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Returning, Remitting, Reshaping: Non-Resident Indians and the
Transformation of Society and Space in Punjab, India

Margaret Walton-Roberts

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Returning, Remitting, Reshaping: Non-Resident Indians and the transformation of society and space in Punjab, India¹

Margaret Walton-Roberts
Department of Geography
University of British Columbia
walton@interchange.ubc.ca

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Abstract: This paper examines the ways in which Indo-Canadian immigrants link communities across Canada and India through fundraising for village development in their countries of birth. Attachment to the land of birth – the power of place – is a central aspect of Punjabi identity, and I support this assertion through a range of empirical material in order to argue that this connectivity, and the related transformations it encourages, will continue to mature. I argue that it is important for academics and policy makers to acknowledge the influence of transnational linkages upon immigration flows and issues of economic and social development in both India and Canada.

Key Words: Punjab, India, development, transnationalism

Introduction: Transnational spaces

Since Glick-Schiller *et al.* (1992) introduced their analytical framework for transnational understandings of immigrant communities, studies of transnational spaces or transnational social fields have produced rich illustrations of the ways in which space and social relations are being shaped by migrant networks that operate across the boundaries of multiple nation states. Much of this work has been driven by investigations focusing on the USA and Central and South America (Goldring 1998; Kearney 1995; Mountz and Wright 1996; Rouse 1991). In this paper, I turn my attention away from Latin America and the USA to India, Canada and Britain – three nations joined through shared, but unequal, colonial experiences and linked in the present through a post-colonial transnational space built primarily around Indian immigration. Within India, I focus on the Doaba region of Punjab, northwest India, the site from which millions of Indian immigrants have dispersed to numerous places of settlement and resettlement to form extensive global networks. Researchers such as Ballard (1990), Helweg (1984), Johnston (1984), La Brack (1989), and, more recently, Tatla (1999), have focused on Punjab specifically through diasporic migrant links, but the density and continued development of Indian Transnationalism merits further attention. In this paper I will review these distinctly transnational connections through considering Canadian NRI (Non-Resident Indian) fundraising for community development projects in Punjab.

Indians Overseas

The number of Indians overseas is estimated by the magazine *India Today* at around fifteen million with approximately three million each in Europe and North America.² Within India the regional sources of migration have been highly concentrated in a few states, namely Punjab, Gujarat, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Goa. Particular migration patterns have also been linked to particular regions; for example there are strong migratory networks connecting Punjab, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Goa, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu with Middle East countries. Similarly migrants to the UK and Canada tend to come from Punjab and Gujarat; all the above states have contributed to migration to the USA, Australia and West European countries (Madhavan 1985).

Although definitive numbers are impossible to secure, the state of Punjab is thought to be one of India's most significant out-migration regions and exhibits very close links to several countries of Punjabi settlement overseas. During discussions in 1999 with NRI Sabha officials in Jalandhar, Punjab, I was told that possibly five million Punjabis, documented and undocumented, were currently overseas.³ This represents almost one third of the total estimated number of Indians overseas, for a state with less than two percent of the total Indian population. This overrepresentation of Punjabis overseas becomes evident when traveling through the state, where one is struck by not only the intimate geographical knowledge many locals have with the sites of Punjabi settlement overseas, such as Vancouver in Canada, Southall and Wolverhampton in the UK, and Yuba City in California, but also, especially in the winter months, the number of British, Canadian and US citizens of Punjabi origin visiting family and friends in the region.⁴

Such concentration results from sustained and long-term migration networks between Punjab and multiple sites of settlement (Jensen 1988, Ballard 2000, Walton-Roberts 1998). The ongoing resilience of these networks is confirmed by current immigration application data; for example eighty percent of applications for family class immigration visas through the Canadian Embassy in Delhi emanate from Punjab and Haryana, and British and Canadian immigration officials in Delhi commented that they cooperate closely on immigration matters because of the similar regional immigration patterns the two countries have experienced.⁵ Punjab certainly qualifies as a transnational space, one that has, over at least a century, been subjected to intense international migration, creating a territory that continues to be at the centre of multiple transnational networks linking migrants and their relatives back in Punjab.

² Plus five million in South Asia (Nepal and Sri Lanka), three million in Mauritius, Fiji, South Africa, Trinidad, Guyana and Surinam) two and a half million in the Middle East and one and a half million in east Asia (Kautilya 1998).

³ The NRI Sabha is an organization representing the interests of NRIs, especially with reference to property related matters.

⁴ Throughout this paper I will refer to "Punjabis" overseas rather than Sikhs. Whilst Sikhism is strongly associated with Punjab, and the majority of Punjabis overseas would define themselves in some way as influenced by Sikhism, it is not necessarily the case that all Punjabis are Sikhs. To refer to a person as a "Punjabi" does imply certain shared cultural understandings, which may or may not include religious influences emanating from Sikhism, which is in itself also a highly *cultural* as well as religious marker. For a discussion of the complexities of "Punjabi" self-identity in London see (Raj 1997).

⁵ Personal interviews with Canadian and British immigration officials, conducted in Delhi, India in December 1999 and February 2000.

The History and Significance of International Migration for India

The notion of communities having global links that form a kind of transnational space, social field or linkages of multiple ‘translocalities’ (Appadurai 1996) may be a relatively new idea, but in the case of Punjab the actual links and processes are not new. Punjab, especially the Doaba region, has been a traditional site of international out-migration for over a century. Initiated during the colonial period, a combination of declining land holdings and increasing options through military and other paid employment, encouraged families to support the movement overseas of a large number of young single men, with the initial intention of sojourning (Kessinger 1974; Fox 1985). The networks resulting from these movements enabled information, people and money to circulate between Punjab and overseas Punjabi settlements with significant consequences. For example Punjabis on the west coast of North America played an important role in advancing the Indian independence struggle through the Gadar party (Juergensmeyer 1982), and as a result were subject to intense surveillance from British and Canadian Colonial forces (Johnston 1988). In the post independence era, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, the contribution remittances made to Punjab assisted in the agro-technological advances of the Green Revolution through the purchase of tractors and the construction of tube wells, with significant, though not always positive, results (Shiva 1991). There have also been challenges to the central Indian state through the role Sikhs overseas played in the rise of the Khalistan movement through the 1980s and 1990s (Tatla 1999).

In searching for more politically stable influences, the states and central governments in India have been encouraging all overseas Indians, referred to as Non-Resident-Indians (NRIs)⁶, to play a greater role in India’s economic development through various investment initiatives, for example the India Resurgent Bonds launched in 1998, and well-established NRI investment accounts held in hard currency with favourable rates of return. These investment initiatives serve to satisfy India’s desire to develop along with the global economy, but also to retain important cultural, economic and political control (Lessinger 1992). Such investment is in addition to the significant transmission of worker remittances overseas individuals send to family members in India. The current rate of these transfers places India as the single largest remittance receiving country with close to US\$10 billion received in 1998.⁷

⁶ The NRI Sabha (organization) of Punjab defines an NRI as; “an Indian citizen who stays abroad for employment, carrying on business or vocation outside India or stays abroad under circumstances indicating an intention for an uncertain duration of stay abroad is a non-resident. It will also include non-resident foreign citizens of Indian Origin and Indian citizens having green card or otherwise the right of residence in a foreign country.” (Constitution of the NRI Sabha Punjab, 5)

⁷ The Reserve Bank of India collects remittance data from banks and authorized currency exchangers, and quarterly surveys are conducted to ascertain unclassified receipts (IMF Balance of Payments Statistics

Grounding Transnational Research

While it is important to place immigration from India within a wider political-economic context, my purpose in this paper is to reveal the circulations and transformations transnational linkages entail at the village level by focusing on two villages, both in the Doaba region of Punjab: Palahi, near Phagwara in District Karpurtala, and Dhesian Kahna, in District Jalandhar.

Methodology

A brief review of the methodological framework of my study is important to contextualize these examples. My research into immigrant networks initially focused on Vancouver, Canada and Punjab, India. In Vancouver using a qualitative, open-ended interview structure, I interviewed several Punjabi immigrants who maintained strong commercial and cultural links back to Punjab. Following these networks, I spent four months in India with the majority of my time in the Doaba region of Punjab. In total I conducted 76 interviews of varying length and intensity with transnational actors both in Vancouver and Punjab. In this paper I review two of those networks with particular reference to the transformations caused at the village level through overseas migrant fundraising and subsequent development initiatives. I was introduced to each of these villages through initial Vancouver contacts and toured each village with members of the community on various occasions.

Palahi: The Global village

Palahi is located on a link road between Phagwara on the main GT road, and the Hoshiarpur road. It has a population of 3,800, with an equal number of former residents settled abroad. Seventy percent of the working population in the village are agriculturalists, and the village has 548 hectares of irrigated arable land. The village is home to a successful rural polytechnic, which since 1984 has trained over twelve thousand technical and computer students. The majority of students are rural, unemployed, male youth, but women are trained in computer and stenography courses. The Polytechnic also has seven extension centres around Punjab where young women complete embroidery and sewing classes. The village has become something of a model village boasting a library, post office, two banks, a community park, three schools, solar street lighting, a community

Yearbook, 1999, methodology section, p 210). Of course this official data, it is widely agreed, tends to underrepresents the true magnitude of remittance flows (Choucri 1986).

hall, and a community biogas project,⁸ and as a result, has been profiled in the television and print media as a local as well as national success story (Hartosh 1999; Vinayak 1997).

Palahi benefits from a number of committed individuals on the village council or *panchayat*, but the large communities of Palahi people abroad have been central in funding the major village improvement projects. There are important precedents to these overseas contributions. Early migrants who settled along the North American Pacific west coast in the early twentieth century were active in raising funds for the needs of several villages and educational institutes back in Doaba. Palahi set up its own educational society as early as 1922, and village elders believe that US\$17,000 was donated by Palahi men working in North America at this time. More recent fundraising has been channeled through the village NGO, the National Rural Development Society Palahi (NRDSP), which was set up in 1983 and was responsible for establishing Palahi's Polytechnic. The advantages of collecting money through an NGO rather than the village council or *panchayat*, allows funding decisions to be made independently of the local block development officer. The head of the society is Jagait Singh Palahi, who for many years was village head or *Sarpanch*. Mr. Palahi is now a permanent Canadian resident, and spends his time visiting his family in Victoria, Canada, touring throughout North America collecting money for village projects, and returning to Palahi to oversee developments. His global mobility is central to his fundraising effectiveness.

The most recent project to be completed in Palahi was the Miri Piri community hall. This sound-proofed hall with a capacity for 1,100 cost 35 lakh (over US\$83,000) to construct, and was financed with US\$80,000 contributions from Palahi people overseas. The hall also has a clock tower and solar powered clock that cost five lakh (US\$11,900), which was fully financed by one man from Slough in Britain.⁹ Currently the society is raising funds for an underground sewage system, which has been denied a matching grant from Punjab's rural development program because officials argued that many towns in the region have no underground sewage system.

Besides contributions to community projects, a significant amount of personal capital flows into the village from abroad. At the Punjab and Sind Bank, Palahi, the manager told me that 20–30 per cent of the money handled by his bank came from NRIs. The manager of the Cooperative Bank told me that since 1996, when the bank came into operation, they have taken in four crore rupees (roughly US \$900,000).¹⁰ A significant amount of this, he felt, came from NRIs and was most commonly used for the purchase of land, building houses, financing weddings, and donations to the

⁸ This involves capturing methane from human waste and using it as a energy source.

⁹ One lakh is 100,000 rupees. 1 US dollar is equal to 42 rupees.

¹⁰ One crore is 100 lakh.

village, especially the religious temple or Gurdwara.¹¹ Most villages in Punjab have at least one Gurdwara, which acts as a central gathering point and spiritual focus for the community. As a measure of the transnational networks Palahi is embedded within, three of the five-person Gurdwara management committee are Canadian residents who meet annually during the Gurdwara's main festival, the birthday of the Sixth Guru, Guru Hargobind.

It is difficult to get any figures on the number of people who had left this village (or indeed Punjab for that matter), but a few examples show how extensive the global migrations have been. My host, the principal of the village polytechnic, guided me through a survey of sixty houses in the central part of the village where Jat and other higher caste families reside.¹² Residents had moved abroad in forty of the houses, mostly leaving them to be inhabited by other family members. But ten of these houses were empty and locked, and eleven were rented or had a caretaker. The destination of migrants from the 40 households is indicated in figure 1, and reveals the diversity of settlement sites. Regardless of the significant out-migration – two-thirds of households are affected by international migration – Palahi does not represent a landscape of decline. In most cases those overseas were still maintaining their properties for occasional annual or biannual visits, and I was told that it was very rare for migrants to sell the family home. In this sample only one house had been sold, and that was owned by one of the first people to leave Palahi. Despite what seems like an massive exodus, there was a very regular movement back to Punjab, especially during November to March when the best weather brings people back for family visits, wedding arrangements, and tending to family property. To facilitate this movement coach companies – some run by NRIs – transport people directly from Delhi airport to the major out-migrant areas in Doaba, like Phagwara, Jalandhar, and Ludiahana. This allows returning migrants to go directly to their towns and villages without having to negotiate Delhi, and contributes to maintaining the perception of proximity between distant overseas sites of migrant settlement, and the home village in Punjab.

¹¹ He estimated that 50 percent of the NRIs he dealt with came from Canada, 45 from the UK, 1 percent from the USA, and 4 percent were in the Middle East.

¹² Most villages in the Doaba region are set out in a particular pattern, with the central houses inhabited by the Jat Sikh landowners and other higher castes, with the “untouchable” sweeper and tanner castes experiencing the most residential isolation on the periphery. Hershman (1981) argues that the presence of caste as an organizing system within Sikh villages is still important despite the religious teachings of Sikhism, which shun caste based practices. The fact that this survey was carried out in the central part where higher caste families live probably causes an overrepresentation of certain settlement locations. Even with lower caste village members however, migration is common, but there would probably be greater emphasis placed on temporary or undocumented migration to the Middle East and Europe.

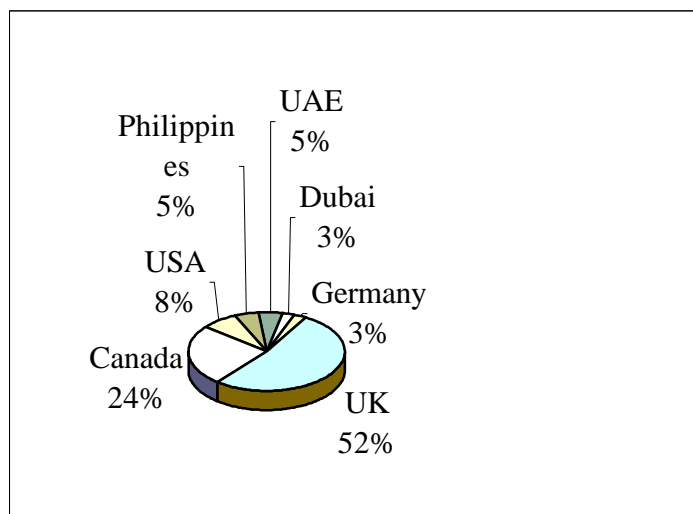


Figure 1: Overseas Location of Residents from 40 Palahi Households Affected by International Migration.

Increasingly, these regular networks are furthered through the effects of communication technologies, allowing the villagers greater and more regular contact with their relatives. The village has about two hundred and seventy phone connections for five hundred houses and five Public Communications Offices offering the ability both to make and receive international telephone calls. This is relatively high for a village of this size, which might normally have only twenty-five or so home phone connections for five hundred houses. Other forms of communication are shaped by very intimate personalized connections; the principal of the Rural Polytechnic for example, acted as a type of local correspondent for an international Punjabi language newspaper based in Vancouver. Most evenings he would scan the local newspapers and select stories he thought people overseas might be interested in. Late in the evening he would then fax the stories to the newspaper and for this he received a small payment. One communications resource the people of Palahi particularly prided themselves on, was the Polytechnic internet connection. All villagers and visiting NRIs can send and receive emails through the college, and it also enables the principal of the Polytechnic to maintain contact with Jagait Singh Palahi, the chairman of the village development society, as he tours North America gathering funds. This situation, a village with an internet connection, is seen as rather unique in India, and in one local television story Palahi was termed a 'Cyber Village.' The report's storyline reveals how processes of time-space compression have introduced spatial complexity to this village through its contradictory relations with "nearby local" government officials and "distant global" migrants overseas:

The state officials in Phagwara, a three-kilometer drive away, remain as inaccessible as ever to the villagers here. But their NRI relatives are only a click away. Step aside Mr. Postman; Palahi is zooming ahead on the info-highway.¹³

This type of communications technology has enabled Palahi to promote itself through a monthly internet newsletter sent to Palahi people overseas and others who have a connection to the village (such as myself, development agencies and environmental NGOs in Europe). This newsletter is increasingly becoming a central means through which villagers connect themselves more closely to a globally dispersed community, and is certainly an example of how new globalizing technologies are intensifying, extending and transforming traditional immigrant networks. It also presents an example of Latour's (1999) ideas of how space becomes folded and creased as networks transform physical distance through the circulation of information.

Transnationalism and immigrant settlement

Transformations at the level of the village are also accompanied by transformations at the site of overseas settlement. As Appadurai (1996) argues, we need to see how immigrant communities and networks are often formed across nation-states in very personal and intimate ways, revealing the highly emotional connections immigrants maintain with their home villages. My link into Palahi was Ajit Singh,¹⁴ a man who emigrated to Vancouver in 1974 with a degree in economics. By 1982 he became a real estate agent, but prior to that he held several jobs as a cleaner, glass-cutter and taxi-driver. Despite, or perhaps because of, the hard times he faced in achieving a successful life in Canada for himself and his family, he always felt extremely attached to his village. Soon after Palahi's National Rural Society was set up in 1983, Ajit felt he was in a financial position to contribute, so in 1985 he assisted in collecting over Cdn\$30,000 for Palahi from Canadians connected to the village. About 10 years later he helped coordinate a similar collection, gathering Cdn\$32,000. Such fundraising was facilitated in part by the spatially concentrated geographical settlement pattern of Indo-Canadians. Of the 126 donors in 1995, all were in British Columbia, and three-quarters lived in the Lower Mainland region of the province, with over one third from just one municipality, Surrey, in the south-east of Greater Vancouver. Palahi village became an important symbol of success both in India and for immigrant communities abroad, and Ajit explains why the collection was so successful:

[This] is an exemplary thing, because most villages they don't have electricity, and here we are talking about Internet web site. So I think the main inspiration was since I spent my time, I have studied there; I was totally involved with the commitment to my

¹³ "Cyber village on self-help mission," Gajinder Singh, 5 January 2000 T.V. Today.

¹⁴ Pseudonym

village. But here, when I came here, I could not forget it, I even thought I was more in a position to do something... Why we did it? It was needed, how we did it? Because we were able to do that, and people were cooperative.¹⁵

The impact of such actions are important not only for the positive material transformations of place in the receiving locality – Palahi – but also because of the ways they allow for the maintenance of important emotional attachments for immigrants as they negotiate their position both within and between multiple sites of home:

Ajit: Like for me, this is my community now, Canada is my community. If I am thinking about my village... I think how I can contribute to a fund for Surrey Memorial Hospital, because when a patient is turned down there, my pain is equally, same or more, than for people suffering in India. Plus, I can make a contribution if we are here, because, there [in India] it is a very hard task to make enough money ... Whereby here, we can make, I mean if we don't go to McDonalds one time, that is worth 236 rupees, and one can teach their child for 236 rupees for a whole year!

MW: So your contribution is much bigger if you are earning in Canada.

Ajit: Definitely, definitely. But my psychological problem is I am a Canadian, but I am Punjabi and Indian and living psychologically in Punjab all the time.

The actions of maintaining these linkages across “source and destination” countries, therefore, are not merely a matter of economic development, measuring the impact of remittances and the pace of development and change in the source region, but of negotiating and maintaining positive forms of transnational identity and attachment to place, which can also contribute to successful settlement overseas.

Honouring Parents and Luring Children: Dhesian Kahna

Where Palahi represents the successful mobilization of a significant overseas community, Dhesian Kahna represents a much smaller project, but nevertheless still draws upon transnational networks in order to effect change at the level of the home village. Dhesian Kahna is a small village in District Jalandhar, roughly one hour's drive from Palahi. The village has about eight hundred houses, four Gurdwaras, some successful light industry, and six banks. There is also a very large Gurdwara complex built around Sant Gurmail Singh, attracting many devotees and funds from abroad. One similarity between Palahi and Dhesian Kahna, which indicates the lack of formal development assistance from the state, is the conditions of the roads connecting the village to external routes.

¹⁵ Personal interview Vancouver, November 1998.

Although in 1996 state officials made political gestures by unveiling two foundation stones to mark road improvement schemes, by 2000 there was no evidence of any progress.

I had been introduced to this village by my Vancouver contact, Mr. Dhesi, to study a development project he was funding to drain a large pond of stagnant water in order to convert it into a village park. Mr. Dhesi had set up the Mehroki Patti Development Fund, which according to receipts was financed by Non-Residents, but in reality had overwhelmingly been financed by Mr. Dhesi, whose sole financial contribution up to 1999 was 705,608 rupees, or around Cdn \$25,000.¹⁶

As with Palahi the village had been a site of out-migration for several decades, and Mr. Dhesi estimated that between fifty to eighty percent of his generation had left Punjab. Many of the houses were empty, locked and in poor repair. Contact appeared to be ongoing however, with several new houses being built by NRIs from Britain and Canada, and communication facilitated through about fifty phone connections, as well as five PCOs. Most of the international calls placed through the PCOs were to the UK.

Transnationalism and immigrant settlement

Immigrant communities, despite the different areas of settlement overseas, can still effectively operate as a network across these different sites. In the case of Dhesian Kahna, though Mr. Dhesi in Vancouver provides much of the finance, his cousin from Bradford, England oversees and manages the actual project during his annual visits to Punjab. Each of these individuals represents different processes of migration and settlement overseas. Both are financially secure and well established, and they both maintain important links to their original migratory site.

Mr. Dhesi, an Indian trained engineer, came to Canada in 1969 assisted by his uncle, an early migrant to Canada, and found work with BC Rail where he remained until 1982. In 1979 the Chief Engineer who had promoted and mentored Mr. Dhesi, died and was replaced by a man from Saskatchewan. Under this new manager Mr. Dhesi was made to feel like an outsider:

As soon as he became in charge of our engineering services department, I start feeling same thing that I did when I came to this country... What he did, he start bringing all his close friends... I was in charge of department, then he put me aside, then he put another person beside me. Then he says, now, "you teach him what you are doing." Of course I train him a full year, then the fellow is fully acquainted with what I am doing, then he again sub-divide our sections. Then he put me on the corner, and for about one

¹⁶ The fund was established in Canada and had secured charitable status.

year and a half, I was going back to the office, eight o'clock, come 4 o'clock, for a full year I never touched one thing, and I was being fully paid and I was getting frustrated, and junior people than me become my boss. They were promoted; I was sort of demoted, you know because I didn't get my promotions.¹⁷

Mr. Dhesi left BC Rail and opened his own business importing and exporting goods from India. He developed a business partnership with a London-based company importing and manufacturing fruit juices, initially for the Indo-Canadian community. Over time the business became so successful he set up alone and now runs a fruit juice production plant as well as having an interest in an engineering consultancy. His work with his fruit juice company requires him to visit India regularly, where he usually stays with relatives in Delhi. In 1996 he took a day out from the Team Canada Trade Mission he was involved in to visit his home village, and what he found disturbed him:

I was going in the winter time... still January it start getting hot there. So I say I can't stand it I have to go back, people say... how come you are not going to live with us anymore?... then I say, why is it such a smell? This smell comes from this pond... I could not sleep, the wind was blowing and smelling this, you know... You were born here, you played here, you played with the dirt you know, you lived here, you jump in the pond, swim in the pond. Those days there was no sewage water, nothing like that it was just simply rain water, it was clear water! And the animal was drinking water there because there was no sewage there.

The presence of the large drainage pond filled with stagnant water and sewage was a shock to his nostalgic childhood memories. Perceiving his shock, the older local men asked him to do something to help them, telling him; "Son, if you can do something for your own village, if you can afford to do, look that you have everything, all these things, we heard about you." Having "heard about you," they were implying that they knew he was a successful man in Canada, and that meant he had the funds to help the village improve. In response Mr. Dhesi paid Cdn\$10,000 towards having a park built in his father's name in place of the stagnant pond, and eventually his contributions rose to Cdn\$25,000. His main motivation came from the desire to honor his father, but also, as is common in Punjab, to compete with other villages to create something unique:

There is no village in Punjab, I search all over [where] there is a park, where the kids can play, have a good health, and in the evening, after the sun, after the hot day, go in the cool air, sprinkling water, all these things, sit there, talk, exchange ideas, look after it... we have a school, dispensary, banking, you name it, but there was no park.¹⁸

¹⁷ Interview 13 July 1999.

¹⁸ During my fieldwork I did visit other villages that had parks, but generally the presence of a park was not common.

Due to Mr. Dhési's business concerns, he rarely had time to visit his village, so in his place, his cousin, Sohan Singh, agreed to manage the project during his annual visits. Initially Mr. Singh felt there was little interest in the project, and the responsibility to motivate the community and oversee construction work became excessive for him. A letter he wrote to his cousin in Vancouver in December of 1998 hints at the frustration he was experiencing with the project:

As you know I have been tied down to this responsibility for last 2/3 years. Nobody co-operated or given any help to me. This job was too demanding and pressurous [*sic*]. Now, somebody else should take responsibility.

But by February of 1999 things appeared to have improved as other village improvement projects received funding and increased interest from both the village leader (*sarpanch*), and NRIs:

New *Sarpanch*... is taking keen interest in improvement work. But, still, nothing is being done to the drains that lead to the big pond...people hope that this *Sarpanch* would do something to rectify.¹⁹

Though there appeared to be more support from the *Sarpanch* for improvement schemes, the designation of the land as a *park* strictly for recreational purposes in a village where function and utility – whether material or spiritual – are paramount, was creating some tension:

[E]ntrance gate must be finished soon, so that misusing of park could be stopped. People graze cattle sometime we have to quarrel with them to stop. Sometime farmers park agricultural machinery in the park. So once gate is fixed we can control the entrance.

By late 1999 the progress made on the park had impressed some other NRIs who maintained houses in the village, about ten of whom had contributed funds, giving the project a further 300,000 rupees. Despite these gestures, during my visit to the village, Mr. Singh indicated to me the frustration he felt that the older generation of immigrants were the only ones with any emotional attachments to the village. With nothing motivating their well-settled children overseas to develop any attachment to their parents' home village, he was concerned about the long-term viability of the project. Though Singh's children did occasionally visit the village, he commented that his son had advised him not to assume he would visit regularly, and therefore he should not spend too much money on improving his house there. To compound this detachment, despite Mr. Dhési's attempts to convince state officials of the importance of this project, the Punjab State government offered no matching grant for the development project, and Mr. Singh was unable to gain information on those projects that were funded.

¹⁹ Letter 3 February 1999.

The park development offers an interesting reading of the desires of NRIs to improve the status of their village. In part the motivation is clearly a feeling of emotional responsibility to honor their family name, but it is also in response to their own desire to spend more time in the village as they approach retirement. To fully enjoy their regular annual trips back to Punjab, it was important that children and grandchildren felt comfortable with the idea of spending time in the village. While improvements could be made to individual homes – and they certainly were in Dhesian Kahna – the surrounding environment would continue to intrude unless action was taken. In Mr. Dhesi's case it was the smell that first offended him, but in other cases the potential for disease, especially malaria, was of major concern to NRIs. Ranjit Kaur Singh²⁰ and her husband, who had been living near Bradford in the UK for almost 20 years, were building a large house with six bedrooms and bathrooms close to the park. In discussions with Ranjit it became clear that she was excited at the prospects of her children and young grandchildren visiting them in their new house while they stayed in Punjab for extended periods. This was complicated however by the fact that her young granddaughter was terrified of mosquitoes after her grandmother contracted Malaria while in India. The illness the child witnessed her grandmother endure once she was back in the UK had sensitized her to the possibilities of disease from mosquitoes. Ranjit felt something had to be done about the standing water in order that the family would feel comfortable enough to visit. In this way the transformations occurring in Dhesian Kahna result from a series of complex interactions between generations, as well across a landscape shaped by uneven development and international flows of capital.

General Processes

These two examples are obviously selective, but after four months of fieldwork, seventy interviews and thirty-nine field visits throughout Punjab viewing NRI – funded community development schemes, they do highlight a series of processes common to several of the projects I viewed. I will review these processes under the following headings: spatial and temporal linkages, the myth of return, demographic markers, ongoing circulation, inter-generational issues, and community conflict, in order to demonstrate the wider importance of transnational migrant activities across both source and settlement regions.

²⁰ Pseudonym

Spatial and temporal linkages

Most of the NRIs I interviewed had migrated from *rural* villages in Doaba to *urban* regions in the west, and their lasting attachment to their village – a socio-spatial merging of family and place – sustained their desire to return. Even when NRIs buy houses in towns away from their villages of origin, they often retain ownership of their village family property, and contribute to village fundraising projects. In this way the territorial link to a specific place is retained despite the reality of a long-term movement away from the village.

It is also important to understand that Punjab, and Doaba in particular, is a region fundamentally shaped by long-term and sustained global out-migrations. The intensity and scale of these movements has changed as opportunities fluctuate globally in line with changing immigration policies. As immigration regimes have changed so has the nature and magnitude of flows out of this region, but it needs to be stressed that any human migration must not be interpreted as a one-time event. The whole point of using a transnational approach to understanding migration is to emphasize the long-term effects of such movement, which, in conjunction with new technologies, accelerate and sustain the creation and recreation of multiple social and spatial outcomes over time. The examples of transformation within Palahi and Dhesian Kahna offer one attempt to chart these outcomes.

Myth of Return and Actual Processes of Return

Linkages between the source region and multiple sites of Punjabi settlement overseas must also be emphasized within a transnational approach. Punjab is a central symbolic anchor for many migrants who are well settled overseas, and understanding the strength of this connection is central to why linkages are so resilient over time and across space. This anchoring has been referred to in numerous studies of Indians overseas through consideration of the “myth of return.” In Britain, Harlan (1991) suggests that despite the fact that only five to fifteen percent of Punjabis in Southall actually do return to India, the myth of return functions to provide important mechanisms for social control and psychological security, as Robinson (1986) and Helweg (1979) have also argued. Indeed Helweg, throughout his extensive research on Indians overseas, has continually highlighted how individuals balance the desire to return with the reality of their settled life overseas, arguing that the plan to retire in India “is a dream held by many Indians in the States” (Helweg 1987:169). In a Canadian example, Helweg found that one immigrant’s decision to buy a house was accompanied by regret: “I procrastinated on buying this house because it symbolized permanency in Canada. I did not want to face the fact that I would not be returning to India” (Helweg 1985: 69). In Australia Helweg found the

initial intention of returning to India was present for both the 'new' and 'old' immigrant groups (Helweg 1991). The intention to return is also recorded by Rangaswamy (2000) in a survey of 574 Indian immigrants in the Chicago area. Rangaswamy found that though fifty-one percent of respondents stated that they had initially intended to return to India, only five percent had actually made this a reality. She also reports that men exhibited a greater desire than women to return to India.

In the two examples I have highlighted, both male Vancouver contacts indicated their desire to return to India on at least a semi-permanent basis, and their socio-economic position allowed for such possibilities. It is important to stress, however, that many immigrants, young and old, are unable to exercise their desire for return due to lack of financial resources. In addition to financial concerns, permanent return is also made difficult for the older generation once their children become successfully established in the country of settlement. The idea of permanent separation from sons, daughters and grandchildren becomes too distressing, especially for women.

In place of permanent return it is more likely that the current trend of visiting India for extended trips will increase. In the case of Vancouver, such transnational flows are evidenced by the fact that scheduled flights from Vancouver to Delhi, (both via London and Singapore) are often fully booked in the winter months.²¹ Visa applications also indicate the extent of traffic, with the Indian Consul issuing 30,000 visas annually to Canadians of Indian origin across Western Canada. While this represents a substantial fourteen percent of the Canadian South Asian population in the western provinces, a Vancouver survey of 3,500 South Asians puts this estimate higher, suggesting that approximately a third of those sampled reported traveling to India in the previous year (Ethnimark 1997). I offer these figures to suggest that though the idea of return may well remain a myth for many Indian immigrants, the desire to return is a potent force that may be satisfied through regular trips to India. Such movement has the potential for a variety of outcomes, including development projects funded and/or directed by NRIs.

Demographic Markers

Who are the people organizing these transnational networks and linkages? My field visits to NRI-led community development projects were overwhelmingly directed by men. This is the result of a number of factors: my limited language ability, which curtailed my ability to confer with many women at the village level, the patriarchal nature of Punjabi society, and the cultural norms of interacting with 'honoured' guests – as I was often deemed to be. I tried to rectify the absence of women from much of my fieldwork through specific visits to women's schools and colleges, and through secondary

sources and expert interviews. However, it is clear to me that older men control most of the fundraising and community development projects funded by NRI money. This reflects normal Indian cultural patterns, since in most Indian families authority is determined by gender and seniority (Sharma 1993). Elder males are seen to deserve the most respect, and those who have attained significant reputation and success overseas are often treated with special deference, especially in villages. Most of the projects I visited were explained to me as the direct outcome of the “vision and sacrifice” of certain male individuals, with little comment on similar sacrifices made by their spouse and/or children. The customary importance of honoring and deferring to such individuals needs to be understood as an important aspect of Punjabi, indeed Indian, cultural relations. Most of these men were retired, and at a point in their life where they could afford a significant amount of time to be either in Punjab overseeing developments, or traveling to overseas sites of Punjabi settlement in order to raise more funds.

It was particularly striking that British citizens of Indian origin were involved with many of the projects I visited. In many interviews with British and Canadian NRIs, it stuck me how similar their life-cycle patterns were: emigrating in the late 1950s and 1960s, employed in a semi-skilled occupation or running their own business, and working through to retirement to enjoy considerable financial savings and success (at the time of my research the value of a British sterling state and private pension alone was financially significant in Indian rupees). Most respondents had grown children who were successfully established in the country of settlement, often pursuing professional and managerial careers with the support of their extended family, especially older females who provided child-care services. Seeing their families well settled seemed to reassure many of the men I met, freeing them to pursue regular contact with their remaining Indian relatives, and deal with any outstanding Indian property or business interests.

The demographic profile of Indian immigrants in both Britain and Canada, as shown in table 1, provides an indicator of the population under discussion. The age profile of older Indian immigrants is fairly similar across Canada and Britain, but the Indian origin population over 45 years old in Britain is larger in absolute numbers than Canada’s. The larger percentage of Indian origin population in Britain over 45 compared to South Asian Canadians reflects the nature and timing of significant migrations, with Britain’s most active Indian immigration occurring a decade before Canada’s. Assuming the continued desire for some form of return or connection for this group, increased transnational activity may become more evident between India and Canada as this age group of Indo-Canadians finds both the time and the finances to satisfy their desire for regular and

²¹ Interview with Air Canada official October 1998.

longer trips to India. This suggests that the type of connections already present in the form of transportation networks, financial transfers and cultural interactions and exchange will intensify.

Table 1: Total Number and Percentage of Indian/South Asian Origin Population in Canada and Britain Over 45 Years Old.

Britain Indian Origin ²²	#	%	Britain Total population ²³	%	Canada South Asian ²⁴	#	%	Canada total population ²⁵	%
> 75	18,840	2.0	4,266,000	7.4	> 75	10,505	1.5	1,465,905	5.1
60-74	84,780	9.0	7,593,000	13.1	65-74	26,425	3.9	2,668,815	9.2
45-59	150,720	16.0	10,669,000	18.5	45-64	127,355	18.9	5,592,975	19.4
Total >45	254,340	27.0	22,528,000	39.0	Total >45	164,285	24.3	9,727,695	33.7

Ongoing circulation

As with other transnational communities status plays an important role in transnational social fields (Goldring 1998). The ability of NRIs to display wealth and power through their material investments in the village indicates success and increased status. Many of those who left in the 1960s and 1970s were relatively uneducated men and their success abroad proves an immense incentive for young men and women in the villages of Doaba, despite the fact that the economic conditions and labour market demands overseas have changed since the 1960s. The fact that many recent migrants face great hardship, especially if they are undocumented, does not seem to deter young men and women inspired by the NRI wealth they observe directly in their village. Young people find ways to go overseas by utilizing different migration options that are highly gendered and carry with them a number of potential negative effects for the individuals concerned. For men, a common option is to use an agent, who for upwards of 1 lakh rupees, (approximately US\$2,500) can provide a fake visa.²⁶ I heard many reports of men who found themselves stranded in Eastern Europe for up to two years waiting for a

²² Indian origin 1999 population 942,000. Annual abstract of Stats (Wisniewski 2000)

²³ Great Britain 1999 population 57,804,000 www.gad.gov.uk/population/

²⁴ South Asian population, Census, Statistics Canada, 1996, total 1996 South Asian visible minority population 670,590.

²⁵ Canada Census 1996 total population profile tables, total 1996 population 28,846,765.

²⁶ I heard many different reports about the cost of fake documents and assistance to go overseas, some were as high as 9 lakh (Over US\$20,000), for a genuine visa. Other newspaper reports indicated that agents were selling fake visas for 1 lakh, and for cases where assistance to the destination was provided – in one case to Korea - over 2.5 lakh.

chance to enter the European Union. For women, most cases I came across involved marriage to an NRI, which in itself can present great difficulties depending upon the intentions of the receiving family overseas.²⁷ While many middle class urban families I spoke to held more ambivalent attitudes regarding overseas migration, marriage was often a time when families would seriously consider the possibility of selecting an NRI partner, attested to in the matrimonial pages of Indian and overseas newspapers which often included detailed immigrant or foreign citizenship status information.

Attitudes to work are also influenced by the possibility of working overseas. Many respondents referred to young men who refused to work on their family farms because they saw it as demeaning, preferring instead to hire in-migrants from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. These same men, however, would willingly work overseas in the most menial janitorial and labouring jobs because of the potential to earn foreign currency. In conversations justifying the reinterpretation of status across transnational labour markets, it struck me that people always referred to foreign earnings in terms of Indian rupees, another sign that the intention to return to India to display this foreign wealth was central to their actions. The display of wealth NRIs exhibited through land investment, property improvement, and lavish weddings, etc., and the increased status performed through charitable giving and preferential choice in the selection of a match for their sons and daughters, all contribute to perpetuating the desire for overseas migration within rural Doaba. This desire is matched through several mechanisms, including the extensive range of services provided for fake document production and migrant smuggling, and the cultural norms and mechanisms for increasingly globalized marriage networks. These influences are important to highlight, albeit briefly, because they reveal how transnational networks contribute to the *continuous* nature of migration across an extended spatial and social field, a point that both academics and policy makers should recognize.

Inter-generational issues

For Sohan Singh the long-term viability of improvement projects in Khana Dhesian depends upon the interest and contribution of the second generation. Concern about the second generation's interest in its cultural roots and attachments to Punjab have been displayed in a number of ways. In a report on a group of Punjabi writers settled in the UK visiting Punjab, the impression was that the second generation was detached and selfish:

²⁷ I heard of several cases where the NRI deliberately deceived the family in Punjab regarding his educational and class status. Details of such events have become common throughout Doaba, and though many people are more cautious about going through with such unions, the demand for NRI matches, especially grooms, is still high.

Where the older generation, which once migrated to the west from here, desperately pines for the motherland, the new generation is only concerned about their growing individual interests (Tribune News Service 2000).

Concern over this detachment was given official recognition at the Fourth Annual NRI Sabha Punjab convention in January 2000, where government officials, NRIs and Sabha officials dedicated one day of the conference to discuss “Dilemma of Punjabi Disapora.” Part of the program read as follows:

The first generation of NRIs has the anchorage of their memories but the new generation which was born and brought-up in foreign lands does not have any moorings in the motherland of their parents. Elders want to mould their children according to the Punjabi culture and they expect from them adherence to age old values and obedience to social norms which appear ridiculous to younger generation. Both live in a state of dilemma – the old ones live in nostalgia, the younger ones in the new world. (NRI Sabha 2000)

The NRI Sabha, responding to the general concerns of NRIs, also lists one of its main objectives to: “Maintain cultural and ethnic bonds of Punjab with the NRIs especially with the new generation of the NRIs.” (NRI Sabha Punjab constitution, 1). The intention of the NRI Sabha merges with so many of the concerns academics have pinpointed in work that focuses on second-generation youth and identity formation (Gillespie 1995). But building second-generation interest in the home village in order to sustain its viability and vitality needs to be critically evaluated. Palahi manages to maintain its vitality not just through the active overseas fundraising, but because it has a rural polytechnic which attracts hundreds of local young people into the village every year, as well as an active involvement in a number of sustainable development initiatives coordinated at the national and state level. These interests extend to involvement in biogas projects, ferro cement technology and advocating for environmentally sustainable agricultural methods. Without involvement in local and national projects directed by local residents, a village will not be able to prosper. In this way NRI fundraising needs to be included in an overall development scheme, mediated by locals who are residents and can confer with those still resident in the village. Though many NRIs may worry that their children are losing interest in their cultural roots, the actual improvement of their home village needs to be seen as something more locally rooted that will not be improved through migrant transnational actions alone.

Community Conflict

Transnational movement and the social influences exercised in the source region do not necessarily result in wholly positive processes. Kearney (1995) for one has indicated how flows of capital and development processes within Mexico can contribute to furthering the uneven nature of development within and between villages and regions. Punjab also exhibits this trend. At the level of the village Helweg (1983) has considered this process of NRI led development, detailing how the allegiances formed between emigrant families and trusted 'managers' who remain in the village, alter power dynamics, displacing traditional structures of control and social norms. In both Palahi and Dhesian Kahna, investment and change depend upon having people in place at the village level in order to control project development. How villagers accept the project is also open to various interpretations. In the case of Palahi, the respect shown to both Mr. Jagait Singh Palahi and the polytechnic principal are certainly due to their long-term presence and activity in the village – Jagait Singh Palahi only recently emigrated to Canada. In the case of Dhesian Kahna however, Mr. Dhesi, though respected, cannot be present in the village, and his cousin, though present part of the year, has to work with other people in the village to get cooperation and support from the wider community in order to sustain the project.

Across the whole of Punjab, and Doaba in particular, the injection of significant overseas funds has transformed villages economically, socially and culturally (Shiva 1991; Mehta 1990), but such transformations have not occurred equally across the landscape. Regionally, Punjab is seen as one of the more prosperous states in India due to its agricultural production,²⁸ but in recent years agricultural productivity has declined with very little replacement manufacturing and hi-tech diversification (P. Singh 2000). While many village families and properties in Doaba receive remittances and investment through NRI channels, other parts of Punjab are not so fortunate. Across the whole of Punjab it is widely acknowledged that the local state has failed to invest in rural areas to provide basic civic amenities such as adequate water, lighting, roads, sewage systems and schools, and only half of the funds budgeted for rural development actually reached villages (Thukral 1999). In the financial vacuum left by the state's failure, villages with no alternative sources of revenue are left to flounder. This is particularly evident in those districts south of the Sutlej River, which are not traditional sites of out migration and do not have extensive overseas resources to call upon. Three such districts, Mansa, Sangrur and Bhatinda in the Malwa region, have been reported in the media as the site of a number of farmer suicides prompted by massive debt, and the lack of state concern has

²⁸ Though only 1.5 percent of the area of India, in 1998 Punjab produced 21 percent of Indian wheat, 9 percent of the rice and 15 percent of cotton.

prompted widespread criticism (Shiva 2000; Gill 2000). Many villages in this region are also cited as suffering from the lack of state investment in basic amenities such as schools (S. Singh 2000). In periods of economic decline and transition coupled with local state withdrawal, the insertion of external capital such as NRI remittances and investment exaggerates and perpetuates uneven development, protecting some while others are impoverished.

While NRI development funds can often be deployed far more efficiently than those from the local and central government, associated problems of community tension, unplanned and uneven development are present at all levels. At a time when Punjab faces a number of domestic challenges, especially the limited ability of the state to mould and implement policies that advance some kind of overall development throughout the region, these migrant contributions are examples of development almost entirely out of the hands of the local state. Driven by deeply cultural attachment to specific *people* and *places*, the positive impacts of such investments, though undoubtedly evident, are highly fragmented both spatially and socially.

Conclusion

The interpretation of a transnational space implies a spatially extended field. As a result of this extension, multiple sources of information from several locations need to be integrated in order to illustrate how networks operate, and the role of the various actors involved. In this paper I have attempted to follow through two specific networks from Vancouver to Punjab, but as this paper has illustrated, the material consequences of actions transmitted through these transnational networks contribute to wider processes of change in both the source and destination regions. In both of the examples I have traced, though the intentions and aims of those involved have material effects, they are highly motivated by *cultural* meanings and desires. This cultural contextualization of capital and information flows repositions such actions outside the typical model of capitalist expansion from the west into less developed zones, as well as challenging the ideas of assimilation in the destination country.

This paper has also contributed to the field of transnational literature by moving away from the dominant USA/Mexico continuous land border focus, to a more spatially dispersed context. Also, unlike previous anthropological studies which considered migrant fundraising and impacts on the home village by tracing links from the rural village to the urban site of migration settlement (Kearney 1986), this paper has traced networks in the opposite direction, from the urban site of settled “home” to the rural village “home,” several decades after the initial, now permanent migration was

undertaken. This indicates the long-term resilience of transnational attachment and the material consequences such attachments have on the landscape of the sending region.

In this paper I have made connections to South Asian origin settlement experiences such as the myth of return, demographic and generational patterns of change. In the source region I have highlighted the links to factors of local state involvement and the grounded realities of village development through external funding. The combination of the Punjab state's failure to advance development and the insertion of outside capital from NRIs has led to a patchwork landscape of success and decline, and though a forceful participant in the development of Doaba's rural villages, the NRI is not a panacea for the problems faced by many Punjabi villages. Recognizing this unevenness, and the ongoing place of international migration within it, highlights that fact that these processes are no longer separated as distinct fields of enquiry – immigrant settlement on the one hand and 'third world' rural development on the other – but brought together into one field of interpretation as a transnational space. Therefore this paper has also addressed Skeldon's (1995) concerns regarding the need to move population geography forward by broadening our field of view to include work from both developed and developing sites.

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