direction are you headed?" The passengers and cargo on top of the plane and the text accompanying the image were referencing popular representations of Punjab Roadways buses that are notorious for being over-crowded, and the bus conductors who frequently allow passengers and cargo to be piled on their roofs. These over-crowded buses are a common feature of the rural landscape in Punjab. The caption references phrases bus-conductors repeatedly bellow at bus stops to get passengers' attention and to indicate the direction in which the buses are headed.



23: Image From Manpreet's Facebook Profile Featuring Punjab Airlines.



24: A Punjab Roadways Bus Carrying Passengers on its Roof (2009 photo by author)

While this digitally edited image re-imagined the physical processes of transnational migration to be synonymous with an everyday bus ride on a Punjab Roadways bus, commenting on the sense of familiarity, accessibility and popularity of such journeys, another image on Manpreet's Facebook profile featured a world map entitled "The World According to India" where Canada was labeled as "An extension of Punjab." The map reimagines the expansion of Punjab's geographical landscape, conflating it with its cultural landscape to include the diasporic communities in transnational locations.

"Punjabi and potatoes – you will find them everywhere in every corner of the world," Palli told me, when I had asked him about his impressions of the diasporic community. By deploying these discourses that not only evoke but celebrate senses of rural identity and cultural authenticity and superiority, young men familiarize themselves, their peers and family members with new and unexpected experiences that accompany leaving home, moving to a city like Chandigarh and eventually migrating abroad. These are also some of the strategies for establishing belonging and cultural citizenship that Punjabi and other South Asian migrants use, often rejecting the assimilationist logic of enculturation in favor of retaining their distinct ethnic and cultural identities living in diasporic communities.<sup>29</sup> While popular, these ideas were not universally shared by all Punjabi migrants and often differed from one individual to another, and in practice were at times more successful than others.

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<sup>29</sup> See Rudrappa (2004) and Shukla (2003) on experiences of Indian immigrants in the United States and in the diaspora.

The motivation to claim Chandigarh as rightfully belonging to Punjab, as I discussed briefly in Chapter 1, also has historic and geopolitical implications. Despite the Anandpur Sahib Resolution being largely ignored by Indian politicians and leaders on the national level, Punjabi politicians and Sikh religious leaders continue to voice demands that Chandigarh rightfully and exclusively belongs to the State of Punjab and its citizens. Coincidentally, during the year that I conducted my fieldwork (2009), elections took place in India, and the debate over who should control Chandigarh resurfaced repeatedly in regional media and newspapers<sup>30</sup>. On numerous occasions, I even noticed graffiti on the park benches and other public property in Sector 17 City Center inscribed with statements like “ChD is Punjab.”

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<sup>30</sup> During the Punjab Vidhan Sabha held on February 27<sup>th</sup> 2009, the Governor of Punjab, Gen SF Rodriguez accused the Congress-led UPA government of continuing its discriminatory policies and demanded that the control over Punjabi-speaking areas, including Chandigarh, should be given to the State of Punjab. This was one of several incidents reported in the local news media where regional leaders had, as the Tribune’s headline read, “again laid claim to Chandigarh.”





25: Graffiti on Public Benches in Sector 17 City Center (2009 photo by author)

### Contradictory Conceptions of Chandigarh

Despite the fact that most young migrants I interviewed staunchly agreed with Punjab's claims over Chandigarh and firmly believed that the control over the city should be handed over to the Government of Punjab, they also recognized that Chandigarh had benefited from being autonomous in creating a more functioning educational and legal infrastructure, accomplishments that other Punjabi cities like Amritsar had been unable to achieve thus far.

Accompanying the steady increase in transnational migration from Punjab over the last three decades, Chandigarh has witnessed a growth of migrant consultant sector that includes immigration consultants, and other migration related professional services such as IELTS and IT training centers. Many of the immigration agencies and coaching

institutes are owned by individual entrepreneurs living in Chandigarh who recognized an opportunity to capitalize on the growing demand for migration related services in the region. This industry is officially referred to as “immigration consultants,” but the companies will often differentiate themselves through self-invented labels such as “international education and career guidance services” or “global resettlement agencies.” Their offices range in size anywhere from a small classroom where individual instructors provide basic IELTS coaching to a handful of students to large multi-story building with gleaming marble covered lobbies where teams of sharply dressed employees promise every service imaginable to perspective migrants –IELTS coaching, job placement abroad, scheduling airport pick ups and making living arrangements upon arriving in the foreign country.

As Walton-Roberts observes, these consults are often transnational migrants themselves with the most current knowledge of immigration policy changes (2012). If visa applications are denied, immigration agents will partner with legal advisors to challenge the decisions, and often effectively brokering a path to transnational migration. Based largely in and around Chandigarh, these professional brokers and consultants not only, as Walton-Roberts notes, “mentor skilled immigrants interested in migration, but also engage in market making by pushing the migration ‘dream’ and promising to make it a reality for those with the human, if not social capital necessary” (2012:18).

Though rural Punjabis regularly complained about the high cost of living in Chandigarh, most Punjabi migrants preferred taking their IELTS courses and vocational trainings in Chandigarh. Their choice to move to Chandigarh was driven partly because



of the abundance of educational resources available in the city and partly because immigration consultants, educational institutions (private and public) and training centers based in Chandigarh are often imbued by Punjabi migrants with a sense of legitimacy and credibility that was missing from institutions based in other Punjabi cities.

In their conversations, the young men often conveyed a clear understanding of the shortcomings of emigration pursued through illegal and illegitimate channels. “The *faida* [profit] is in going *pakka* [permanently or legally], there is no *faida* in going *kacha* [temporary or illegally],” one young migrant explained to me. As I spoke with my research participants and their families, I learned that many migrants and their parents carefully weighed each migration related decision to determine the likelihood of economic *faida* (profit) and *nuksaan* (loss) to the entire family before making financial investments towards their sons’ and daughters’ overall process of migration.

Stories of migration-related fraud appeared frequently in Punjabi daily newspapers, detailing cautionary tales of innocent Punjabis and their families duped by greedy immigration agents. In a later conversation, Palli revealed to me that his father was a victim of an emigration scam in 1990. His father wanted to migrate to Canada and his neighbors who had family members living near Toronto promised Palli’s father a visa for Rs.400000 (US\$8100). “After all the documents were paid for and finalized, and the passports were made, a week before he was getting ready to leave, they [the neighbors] demanded additional Rs.100000,” Palli recalled. “We had already given them all of our savings. My family couldn’t produce the money in such a short period of time, so my father was left behind.” Like Palli, almost all of the men I interviewed knew someone

within their own families or in their villages who had become victim of similar scams while pursuing their dreams of emigrating abroad.

When I asked Palli if his family reported the incident to the authorities, he shrugged and explained “there is no *insaaf* [justice] in Punjab. The government does not impose *kanoon* [law]. There’s too much corruption in this country, too much disparity between the rich and the poor.” He cited these reasons as also reasons why he wished to leave his homeland. “One cannot develop here! Dreams of a better future can only be realized abroad,” he concluded grimly.

Fearing financial loss similar to what Palli’s family endured, Punjabi families often thoughtfully selected migration-related services, vetting the agencies by asking around and seeking recommendations through their kinship networks. Migrants and their families often scrutinized even the smallest details when signing up for migration related service such as IELTS coaching and IT Training offered by immigration consultants. One young man who had recently moved to Chandigarh advised me to pay attention to, among other details, the condition of the building in which a given immigration agency was housed and the number of agents hired by the agency, looking for even the faintest hints of deception that might suggest a potential scam.

Punjabi migrants also assigned more legitimacy to immigration consultants, brokers and agencies based in Chandigarh than agents and agencies in other cities like Amritsar partially because they believed that unlike the Punjabi police, the Chandigarh police was more vigilant about cracking down on emigration fraud and persecuting violators. During an interview, Baljinder, a young migrant in his late 20s, directed my

attention towards a document posted on Chandigarh police's website that lists the names and information of 134 registered emigration consultants based in Chandigarh that are endorsed by the police department. Baljinder claimed that the presence of such documents gave the immigration consultants and brokers in Chandigarh a perception of legitimacy. In contrast, Punjab police's website only lists the name of the offenders caught running immigration and other scams.

The notion that Chandigarh's residents and businesses were more law abiding than those in other urban areas of Punjab was also rooted in the functionalist legacy of the modernist city. The young men distinguished Chandigarh as different from other Punjabi cities overwhelmingly for its restrictions and laws, which were also some of the main reasons why they chose Chandigarh for their educational pursuits. Despite the higher rents, tuition and overall cost of living in Chandigarh, the expenditure was often justified because of the perceived certainty in enabling transnational migration and the profit that might result in the long-term.

The young men's concerns about legitimacy and legality of immigration services, which initially drew them to pursue migration-related services based in Chandigarh at times also contained seeming contradictions. Even though Palli, Davinder and Ranbir viewed Punjab's legal system as dysfunctional, they regularly complained about Chandigarh's stricter enforcement of quotidian laws, such as having to wear seatbelts while driving a car or helmets while riding scooters and motorcycles. "*Eithe sakhti bahut hai*" [there are too many regulations here], complained Palli, when I asked him about the primary differences between Chandigarh and other Punjabi cities. Despite being aware of

these differences, the three men often disregarded the city's prohibitions on littering, urinating, drinking and smoking in public places. They frequently reveled in breaking traffic regulations by driving through an intersection at a red light or by having four men travel on the same scooter or motorcycle when the rules only permitted one rider and one passenger.

When I confronted Palli about these contradictory attitudes, he explained that he felt exempt from following the stringent rules of this city because "we are not from here, the rules don't apply to us." He went on to explain, "we are Jats, and we make up our own rules... *Jattan nu kahi nahi rokda* [no one stops Jats in Punjab]!" Ranbir had a specific term for this sense of entitlement. "We call it *jatitude*," he declared proudly. Central to this attitude of exceptionalism was the expectation that Chandigarh had to accommodate their rural sensibilities, and not the other way around. I saw this as yet another part of the strategy these men deployed to negotiate space the modernist city; however at the same time they also deployed the rural Jat trope to distinguish themselves from the long-term residents of Chandigarh and to indicate their temporary residential status in the city.



26: Young Men Breaking Traffic Regulations in Chandigarh (2009 photo by author)



27: Outside a Local *theke* (Liquor Store) Near Chandigarh (courtesy of Gaurav Sogi)

Despite their claim that the city rightfully belonged to the State of Punjab, Palli, Davinder and Ranbir simultaneously conceded that Chandigarh's long-term residents – the bureaucrats, the businessmen, the government employees and their families – were not “full Punjabis.” They, especially the non-Punjabi speakers, did not share the same *sanskar* (moral values) as Punjabis living in the village. When I first asked Palli, Davinder and Ravikant for their impressions of the modernist city, they unilaterally described the city as *gannda* (filthy or polluted) or filled with *ganndagi*. At first I was perplexed by this response, given that Chandigarh is consistently ranked as one of the cleanest city in the nation. When I explored the topic further, I discovered that they were often referring to moral un-cleanliness, rather than environmental. Ranbir explained:

In Chandigarh, people are like dogs. They don't have *sanskar*. They are only driven by greed. They will even fight you over two rupees. For instance, I know this guy who lives here. He is my maternal aunt's son, also a son of Jats. I took few rupees from him because I needed some change to pay the rickshaw driver. As soon as we returned home, he started nagging me about returning his money. Chandigarh is dirty. Its residents are selfish. They'll speak sweetly to your face, but as soon as you turn around, they'll stab you in the back.

In response to Ranbir's impressions of Chandigarh's residents, Davinder's descriptions of life back in the village were often romanticized and idealized. His voice, at times, conveyed a sense of longing and nostalgia frequently shared by members of the diasporic community:

The environment back in the village is pure and simple. We have fresh water and clean air. Neighbors regularly help each other out. People are friendly and generous. They won't even ask thousands of rupees to be returned... Jats might be gullible, but we are passionate people. If we admire you, we will offer you everything we own. And if you betray us, we will cut you into pieces without thinking about the consequences.

In statements like these, young migrant men often voiced a sense of ambivalence and suspicion of the city's foreign landscape and its residents. By differentiating themselves from other Punjabis who lived in Chandigarh, the men often implied (though never explicitly stated) that Chandigarh's modernist landscape had the ability to transform even their own family members into selfish, greedy city people who, given the opportunity would prey on the gullibility of village folks. These discursive practices further added to the notion that Chandigarh is a "city transplanted from the west," and hence devoid of regional culture and traditions. Many migrants I interviewed also believed that traditional moral values were endangered in Chandigarh. Several of my research participants cited the fear of losing morality in the modernist city and thereby losing the family's *izzat* (honor) as the primary reason why they would never allow their sisters and daughters to live in Chandigarh unaccompanied by a family member or a relative.

The general suspicion of urbanites by villagers is not unique to Chandigarh or Punjab. Bollywood films, the popular Hindi language cinema based in Mumbai, regularly features stories of innocent women who move to the chaotic city in search of acting or modeling opportunities and end up being taken advantage of by rich and powerful men bearing soon-to-be unfulfilled promises. Rural residents often view cities and urban spaces with a sense of suspicion and fear. However, I was more surprised to learn that the Punjabi migrants' views of Chandigarh as a foreign and unfamiliar place was not mirrored in their perceptions of the diasporic communities living outside of India. Palli, Davinder and Ranbir described abroad, and specifically the diasporic communities, as "more Punjabi than Punjab." Palli explained:

Punjabis living abroad/in diaspora have retained their *sabhyachar* [cultural heritage], and their traditional ways of life... My *mama-ji* [maternal uncle] and family is in Canada. They visit the *gurudwara* [Sikh temple] every Sunday. They insist on teaching their kids Punjabi. Their kids are not allowed to speak English at home. They watch Punjabi films and read Punjabi newspapers. They value their language and culture, and work to keep it alive ... [They are] unlike the Punjabi living in Chandigarh, who refuse to speak their *maa-boli* [mother tongue] and are ashamed of their heritage. These people think Punjabi is beneath them, so they hurl English at you to assert their superiority.

These idealized conceptions of the diaspora often played a crucial role in informing the young men's decisions to migrate to specific transnational locations such as Canada, England, the United States and Australia. For Punjabi migrants like Palli, Davinder and Ranbir, this choice to migrate to specific locations was above all informed by the connection with Punjabi-speaking diasporic communities whom they could turn to for emotional and maybe even financial support.

### Learning IELTS – Punjabi Style

While Davinder and Ranbir had some grasp of English, Palli's occasional attempts to converse in the language were largely incomprehensible to me. When he spoke English he reminded me of stereotypes of American tourists in foreign countries, trying to get directions by indiscriminately stringing together phrases using a foreign dictionary. I would often end up staring blankly at him, trying to make sense of what he was saying. Despite my inability to understand his English, it did not deter Palli from trying again and again. Often our conversations quickly reverted back to Punjabi after some failed attempts. During our initial meeting, it took me few minutes to figure out the name of the institute, "Touchstone," where the three men were enrolled to receive IELTS coaching. Palli pronounced it "Tustoon."



In addition to the immigration consultants, an entire industry of privately owned training centers has also emerged throughout the city and its satellite towns to meet the growing demand of students and perspective migrants moving to Chandigarh to study for the IELTS or to gain IT or Engineering training. Touchstone is among one of the more prominent IELTS institutes located in Sector 17 City Center. Though Palli, Davinder and Ranbir were only enrolled in the IELTS test prep course, according to the institute's glossy brochures, it also offers a variety of additional services including "IT Training" and "Management Training." Billboards and advertisements of institutes like Touchstone have dominated Chandigarh's landscape.

The five-letter word "IELTS" is ubiquitous throughout the city. The word is frequently accompanied by promising phrases like "reach your potential by studying abroad" and images of planes taking off. The more prominent institutes and training centers are concentrated in Sectors 17 and 34, while the smaller and less expensive establishments are scattered near the peripheries of the city and throughout the satellite towns where commercial real estate is more affordable. Unlike the locally owned businesses in Chandigarh that are often named after family ancestors or Hindu gods and goddesses, most of these agencies and institutes have Anglicized names that deliberately evoke transnational educational discourses. For instance, Brain Tree, Competition Cell, Mr. Visa, AWIS (Around the World Immigration Services) and WWICS (World Wide Immigration Consultancy Services), just to name a few.

This industry also builds on the colonial legacy of education and the post-colonial emphasis on English within the contemporary Indian educational system.<sup>31</sup> The coaching and training centers benefit from a booming IT industry in and around Chandigarh, and the accompanying perception of the city as North India's "knowledge society" (Nisbett 2010). Families living in rural Punjab refer to Chandigarh as the place where their sons can go to "learn computers," and "learn IELTS" or other vocational skills that might put them on a path towards transnational migration.

IELTS and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) are the two main standardized tests and passing them is often the first crucial step in the process of applying to study abroad. While the universities in the United States prefer TOEFL, IELTS is the more commonly used language proficiency test preferred by universities in Australia, Canada, England and other European countries. Throughout Northern India, the British Council, IDP Education (an Australian student placement firm) and the University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations (Cambridge ESOL) administer the IELTS exam. Costing an average fee of Rs.8500 (US\$172), the IELTS examination is administered to an estimated 800 candidates every week within the State of Punjab alone. The exam is broken into four "modules," that include: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. The cost of tuition for the training centers vary widely depending on the resources offered. On average, an IELTS coaching center in Sector 17 charges anywhere from Rs.15,000 to Rs.25,000 for a course that lasts three to six months.

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<sup>31</sup> See Chopra and Jeffery (2005) for more details on the education system in contemporary India.

The courses are often taught by local teachers of English and include an elementary overview of English grammar and comprehension followed by practice tests. From what I observed during my visit to one of the IELTS coaching centers, both on the part of instructors and students, the primary emphasis seemed to not be on mastering the language. The training instead focused largely on being able to learn the exams themselves, the type of questions one should anticipate and how to answer them. “Many don’t bother studying. They believe that they will perform well on the exam simply by enrolling in the course,” a teacher for one of the training centers told me. “When they don’t score well, we encourage them to re-enroll in the four-month course and try again. We also give them the option of taking more advanced courses that are time-intensive and cost additional fees.”

When I met Palli, he had already taken the IELTS course once and received an overall score of 2.0 bands, which he was certain he could improve after retaking the course. “I didn’t study attentively the first time around. I was distracted by the different things there are to do in Chandigarh – hanging out in Sector 17, going to the cinema daily, meeting up with different friends.” Despite his rudimentary grasp of English, Palli spoke about migration with an absolute certainty – as though it was only a matter of time before he boarded a plane heading out of the country. “Just let me clear my IELTS once,” he declared confidently, “all I have to do is show twenty lakh rupees [US\$40500] in my bank account and I too will get a student visa for Canada.” He went on to explain that upon arriving in Canada, he would find a job and obtain permanent residency while Davinder and Ranbir obediently listened to his plans. “I’ll get a job, study hard, work

hard, and earn money.” He continued, “Once I show them [the Canadian government] that I have money in my Canadian bank account, they will automatically make me a permanent resident.”

Palli described his upcoming life in Canada with enthusiasm and optimism, a life for which he was willing to study and work hard upon emigrating, the two things he admitted he had not been very successful at doing while living at home in his village and in Chandigarh. When I asked Palli if he anticipated any challenges in Canada given his limited English skills, he replied confidently, “Its no big deal brother! Once I live there for few months, my English will automatically improve. Beside they speak Punjabi everywhere in Canada,” he assured me.

Palli’s comments reinforced notions shared by numerous other Punjabi migrants for whom learning and speaking English was often secondary to the process of migration and to being successful abroad. For majority of them, their ultimate goal in moving to Chandigarh was “to clear [pass] IELTS.” In this sense, the three men often thought of taking the IELTS exams as first of the numerous other hurdles they must overcome on their path towards transnational migration. The three men approached this hurdle with a mix of excitement and resentment. They were excited to be on the path to transnational migration while they resented having to pay to acquire the language skills they needed to migrate. In contrast, their descriptions of abroad seemed to be imbued with a sense of transformative potential and hope where new languages and other skills could be easily acquired without having to enroll in expensive coaching and training programs.

The service economy that has grown to accommodate the needs of these temporary residents included not only the immigration consultants and training centers, but also a whole series of privately owned and often informal businesses. For the city's residents, these migrants provided new sources of revenue. Walking through the residential neighborhoods surrounding Sector 17, I saw numerous multi-story houses where one or more floors had been converted into an internet café or a student hostel, or PG's. Flyers advertising *tiffin* specials, home cooked food delivered in circular tin lunch boxes, were plastered on lampposts throughout the residential sectors offering migrants a cheaper alternative to eating out in restaurants and eliminating the need to cook their own food at home. Even local restaurants and barbershops catered to migrants' needs at discounted "student" prices. Young migrants often relied on the network of friends or word of mouth to seek out these services. Though the residential sectors surrounding Sector 17, Sectors 20, 21, 22 are densely populated with these service providers, PGs, internet cafés and tiffin services have also proliferated throughout other sectors of Chandigarh and the surrounding satellite towns.



28: IELTS Test Prep Centers and Training Institutes in Sector 17 (2009 photo by author)



29: At a Recruitment Seminar by WWICS (photo courtesy of Margaret Walton-Roberts)





30: A Smaller Immigration Consultant Offices in Mani Majra (2009 photo by author)



31: IELTS Advertisement Above the Kotkapura Bus Station in Punjab (2009 photo by author)

### Life in a PG

Around the time I met Palli, he was moving out of his PG accommodations in Sector 29 where he complained that he was paying too much rent. He had decided to move into Ranbir's PG for the time being until he found more affordable accommodations. Adjacent to Sector 17, Ranbir's PG in Sector 22 was a ten-minute walk from their institute. Palli had agreed to contribute Rs. 2000 (US\$39) towards the monthly rent. He would share a one-bedroom and one-bathroom unit with Ranbir and his roommate, whom Ranbir referred to as "uncle," a term many Indians often use liberally to address two elders<sup>32</sup>. Uncle, whose name I later learned was Gurjit, was in his early thirties, married with kids, and also studying for his IELTS exams. "He's rarely here on the weekends," Ranbir explained, "he returns home to spend time with his kids." I accompanied Palli and Ranbir to check out the new accommodation.

Opposite the Inter-State Bus Terminal and across the main boulevard that separates Sector 17 and Sector 22, Ranbir's PG was located on a narrow residential street lined with three-story row-houses identical in shapes and sizes but varying in color. Built in the 1950's, Sector 22 was the prototype of a residential sector developed under Pierre Jeanneret and Jane Drew's direction. The style of house in which Ranbir lived is commonly referred to as a *das merla makan* (250 sq. yard house). They are standard throughout Chandigarh, and their modest and functional designs make them ideal real estate investments for middle class families who often occupy the ground floor and rent

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<sup>32</sup> The terms "uncle" or "auntie" are widely used in urban setting to address adults. It signifies respect, especially when talking to an elder. The terms do not necessarily signify kin-based relationships as they do in western and American contexts. Instead, in Punjabi there exists a distinct set of terms (such as *mama, taya, bhuha, massi*), which are used specifically to address a relative distinguishing paternal and maternal family members and relatives.



out the two floors above. In comparison, the more exclusive *ik* or *do kanal kothis* (500 or 1000 sq. yard bungalows) with manicured lawns and luxury cars lining the driveways are largely concentrated in the older residential sectors of the city (2 through 19) occupied by the city's more affluent upper middle class residents.

With a flat brick façade whitewashed pale yellow and a pair of small balconies protruding from each one of the three equally proportioned floors stacked vertically, Ranbir's PG, house number 309, appeared unchanged from the time it was built. Whereas some of his neighbors had made additions to their houses, adding pillars and other ornamental details in marble and sandstone. The front lawn of 309 was paved over completely and a cluster of scooter and motorcycles occupied one end of the driveway. A white Maruti Swift, a popular economy car manufactured in India, with a sticker of the Australian flag on its bumper was parked on the other end. Aside from a small hand painted sign that read, "TO-LET FOR BOYS" hanging from the exterior wall of the ground floor, there were no other indicators that the house was a PG. Before we entered the hallway that led to the stairs to the second and third floors, Ranbir pointed to a retractable metal gate and cautioned, "they [the landlord] locks this gate at 10 PM. If you are running late, don't ring the bell. Instead call my mobile and I'll come unlock it."

We climbed a flight of dark concrete stairway, and as I entered Ranbir's room a damp stench of sweat and cigarettes filled the air. The floor was littered with candy wrappers, used matchsticks and cigarette butts. As I looked around the room, Ranbir casually apologized for the smell. He told me that he himself rarely smoked, but Gurjit (his roommate) was a regular smoker. Lit by two florescent tube lights, the spacious room

was largely filled by two queen size beds. Ranbir and Palli would share a bed while Gurjit was in town. With minimal furniture and personal belongings, the room felt like a cold dormitory, lacking the warmth and coziness of traditional Punjabi homes.

A dusty old fan hung from the ceiling. The walls were painted white. They were completely bare except for a calendar featuring a portrait of Guru Gobind Singh gazing angelically off into the distance while balancing a falcon on his index finger. Aside from the beds, the room also contained a steel armoire filled with blankets, duffle bags, some clothes, and a small dressing table with a full-length mirror. A pile of IELTS test prep books sat on the dressing table next to a can of Axe deodorant spray. Stuck to the mirror was a sticker depicting a sketch of Bhagat Singh twirling his moustache, an Indian revolutionary nationalist who was executed by the British Raj in 1931. Singh, who belonged to a Jat Sikh family, is yet another iconic figure who is celebrated among young Punjabi men as an exemplar of Punjabi/Sikh masculinity and bravery.



32: A *Das Merla Makan* (250 sq. Yard House) in Chandigarh (2009 photo by author)



33: Sticker of Bhagat Singh Twirling his Moustache (2009 photo by author)

As we sat down, Ranbir retrieved two mobile phones from his pocket and attached them to the black wires dangling from the large electrical socket board sitting between the two beds. When I asked Ranbir why he carried two mobile phones, he explained that he used one to call his family, while the other phone with a larger display was reserved for downloading and watching videos. He grabbed the black Nokia phone with a shiny glass screen and started punching away at the buttons. “Let me play a fun song,” he said to me, before thrusting the phone into my hand. The song was titled, *Ramta Meman Wich* (Ramta Among White Women).

Derived presumably from the English word ma’am (an abbreviation of madam), “*mem*” is a term that has found its way into the rural Punjabi vernacular. It is used when referring to white foreign women and evokes the stereotype of Europeans as somewhat naïve and sexually promiscuous. Sung by Hazaar Singh Ramta, a prolific Punjabi folk singer and poet as I later discovered, the song describes his journey to England where he finds himself among hoards of white women swooning over him. The video accompanying the song was a slideshow of images of Ramta, an elderly turbaned man with a grey beard holding a *tumbi* (similar to the image I saw on the signboard at Wagha border) intercut with scantily dressed white women and postcard shots of London’s iconic landscapes: Piccadilly Circus, Tower Bridge, Westminster Palace. In few of the images Ramta had been digitally photo-shopped between two women wearing bikinis and tank tops that read “ModelsGoneBad.com.” Palli and Ranbir watched the video with preadolescent sexual amusement and excitement. I asked Ranbir where he had found the video. He replied “Ju-toob” (YouTube).

While watching the video, Palli half jokingly asked me if I could introduce him to *meman* back in Washington DC. When I pointed out the logistical difficulties in introducing two individuals on opposite sides of the globe, he replied, “Oh brother, I am not asking for an in-person introduction,” instead he wanted me to initiate a conversation between him and my single female friends via Facebook. “I hear they like Punjabi guys,” he reasoned. “I’ll romance them into visiting Punjab, give them a tour of our fields... maybe one of them will take me back and get me a green card.” When I pointed out that during our first meeting he had expressed interest in moving to Canada (not the United States), he replied “Oh brother! Whether it’s Canada, America or Australia, it makes no difference. I just want to go abroad and experience some *meman*...”

After showing me *Ramta Meman Wich*, Palli and Ranbir continued discussing the different girls they had dated in the past and ones they would like to date or have sexual encounters with now. Their conversations about dating women in Chandigarh or abroad were largely limited to wanting temporary sexual relationships, while both men expected to only marry Punjabi brides from Jat families selected by their parents. Ranbir recalled the last date he had gone on, a young woman named Parul whom he had met in Sector 17. He complained to Palli, “Its too expensive to date women in Chandigarh.” He recalled the date where he had taken Parul to the DT City Centre in the new IT Park.

First she wanted to shop. She had me spend Rs. 4,000 on a new jacket from United Colors of Benetton, and some other knick-knacks. Then she wanted to eat Chinese, I ended up spending another Rs. 1,000 on our meal, which she only ate half of. Then she wanted to see a movie, so I ended up spending another Rs. 300 on our movie tickets. Only after suffering the loss of Rs. 5000 to 6000, I was able to have sex with her.

Palli, who had been listening to Ranbir's story intently with his mouth wide open, consoled him at the end, "that's devastating my friend, you suffered some major financial *nuksaan* (loss)."

The two different perceptions of masculinity and sexual attitudes of women in London and Chandigarh among Punjabi men like Palli and Ranbir are revealing. As depicted with *Ramta Meman Wich*, there existed a general perception among Punjabi migrants that in the "west" their ethnic and agrarian heritage, their muscular physiques, their skin color often darkened over time from having grown up playing and working in scorching sunny fields of Punjab would make them more desirable to western women. Palli and Ranbir seemed partly amused and partly reassured by Ramta's reverse objectification by the *meman* who presumably found him desirable for embodying the oriental and exotic masculinity and "started chasing after him." Whereas, Palli and Ranbir suggested that women from Chandigarh preferred dating Punjabi Jat men partly because Jat men are stereotyped hyper-masculine and partly because many, like Ranbir, belong to affluent families and had the resources to spend money on them. This was another way in which the young men differentiated Chandigarh from abroad, and perhaps thought of the city as less modern than abroad.

Ranbir later informed us that despite having a wife and two children back home, his roommate, Gurdip had been carrying out an extramarital affair with another woman he met in Chandigarh. "He keeps girlfriends in Chandigarh, and a wife at home... he's a smart man," noted Ranbir. Palli, amazed by this revelation, admitted to us that he was still a virgin. Ranbir laughed, mocking him momentarily before sympathizing with his

conundrum. “Growing up, I had the sister syndrome,” Palli told us. “I addressed every woman I met as *bhanji* [sister], that is why I have not been lucky,” he joked before reciting the following couplet:

*Oh babbe Arjuna  
Lokkaan kol darjna  
Sade kol ik nahhi  
Ki assan tere Sikh nahhi?*

Oh Guru Arjun Dev  
Others have dozens  
I have not one  
Am I not your disciple?

Apart from going to the cinema, mobile phones and the internet were often the only alternative sources to entertainment available to young migrant men who had moved to Chandigarh with few necessary belongings like clothes, shoes, and things that could be contained within a single duffle bag. Many young men like Palli floated around from one PG to another where rooms came furnished with at least a bed and a couple of blankets, and might even include a small kerosene stove along with few dishes. While couple of the young men I met owned laptops, most would visit cyber cafés nearby and spend hours surfing the internet, downloading music, watching videos and chatting online.

Palli, Davinder and Ranbir not only simply downloaded music videos from the internet but also shared them diligently with each other and their friends through text messages or Multimedia Messaging Service (MMS). The types of digital media circulated among young men through mobile phones occasionally also included pornographic images and videos; many made amateurishly using handheld recording devices. Though none of the men I met during my fieldwork disclosed having

participated in the making of pornographic videos, many claimed to know others who had. Palli, Davinder and Ranbir regularly discussed various MMS sex-scandals that had dominated Indian news media following the growing use of mobile phones. Even though they were aware that the women who were victims of MMS sex-scandals would suffer severe social repercussions, young Indian men (migrants and non migrants alike) frequently encouraged the production and circulation of such videos, applauding the makers' sexual conquests.

As depicted within *Ramta Meman Wich*, visual media circulating through mobile phones and over the internet played a crucial role in conflating regionally dominant notions of Punjabi masculinity and hetero-normative sexuality with transnational mobility and migration. By inserting a figure of traditionally dressed Punjabi man between foreign landscapes and bodies of women and racially and sexually objectified, the video reasserts the transnational mobility as inherent characteristic of successful masculinity that accompanies financial and sexual rewards.

### Becoming Men

For most young men I interviewed, the move to Chandigarh was the first time they had lived on their own and away from the watchful and disciplining gaze of their elder family members, relatives and neighbors. While the transition from the village to Chandigarh offered new opportunities for fraternal bonding, exploring their sexualities, and developing a sense of masculine selfhood, the young men simultaneously mourned the loss of the comforts they had grown accustomed to back at home where everything was often provided to them at their bedside. "In the village, you were handed a cup of tea



while still in bed, wrapped in blankets,” complained one young man. “Cooking, cleaning, washing, the women in your family did everything for you. Here you have to do everything on your own!”

Despite the financial support they received from their parents, who regularly sent them money for rent, food, tuition fees, and shopping in Sector 17, many of the men expressed a sense of gendered achievement having persevered through the challenges of urban life. They frequently used variations of the phrase *bannda ban jaana* (to become a man) when reflecting on their experiences of having lived on their own, away from their families and childhood homes. While the overall sense of becoming a man was often conveyed as a singular experience that the men from rural Punjab underwent upon moving to Chandigarh, the exact definition of what it meant to become a man and the various processes through which the status was achieved varied from person to person.

For Palli, who had not yet had a sexual experience with anyone, an important feature to attaining manhood entailed developing a hetero-normative relationship with the women he met in Chandigarh, and eventually losing his virginity. Palli made several failed attempts to befriend the young women enrolled in his institute, or the ones he met through his network of friends. At one point, he even asked one of his English teachers out on a date and was promptly reprimanded. Having to share an accommodation in an exclusively male PG where the landlord had strictly forbidden any young women to enter the men’s rooms, Palli also faced the difficulty of not having a place where he could host a sexual encounter even if he had found a willing partner. One summer night, following a homosexual experience in the Sector 17 bus station where another passenger had

apparently fondled his crotch, he called me out of desperation, asking me if I could provide him with the contact information for any female sex workers in Chandigarh. “It went to my head,” he told me over the phone, explaining his reaction to the bus station encounter. When I told him that I could not assist him in finding a sex partner, he hung up feeling slightly betrayed and did not answer my phone calls for almost a week. Sensing his discomfort and uneasiness around the issues of sex and sexuality, I avoided talking about it in our future conversations.

Having had limited sexual experiences growing up in their villages, the young men often developed their sexual identities after moving to Chandigarh through personal explorations, though conversations with each other, and frequently basing their ideas on the films they watched and from what they saw and read online. While men and women in Punjabi films are rarely sexualized, more recently Hindi films have started offering bolder yet, nevertheless hetero-normative, portrayals of South Asian sexualities. In contrast to Indian cinemas, the young men from rural Punjab considered Hollywood and European films to largely feature very explicit portrayals of sexuality, often conflating them with pornographic films (they referred to as “blue” films), which almost always featured non-south Asian characters and actors.

Most of the young men from rural Punjab also considered homosexuality, along with gay and lesbian identities to be urban or western phenomenon, and at time classified it as unusual in Punjab or “un-Punjabi.” While none of the men I interviewed stated anything explicitly or violently homophobic, some them did associate homosexual behavior and being gay to a loss of a dominant masculine persona. For instance, during

my first meeting with Ranbir, I had told him that I also worked as a filmmaker in the United States. He responded by asking me about a rumor he had heard questioning his favorite action hero, Vin Diesel's sexuality.

Did you meet Vin Diesel? He is my favorite action hero! He is superb in xXx. He has great body, with large *dhole sholle* [biceps and other muscles]... But my friend who lives in New Jersey told me that he [Diesel] is gay. He said he had read about it on the net. Do you know if what my friend is telling me is the truth?

Lacking any substantive information on the topic, I could neither confirm nor deny the rumor Ranbir had heard. However the tone in Ranbir voice suggested repulsion towards gay and non-normative sexualities and its potential for eclipsing one's masculinity by marking even someone like Diesel as inadequate, who would otherwise be considered hyper masculine or stereotypically "macho."<sup>33</sup>

The notion of "being gay" in the construction of masculinity, as CJ Pascoe notes, has less to do with the sexual orientation or identity but classifies the otherwise normative male body with "subordinate" masculinity, which threatens the hegemonic notions of masculinity, making "being gay" an abject position (2007:7-15). Gender, in this sense, following gender studies scholar Judith Butler is "constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation" (Butler 1993:3). While sexual categories such as "gay" and "lesbian" were rarely part of public discourse in Punjab and Chandigarh as they often are in larger cities like Delhi, Mumbai and in western counties, sexual practices and the construction of sexuality among Punjabi men nevertheless reinforces Pascoe's observation on how "becoming a

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<sup>33</sup> See Gutmann (2007 [1996]: 24-30 for a longer discussion on the concepts of "macho" and "machismo."

man” is a social process rather than just an identity associated with specific bodies (2007:156-74).

Whereas for Palli and Ranbir the process of becoming a man was embedded with sexual meaning and often achieved through gendered and sexual practices, Davinder, who grew up in a orthodox Sikh family, conveyed a distinctly different sense of masculine identity that was achieved through series of religious rituals and traditions. As the only son in the family with three younger sisters who lived in his village near Fatehgarh Sahib, Davinder explains, “growing up, my parents regularly told me that I am Guru’s Sikh, the equivalent of *sawa lakh*” referencing guru Gobind Singh’s Khalsa slogan “*sawa lakh se ek laddaun*” (my one Khalsa Sikh possesses the strength of 125,000 men). Davinder explained that he “became the man” at the age of 15 when he underwent the *dastaar bandhi* (turban tying) ceremony, a rite of passage that all unshorn Sikh men are expected to undergo during their adolescent or teenage years. “My *dastaar bandhi* took place in Fatehgarh Sahib Sikh temple. My *mama-ji* [maternal uncle] tied my first turban, and from that day onwards I stopped wearing the *patka* [the head wrap often worn by Sikh boys] and started tying a turban.” Having grown up as a *mona* (shaven) Sikh, Palli was never expected by his parents or family to wear a turban, while Ranbir who had trimmed his hair before he started wearing the turban, also avoided the ceremony altogether.

Despite belonging largely to Sikh families, the majority of the young men I met from rural Punjab whom I interviewed for my research had cut their hair and self-identified as *mona* (shaven) Sikhs. Only seven out of all the forty-six men I interviewed

had kept their hair. Out of the seven, three (including Davinder) strictly observed the religious prohibition on cutting hair, while the other four men trimmed their beards but not the hair on their heads. Their reasons for cutting their hair varied widely, and for many the decision to cut their hair had been made by their parents. While for others like Davinder, whose parents were *Amritdhari* (orthodox or baptized) Sikhs, his decision to retain his hair and turban was influenced by his parents' faith. Davinder explained to me, "I have thought about cutting my hair, mostly because it takes a long time to get ready in the morning, but I fear my parents' wrath. They will scold me if I do such a thing." He later also revealed that for many young Sikh men, the motivation to cutting their hair was rooted partly in the supposed perception that Punjabi women did not find "unshorn guys with long beards attractive."

The decision to cut their unshorn hair, at least for the men who were pursuing transnational migration, was also motivated by the commonly shared belief that upon emigrating, their turban and unshorn hair might invite racial profiling and false "terrorist" associations (Kalra 2005, Puar 2007:166-202). One young man explained, "My *bhua-ji's* (maternal aunt's) son who lives in Ohio wore a turban and after 9-11 happened, people started calling him names like 'Osama'<sup>34</sup>... fearing something bad might happen to him, he trimmed his hair the next day." Unlike Ranbir who had cut his hair before moving to Chandigarh, many of the young men who moved to Chandigarh with unshorn hair had their first haircuts in Sector 17 City Center, as part of the steps they took and the transformation they underwent in preparing for their upcoming migrations. However,

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<sup>34</sup> Referring to the al-Qaeda terrorist leader Osama Bin Laden.

even after trimming their hair, young men like Ranbir did not abandon their turbans altogether. Instead, they would put on the turban while visiting their family back home in their village, and remove the turban upon returning to Chandigarh, shifting seamlessly between two bodily styles of Punjabi masculinities – rural/traditional and modern/transnational.

In addition to trimming their unshorn hair, the young men also reshaped other aspects of their religious identities to enhance their opportunities for transnational migration. In a follow up interview, Davinder informed me that despite having grown up using “Singh” as his last name, which the Sikh scriptures decreed that all Sikh men must use (Kaur for women), his passport only listed his familial last name – Dhaliwal. “They [immigration officials] will deny you a visa if you list Singh or Kaur as your last name on your passport or visa applications,” he warned. At first I dismissed Davinder’s claim as hearsay, part of the several other false claims, invented stories and myths about migration that the men regularly disputed and quarreled over, but later while researching the topic, I came across a Times of India article titled “No more Singhs, Kaurs on visa forms: Canada”<sup>35</sup> substantiating Davinder’s claim. While Davinder was convinced that the immigration officials were deliberately discriminating against Sikhs, keeping them from “over-populating” Canada, the newspaper article explained the policy was a way of helping immigration officials with paperwork and “allowed them to identify people’s forms quickly and accurately.”

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<sup>35</sup> Published on July 26<sup>th</sup> 2007.



34: A Sikh Boy Going Through the Turban Tying Ceremony (2010 photo by author)



35: A Young Sikh Man Getting his Haircut in Sector 17 (2010 photo by author)

Serving as a place where not only the formal coaching and training took place, but where informal notions related to sexuality, tradition, religion, and transnational migration were contested and affirmed, Chandigarh represents a liminal space where the young migrants formed and reformed their masculinity and became men. Accompanying the sense of masculine achievement was also an acute realization that their lives in Chandigarh were a rehearsal for what they might encounter upon emigrating, except once abroad they could no longer rely on their parents for financial support.

### Transnational Dreams of Wealth and Success

As the summer heat rose from the concrete pavements of the City Center, we sought refuge in my ground floor apartment in Sector 21 cooled by a leaky air conditioner, at least at times when the electricity was not cut off. Upon arriving in Chandigarh, I had also purchased a small 20-inch television. I did not have cable connection but the television came with a wiry antenna that required regular maneuvering to catch an adequate signal. Palli, Davinder and Ranbir would regularly stopped by unannounced and end up staying for hours watching whatever shows were playing on the three or four local TV channels available via the standard broadcast. They were particularly interested in watching *DDK Jalandhar*, a regional Punjabi language affiliate of the national public television network *Doordarshan*.

The channel featured the standard fare of news, talk shows, Punjabi movies, and spiritual hymns. Though the channel broadcasts only to regional audiences in Punjab, it regularly aired programs showcasing members of the diasporic community such as the show titled: *Videshi Wassan Punjabi Heere* (Punjabi Jewels Settled Abroad). One of the



episodes of the show, which I watched with Palli and Ranbir, featured the story of a Punjabi man named Daljit Singh and his two sons. Singh, a tall turbaned Sikh who has been living in Canada since the mid-1980s told the host that he had started out with very little money but allegedly through hard work and perseverance alone, he had managed to develop a successful auto repair and detailing business in Mississauga, a predominantly South Asian suburb of Toronto.

“I am illiterate, and when I arrived here [in Canada], I didn’t even have a work permit,” Singh explained to the host in a very matter-of-fact manner. The host went on to attribute Singh’s success to the support he received from other Punjabis living in the diasporic community as well as his family, especially his two sons, who had since grown up and married Punjabi brides and were now looking after the family business. “But we still live together in the same house,” interjected Singh, establishing his position as the respected patriarch of his household. The interview concluded with Singh promising a generous grant to fund *kabaddi* (a popular Punjabi team sport) and field hockey tournaments in Jalandhar district, the region of Punjab where Singh had grown up and his parents still lived. Palli and Davinder watched the show with an unwavering concentration and after it was over, Palli turned to me and said:

See, these are real Punjabis. They are *dillon channge* [sweet hearted] and *bholle bhaale* [simple and innocent]. They like to do *sewa* [charity] by giving back to their community. There is *bhaichara* [brotherhood] among Punjabis living abroad, just like there is back in the village. Here [in Chandigarh] no one would offer even a cup of water to someone who was illiterate or didn’t have any money... In Canada you have the government there to assist you. You have *gurudwaras* [Sikh temples] where you can go and get food if you are hungry. You have Punjabis who are always happy to see other *desis* [people from their homeland]. When they meet a fellow Punjabi in need, they are happy to extend a helping hand.

Punjabi news media played a crucial role in facilitating the migration related processes, indirectly through idealized depictions of the diasporic communities and directly by providing updated information on changes in immigration policies and other logistics closely considered by Punjabi families when deciding how and what country to send their sons and daughters. In addition to *Videshi Wassan Punjabi Heere*, the channel also hosted a call-in show titled *Je Jana Pardes* (If You Want to Go Abroad), which advised viewers on emigration related questions and concerns. Local newspapers also published new-stories like “Canada the best place for immigrants: UNDP,” which quoted statistics including the number of immigrants the country accepted each year (250,000) and the number of Indians immigrating to Canada each year (more than 30,000)<sup>36</sup>. Young Punjabi migrants played close attention to these details not only when making migration related decisions, but also when forming notions of work and success. They often received the message early on that their work and worth would never be valued as much by staying in India as it might be by immigrating to a country like Canada.

Though over the last decade agriculture has been a marginally lucrative profession for many Punjabi Jats, their land has continued to increase in value. Many Punjabi families have sold or leased their land to finance their family members’ migrations. Among majority of the Punjabi parents that I interviewed, there was a consensus that farming offered an uncertain future at best. They preferred at least one or more of their sons would emigrate abroad and help supplement the family’s income. Most Punjabi farmers I spoke to during my research, Sikh and non-Sikh alike, believed

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<sup>36</sup> Published in the Tribune on October 7<sup>th</sup> 2009.

that the recent growth in India's economy had benefited a slim minority of Indian society living in urban areas while the conditions of farmers and rural communities continued to deteriorate, farmers further burdened under mounting debts.<sup>37</sup> The privatization of debt and slashing of agricultural subsidies by the Indian Government has also led to unprecedented rates of farmer suicides throughout Punjab and the rest of the country over the past two decades since Indian economy underwent liberalization.<sup>38</sup> Punjabi families actively discouraged their sons from going into farming, instead selecting often the eldest son to look after the family's farms and property, while encouraging others to seek employment abroad and help supplement the family's income (Chopra 2010:113).

In addition to owning several liquor stores, Palli's family also owned 45 *kilas*<sup>39</sup> of land, on which they grew cash crops including *chonna* (rice), *kanadk* (wheat), *narma* (cotton) and *makee* (corn). Palli's elder brother, the primary caretaker of the family's land explained to me the family decision to not have Palli pursue farming and to send him abroad instead. "Even if you have ten people doing the farming, at the end of the day your yield will be the same. There is no point in putting more effort into something that has such limited returns." He went on to list additional challenges that farmers in Punjab faced including natural disasters, infrastructural problems, the rising cost of electricity

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<sup>37</sup> A study conducted in 2008 by the Institute of Development and Communication (IDC), estimated the average Punjabi farm household debt grew five-fold over the past decade to be Rs.139000 (US\$2700). Findings of this study were published in the Tribune on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2009.

<sup>38</sup> Though there is no comprehensive data available for the State of Punjab alone, a 2009 report put out by India's National Crime Records Bureau states that close to 200,000 farmers had committed suicide in India since 1997. See Sainath (1996, 2010).

<sup>39</sup> *Kila* or *keela* is a unit of measurement frequently used in North India to measure land. One *kila* equals 43,560 sq ft.

needed for irrigation coupled with the overall lack of government investment, conditions similar to the ones that had led the economic and social crisis in the 1970s and early 1980s. “Sometimes, flood or droughts ruin five months of hard work, on other occasional something as small as sparks from the electricity pole will cause the entire field to go up in smoke,” he lamented.

In choosing to pursue employment abroad over farming, the young men’s desires to emigrate were often characterized through wanting to attain a sense of masculine self worth defined by the types of financial success and material consumption associated with being part of the urban middle class or being an NRI. Even in a year in which countries worldwide were in the midst of a financial recession, the local Punjabi news media regularly highlighted instances of copious consumption in the region with headlines such as “Punjabis thumb nose at recession.”<sup>40</sup> The article detailed instances of weddings in Jalandhar in which the families had “airlifted roses from Karnataka [a state in South India], sweets from Ludhiana, and belly dancers from Russia.” It also went on to note that the yearly sales of luxury cars such as Audi, BMW and Mercedes-Benz had doubled in Punjab. Palli, Davinder and Ranbir pointed to such instances as financial achievements that in India could only be attained through *rishwat* (corruption) and *do-number da kam* (illegal work). For them to achieve a similar level of success through honest hard work it was allegedly only possible through transnational migration and working abroad.

The young men’s desire to seek employment opportunities outside of the country, as opposed to in Chandigarh or other urban cities within India, was also influenced by

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<sup>40</sup> Published in the Tribune, Chandigarh on March 1<sup>st</sup> 2009.

notions of caste and class hierarchies that limited the type of employment and work Jat men saw themselves doing. Whereas, upon emigrating young men like Palli, Davinder and Ranbir expressed a willingness and eagerness to join the “unskilled” workforce and take on low-wage, labor-intensive jobs, they told me that they would never entertain doing similar jobs in India.

Citing the Daljit Singh as an example, Palli pointed out, “Punjabis do many things abroad. Run liquor stores, drive trucks, pick fruits, they even clean toilets... whereas here [in India] it’s considered shameful for a son of a Jat family to be seen working these types of jobs.” Davinder joined in, “Over there [abroad] no one cares about who you are and your social status as long as you do your job. You are rewarded based on your efforts.” The attitude towards labor and work was not only limited to the types of employment they would undertake abroad, but also extended to the way Punjabi migrants thought about work itself and the social value they attached to their labor. One young man told me, “Work is very important when you go abroad, you cannot get by without working... Here at home we just make up an excuse and say, ‘Oh, I have a headache, I cannot work today,’ but over there you have to go to work otherwise you won’t get paid, and you will have to go hungry.”

These discourses related to work and labor build on the histories of transnational Punjabi labor migration that stretch back to the colonial period. However, in the contemporary moment they seem to have acquired new currency among Jat families in Punjab as they observe more and more foreign earned money being remitted home and enhancing individual family fortunes. In their description of working abroad, the young

men conveyed an acute sense that their labor and wages were worth more when earned abroad. “*Ik de challi bande ne* [one makes forty],” one man succinctly summed up for me when I asked why he wanted to emigrate, referring to the currency conversion rate from Canadian dollars to Indian rupees. When I pointed out that the cost of living in a place like Canada might make his salary comparable to salaries earned in India, he chuckled and corrected me:

Punjabis go there to earn money. They live in small apartments, get by on bare minimum. But when they come back to Punjab and they spend their dollars here, or they send money back home to their families. They build their farmhouses here. They get married here. They only work in Canada.

As reinforced by the comment above and migration related discourses in popular Punjabi media, returning home to Punjab and reinvesting in the region’s economy through remittances and philanthropic donations was often an essential component of the popular narrative of successful transnational migration. While Punjabis I interviewed viewed the diasporic community as an extension of the homeland whose citizens were deeply committed to their places of origin, the need to emigrate and remain abroad, especially for single men without their families, was often articulated with contradictory notion of necessity to work and earn money against the nostalgia and longing for home and family. “Australia is a *mitthi jail* [sweet prison] brother!” an Australian migrant told me during his visit home. “You work all day and night, you are like prisoner to your work. Yet you never leave because dollars are sweet,” he went on to explain. “That’s why when Punjabis like me go there, they never move back to Punjab. They only come to visit for couple of few week or maybe a month.”

While these discourses about transnational migration and success were particularly salient among the young Jat men and their families, many of the middle and working class non-farming Punjabis living in Chandigarh and other urban areas throughout Punjab did not share similar views about transnational migration. In talking to some of the non-Jats based in Chandigarh I found two general attitudes towards migration. Many upper middle class families who owned businesses in Chandigarh did not see the benefit of migrating abroad (though some wished to send their kids to study abroad), while others simply did not have the financial resources and kinship networks to send family members abroad.

### Conclusion

Through my conversations with Palli, Davinder, Ranbir and numerous other young men I met over the year of my fieldwork, I slowly learned the complexities of transitional migration and how the process related to migration was often embedded with conflicting discourses. Almost all of the migrants I spoke to emphasized the importance of retaining their linguistic and cultural heritage while simultaneously desiring a better life abroad that would allow them to earn and remit money home, enhancing their family's fortunes and enabling them to access middle class lifestyle characterized through material consumption.

Most of young men also perceived migrating and settling abroad as the quickest path to modernity, financial success and independence, something that was difficult to achieve back home in Punjab or by staying in Chandigarh, the proclaimed "modern city." In this sense I slowly realized that Punjabi migrants' definition of what it means to be

“modern” and the extent to which modernity is defined in relationship to the traditional ways of life is radically different from Le Corbusier’s framing of the concept as embodied by Chandigarh’s architectural sensibilities. Instead of the doing away with traditions and their past, for Punjabi Jats, the notions of modernity and tradition, as Mooney points out, “must be understood as paired rather than opposite in meaning, for notions of modernity are constructed in conjunction with, and in simultaneous antithesis to, notions of tradition” (2011:28).

In addition I also discovered how notions of masculinity and sexuality further engendered the process of transnational migration. Punjabi women were often not allowed to pursue similar avenues of student or employment-based migration whereas among Jat Punjabi men transnational migration was seen as an unofficial rite of passage into manhood. Transnational migration was further masculinized by the young men who saw the failure to attain one’s dream of migrating abroad as not only a financial loss to their families, but also a loss to their masculinities. Though their stay in Chandigarh was temporary, it is often a pivotal period in migrants’ lives where they developed their gendered identities and prepared for their journeys ahead. The modernist city, with its promises and restrictions, served as yet another departure point, much like the Wagha border and International Airport in Amritsar, where itineraries for transnational mobility were approved or denied.



## CHAPTER 4

### MAKING OF THE TRANSNATIONAL PUNJABI HERO

#### When Art Imitates Life

Released in 2011, the Punjabi film *The Lion of Punjab* opens with a montage of news exposés highlighting the endemic rates of cancer in the agriculturally rich Malwa region of Punjab.<sup>41</sup> The camera cuts to shots of villagers watching their television screens in terrified silence as the news reporter details the horrors linked to the often-deadly disease. Intercut with shots of the dying and the dead, which include both people as well as livestock, is a scene of a doctor delivering the devastating news to an unsuspecting mother that her son has been diagnosed with cancer. The camera pans across the lush rural landscape as the voice of the news anchor warns, “Though it appears green and fruitful, this land is permeated with a silent and deadly poison that goes undetected until it’s too late”.

On one level, this emotionally charged montage is another clichéd technique for setting up the film’s plot. By appealing to audiences’ sense of social justice and human rights, the film draws on the familiar tropes of the Indian villagers as the innocent and voiceless victims characteristic of popular depictions of feudal life in Indian cinemas (Virdi 2003). On another level, this montage closely resembles actual news reports on the topic of cancer in Punjab that I came across regularly on Punjabi television and in Punjabi newspapers while conducting fieldwork. These reports detailed the unusually

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<sup>41</sup> The State of Punjab is divided into three regions. Malwa, which lies South of the Satluj river is the makes up majority of Punjab, while Majha and Doaba regions make up the rest.

high rates of cancer in the region over the last decade where public health researchers have discovered links between the disturbing trend and the indiscriminate use of fertilizers and pesticides in farming, a practice promoted during the Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s (Kaur and Sinha 2011, Kuruganti 2005, Thakur, Rao, Rajwanshi, Parwana and Kumar 2008).

While the growing rate of cancer in Punjab is a complex problem that materialized over decades, in *The Lion of Punjab* the sudden outbreak of the deadly disease is blamed on high levels of uranium in the village's drinking water. "The same uranium that is used to make the atom bomb," the anchor reporting on the crisis reminds the villagers. Upon discovering that the uranium is being dumped into the village's local river by a factory upstream, the villagers resolve to blow-up the polluting factory. The film's hero Avjit, played by the Punjabi pop-star Diljit Dosanjh, intercepts the criminal act and takes it upon himself to resolve the issues through legal means. Avjit is a young, six-feet tall, muscular turbaned Jat man with a neatly trimmed beard, wearing a silver *khandi* (identical to one worn by Ranbir) around his neck. Despite being illiterate, brave and self-righteous Avjit sets off on a journey to Chandigarh to meet with the regional minister to submit the villagers' grievances in-person. He is accompanied by a young woman named Amrit,<sup>42</sup> the only college-educated resident in his village, and Amrit's brother who looks after his sister, protecting her *izzat* (honor) while simultaneously acting as Avjit's sidekick.

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<sup>42</sup> Played by Jividha Ashta

Upon arriving in Chandigarh, Avjit discovers that the regional minister himself owns the polluting factory and regularly bribes the law enforcement into rigging local elections to remain in power. He finds himself powerless against a political and legal system fraught with corruption. Abandoning his pursuit for justice through legal means, Avjit turns to his physical might to defeat the minister. A David-and-Goliath-like battle ensues between the two and the minister's entourage of goons, who Avjit single-handedly beats up. In a formulaic style of a conventional Bollywood action flick, the film concludes with Avjit abducting the minister from his office in Chandigarh and dragging him back to his village, where the villagers exact their revenge by forcing him to drink the uranium-laden water.

Even though *The Lion of Punjab* was released after I had already finished my fieldwork, and therefore I did not have the opportunity to discuss the film with my research participants, the film is significant to this discussion because it features the journey of a young Jat farmer from his village in the Punjabi countryside to Chandigarh. Since it was also a journey that many young migrant men like Palli, Davinder and Ranbir regularly undertook, the film is worthy of exploration as it reinforces some of the Punjabi migrants' stereotypes of Chandigarh, adding to the popular conceptions of a modernist city as an foreign and unfamiliar space.

The film depicts Chandigarh as a chaotic and dangerous place, a repository of criminal activities, and a city overrun by mobsters and corrupt politicians. Missing from Avjit's gaze are images of the pristine and planned landscape frequently associated with Chandigarh. Instead the streets of the city appear cluttered and filled with grime, dirt and

pollution. The choice of this cinematic depiction is deliberate on the part of the filmmaker as a careful viewing of the film's footage reveals that most of the scenes were not shot within Chandigarh.<sup>43</sup> The film falsely associates Chandigarh with the conventional Bollywood representation of large cosmopolitan cities like Delhi and Mumbai that are often depicted as dangerous and unpredictable. Whereas Chandigarh, owing in part to its modernist design, is largely mundane and relatively safe.

One of the only two segments within the film that features Chandigarh's distinctive landscape is a song-and-dance sequence in which Avjit performs bhangra, a popular male folkdance, with a troop of male dancers in front of the iconic fountain in Sector 17's City Center, almost in the exact spot where the architecture students had set up their postmodern installation. The second segment includes yet another bhangra performance featuring Avjit and his troop of male dancers in front of the new DLF City Centre in the recently developed Technology Park. The public performance of bhangra and the agrarian identity the dance celebrates, as I explore later in this chapter, is yet another strategy for men to claim space with the modernist landscape of Chandigarh.

In *The Lion of Punjab*, Chandigarh is also depicted as a place where corrupt government officials reside, who in Avjit's own words, "sitting in their air conditioned rooms, have little regard for the daily struggle for clean drinking water faced by Punjabi villagers." The representations of the modernist city and its residents within the film assume an embodiment of the post-colonial imperialism where those in positions of power continue to oppress and exploit rural Punjabi farmers. Through the contamination

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<sup>43</sup> Some of the scenes seem to be shot in Patiala, another major city in Punjab or in Chandigarh's satellite towns.

of the village's water supply, the opening sequences of the film imply that Punjab's rural landscape is being "poisoned" by the corrupt governmental officials in Chandigarh, making not only farming but also the day-to-day life in Punjab dangerous. The "poisoning" of Punjab's landscape, even in the context of this fictional narrative, evokes political implications, adding to the preexisting sense of marginalization shared among Jats in Punjab. The news reports conjure up memories of the blackout period in the late 1980s and the early 1990s when Punjab was plagued by political instability and violence that claimed the lives of thousands of young men and women. The parallel between the news reports from the blackout period and the current cancer epidemic implies that the pathologizing of region's landscape is ongoing even in post-insurgency Punjab. Instead of the state police persecuting innocent Punjabi men, now neoliberal interests and corporate greed seem to drive the violence.

*The Lion of Punjab* also reinforces migrants' like Palli, Davinder and Ranbir's deeply held beliefs that there are limited options available to Punjabi farmers struggling to sustain themselves and their families. Like Avjit they, too, can either take a stand against the structural corruption and injustice, fighting for their rights and breaking laws in the process, or they can give up farming and emigrate abroad. While the illiterate Avjit chooses the first option, young men like Palli, Davinder and Ranbir would see themselves as consciously choosing to give up farming and choosing the latter option. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the Malwa region, along with the highest rate of cancer, also has the highest rate of emigrants leaving Punjab relative to the neighboring Doaba and Majha regions.

Beyond the political corruption, the film also stereotypes Chandigarh's residents as having lost their "traditional cultural values," influenced by western cultural sensibilities. Upon arriving in Chandigarh, Avjit finds himself seduced by Jassi, a young sultry press reporter who is an urbanite from Chandigarh. Unlike Amrit who is often seen dressed in a modest *salwar kameez* (resembling the woman on the signboard at Wagha border), Jassi wears tank tops and miniskirts that struggle to cover her thighs. The juxtaposition between the sexually lascivious city-girl Jassi against the demure and conservative village-girl Amrit feeds into the migrants' stereotypes of the modernist city as also being a repository of moral and sexual perversion. In the end, Avjit's infatuation with Jassi is short lived as he returns to his village and chooses Amrit as his spouse, the one who fits seamlessly into the patriarchal model of the obedient wife and daughter-in-law.

### Cinema and the City

Made on a relatively small budget (compared to Bollywood films), *The Lion of Punjab* opened to a few weeks of commercial success before fading off the theatre marquees and ending up on YouTube, which is where I first watched the film. Like most Punjabi films it is also peppered with its share of song and dance sequences, comedic routines, action packed fight scenes and a love story. Urban audiences in North India largely ignore Punjabi films. Many even consider them a mediocre art form especially when compared to the more popular and widely distributed Hindi language Bollywood cinema. The soundtracks of Punjabi films, usually featuring songs sung by the pop star starring in the film, are often more popular and widely circulated than the films

themselves. Keeping their profit margins in consideration, Punjabi filmmakers regularly cast Punjabi pop-stars as their leading heroes and place more emphasis on the song and dance sequences that would help boost the album sales. As a result, the other aspects of a Punjabi film, such as the plot, acting, and direction are often underdeveloped. Despite their lack of artistry, Punjabi films were immensely popular among Punjabi migrants living in Chandigarh where going to the cinema was one of the few affordable sources of entertainment available to men like Palli, Davinder and Ranbir.

In this chapter, I explore the popular representations of Punjabi masculinities in regional Punjabi-language cinema and how heroes of Punjabi films, like Avjit in *The Lion of Punjab* are frequently characterized by a sense of mobility between rural, urban and transnational landscapes. I used video elicitation, a methodological strategy that entailed either showing my research participants clips from popular Punjabi films on my laptop or accompanying them to see Punjabi films in the Kiran and Neelam movie theatres in Sectors 22 and 17, respectively, to get a sense of how the young men interacted with representations they saw on screen. I discovered that the young men interacted with Punjabi films very differently from how they viewed Hindi-language Bollywood films. Audiences and producers of Punjabi films regularly referred to Punjabi films as a “more accurate” reflection of everyday life in the region. Baljit Singh, an IT student and Punjabi film enthusiast whom I met in Sector 17 as we were leaving Neelam Cinema after watching *Munde UK De* (Boys of UK), a film rereleased in 2009, summed up his impression of Punjabi and Bollywood cinema by stating:

In Hindi films they show emotions, but it is too much. Too much action, too many other things. The story is unrealistic, the acting is over exaggerated, they show

more negative things. Punjabi films do not have anything negative in them. No nudity, no unrealistic stories. They (Punjabi films) tell you everything in positive manner. Punjabi films show reality. It's the truth they are showing. Hindi films are just based on made-up (or unrealistic) stories. Punjabi films teach you valuable lessons, they depict the truth.

In comparison to Punjabi films, young men like Baljit saw Bollywood or Hindi films as often trying to imitate Hollywood's cinematic sensibilities and creating a "fantasy world" that is not fully representative of any one regional community within India. These impressions were also reaffirmed within my conversations with Punjabi film producers and directors based in Chandigarh who actively distinguished themselves from Bollywood filmmakers by claiming that their depictions of life in Punjab were more authentic and adhered closely to regional conventions and traditions. While Bollywood filmmakers like Yash Chopra frequently feature Punjabi themes and settings in Hindi films, one Punjabi filmmaker complained, that Chopra is "simply putting a Punjabi *tardka* (flavor) into a Hindi story."





35: Kiran Cinema in Sector 22 (2007 photo by author)



37: Neelam Theatre in Sector 17 City Center (2009 photo by author)

While the city is largely overlooked or misrepresented within the narratives of Punjabi film, ironically the majority of current production of Punjabi films is located in or around Chandigarh. The Punjabi film industry in India initially developed in the decades following partition between India and Pakistan. Though separate from the more established Pakistani film industry, referred to as Lollywood,<sup>44</sup> Punjabi filmmakers (in India) borrowed heavily from the aesthetics and styles of Lollywood, which made films in Urdu as well as in Punjabi languages, and in turn drew from and often plagiarized the aesthetics and styles of Bollywood (Ahmed 1992:317). As Akbar S. Ahmed notes, “its (Punjabi films) themes were crude, and its characters stereotyped. The heroes shouted far too loudly, its heroines waggled their padded sleeves far too clumsily and its villains bellowed far too often” (1992:317). This rebellious masculine “angry young men” aesthetic was first popularized by the 1975 Hindi films *Sholay* (Embers) and *Deewaar* (Wall) and quickly permeated into the regional cinemas in India and Pakistan (Mazumdar 2007, Viridi 2003). By the 1980s, in addition to an already established Punjabi-language television industry in Jalandhar, a thriving Punjabi film industry had grown in and around Chandigarh.

The filmmakers I interviewed regularly referred to the 1970s and early 1980s as the “golden age” in the history of Punjabi cinema. Numerous films released during this time period went on to attain wider recognition and win the National Award. However, the 1990s were a decade of slump in the history of Punjabi cinema during which very few films were made due to militancy and political unrest in the region. Sikh militants

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<sup>44</sup> After Lahore where most of the production companies in Pakistan are located

generated fear and instability by discouraging cultural activities including the production of Punjabi films. A prominent Punjabi filmmaker, Veerendra, was assassinated in 1988 while making *Jatt te Zameen* (Jat and His Land). Though his assassination remains unresolved, numerous accounts link the assassination to the militancy. After Veerendra's assassination, the production of Punjabi films came to a halt. Nighttime curfews cut into box office revenues and the theaters in Punjab were limited to one or two screenings daily.

The production and exhibition of Punjabi film picked up again with the release of *Jee Aayan Nu* (Welcome) in 2003, which marks a turning point in the history of Punjabi cinema. *Jee Aayan Nu* was the first Punjabi film to be set partly in India and partly in Canada. The film popularized the 'NRI (Non Resident Indian) genre' among Punjabi audiences. The genre had previously gained popularity in Bollywood following the release of numerous transnational Hindi films, most notable of these films include Chopra's 1995 Hindi film *Dilwale Dulhania Le Janenge* or *DDLJ* (the Brave Hearted Will Take the Bride) chronicling the journey of London-based NRI man returning to Punjab along with his family to arrange his daughter's wedding.<sup>45</sup>

Over the past decade, the production and circulation of Punjabi films has grown increasingly transnational as Punjabi cinema went from a regionally based form of entertainment and depicting life in rural villages to almost exclusively focusing on the experiences of those living in diasporic communities. *The Lion of Punjab* being one of the few exceptions, the majority of Punjabi films released in the past decade have

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<sup>45</sup> See Mehta (2007) and Mankekar (1999) for a detailed discussion of DDLJ and globalization and transnational circulation of Bollywood cinema.

featured plot lines that are set partly in Punjab and partly in locations abroad including North America, the United Kingdom and Australia.<sup>46</sup> Even though the landscapes of Chandigarh are marginally featured within Punjabi films, the majority of the Punjabi film industry and production companies are based in and around Chandigarh, while much of the production takes place in the surrounding villages. As veteran Punjabi film producer Iqbal Dhillon explains:

We are usually trying to capture traditional village life in our films. Unfortunately, most of the villages around Jalandhar no longer fit that look (aesthetic). Villagers have money coming from abroad, and they have torn down the traditional houses and built big mansions and farmhouses... the funny thing is that even though Chandigarh is a modern city, all the villages surrounding Chandigarh still appear very rural. They look authentically Punjabi, so there are good locations for our shooting only 30 minutes outside of Chandigarh...

Dhillon goes on to add, “access to the airport, five star hotels, and no traffic jams to deal with adds to the convenience of being located in Chandigarh, especially when our talent and crew is flying in from Mumbai,” the film capital of India.

Chandigarh and its satellite towns also serve as the primary theatrical market for Punjabi films in India, where films are first released before going on to screening in other parts of the country. However, more recently Punjabi films are increasingly being released among diasporic audiences in countries like Canada, Australia and United Kingdom on the same day as their scheduled theatrical release in Chandigarh. With the popularity of the NRI-themed films, especially among diasporic audiences, what was once a struggling regional film industry has experienced a long awaited revival. In 2009, ten Punjabi films were released theatrically in Punjab and locations abroad including

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<sup>46</sup> My research only includes feature films released theatrically in Punjabi language. I did not include documentaries, made for TV movies, or short-films that are often released directly in the form of DVDs into my discussion or analysis.

North America, England and Australia.<sup>47</sup> Before, only one or two films were being released in theaters annually.

### Cinema and Masculinity

While films cater to both regional Punjabi and diasporic audiences, connecting the two together through their transnational characters and themes, the primary viewers of Punjabi film in India include young migrant men living in urban areas like Chandigarh. Palli, Davinder and Ranbir frequently sat through multiple screenings of the latest Punjabi film not simply for entertainment but also to see what “*videsh* [abroad] looked like.” Commenting on the popularity of NRI-themed film among Punjabi audiences, one young man joked, “when you [have] nothing else to do all day, for sixty rupees you can go on a site-seeing tour of England or Canada.” Often at the center of these transnational narratives are the male heroes of Punjabi cinemas who are regularly seen traveling across national boundaries.

In addition to themselves being transnational, the heroes of Punjabi films are almost universally shown as belonging to the Jat caste. This ability to successfully navigate the unfamiliar terrains of the world outside their villages serves as a rite of passage to becoming a man and a testament to their masculine affirmation. Within these cinematic narratives, the filmmakers also assign their transnational Jat heroes the tasks of upholding *Punjabiya* (a sense of being Punjabi) and recovering Punjabi *Sabhyachar* (culture and tradition), often through the reproduction of the hetero-normative patriarchal

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<sup>47</sup> *Munde UK De* (Boys of UK), *Videsh* (Abroad), *Apni Boli Apna Desh* (Our Language Our Nation), *Tera Mera Ki Rishta* (What is Our Relationship), *Akhiyaan Udeekdian* (The Eyes Await), *Mini Punjab*, *Jag Jeyondeyan De Mele* (Celebration of Life), *Lagda Ishk Hogaya* (Seems Like Love), *Luv U Bobby*, and *Heer Ranjha*.

family. They go abroad, yet they do not lose touch with their cultural values, traditions and their ability to farm their lands. They are shown as ideal sons and husbands who respect their parents, support their families and only marry brides they met in Punjabi villages. Not surprisingly, largely absent from these narratives are the accounts of the journeys that Punjabi women undertake when traveling across national boundaries.

In any given time period, Punjabi cinema has two to three male actors who enjoy a major fan following. In the 1980s and the 1990s actors Guggu Gill and Yograj Singh dominated the cinematic screen for their depiction of rural Jat farmers. Over the last decade, actors Harbhajan Maan and Jimmy Shergill have enjoyed the limelight for playing the NRI Punjabis. As NRIs, Mann and Shergill are frequently seen moving across national boundaries, either leaving Punjab and traveling abroad or living in the diaspora and returning home to Punjab in search of their roots. Singer-turned-actor Gurdas Maan is one of the most prolific actors in Punjabi cinema, and perhaps the only actor who has successfully worked across a variety of cinematic genres.





38: *The Lion of Punjab* Promotional Poster Featuring Diljit Dosanjh



39: A still from a *badla* (revenge) Themed Film Featuring Punjabi Actors

Guggu Gill (left) and Yograj Singh (photo courtesy of Navtej S. Sandhu)

Unlike the heroes of Punjabi cinema who often remain the same, embodying the same on-screen persona over a collection of films within a certain genre, the heroines in Punjabi films frequently change. Punjabi women are rarely featured as central characters in Punjabi films.<sup>48</sup> There are very few female actors who enjoy a fan following similar to their male counterparts, especially in more recent transnational films classified under the ‘NRI genre.’ Women in Punjabi films largely appear in the roles of a lover, a wife or a mother.<sup>49</sup> In popular depictions of traditional Punjabi femininity, the filmmakers place heavy emphasis on sexual modesty and preserving traditional family values. Their bodies are rarely sexualized and objectified in the same manner as in Bollywood. Instead, within the song and dance sequences set in diasporic locations, Punjabi heroes are frequently seen performing Bhangra with *meman* (the white or European women dressed in sexually suggestive outfits) whom they meet during their journeys abroad.

A young Punjabi woman named Navneet, whom I spoke to about the depictions of women in Punjabi films, shared the following impressions with me:

Punjabi women are always shown helpless and vulnerable. In Hindi films, there you see that she struggles and you see that, but Punjabi films heroines are always vulnerable and helpless, she always needs the hero to come and save her... it’s part of the culture of male dominance that keeps women suppressed... women should understand that they themselves have to bring themselves forward.

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<sup>48</sup> Within the last ten years, *Videsh (Heaven on Earth)*, made by Indian born Canadian filmmaker Deepa Mehta, is the only Punjabi film that features a woman at the center of its narrative.

<sup>49</sup> Cultural critic Katha Pollitt refers to this tendency of ignoring or sidelining women’s experiences in films and popular culture as the “Smurfette Principle” (New York Times 1991).



Performing Masculinity  
– On Screen, In the Streets

In addition to the popular representations in Punjabi films, the consumption of cinemas in Punjab (both Hindi and Punjabi) is deeply gendered. On average, women participate far less in cinema-going activities and film related culture. However, this trend is beginning to change as more and more multiplex cinemas are being built as part of shopping malls such as the DLF City Centre in Chandigarh and other Punjabi cities. The developments have conflated the act of going to the cinemas with shopping and dining out all within the same location, making cinema halls more woman and family friendly spaces. Filmmakers asserted that the development of these multiplex cinemas was also responsible for the recent resurgence in the production of Punjabi films.

In a similar study on the gendered consumption of regional (South Indian) Malayalam cinema, anthropologists Caroline and Fillippo Osella note that the absence of women in the cinematic arena often leads to "masculinities being reproduced and defined in belligerent opposition to women, as young men aggressively embody and mimetically perform hyper-masculinity in the space they take as their own and make uncomfortable for young women – the street" (2004:245). Osella and Osella go on to explain that life of the street acts as a rite of passage where "young men turn inwards to the peer group in competitive and often exaggerated performances of masculinity" (2004:245). In Punjab and within Punjabi films, the street also serves as a central space where different forms of public culture are performed and consumed.<sup>50</sup> However, unlike in Malayalam cinema,

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<sup>50</sup> In addition to *melas* (fares), there are various forms of public cultural performances including *nautanki* (a play or street theatre) and *tamasha* (a sideshow) that are also performed in the streets.

and even in Bollywood, where heroic masculinity is frequently realized through the overt subjugation of women in the street such as whistling at or harassing women in public, heroic masculinity in Punjabi films is not necessarily performed in reaction to but often in the absence of the figure of the Punjabi women.

Similarly, the streets also serve as an epicenter of nightlife in Chandigarh where a boys-night-out often entailed drinking and making *gerdis* (rounds), driving around aimlessly through the streets of the city. A typical *gerdi*, in which the young men from my neighborhood regularly invited me to join, would start around 9:00 PM in Sector 21 and included several stops at a *kaimbwala theka*, a local liquor store located on the edge of the city, north of the Sukhna Lake and away from the residential sectors where the men could make as much noise as they wanted. After getting drunk, the young men would drive around Chandigarh for a couple of hours through the different sectors of the city, often ending up at the Night Street market in Sector 14 which featured a number of outdoor fast-food stalls that were open all night. During these *gerdis*, groups of young Punjabi men would congregate on the roadsides at night – playing loud music and performing bhangra, marking the streets of Chandigarh an almost exclusively male space where masculinity was enacted and affirmed, generally in the complete absence of Punjabi women.

Performances of bhangra, both on the cinematic screen and in the streets of Chandigarh were similarly imbued with gendered meanings. Above all other features such as acting, plotlines and dialogue, my research participants often remembered and

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recalled Punjabi films by songs and dance sequences featuring bhangra performances. The lyrics and verses featured in bhangra tend to celebrate agrarian life. They frequently draw upon notions of patriarchal supremacy through what South Asian student scholar Gayatri Gopinath refers to as the “ritualized enactments of heterosexual patrilineal descent” that focuses on the inheritance of land between a father and a son (2005: 29-62).

Along with the growing popularity of Punjabi cinema among diasporic audiences, bhangra has also gained global recognition as it infuses into modern styles of music by contemporary western and South Asian artists.<sup>51</sup> Over the last two decades, bhangra has transgressed the traditional spheres and invaded dance clubs, cinema and concert halls and even wedding parties throughout North India and the South Asian diaspora. While bhangra remains the most popular form of music though north India and within South Asian diaspora, the female equivalent of bhangra, a folk dance called *gidha* where women form a circle, sing small couplets and clap their hands energetically, continues in clandestine and localized spaces. “In the context of the male domination in bhangra music industry,” explains sociologist Virinder Kalra, “*gidha* has not seen the parallel development of modernized forms but rather been cannibalized by male bhangra stars” (Kalra 2000:94).

In Punjabi films, men are frequently shown in both regional and diasporic settings performing bhangra in the parks, on-stage, in shopping malls and in the streets. In contrast, *gidha* performances occur in spaces that are marked for women only, such as

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<sup>51</sup> See Maira (2002) and Gopinath (2005:29-62) for a detailed discussion on the prominence of bhangra in South Asian diasporic popular culture and soundscapes.

during a *jaggo* ceremony<sup>52</sup> or during *ladies-sangeet*.<sup>53</sup> Following Kalra who notes that “gidha is part of the gendered paradigm which associates women with traditions, where women’s bodies, otherwise so mutable, are timelessly fixed in this view,” transformation of Bhangra into a global music and dance form and the seclusion of gidha into traditional ritualized spaces provides a useful metaphor for understanding how gender is framed within Punjabi culture and society (2000). Often in bhangra performances featured within song and dance sequences in a given Punjabi film, we see the Punjabi Jat hero undergo the transformation from being rural to becoming urban and transnational all within the duration of three hours. Whereas, Punjabi women are continually denied such transformations, both on screen and in real life.

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<sup>52</sup> The night before a Punjabi wedding, women stay up late to perform the ritual of *jaggo* – it is a procession song to wake up the neighbors and invite them to the wedding.

<sup>53</sup> A ceremony held prior to the wedding, where women gather and perform the dance among each other. Men are often not allowed to participate.



40: *Bhangra* Performance (photo courtesy of Navtej S. Sandhu)



41: *Gidha* Performance During *Jaago* Ceremony (2009 photo by author)

Early Formations –  
*Putt Jattan De* (Sons of Jat Farmers)

In the 1970s and 80s, before the era of VCRs, DVD players, shopping malls, multiplex cinemas, YouTube.com and the internet, Punjabi films were largely shown at single-screen cinemas like Neelam and Kiran theatres. Audiences, especially young men from neighboring villages, would travel in groups to view the latest Punjabi film. As Dhillon nostalgically recalls, “In the early 1980s, perhaps the most prolific period in the cinema’s history, hoards of young men loaded on to tractor trolleys would come to watch the latest Punjabi film. We determined the success of the film based on the number of tractor trolleys parked in front of the theatres.”

Punjabi films made in the 1980s especially appealed to the sensibilities of regional audiences because they were largely set within the rural landscape of Punjabi villages, glorified agrarian life and depicted hardships suffered by Punjabi farmers. In films from this time period such as 1980’s *Chann Pardesee* (Lover Alienated), the city was frequently depicted as a faraway foreign place where only the Punjabi farmer travelled to while his lover or his wife awaited his return. As in the case in *Chann Pardesee*, the city also had the potential of alienating the farmer, rendering him unrecognizable to his family members upon returning to the village. Conflict often arose from disputes related to the dispossession of land or the violation of women, or both. It is worth mentioning that in most Punjabi films, land is feminized and often referred to as the “mother.” Therefore the act of dispossessing a farmer from his land was often framed as equally egregious as the act of sexually violating the women in his family, and thereby directly challenging his masculinity. The climax often included a good-old-fashioned fight sequence where the

righteous Jat farmer, driven by vengeance, defeats the morally corrupt villain, often a greedy *jagirdaar* (feudal landlord), thus restoring his *izzat* (honor) and dignity by the film's end. Films in this popular genre that dominated the cinematic screen throughout the 1980s and the early 1990s are often referred as “*Badla* [revenge] films” or “Jat-themed films.”

*Putt Jattan De* (Sons of Jats), released in 1982, remains one of the most popular and celebrated films in the history of Punjabi cinema (Mooney 2011:55-56). A key feature of the film is a song and dance sequence with the same title as the film, which even after 30 years, still circulates regularly on Punjabi television, radio stations and sites like Youtube.com. The song lists various characteristics of Jat men, including their physical appearance and how they embody their masculinity. The video accompanying the song depicts a caravan of Punjabi men traveling through the rural landscape of Punjab to a *mela* (fair) in a nearby town. As they travel, they sing and perform bhangra along their path.

*Putt Jattan de bulonde bakre,  
Modeain te daangan tharian  
Kante sone de gardana lambian  
Chitte chardre sumbarde dharti  
Madak naal pub chakde*

Son's of Jats, make some noise,  
carrying long batons on their shoulders,  
their long necks adorned with gold jewelry,  
their white wraps sweep the earth as they walk,  
they walk with vigor and confidence...

Within this band of men, the two popular bodily styles of traditional Punjabi masculinity are depicted. The man leading the band, the film's hero,<sup>54</sup> sings and dances in the forefront dressed in a cotton *kurta* (long shirt) and a saffron colored *parna* (head-wrap), a traditional outfit farmers wear when working in their fields. He is followed by a group of dancers performing Bhangra who are dressed in more festive and colorful costumes, wearing decorated turbans that are elaborately tied. The dancers are followed by a third group of men riding camels who are also dressed in the traditional farmer's attire. While riding camels within the agrarian discourse signals that these men belong to the landowning class, distinguishing them from laborers, the camels also reinforce the sense of mobility of this collective body moving from the rural domestic space of the village into the urban public space of the city.

There is brief a moment within the video when this band of men encounter a woman<sup>55</sup> on their path. Unlike the men who are performing Bhangra, the woman is shown standing still. The bandleader addresses the woman, "Step aside! Make way for the Jats." She does as she is told. The band proceeds to move ahead on its path. Though momentarily her presence seems to evoke sexual desire within the bandleader, she also represents an obstacle that the men must collectively negotiate in order to proceed on their path. Her presence and her sexuality pose a threat to this band of men and their ability to move forward as a collective body. Aside from this brief encounter, the rest of the music video features only men.

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<sup>54</sup> Played by Baldev Khosla

<sup>55</sup> Played by Daljit Kaur



Though I had seen this video and heard the song on numerous occasions while growing up in Chandigarh, the first time I rediscovered it during fieldwork was at *Kaimbwala Theka*, the liquor store behind the lake where young men gathered to drink and socialize. On one occasion at the *theka*, a young turbaned Sikh man with his three friends pulled up in a *Mahindra Bolero*, an Indian sports utility vehicle (SUV).<sup>56</sup> After being sufficiently inebriated, the three men started dancing to a re-mixed version of the song blaring over the SUV's speakers. As soon as the song played, more and more young men, Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike, joined in the impromptu bhangra dancing that continued through several other Punjabi songs.

It was at this moment when I heard the song and witnessed the men's reaction to the music and the lyrics that I understood its discursive significance. The lyrics of *Putt Jattan De* celebrate the patrilineal development of traditional Punjabi masculinity as passed down from father to the son, implied within the title "Sons of Jats" and embodied through the farming attire worn by the men in the video. The bhangra performance featured in the video, as well as the ones the song provokes on the streets of Chandigarh, celebrates the development of hegemonic masculinity in fraternal peer-group settings. The location of both formations of Punjabi masculinity, as Chopra notes, is public – the street and the field (2004:57).

When I showed the clip of the song and dance sequence to Davinder, his eyes brightened with excitement. "*Putt Jattan De* is my favorite Punjabi film of all time," he told me. He continued,

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<sup>56</sup> Equivalent of the Jeep Cherokee in make and size.

Jats have a lot of land and money, but Jats are very open hearted. They say that Jat and land are attached by the soul. Jats are not afraid of anything or anyone. Jats are Punjab's *gabbaru* [studs], and you cannot intimidate them with anger or ego... this film shows Punjabi *sabhyachar* [culture or heritage], how people dress, how the farmer plows the fields, what the rural landscape looks like...

Davinder goes on to attribute this sense of entitlement and bravery as one reason why Jats are "well respected and successful wherever they travel." This relationship between being a Jat and being able to fearlessly navigate unfamiliar terrains of world outside of their villages is repeatedly echoed by my research participants as characterized Punjabi masculinity on screen and in real life. Both the film *Putt Jattan De* and the song and the video resonates with young Punjabi men, especially migrants, because they reinforce relationship between Punjabi masculinity and a sense of mobility. Being able to move between and transgress rural and urban setting serves as a testament to Jat and Punjabi masculinity, and the can-do attitude associated with being a Punjabi man.

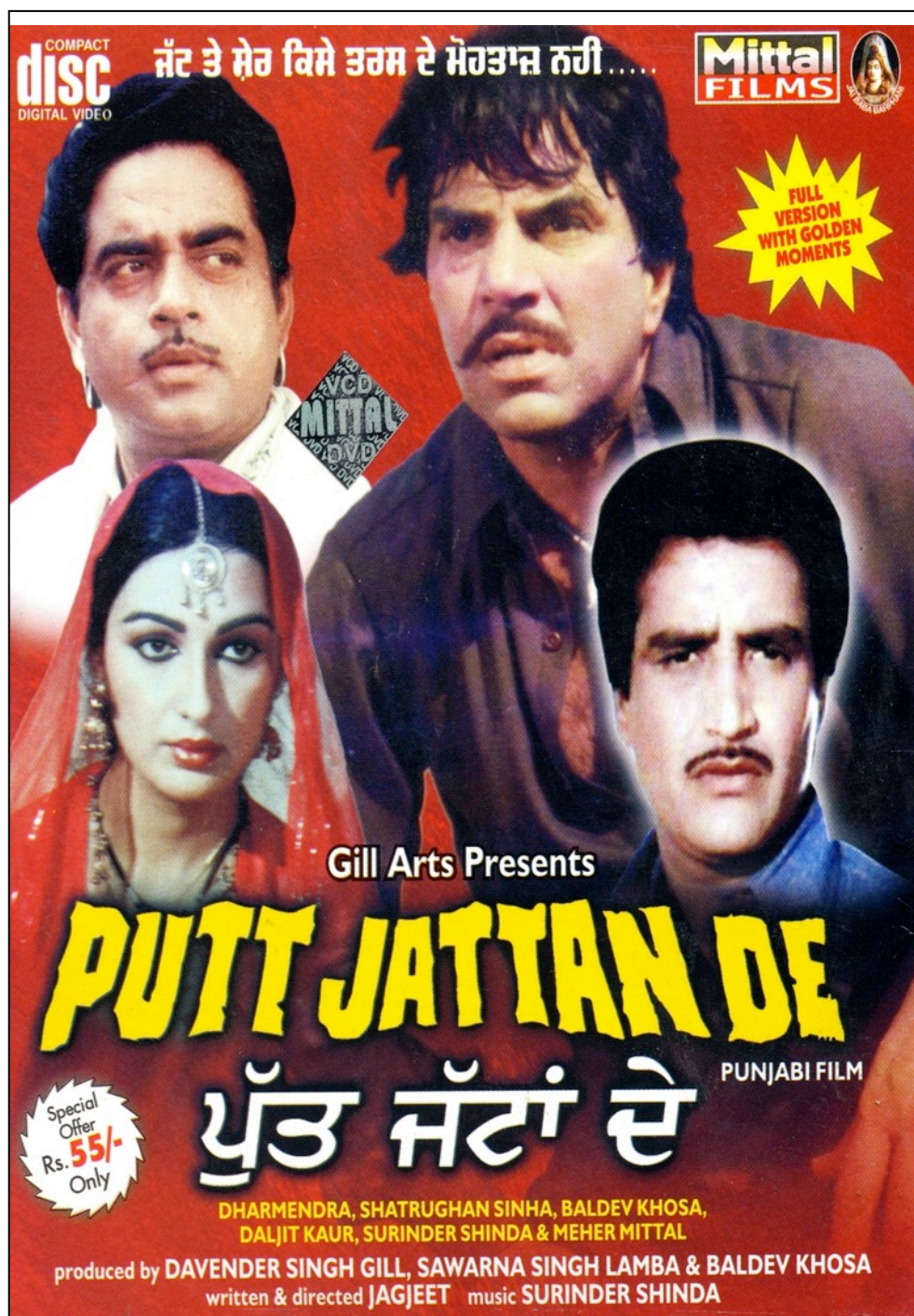
Though the category of Jat is a caste category belonging to landowners, in Punjabi cinema, music and popular culture, the term is often used as synonymous with being a farmer. Though the use of the identity first popularized by *Putt Jattan De* privileges the experience of rural Jats over all other sub-groups and castes, it also a cinematic experience in which even non-Jat audiences have participated.<sup>57</sup> The glorification of Jat identity in Punjabi cinema is the extension of the economic dominance and cultural hegemony Jats enjoy as a distinct group within Punjabi politics and popular culture (Mooney 2011). It would be regarded with suspicion for a non-Jat to claim to be a Jat,

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<sup>57</sup> However, over the past decade as caste-based stratification in Punjab intensified (Jodhka 2004), Punjabi songs and videos celebrating non-Jat castes have proliferated over the internet and on sites like Youtube.com. One such song currently circulating on YouTube.com is titled "Putt Chamara De," celebrating the *dalit* identity.

however for a non-Jat to celebrate Jat identity within the context of Punjabi cinema and popular culture is widely accepted and even encouraged. Being a Jat signals a specific mode of Punjabi masculinity, one that—at least in Punjabi cinema— is generally portrayed as superior to and more physically powerful than other regional forms of masculinity in north India.

The success of *Putt Jattan De* was followed by a entire series of Jat-themed films including, *Yaari Jatt Di* (Friendship of a Jat), *Anakh Jattan Di* (Pride of Jats), *Jorr Jatt Da* (Strength of Jats), among others. Within these films the masculinity of the Punjabi hero is typified by his identity as a landowning Jat, and visibly marked upon his body through his cloths and his ability to farm his land. Following the circulation of these films, the expression “*Putt Jattan De*” has become an integral part of popular cultural discourse in Punjab and in the diaspora. The phrase continues to appear on T-shirts and bumper stickers throughout Punjab. It is referenced in almost every Punjabi film made in the past thirty years, as we are reminded at one point or another that the hero of the film indeed belongs to a Jat family. It reinforces the sense of ethnic and caste superiority and entitlement that many young men like Palli, Davinder and Ranbir proudly claimed as their birthright—being the sons of Jat farmers.



42: VCD Cover of Punjabi Film *Putt Jattan De* (Sons of Jat Farmers)

Becoming Transnational –  
The Success of Living Abroad

Through Punjabi films, audiences in Punjab can see what life is like in places like Surrey, Yuba City and Southall, while diasporic audiences are able to experience life back in the village. This transnational circulation of Punjabi films differs slightly from the recent “globalization of Bollywood cinema” often discussed in popular media and written about by numerous South Asian and films studies scholars (Desai 2003; Jolly, Wadhwani and Barretto 2007; Kavoori and Punathambekar 2008; Rai 2009). Whereas the depictions of diaspora within Bollywood films are often multifaceted – diaspora is a space where national culture and traditions are simultaneously contested and reaffirmed (Desai 2003, Gopinath 2005), in Punjabi films the popular depictions of life in the diaspora tend to be invested exclusively in reproducing the regional culture and reinforcing traditions among the diasporic communities. Characters living abroad are often shown as more conservative with traditional family values than characters living in Punjab, especially in Chandigarh.

Sociologist Ulrich Beck refers to this phenomenon as ‘glocalization,’ under which highly localized representations are further accentuated and projected into transnational geographical and cultural spaces (2000: 48-50). The NRI-themed Punjabi films do not simply depict abroad as a foreign, unfamiliar and unpredictable. Instead their interpretations of abroad rely on the similarities and landscapes of home being replicated in foreign locations, focusing exclusively on the experiences of one regional community dispersed across the globe through the processes of globalization. At the center of these narratives about transnational migration are usually Punjabi Jat migrants played by one of

the heroes of Punjabi cinema, embodying and shaping the glocal ambitions of the film's primary audience, young Punjabi men like Palli, Davinder and Ranbir, as the hero is shown moving seamlessly between rural and transnational settings.

*Mitti Wajaan Maardi* (The Soil Beckons), released in 2007, which followed the release and success of *Jee Aayan Nu*, is another film set partly in California and partly in Punjab. The film is about a second-generation Punjabi man named Varyam<sup>58</sup>. The film opens with a shot of a signboard similar to the one on the Wagha border that reads "Welcome to Yuba City" in bold letters. A montage featuring the rural California landscape overlaid to a Punjabi folk song titled *Jugni* follows the opening shot. The camera pans across luscious green fields and on to the rocky hills in the distance and then to the horizon where the wide-open space meets the cloudless blue skies. Intercut with these shots of landscape that closely resemble the rural landscape of Punjab in *The Lion of Punjab*'s opening sequence, are shots of interstate highway with a rows of shiny cars entering and exiting the screen. There is a shot of a Sikh temple, followed by a shot of strip mall advertising Jamba Juice, a U.S. juice company. We see an elderly turbaned Sikh man strolling down a suburban street, followed by a shot of a picnic where a group of Punjabi men, young and old, are gathered to enjoy the afternoon sunshine.

These images give the audiences the sense that Punjab has been transplanted into transnational and diasporic locations. "It's Punjab outside of India," a young Punjabi migrant named Ramandeep commented, reacting to the opening sequence.

My friend who lives in California tells me that over there the environment is exactly the same as in Punjab. They tell me that they don't even feel like they are

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<sup>58</sup> Played by Harbhajan Mann

living abroad. You see *apane bande* [our people] everywhere you go. They are very friendly and welcoming. Except, there is no dirt. It's very clean and very beautiful. You still feel that it's our Punjab. It feels like it belongs to us. You can just call it second Punjab.

Unlike in the depiction of diasporic communities in Bollywood films, where similar stories of Indian immigrants living middle class lives in multicultural and metropolitan cities like New York or London, which the young men frequently dismissed as unrealistic, Ramandeep claimed that Punjabi film's depictions of the diasporic communities was "more real" because it looked and felt like the "real Punjab."

However, as Ramandeep acknowledged, there were subtle and important differences. In addition to the lack of dirt, unlike the State of Punjab within India, which remains confined within the geopolitical boundaries of the nation state, this opening sequence in *Mitti Waajan Maardi* suggests an expansion of that geographical and cultural landscape. The promise of abroad as depicted within NRI-themed Punjabi films does not lie in the exact replication of Punjab's rural landscape but in the way in which its boundaries could expand well beyond what was previously imagined within films released in the 1980s and the 1990 like *Putt Jattan De*. The use of long shots to reveal limitless space intercut with familiar images of traditional Punjabi life in transnational locations not only creates a sense of belonging within the unfamiliar landscape of abroad, but also leaves open the possibility of its further expansion. Abroad, as NRI-themed Punjabi films depicts, is shown as a space that is open and inviting to all Punjabis if they are able and can afford to emigrate.

While *The Lion of Punjab* and *Putt Jattan De* both characterize masculinity with the ability to move between the rural domestic space of the village and the urban public

space of the city, in *Mitti Wajaan Maardi* an analogous journey takes place. It is a journey between rural and urban spaces as well as across national borders. Following the opening sequence, Varyam<sup>59</sup> is seen dressed in a graduation gown driving a convertible sports car. Exiting the streets of San Francisco and entering the rural landscape of Yuba City, he arrives at a farm where his father is plowing the field on his tractor. The father, excited to see his son, climbs hurriedly out of his tractor. The dialogue follows:

*Father:* Oh Varyam! You should've informed me that you are coming.

*Son:* Dad, it's Dr. Varyam now. I thought I'd give you a surprise.  
So, how do I look?

*Father:* You look wonderful! I can't tell you how happy this father is to see his son's success. Tell me what position did you graduate with?

*Son:* I have always been number one, dad.

*Father:* God bless you! I cannot believe that a son of a Jat can earn first position in an American university. Today my migration to America has been successful.

This interaction between the father and his son reenacts a similar celebration of the son's achievements and his post-adolescent masculinity that is passed down from father to son within *Putt Jattan De*. However, unlike *Putt Jattan De* where the father's (the Jat farmer's) success is celebrated by the son's achievements within the same profession, abroad seems to promise new possibilities of the type of work Punjabi Jat men can engage and succeed in.

The mother-son relationship between a Punjabi man and his land changes upon migration abroad. This change is reflected both within his choice of work and is marked physically on his body and his appearance, which in California has been transformed from the traditional farmer's attire (a light colored *kurta*) into more westernized status

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<sup>59</sup> Played by Harbhajan Maan



attire, in Varyam's case a black graduation gown. When I show Ramandeep this segment, he responded:

I think it's an accurate representation. Punjab boys, they go abroad, they study hard and make their parents proud. I think that ethos comes from our Punjabi culture that you have to work hard regardless of whether it is in farming or studying. Foreign boys don't study as much as Punjabi boys. Punjabi boys living there (abroad) excel in their studies.

As Ramandeep concluded his statement, he pointed at me, a son of Punjabi immigrants studying at American University as an example, expecting a nod of agreement in return. I neither denied nor confirmed his assertion. Instead I asked, was it necessary to migrate abroad to do well in studies? Was it not possible to achieve similar success here in India? "Can a son of a Jat earn first position in an Indian university?" I asked. "It's not possible here," Ramandeep shook his head conclusively. He explained:

There is too much corruption here. Jats have money and property so their sons don't take interest in education or work. We think that our families are wealthy so we don't need to work hard. Parents often bribe the teachers and get their boys to pass classes by cheating. I know guys from my village who passed their 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades without studying a single day. Their parents simply bribed the headmasters.

Ramandeep went on to explain that even students who were academically inclined and hardworking are frequently disheartened when they witnessed their classmates passing their exams by bribing the teacher. The cycle of corruption continues into their adult lives, as more and even larger bribes are expected when searching for a job or obtaining a promotion. The only way to escape it, concluded Ramandeep, "is by migrating abroad."

NRI-themed Punjabi films like *Mitti Wajaan Maardi* were popular among young Punjabi migrants like Palli, Davinder, Ranbir and Baljinder not only because they gave

them a glimpse into life outside of India and within diasporic communities, but also because they seem to provide new possibilities of liberating themselves from traditional identity boundaries that defined their social status and the work they could do in India. These films allowed the young men to dream about becoming something more than just a farmer and, in the process, forge new identities for themselves. Even though these new possibilities, like the landscape of diaspora, appear to be limitless, they remain open only to a privileged few, as patriarchy, gender inequality and caste and class hierarchies are also reproduced and reinforced within diasporic communities.

The Journey Home –  
Recovery of the Rural Masculinity

Unlike the Punjabis living in Chandigarh, depicted in films like *the Lion of Punjab* as consciously corrupt, driven by greed and having given up their cultural values, diasporic characters are often shown as kind, generous and compassionate individuals who are successful through hard work. Audiences are made to sympathize with characters living in diaspora. Even the ones who have become “Americanized” as Palli explained, “are helplessly influenced by western cultures, while simultaneously nursing the desires to retain their traditional cultural values.” The marker of a successful Punjabi migrant, as I was told in almost every interview I conducted on the topic, entailed retaining a connection to one’s culture and one’s homeland. For many migrants including Palli, Davinder and Ranbir, their goal was not only to leave the country and move abroad but also to be able to return home and regularly visit their villages and invest in the region’s economy and development.

Not surprisingly, a key feature of the transnational heroes of Punjabi films entails the journey back to their villages to re-discover their homeland and roots. In *Mitti Wajaan Maardi*, following his father's death, Varyam, the second-generation son of a Punjabi migrant farmer is in Palli's words "pulled back by the powerful soil of Punjab." Palli, who re-watched the film with me on DVD noted:

He is in love with his soil. His father has given him the right *sanskar* [values]. He does not allow himself to be colored in American colors. He comes back to Punjab, to discover his Punjabi identity. That was the best aspect of this film. It is important to remember your roots and your history and where you come from, even when you are away from home.

As reinforced though these narratives of circular migration and movement, returning home to their village in Punjab was often almost as essential for Punjabi migrants as migrating in the first place. Another popular feature within NRI-themed Punjabi films featuring a returning Punjabi hero is selecting a lover and a future bride from his village whom he would go on to marry. But before he is able to do that, the transnational hero of Punjabi films must undergo the transformation back into being a rural farmer by reincorporating himself into the traditional space of the village and proving his Jat masculinity, making him worthy of marrying someone from his village.

Similar narratives of returning home are also featured in the films *Tera Mera Ki Rishta* (What is our Relationship) and *Munde UK De* (Boys of UK), both starring Jimmy Shergill and both released in 2009. Unlike the other Punjabi films we watched on my small television or on my laptop, I watched these two films at the Neelam theatres, accompanied by Palli, Davinder and Ranbir. Davinder had already seen *Munde UK De*

before, but when I offered to pay for the ticket, he eagerly joined us to sit through another screening.

As we walked into the lobby of the theatre, I could see that Neelam's once beautiful façade was in desperate need of repair. Littered with trash, the theatre's lobby was poorly lit, and the dingy room smelled of floor disinfectant. As we watched Shergill play ice hockey in an indoor sport arena and zip through the streets of London on a motorbike, the sound stopped working for several minutes, encouraging the men in the audience to adlib their own dialogues to the muted scenes. The third disruption was caused by a stray cat that brushed past my leg, startling me into a state of panic. Palli, Davinder and Ranbir all laughed at my reaction to the cat, treating the animal's presence inside the movie theatre as a normal occurrence. Palli suspected that the cat lived in the theatre and there might be more of them walking around searching for spilled popcorn and other snacks. The men in the audience whistled and commented throughout both films, a common feature of a movie going experience in North India.

*Munde UK De* opens with shot of Shergill, an NRI who immigrated to the United Kingdom during childhood, arriving at his bungalow in his village, where his grandfather eagerly awaits his return. He steps out of a SUV wearing a shiny silver jacket, funky sunglasses and a large wristwatch, among other flashy jewelry that includes earrings, necklaces and bracelets. With his gelled and spiked up, and a Bluetooth headset attached to his right ear, he looks around chewing compulsively, presumably on a piece of gum. As he greets his grandfather, his Punjabi is interspersed with English words, which other villagers would go on to mock. But shortly after his arrival in both films is Shergill

begins love affairs with college-educated Punjabi women with traditional family values (characteristics emphasized repeatedly throughout both films), belonging to Jat families. In order for him to marry his lover, we see Shergill undergo the physical transformation from looking like a stereotypical NRI, into a rural Jat farmer and staking claim to his land and subsequently his lover.

As part of the similar transformation process in *Tera Mera Ki Rishta*, Shergill acquires thirty *kilas* (acres) of land. Initially, Shergill expresses puzzlement to his friend in not knowing what to do with the newly acquired land. His friend reminds him, “You are the son of a Jat. It is obvious that you are going to farm the land. It’s not like you are going to raise hogs.” Shergill’s uncertainty is transformed into confidence the moment he inserts the key into the tractor’s ignition. Farming appears to come naturally and effortlessly. Not knowing what to do is seamlessly resolved as he begins plowing the field leading to the recovery of rural Jat masculinity. This transformation into a Jat farmer is marked physically on to Shergill’s body, as the silver jacket and the flashy jewelry is abandoned for a plain white *kurta*, like the one worn by the men featured in *Putt Jattan De*.

This bodily transformation is also reminiscent of the popular film *Dilwale Dhulaniya Le Jayenge (DDLJ)*, which as I discussed earlier in this chapter, was one of the first Bollywood films to popularize the NRI genre by featuring the story of a London-based Punjabi man returning to India along with his family to arrange his daughter’s wedding. Despite having grown up in London, the film’s main character, Simar,<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Played by Kajol

abandons all visual elements of western culture (mini-skirts, jeans etc.) upon arriving in India. Citing the film as an example, film studies scholars have pointed out that in Bollywood's depiction of diasporic communities, filmmakers often assign women's bodies with the task of reproduction of the patriarchal family (Mehta 2007, Mankekar 1999). When traveling across national boundaries they undergo the transformation from being western and transnational to dressing in the traditional Indian attire. In Punjabi cinema, it is often the transnational Jat men who undergo identical transformations and are pivotal in the reproduction of the patriarchal family both at home and abroad.

Despite this transformation being an essential step in reclaiming one's cultural identity, the transition into becoming a Jat farmer is only partially achieved. In *Tera Mera Ki Rishta*, Shergill's white *kurta* is juxtaposed with a baseball hat and sneakers. When Shergill starts his tractor, instead of hearing Bhangra beats, audiences hear rock music indicating a sense of cultural hybridity.<sup>61</sup> Discussing what it means to be modern and traditional sociologist Bruno Latour writes, "the more we forbid ourselves to conceive of hybrids, the more possible interbreeding becomes" (1993: 12). Following Latour, I believe that unlike Le Corbusier's premise of modernity, upon which Chandigarh's master plan is modeled, where to be modern is antithetical to the traditional way of life in rural Punjab, modernity as embodied by the transnational Jat heroes of Punjabi cinema and as conceptualized by young migrant men like Palli, Davinder and Ranbir is often a process that does not entail forgoing their traditional ways of life but mixing regional and global sensibilities to create a new hybrid identity.

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<sup>61</sup> See Bhabha (1994) for a useful discussion of cultural hybridity.

Young Punjabi migrants gravitate towards popular representations of transnational Punjabi heroes because they embody the best of both worlds. They are successful both at home and in the diaspora, and they are able to move fluidly across national boundaries. It is worth noting that both *Munde UK De* and *Tera Mera Ki Rishta* conclude with Shergill returning back to England or Canada along with his new brides.



43: Poster of *Munde UK De* (Boys of UK) Featuring Jimmy Shergill (bottom left)



### Failing to Be a Man

Popular representation in Punjabi cinema often glamorizes life in diaspora, reinforcing ideas that success and successful masculinity can only be achieved through transnational migration, while simultaneously perpetuating masculine hegemony and the dominance of landowning Jats. Young Punjabi men like Palli, Davinder and Ranbir frequently turned to the heroes of Punjabi films as models of successful masculinity. However, missing from this panorama of experiences projected on the cinematic screen is the depiction of women who migrate across national boundaries and the alienation and the challenges many migrants (men and women) often face upon arriving in a strange, unfamiliar land.

In her film *Videsh* (Abroad), which was also released in 2009, Indian-Canadian filmmaker Deepa Mehta provides a moving account of the difficulties that working class Punjabi migrants experience in Canada. The film opens amid a group of women performing *gidha* on a rooftop in a farmhouse in Punjab, celebrating Chand's<sup>62</sup> wedding. Chand is a college educated Punjabi bride who would travel to Mississauga, a suburb of Toronto with a large Punjabi community to join her husband and in-laws. Upon arriving in Mississauga, her in-laws, who as we learn received a \$20,000 dowry from Chand's parents, treat her like a servant. Her husband, a young Punjabi guy named Rocky<sup>63</sup> physically abuses her repeatedly. We see Chand pleading to her parents to return to India, but her parents instruct her to continue living within the abusive family, and to sponsor her brother to immigrate to Canada as well. The film ends with Chand finding the

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<sup>62</sup> Played by Preity Zinta

<sup>63</sup> Played by Vansh Bhardwaj

strength to walk out of her abusive marriage after Rocky falsely accuses her of having an affair and beats her ruthlessly.

Unlike the other Punjabi films we watched together, *Videsh* was the only film to illuminate the harsh realities of the lives of working class Punjabi immigrants. Issues such as alienation, domestic abuse and women being used as channels for the men in the family to migrate abroad are only peripherally explored in other Punjabi films, and are rarely given the attention they deserve. Mehta's depiction of life in diaspora deviates from this conventional depiction of the diaspora through the use of black and white imagery that renders Canada as lonely and desolate in contrast to the depiction of a colorful and vibrant Punjab.

The film had a limited release within India, and went largely unnoticed by the mainstream Indian media and audiences in Punjab. It never played in the Kiran or Neelam theatres. Instead, Palli, Davinder and I traveled to the multiplex at the DT City Centre to watch the film in a largely empty theatre where it was competing against a handful of other Bollywood films. After watching the film, I discussed the film with Palli and Davinder along with the issues of domestic violence in Punjabi communities abroad. "Yes, that happens quite frequently. These NRI guys want to marry girls from the village because they are unaware of their rights. They take them abroad and make them work like a servant," Davinder acknowledged. Palli interjected, "But we can't say that everyone is like this. Not all five fingers are the same." Davinder pointed out that within the film we see that Rocky is the only male member of the family who is employed. "He's the breadwinner of the family. He has all the control. He does not respect his

father.” Unlike the other Punjabi heroes, Palli chimed in, “Rocky has lost his *sanskar*, which includes respects for elders. He does not realize the sacrifices his father has made to take him to Canada.”

Despite my attempt to get them to critically reflect on the experience of migrants by bringing up *Videsh* in our subsequent conversation, both Palli and Davinder dismissed the film as one of the worst film they had seen that year. Palli complained, “it had no music, no dancing, it’s not a real Punjabi film.” My case for *Videsh* as an important depiction of migrant experiences that deserved critical reflection was further hampered by the unexpected climax of the film where Mehta thoughtfully uses magical realism to show Chand’s shift into self-empowerment. But the subtleties in Mehta’s depiction, much like the subtleties within Corbusier’s architecture, were largely lost on Palli and Davinder.

Mehta’s version of the migrant’s tale is also unsettling because the men within the film, specifically Rocky (the abusive husband) challenges the dominant representations of the Punjabi heroes Palli and his friends idolize. Unlike the character of Varyam in *Mitti Wajaan Maardi* or Shergill in *Tera Mera Ki Rishta* and *Munde UK De*, Rocky is seen as failing to be able to live up to the expectations placed upon him as a son and a husband. Rocky is cold and distant. When he is not inside the house, he dissolves into the grey landscape of Canada. As he tries to make ends meet, we get the sense that the migration to Canada has forced him to take up more responsibility than he is able to handle. The pressure placed on him is compounded by the fact that both his father and brother-in-law are unemployed. There are a few moments within the film when we are

given a glimpse into Rocky's desires: he reminisces about playing cricket, which he tells his wife was his childhood hobby. Migration, even under voluntary conditions, has left Rocky coping with the loss of his childhood accompanied by the loss of his nation. The affirmation of his masculine self is then overshadowed by trauma from that loss.

### Conclusion

This chapter has explored the dominant models of Punjabi masculinity as popularized within Punjabi cinema. In almost every Punjabi film released in the last thirty years, the filmmakers represent the heroes of Punjabi cinema as belonging to the Jat caste, either as themselves or as sons of farmers. Construction of Punjabi masculinity is not only characterized through the celebration of hero's agrarian heritage, but also with the ability to move effortlessly between rural, urban and transnational landscapes. Whereas films like *Putt Jattan De*, released thirty years ago, depicts young Jat men traveling through fields and into a streets of a city, in the NRI-themed Punjabi films like *Munde UK De* that journey transpires across national boundaries. Bhangra, the male Punjabi folkdance that has over the last twenty years gained global recognition, serves as a useful practice through which young Punjabi men publicly perform their masculinity. The construction of the mobile gendered body of the Punjabi hero within Punjabi cinema represents a privileged site upon which dominant masculinity and cultural identity is articulated both in Punjab and within diasporic communities.

Though few and far between, the experiences of Punjabi men featured in more independently produced films like *Videsh* provide powerful critiques of the hegemonic representation of masculinity in Punjabi cinema by creating space for a less fanciful and

more accurate portrayal of diasporic communities' experiences. These especially implicate the audiences of Punjabi cinema, young men like Palli, Davinder and Ranbir who actively fashioned their own gendered and cultural identities and notions of work and success around what they saw on screen.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

#### Realities of Abroad

Shortly after I returned from India in March of 2010 I received a Facebook message from Palli informing me that he had been given a three-year study visa from Access College in London. On his third attempt at taking the IELTS exam, he had scored 5 bands, which are enough to qualify him for a student visa to the United Kingdom. I tried calling his mobile phone to congratulate him, but it had already been disconnected. I sent a few messages through Facebook, which too went unanswered. By the time I returned to India in the summer of that same year Palli had already left for London, so I met up with Davinder and Ranbir who were still living in Chandigarh at that time.

Almost a year and half later, I noticed that Palli had uploaded two new pictures of himself on his Facebook profile. In the first image he was sitting on a slanted roof of a newly constructed house accompanied by two other South Asian men, one wearing a turban and other wearing a yellow hard hat. With the dull grey sky in the background, characteristic of the perennially overcast British landscape, the three men appeared to be taking a break from constructing the roof. In the second image Palli was squatting in between two large toolboxes, wearing a shiny neon-green construction vest and dark tracksuit pants covered with white paint splatters. Gazing away from the camera he was grinning shyly. His smile was missing the usual enthusiasm I had come to associate with

his personality instead he appeared tired and defeated. I sent him another message over Facebook and we finally reconnected over the phone in December of 2011.

Since arriving in England, Palli had been working as a day laborer, taking on various construction and plumbing jobs that often paid cash. According to the stipulations of his study visa, he was only allowed to work 20 hours per week, which he soon discovered did not earn him enough money to pay for his rent as well as tuition fees. Though he had started at Access College located in Wimbledon, a suburb of London, he dropped out a year and half later after he had been “blacklisted” for his failing grades. He left Wimbledon for Wolverhampton, a predominantly South Asian suburb of Birmingham where he was now living and working.

“There are too many young men here,” Palli told me, complaining about the lack of work and having to compete with others immigrant men in similar financial positions. He lamented,

*Bura haal hai, eithe vi* [the situation is just as bad here]. One is constantly competing for work with other Indians and also Romanians. There are too many Romanians here as well. They are not good kind of *gore* [whites]. They are dirty and rude... I feel very lonely here. *Ghardian bina jee nahi lagda* [without my family, I feel restless], *maan dukhi rehnda hai* [my mind is filled with sadness]... *Faida nahi laagya eithe aan da haje tak* [I have yet to realize the profit of migrating here].

Palli told me that he had been sharing a four-bedroom apartment with four other men, all of whom were Punjabi immigrants. “There are five of us, all boys from Punjab. We all have our own rooms, except there is one guy who does night shift so he shares his room with another guy. They take turns sleeping on the same bed.” He went on to explain that despite living with the four men for over a year, unlike his roommates in Chandigarh, he

knew little about his current housemates. “I rarely see any of them. They all work late. We go out together occasionally on the weekends.”

Through Palli, I also learned that Ranbir had moved to Canada. He had earned 7 bands on his IELTS exams and was currently studying at the University of Regina located about 100 miles north of Montana and over the U.S.-Canadian border. Davinder though scored only 3 bands on the test, therefore he could not afford further study in Chandigarh and moved back to his village. “He is still hoping to emigrate, somehow some way, maybe through marriage or maybe he will retake his IELTS exams,” Palli speculated during our conversation.

A few months after initial conversation, Palli and I video-chatted. He showed me the rooms of his house. Aside from a crowded kitchen, a flat screen television and an old couch, it appeared similar to the empty and cold room he once shared with Ranbir in Sector 22 PG in Chandigarh.

Disenchanted by what he discovered upon arriving in London, Palli complained, “England is dirty. People here take too many drugs and there is too much crime.” Palli was particularly disturbed by the racial discrimination and the tension he observed between different ethnic groups especially in working class and immigrant enclaves of Greater London. “*Gore* [whites] and blacks are often hostile towards Indians. They call names like ‘Fucking Paki.’ White people also dislike blacks,” Palli commented. When I asked his impressions of the Punjabi community in Wolverhampton, he replied, “Punjabi people are mostly good. They are friendly. But many people are very deeply religious... The Indians here also live in segregated Sikh, Hindu and Muslim communities.” Despite



his disappointments with the immigrant life in the United Kingdom, Palli retained his sense of humor. He jokingly asked me if I could find him an American wife. “I am willing to pay 30 to 40 lakh rupees to get married for permanent residency. I’ll even buy her a house,” he half-seriously propositioned.

Palli also expressed concerns about not saving enough money to send back home to his family. With his study visa expiring in another year, his chances of obtaining permanent residency in United Kingdom also appeared bleak. “I think I want to try to move to Canada, I hear there are more jobs there and they pay well.” During our conversations I also learned that Palli had enrolled in yet another IELTS prep class in Wolverhampton, which he attended twice a week from 9 am to 5 pm. “The fees are four times more than what *Tustoon* [Touchstone] charged in Chandigarh,” he complained after having to pay GBP£500 (US\$750) for the 10 week course. During our last conversation, Palli told me that he was planning to retake his IELTS exams in March 2012, and then apply for a study visa to Canada or the United States.

Before he hung up, I asked Palli if knowing what he knows now regarding the challenges accompanied by transnational migration and the difficulties of having to live in a foreign and unfamiliar world where he did not know the dominant language and culture whether he would still choose to leave his homeland and move abroad? He replied with an unwavering “yes!”

I may have to work hard and persevere *aukhe-sukhe* [with difficult or ease], but maybe one day my son or daughter will grow up to be someone as accomplished as yourself. They too can get a good education and go on to teach at a college. And I will feel like I have been *kaamyab insaan* [successful man]. My life will amount to something. And for that, it was worth leaving home, moving to Chandigarh and migrating abroad.

### Some Conclusions

I started my fieldwork in India intending to study the production and circulation of Punjabi films, which over the last decade has gone from being a regional form of entertainment (locally made and seen, depicting rural life in Punjab) to becoming increasingly transnational (featuring international storylines and settings, as well as being distributed among diasporic audiences). While watching these films in local theatres and interviewing Punjabi filmmakers in Chandigarh, where much of the Punjabi film industry is located, I became interested in understanding the experiences of the young Punjabi men I met in Chandigarh and who often made up the primary audiences at these screenings.

These men idolized the heroes of Punjabi cinema. They saw their favorite Punjabi heroes living the kind of transnational lives on screen that they themselves desired. In addition to being fans of Punjabi films, most of the young men I met and interviewed also had two additional experiences in common. They belonged to the landowning Jat families and they had moved to Chandigarh from their villages in Punjab to gain the language and technical skills needed to migrate abroad on student or skilled-worker visas. While many of the men I interviewed sought short-term student visas, all of them ultimately intended to obtain residency upon migrating and settle permanently abroad. Popular destinations included countries with liberal immigration policies and countries with large concentrations of the diasporic Punjabi community, including Canada, United Kingdom, Australia and the United States.

Chandigarh as a city as well as the first stop on the migrant's journey out of India played a crucial role in shaping these men's experiences and identities. Designed by Le Corbusier, a pioneer within the modern movement in European architecture, Chandigarh is unlike any other city in North India. As I explored in chapter two, Chandigarh is self-consciously an "un-Indian" city. Shunning symbolism and historical iconography, Le Corbusier focused on abstractions that informed the minimalist aesthetic associated in his architectural designs. Modern architecture in Chandigarh was meant to signal a break from the past toward the promotion of a utopian future yet it ended up segregating the city's residents and creating a sense of regional isolation both spatially and culturally. While residents of Chandigarh have largely rejected (or in some cases never fully subscribed to) this modernist vision, Chandigarh's administration and the development of public buildings and infrastructure within the city remain committed to the master plan Le Corbusier authored nearly sixty years ago. As a result, Chandigarh today seems like a city fixed in a particular moment in the nation's history and ironically trapped by its own futuristically-visioned past. The young Punjabi men who moved here from their rural Punjabi villages referred to Chandigarh as "similar to abroad" and envision their time in Chandigarh as a rehearsal for their future lives.

While the architecture of Chandigarh remains unchanged from the time of its conception in the 1950s, the surrounding Punjab region has undergone significant transformations resulting from the changes brought on by the processes associated with late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century globalization. Most notably there has been a steady increase over the last two decades in transnational migration from Punjab which, coupled

with globalization, has helped to increase the flows of people, capital, and images moving in and out of the country. Other notable changes in the region include neoliberal corporate expansion and investment throughout the region coupled with the steady decline in governmental subsidies and support for Punjabi farmers. Most of the young men I spoke with perceived farming as no longer a profitable profession and found it difficult to get well paying jobs in urban India. The culmination of these economic and cultural changes resulted in a general sense shared almost unanimously among my research participants and their families that upward mobility and opportunities for a better life was possible only by migrating abroad.

While the young men I spoke with did cite the perceived lack of employment opportunities within India as the primary motivator for them to emigrate, chapter one contextualized this sentiment by integrating and building upon Mooney's research explaining that for the Jat Sikh community living in Punjab their desire to leave India is also rooted in an ongoing sense of ethnic and political marginalization there (2011). This sense of marginalization is a result of decades of disillusionment and half-kept promises made by the Indian government to the Punjabi Sikh community and Punjabi farmers after India gained its independence in 1947. The relationship between the Indian Government and Punjabi Sikh community was further strained by the economic shortfalls of the Green Revolution in 1970s. All of this led to the political uncertainty and religious militancy that plagued the Punjab region in the 1980s.

Building on Chopra's research, which explains that in the 1980s many Jat Sikh families sent their sons abroad fearing persecution by the state police (2010), I observed

how, even after the militancy ended, the desire and the trend towards migrating abroad has only grown over the last twenty years. The young Punjabi men and their family members I spoke to remain distrustful of the Indian government and weary of its ability to support the region's rural communities and their interests. Even as Chandigarh serves as the shared capital of Punjab and Haryana and a transit point for young Punjabi migrants on their journey out of India, it also represents one of the key sources of the Punjabi Sikh community's grievances against the Indian government. Regional politicians regularly cite not being given full control over Chandigarh, as the Indian government had initially promised. Thus, the city serves as a perennial reminder of Punjabi Sikh marginalization within a majority Hindu nation.

In chapter two I explained how given the complex histories of emigration from the region and the marginalization of Punjabi Sikhs and especially young Sikh men living in Punjab, the desire to leave India and seek a better life abroad is widespread among the Punjabi Jat community in India. While transnational migration is not uncommon from other parts of the country, the desire to leave India is rarely motivated by the sense of marginalization that my participants and the Jat Sikh community in Punjab generally seem to share.

Because of its postcolonial legacy, young Punjabi men and their families perceived Chandigarh as a knowledge society, a place where parents send their sons to study English and learn technical skills that would ultimately lead them on the path towards transnational migration. Coming from a vibrant and colorful countryside, these men described Chandigarh as alien and unfamiliar. Capitalizing on the ever-increasing

flow of hopefuls seeking access to immigration related services, local businesses, city residents and private entrepreneurs have started catering to their needs. Thus even as these new migrants contend with the strangeness of this foreign-looking city, the landscape of Chandigarh is also being transformed by their presence.

By contrasting the often exhilarating and ambitious lives of the young Punjabi migrants against the monotonous, reserved and structured landscape of Chandigarh, I discovered that Punjabi migrants' notion of what it means to be "modern" varies radically from how modernity was conceptualized with Le Corbusier's architecture and Nehru's vision of Chandigarh to be a "modern city." In the modernist orthodoxy, to become modern required one to leave behind traditional customs and ways of being and to instead move into an urbane, structured existence governed by foreign and governmental rules and regulations. Alternatively, Punjabi migrants defined modernity through a combination of transnational mobility and fulfilling aspirations for middle class material consumption along with adhering to traditional identity categories and celebrations of their cultural past and their rural identities. Instead of being transformed by the city's architecture urging a transformation from rural or traditional to urban or modern ways of being these young men drew on their caste superiority and agrarian heritage as strategies of claiming belonging in Chandigarh and brought this sense of being with them as they migrated abroad. This process of becoming modern as was not simply about these men being transformed by the present but was instead produced through their "questioning the present" (Gaonkar 2001:17-18). This is a process of "creative adaption... a site where a people 'make' themselves modern, as opposed to being 'made' modern by alien and

impersonal forces, where they give themselves an identity and a destiny” (Gaonkar 2001:16).

In chapters three and four, I explored how young Punjabi migrants developed their gendered identities and notions of successful masculinity leaving their villages behind and setting off on the path to transnational migration in Chandigarh. For most of the men I interviewed, the move was the first time they away from the watchful and disciplining gaze of their family members and their neighbors. The transition from the village to the city offered new opportunities for fraternal bonding, an exploration of their sexualities and the development of a sense of independent, masculine selfhood.

These men often classified these gendered experiences through a series of coming of age rituals that required them to make their own decisions without consulting their parents – including engaging in romantic and sexual relationships, losing their virginity or foregoing their unshorn hair and turbans. The move from the village to the city was a process through which they saw themselves growing up to realize the responsibilities that accompany being an adult: a process they referred to as *banda ban jaana* (to become a man). However, while most of these young men were living in Chandigarh on their own, they still relied on their parents to support them financially. For many, the ultimate definition of successful masculinity, and the one embodied by their filmic heroes was characterized by being able to migrate abroad because it allowed them to obtain the type of independence and financial success they felt was unobtainable by staying in India.

The young Punjabi men I interviewed also perceived migrating abroad as an opportunity to break out of the restrictions imposed upon them by their traditional caste

identities and categories. Their perceptions of work and labor differed within India and in countries to which they wished to emigrate. As sons of Punjabi farmers belonging to the dominant Jat caste, most of these men considered taking on jobs traditionally performed by those belonging members of the lower caste communities as undignified within India. However, most were simultaneously willing, and at times even eager to perform similar tasks (such as working at a liquor store, attending a gas station, cleaning toilets) in Canada or the United States. They attributed their different attitude to work abroad to a shared belief that labor (both skilled and remedial) was valued more outside of India. Earnings dollars and pounds abroad, which garnered a greater exchange rate back in Punjab, was perceived by the young Punjabi men as the only legitimate way of enhancing their own and their families' fortunes.

The young men whose lives I observed seemed to subscribe to two varying concepts of masculinity. As Chopra has previously observed (2004), young Punjabi men drew on notions of hegemonic masculinity as embodied by their fathers and other adult men in their families – the hardworking Jat farmer – to claim a sense of masculine entitlement and privilege. In my research I discovered that young Punjabi migrant men were simultaneously invested in parallel notions of successful masculinity as embodied by the film heroes they idolized – the successful transnational Punjabi migrants – whose lives they hoped to emulate. While hegemonic Punjabi Sikh masculinity has been characterized by physical dominance and caste superiority, successful migrant masculinity seems to be defined by being able to move between rural and transnational locations. The Punjabi men I interviewed recognized that such mobility requires them to



be flexible, adapting as much as they can both physically (in terms of their outward appearance by giving up their unshorn hair) and culturally (in terms of their attitudes towards caste and work).

As Chopra (2010) and Mooney (2011) have previously noted, migration for Jats is not a one-time movement from rural villages of Punjab to suburbs of Toronto, London or San Francisco. Instead the Punjabi migrants and their families characterized migration and related successful masculinity as a circular process that entailed an ongoing financial and emotional connection to their homeland and routine journeys between the two worlds. Migration from rural to urban or transitional sites, as is the case within many non-South Asian cultures, can be seen as an unofficial yet nevertheless important rite of passage for young single men, and a means through which they demonstrate their ambitions, their self-worth and manhood (Massey *et al.* 2005:105). However, in the process of doing this research, I discovered that among Punjabi families the ability to be mobile, which makes the opportunities for transnational migration possible, is controlled and accessed largely by Jat men.

Punjabi Jat men enjoy gender-based privileges that include being able to move between rural, urban and transnational spaces in ways that Punjabi women are rarely allowed. While Punjabi women benefit in specific ways from the trend towards transnational migration (Mooney 2006), Walton-Roberts and Pratt point out that migration from North India in general, “seems to strengthen patriarchal authority, as women may find themselves having to ‘bargain with patriarchy’ in order to maintain access to various economic and social resources” (2005:175).

While this dissertation complicates our understanding of migration from South Asia by looking at how notions of migration are intertwined with notions of masculinity and success, there remains a need for a more nuanced exploration and analysis of Punjabi women's experiences and their lives as affected by transnational migration and globalization. Insofar as I have observed and understood it, access to transnational mobility provides Punjabi men a disproportionate amount of power in Punjabi society. Further research can help connect these findings to the experience of Punjabi women, and help illuminate how male privilege, domination and Patriarchal control over access to mobility among other resources in any society comes at the cost of taking power away from women, and making them more vulnerable to exploitation.

In Punjab an immediate correlation can be made between the growing trend towards transnational migration and the growing cases of dowry related violence as well as the physical and emotional abuse Punjabi women have suffered as brides to NRI husbands. A darker, less visible consequence of this form of gender inequality entails the recent resurgence in the preference for sons over daughters among Punjabi families and the related practice of female feticide and female infanticide. While sons are able to migrate abroad more easily, send money home and help enhance individual family fortunes, daughters are often seen as a drain on a family's resources as women's mobility and sexuality are carefully monitored fearing their actions might result in familial dishonor. The economic and cultural processes related to globalization and transnational migration seem to further perpetuate the unequal construction of gendered identities and social roles associated with being a man or a woman in Punjab. Through this research and

dissertation, I offer partial insight into understanding different social dynamics and processes that contribute to gender inequality in South Asia and hope that this knowledge can be part of a broader solution aimed at promoting gender awareness and equality.

### Some Reflections

As I reflect back on the entire research experience and especially on the migrants lives I observed, young men like Palli, Davinder and Ranbir, many of whom grew up in similar households and families as my parents and with whom I share much in common, I feel a sense of empathy for the isolation and uncertainty they endure and the drudgery and hope it takes to work so hard to achieve the kind of life that I have often taken for granted—a kind of life that remains uncertain for many. While remaining critical of their position as men in a deeply Patriarchal and heteronormative society, I also admire their courage and perseverance in wanting to break free from the limitations placed upon them by their traditional caste roles and for wanting to support their families and earn a living through whatever work they are able to find abroad. I was especially moved by the sense of respect and gratitude many of my research participants conveyed towards their parents, their families and their religious communities.

The few times that I asked my research participants the question, “Why do you want to migrate abroad?” I often received bewildered glances followed by some standard answer about the lack of educational or economic opportunities in India. Though they were too polite to say outright, I knew that some of them were thinking, “Why don’t you ask the same question to yourself?” And I have in fact often wondered why my family chose to migrate to the United States. If I were still living in Chandigarh, I wonder if I too

would pursue a different future abroad? Understanding the complexities of migration seem to only reconfirm my initial suspicion that there are no simple answers to these questions.

In the process of conducting this research and writing this dissertation, I also came to the realization that like Palli, Davinder, Ranbir and the others I met during fieldwork, I too am defined by my past – by my childhood in Chandigarh along with my teenage years in California, where I attended high school and where my parents currently reside. Perhaps this is one reason why I am regularly drawn back to Chandigarh, both as a filmmaker and as an ethnographer. In retrospect I now realize that even as a researcher, I found it difficult to fully detach from the two different worlds in which I grew up. This fieldwork experience reconfirmed for me that like the young men whose lives I observed, having to entirely give up either one of for the other is not a bargain I would willingly make, not for any opportunity, financial or otherwise.

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