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**Mobile Modernities: One South Asian Family Negotiates Immigration,  
Gender and Class**

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## **RIIM**

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**Mobile Modernities: One South Asian Family Negotiates Immigration,  
Gender and Class\***

by

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**Abstract:** For the modern Indian immigrant family ‘modernity’ is not necessarily found in the west. Using qualitative data drawn from in depth interviews with one immigrant Sikh family, conducted in both Vancouver and the Punjab, we draw attention to the mobile and contradictory modernities family members have faced in their migration, settlement and subsequent transnational activities. We explore how class, gender and sexuality have framed the experiences of the members of this family in differential, partial and sometimes ironic ways. We construct a theoretical argument about the nature and geography of modernity, and how it relates to immigrant settlement in Canada.

## Introduction

Feminists have long argued the need to understand transnational migration as a gendered practice, and criticized a tendency within the academic transnational literature to fasten on a particular classed and gendered body, namely the globe-trotting, implicitly male entrepreneur (Kondo 1997; Mahler and Pessar 2001; Visweswaran 1994; Yeoh, Huang and Willis 2000).<sup>1</sup> But bringing gender (and women) into view can come with its own theoretical oversights, and some gendered analyses have been criticized for being thoroughly saturated by an ideology that locates progress, including gender equity, in the West, and the most oppressive patriarchal relations in non-western contexts (Kaplan and Grewal 1999; Shutte 2000).

If decidedly inegalitarian in effect, this particular gender narrative of Western progress nonetheless has been extremely productive, in both non-western and western contexts. Spivak (1988), for example, argues that British colonial administrators legitimated their regulation of sati in India through a discourse of ‘white men saving brown women from brown men.’ This enlightenment narrative is of more than historical interest, however, because it continues to resurface in relation to contemporary migrants and transmigrants, and conditions their reception and settlement in countries such as Canada and the United States. Honig (1999), for instance, argues that immigrants to the United States are typically cast as patriarchal, in both positive and negative terms. ‘Good’ model minority immigrants tend to be pictured within a productive, entrepreneurial extended patriarchal family, while ‘bad’ immigrants are bad precisely because of their economic dependency and violent patriarchal norms (see also Ong 1996). The figure of the patriarchal immigrant haunts some feminist analyses as well. For instance, Susan Okin (1999) builds her case against multiculturalism on the grounds that respect for cultural difference within liberal democratic societies may protect patriarchal practices that threaten hard won feminist gains of equality for women. She portrays immigrants as the repository of these cultural differences that threaten gender equity.

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<sup>1</sup> Attempts to delimit *who* can be considered a transnational actor have relied upon certain readings of behaviour that implicitly reference a particular classed and gendered body. Consider Portes *et al.*'s influential definition: “For purposes of establishing a novel area of investigation, it is preferable to delimit the concept of transnationalism to occupations and activities that require regular and sustained social contacts over time across national borders for their implementation” (Portes *et al.*, 1999 p.219). Portes *et al.* (1999) prioritize entrepreneurialism as a transnational behaviour that results in *physical* movement across borders. This requirement for regular and sustained movement suggests an implicitly gendered and classed subject whose ability to move is unencumbered by political, social and economic barriers. Take, for example, an elderly Sikh immigrant woman, who may move only infrequently between source and destination location, but her unpaid

The South Asian community in Vancouver is an important site for disrupting conceptions of immigrant patriarchy. Indo-Canadian women have challenged patriarchy at the household and state scale through their active political participation in immigration policy reform (Walton-Roberts, forthcoming). Indo-Canadian women have also contributed to the highly sensitive debate regarding gang violence in British Columbia's young male Punjabi Sikh community, in this case firmly identifying patriarchy as one of the root causes:

Punjabi boys grow up in a testosterone-fuelled environment run by an iron-fisted patriarch. In too many cases, violence is the tool with which the head of the household settles disputes with his wife, as well as other members of the family (Bakshi 2002: 33).

Despite concern with the obvious essentialist implications of this statement, the fact that an Indo-Canadian female journalist offers such a public critique is significant. Bakshi's critique is a delicate political act because ethnic stereotyping and community censure can quickly follow this type of public criticism, as demonstrated by Fair's (1996) research on female feticide and male preference within Vancouver's Sikh community. Fair reveals the precarious position the Indian Mahila Association<sup>2</sup> was placed in during their campaign to prevent an American sex determination clinic from advertising in Indo-Canadian newspapers. While Mahila stressed the *systemic* nature of such misogynistic practices, it was their more muted criticism of male preference within Vancouver's Sikh population that elicited sharp criticism from elements of the Indo-Canadian press and wider community (Fair 1996). Obviously these examples suggest a certain paradox; women exercise their political freedom, but in so doing they expose the South Asian community in Canada to the criticisms Okin levels at some immigrant groups.

One strategy to counter this type of reaction has been to pluralize – to insist on differentiated, context-specific patriarchies, diverse traditions of liberalism, and multiple modernities. As Bhabha (1999) argues in reaction to Okin's essay, "Put 'patriarchy' in the dock by all means, but put it in a relevant context... '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 provision..."(p. 81). Bhabha is arguing that patriarchy is not a 'system' that operates evenly across places or even within places and cultures; patriarchal practices develop specifically and unevenly in combination with other social relations: for example, the caste system in India, gun culture in the United States. In a similar strategy, traditions of liberalism and modernity are seen to be plural, to continue to "arrive and emerge,' as always in opportunistic fragments accompanied by

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labour in the form of childcare is vital to the ability of her husband, son or daughter to move frequently between places of business.

utopic rhetorics, but no longer from the West alone, although the West remains the major clearinghouse of global modernity” (Gaonkar 2001: 1).

The image of the clearinghouse is appealing because it suggests a traffic of ideas and practices. It is an image that sustains the understanding that gender relations and patriarchal practices are transformed and renegotiated as ideas and people move from place to place, but in indeterminate ways. And a number of commentators note that migration to ‘the West’ need not lead to gender equity. In some cases, migration seems to strengthen patriarchal authority as women may find themselves having to ‘bargain with patriarchy’ in order to maintain the economic and social resources to which they have access (Kibria 1990). Patriarchal authority within immigrant families also has been interpreted as a defensive strategy within inhospitable societies (Bhabha 1999; Hage 1998). But the state is also complicit in this process. Thobani (1999) argues that Canadian immigration policy reinforces patriarchy because it casts immigrant women in a literal state of dependency on male household heads, and Khan (1995) details a case regarding Muslim *Muta* law where the Canadian legal system entrenched patriarchy rather than support immigrant women’s rights. Recognizing the complexities of gender relations in a globalizing world, Kaplan and Grewal (1999) advocate transnational feminist cultural studies that are particularly “interested in how patriarchies are recast in diasporic conditions of postmodernity” (p. 358). This approach stresses the need to highlight complex subject positions and interlinked forms of inequality that defy homogenizing assumptions.

We pursue both the specificity and mobility of gender relations with an eye to profoundly disrupting the preconception that immigrant groups are typically and wholly more traditional, more patriarchal than liberal, western families. Patriarchal practices are too uneven and too complex to sit comfortably within this generalization. We are particularly interested in the ways that immigrants themselves muddy these conceptual boundaries through a mobile and creative deployment of the categories of ‘modern’ and ‘traditional,’ and through their close readings of the specificity of patriarchal relations in different places. Casting places and themselves as ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ is a resource that immigrants use to negotiate gender and class identifications destabilized through migration and it is by no means ‘the west’ that inevitably emerges as more modern or less patriarchal. In short, we need a far richer understanding of the geographies of gender relations, one that exceeds easy binaries that equate modernity and gender equality with ‘the West’ and traditional patriarchal authority with ‘the Rest.’ It is a geography that encompasses the specificity of place, actual movement across space, and imaginative geographies that circulate within and between them. We develop this

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<sup>2</sup> Mahila is an association that addresses women’s, especially South Asian women’s issues.

argument through an analysis on one nuclear family – a mother, father, and their two sons, who emigrated from India to Vancouver, Canada in 1995.<sup>3</sup>

Our intention is to disrupt and complicate the assumption that patriarchy necessarily travels with ‘third world’ migrants by reflecting on the immigration and settlement experiences of this family. Obviously our study is of limited generalizability: it is based on one case, the Brar family, and this family is unusually affluent for immigrants from India to Vancouver. What the case study lacks in breadth, however, is balanced by a depth that allows us to sketch some of the complexities of the play between alternative modernities.

We first met Meena Brar,<sup>4</sup> the mother within the family, with her sister-in-law, in 1997 at a focus group held in Surrey at an immigrant community organisation, Progressive Intercultural Community Services (PICS). She had connected with PICS through one of its managers who had been a family friend in India, and her youngest son was volunteering at the group’s Surrey office. Meena and her husband were then interviewed together three times in Vancouver between 1998 and 1999, and each son was interviewed once on his own (the older in the company of his wife). Margaret then visited the family in their home in the Punjab in January and February 2000. During this time she interacted with the Brar’s extended family members and friends, observed how Meena operated her fashion and beauty businesses and accompanied Meena during a fabric and jewelry purchasing trip to Delhi. The interaction provided information on the pre-migratory social position the family inhabited as well as providing first-hand information on the challenges the extended family faced in maintaining a transnational household and business network. The case study is thus in-depth in three ways: the interviews occurred over a span of three years; we interviewed several family members on different occasions; and our interviews and associations with this family took place in Vancouver and the Punjab. The family’s class location usefully disrupts stereotypes of South Asian immigrants to Vancouver in a variety of ways that we will outline below, but we want especially to stress the variability of their negotiations of class and gender identifications, and the ways that their individual negotiations work, again in different ways, through imagined geographies of modernity and tradition, geographies that are put to work in relation to both Canada and India.

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<sup>3</sup> The interviews this paper is based upon emerged from a larger community project developed under the auspices of the Vancouver Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Integration in the Metropolis or RIIM. The larger communities project these interviews are part of considers immigration settlement over a five-year period across various Vancouver neighbourhoods (see Hiebert *et al.*, 1998). We both conducted the initial focus group at Progressive Intercultural Society in Surrey. Margaret then conducted three of the interviews with the Brar family in Surrey, as well as visiting the family in India during February 2000. The interviews in Surrey were conducted with different family members and occurred over 1998-1999. We thank Wendy Gibbons and Jamie Winders for conducting the other interviews with the Brar family.

<sup>4</sup> Pseudonyms are used for all family members.

Gaonkar argues that the thread that unites disparate modernities is a critical attitude, an “interminable process of questioning the present...what is common to these strings of similarities is a mood of distance, a habit of questioning...” (2001: 17-18). He considers modernity to be an attitude that is held more generally, and not just by intellectuals: “creative adaptation... points to the manifold ways in which a people question the present. It is 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” (2001: 16). Rather than attending to the creative adaptation of ‘a people,’ we detail the creative ways that individuals in one family make themselves modern by using the discursive resources at hand. Gaonkar locates within plural modernities an ethic of global modernity, which strives to keep power relations mobile and symmetrical through a critical attitude to the present. By detailing the multiple and mobile modernities that one family of transmigrants deploy in an effort to make modern identities and a comfortable home in a globalized world, we hope to operate within this ethic of global modernity by being productively and constructively disruptive of preconceptions about the location and practice of patriarchy.

### **Immigrating to Canada**

Even a superficial account of the Brar’s migration to Canada unsettles a number of stereotypes about the patriarchal immigrant family. By all accounts, the immigration process was led by Meena and her younger son, Sharad.

**Meena:** Um, yeah, like Sharad likes to study outside, and you know he was always willing to go abroad, maybe not in Canada, he would have found somewhere, like in another place, England. So he was interested in going out. So we just applied, not very seriously applied, but for educational reasons (Interview, September 1998).

As Sharad tells it:

I think they started thinking [about immigration] when I was in around Grade 7. So I left [India] after grade 10 [at age 17]. How much was I involved? I think I was the one who was... who wanted to come. I don’t think that my parents had much of an interest in moving...I think my father was very resistant. It was my mother who was pushing it through. She doesn’t think much, which is good. So she just does things. She doesn’t, you know, see ‘this will be the pros and this will be the cons’. She just does it.

While the son’s statement calls upon gendered stereotypes of women’s emotional, impetuous action, as opposed to the rational weighing of pros and cons, the broad outlines of the narrative, in which the wife and younger son instigate and accomplish immigration against the wishes of the family ‘patriarch’, hardly conform to traditional gender norms.

**Meena:** Both sons want to study here, so I just applied for the business visa. Actually my husband was in a very good job... So he never wants to come, so anyway we got the visa like immediately after we applied you know, because I have a business there. I am running a boutique and a beauty salon there. Then my husband says, "well we will come back"... We leave our kids there [Canada] and we will come back. So we came and last year we left them here, and then we went back (Focus group interview 17 July 1997, Surrey PICS offices).

Many South Asian independent immigrants that were interviewed through the larger research project (of which these interviews are a small part) were male professionals whose qualifications provided the means for acceptance. Meena's family, however, were accepted on the strength of her business skills in the feminized occupational realm of fashion design and beauty. Her qualifications were easily transferable due to the positive influence of both political and economic mechanisms; her qualifications were gained in Britain, and she established her own independent salon once in Canada. Her business success was also enhanced by her prior reputation, which extended across the spaces of Punjab into Surrey/Delta, B.C., where some sections of the large Punjabi community were well aware of her previous business operations in India.<sup>5</sup> Thus, unlike the common assumption that Punjabi female migrants are passively subjected to transnational patriarchal processes (Walton-Roberts forthcoming), this Indo-Canadian Sikh woman represents a powerful agent of economic change, her husband followed her reluctantly, and both he and their sons have become, as a result of their migration, dependent upon her business resources for social and economic anchors in their new home.

We now turn to consider each of the Brar family members, outlining the various ways that they both deploy and unsettle a discourse of modernity and its expected geographies.

### **The Entrepreneurial Mother**

At first glance, Meena, conforms to the stereotype of the transnational entrepreneurial subject, although her gender is atypical for those entering through business class immigration programs.<sup>6</sup> The Brar's describe themselves as upper class in India. Meena owns a successful textile design and fashion business in the Punjab, designing and selling high-end *Salwar Kameze* (Punjabi suits) for middle and upper class women, including well-known Indian actresses and the wives of dignitaries and politicians.

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<sup>5</sup> During a focus group held in Surrey in July 1997, the facilitator, a women from Punjab, commented on how Meena's boutique and beauty salon were well known in the area from which she immigrated.

<sup>6</sup> In 2001 only about 15% of principal applicants in Canada's business class immigrant intake were women (CIC facts and figures 2001).

**Meena:** We have so many customers, like people like the Maharaja's wife... So we used to have ambassadors from Australia and the commonwealth. (Interview 10 May 1999).

The suits are manufactured in Punjab by a group of six or so skilled tailors and embroiders housed in a small building behind the Brar's family home in a middle class neighbourhood. The Brar's also own a commercial building, and this housed Meena's successful beauty salon and aesthetics business.<sup>7</sup> Both these businesses were operating fairly smoothly in 2000 (five years after the Brar family first migrated to Canada) because Meena's mother and sister Ranjit were overseeing them. In order to manage her sister's business interests, however, Ranjit had resorted to downscaling her own automotive business operation.

With the businesses in Punjab being maintained through her extended family network, Meena was able to focus on rebuilding her commercial interests in Canada. Immediately after immigration, Meena began to develop her aesthetics business by converting the garage of the new family home into a salon. When we came to interview her four years after immigrating, this business was successfully established, and she employed her daughter-in-law, Pardeep Brar, full-time. In Vancouver, Meena is drawing an ethnically diverse clientele from throughout the Vancouver region, mostly for facials and hair treatment: "Every time it is becoming more popular. Like even some neighbours, all white, they also come. They like it." (May 19, 1999). In addition to the beauty operation, her fashion business was also beginning to grow in the late 1990s. Initially she brought 60 suits back from a trip to Punjab in January of 1999 with the intention of keeping them for herself, but several people wanted to buy them.

**Meena:** not even a single suit lasted. It was around \$250-\$300 [each].

**Interviewer:** You sold them all?

**Meena:** Everything, even like... really rich people, they came and I had only 3 or 4 suits left and they took that.

**Interviewer:** Did you know [these people] before you came?

**Meena:** No, I went to a dinner party... she saw me wearing the suit, so then she followed me, you know. The she called me, then I told her I have a boutique in India, so she said that was a very nice suit you were wearing, I want to order that. So then I got the suits, I brought the suit from India for her. So then she really liked it.

After this, Meena began to organize larger shipments of her suits and planned to establish a boutique in a newly built home, architecturally designed to accommodate her two commercial

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<sup>7</sup> The clothing boutique made approximately CDN \$4,000 per month.

ventures. The investment in the concrete infrastructure of home is telling, because Meena's entrepreneurialism is persistently negotiated in relation to her role as mother. Meena and her husband fully intended to retain a transnational lifestyle from the outset.

**Sarjeet:** We applied [for immigration] and got it and thought we will see.

**Meena:** (*laughter*) so then we came....

**Sarjeet:** We came like that, so now we were thinking, um, of course we have got settled here...

**Meena:** We can come 6 months here and six months there.

**Sarjeet:** We get the citizenship and then we might stay 6 months here, six months there, might help a lot with the business.... (Interview, September 1998).

In a process similar to that identified for Chinese immigrants (Ong 1999), these reworked relations represent a new form of flexibility that transnational subjects bring into play as a result of late capitalist structures and distinct cultural practices. Relocating to Canada makes sense for the Brar family only within a context where previous economic networks are made pliable in order to endure new distended geographies. Their move to Canada would only be feasible if the family could transport some of their wealth with them. In India such capital transfer has only become possible in the last few years. This economic pliability is grounded in a liberalizing Indian financial system where capital transfers are increasingly being freed from government constraint.<sup>8</sup> But this form of 'flexible citizenship' represents not only economic transitions, where profit seeking is geographically extended; it also refers to embodied migration that engages individuals in all of the complexities of their subject positions. For Meena, this includes her identity as mother. Meena always appeared to be more comfortable than her husband with settlement in Canada because she saw her sons' location as the key component of home.

**Meena:** Actually I don't feel divided, because if your kids are here, if I go there, even then I feel like coming here, back you know. No. I think we will most of the time stay here, and sometimes we will go there... Like we have to go there for 3 to 4 months because of our business. Otherwise it's a beautiful place, it's very interesting very nice, we have a very nice experience with the people around us (Focus group interview 17 July 1997, Surrey PICS offices).

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<sup>8</sup> Under the 1973 Foreign Exchange Regulation Act (FERA) there is no allowance for capital to be transferred overseas. FERA was replaced by FEMA (the Foreign Exchange Management Act), in January 2000. FEMA uses civil rather than criminal charges against violators and allows convertibility of capital in the current account, but not fixed assets or capital assets such as land. Indo-Canadians familiar with both the Canadian and Indian systems are able to exploit the current flexibilities of the Indian system in order to transfer capital between India and Canada through informal exchanges of property or currency within networks of immigrants with significant transnational property and capital interests.

It is clear that Meena has more fully transferred her home base to Vancouver, and can contemplate making Vancouver her permanent home.

**Meena:** Actually when you are here...Actually, kids are here so you don't feel like staying there. You feel very lonely.

**Interviewer:** Where? In India?

**Meena:** Yes, India.

**Interviewer:** Why is that?

**Meena:** Because the children are here, you know. Sometimes they come out for one month. He [youngest son] studies in S.F.U. He lives there but on weekends sometimes he comes. (Interview, 25 March 1998.)

Meena's husband, Sarjeet, confirms his commitment to maintain a home in India:

**Sarjeet:** Actually, if you can maintain the bases in both the countries, that particularly suits me.

**Interviewer :** I am just wondering if in some ways you have to change your expectations about your home in India. As Meena was saying every year in India when you go back it is a bit more different and a few more things are damaged and it is changing?

**Sarjeet:** Yeah. But I go and the garden is always kept in good condition. Then the house, I live in it...

**Meena:** Then if you live in the house it is always like, it is different. Even if you keep on returning it is not the same.

**Sarjeet:** Yeah that has to be different, probably in our own house we have, it is....

**Meena:** I told him like, "Now you sell something in India, so we can make a nice house here."

**Sarjeet:** But we have two only....

**Meena:** We have to live here now. That's what I told him: "You should not keep too much there. We have to be more here, to be comfortable here..."

**Sarjeet:** I am not willing to sell my house in India.

**Meena:** Only the house he can keep (Interview, September 1998).

This is a very different story than is typically told about the transnational entrepreneur, often portrayed as a footloose capitalist. Meena is more complex than this, and her transnationalism and

the location and development of her entrepreneurial activities are mediated and modified by her emotional attachments to her sons.

Meena also negotiates her settlement in Vancouver through a class lens of cosmopolitanism. Certainly she understands her class superiority to the majority of South Asian immigrants to Vancouver, and this conversation between Meena and Sarjeet reveals how modernity cannot be located in “the West,” but rather is striated by social geographies.

**Meena:** I found it a little different, because people have more education there [in India]...

**Sarjeet:** The people that are to be found here are mostly the uneducated. But we did not have any bad sort of feeling.

**Meena:** We didn’t have any feeling, but it is different crowd here.

**Sarjeet:** The crowd is different no doubt.

**Interviewer:** So it is not like you are like looking down on them, it’s just that you recognize that it is different?

**Sarjeet:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Is it a different component of people from the Punjab here, then you would experience in the Punjab?

**Meena:** Yeah

**Sarjeet:** Even, especially the older people, even I have not seen such people... their dress, so shabbily dressed, totally uneducated, walking all day, sitting there all the day. I have not seen such people badly dressed even in India... whenever I used to visit villages also in my official capacity; I used to see the better people (Interview, September 1998).

Such observations hint at the classed and regionalized nature of community development in Surrey B.C., and indicate elements of social-spatial transformation that suggest “peripheralization at the core” (Sassen-Koob 1982), a dissolving of the distinctions that define the old binaries of developed-developing, core-periphery, here-over there, and alter the scale at which such differences are perceived (Kearney 1995).

The experiences of interacting with the “different crowd” in Surrey B.C., is a circumstance that throws Meena into what she perceives to be antiquated patriarchal relations in Vancouver. In discussions with Meena in the Punjab in February 2000, she referred to statements made by acquaintances in Surrey regarding her participation in golf outings. She commented that in Punjab she would freely mingle with male friends at parties and at various recreation events, but in Surrey, B.C.

comments were made by male middle class friends regarding her golfing participation. This was echoed by Meena's first son Hardit, and his wife Pardeep when they discussed the differences they felt existed between the young people they used to socialize with in India and the people they met in Surrey.

**Hardit:** ..the way they talk, the way they socialize. I think people are still backward down here than people in India.

**Interviewer:** Really, why that is?

**Hardit:** There's still a mental block, because the people who came, like, forty, fifty years ago, they, ah, they were uneducated...And the way they brought up their children... they taught them the same things, because even if you go to marriages down there... those marriages, you won't even find them in India....So they think India is still the same.

**Pardeep:** The same traditional, like, you can't go out, the girls can't. They can't do nothing, guys can do everything.... And I think when we were in India, parents were more educated; and, you know, they taught us different things, and lifestyle was different. So our thinking is kind of different from the kids our age over here... Because they're still thinking the same as their parents.

**Interviewer:** What, what sort of things? Like, say...

**Pardeep:** Like, say, for, say, ah, say, for example, us. Like, if I'm going to go somewhere, he [Hardit] won't stop me.... If I want to go to a club, if I want to go to a, like, at night, if I go to, want to go to mall, or with my friends, go for a movie. And I have so many friends, their husbands are like, they're born here, everything, and their thinking is still the same. So, like, you can't go out, you know.... They're so much different. I'm like, they're born here; and still, their thinking is the same... Like, they don't give you freedom, they don't let, they don't trust anyone, I guess. (Interview, September 1999).

This behaviour is perhaps more characteristic of 'traditional' gender relations in rural Punjab, it was not something that Hardit and Pardeep had experienced in their middle-class 'modern' urban Punjabi upbringing. Here we see patriarchy recast both temporally and spatially. Pardeep found herself witnessing a distinction in the freedom of her female friends between her pre-migratory experiences in the Punjab and the post migratory realities of Surrey.

But gender relations are unevenly developed and Meena's subject position in relation to her extended family's organization was still subjected to traditional Indian patriarchal norms. Both Meena, in Canada, and her sister Ranjit, in Punjab, would like their parents to live with them. Ranjit lives only a few blocks away from her parents in the Punjab; yet her husband's family often made comments about the fact that she socialized more with her own parents and sister than with her husband's relatives. In Punjab in February 2000 Ranjit related how her husband's family held

traditional ideas about how kinship relations should be structured around the male. Even though they were a middle class, well-educated family, she noted that her mother-in-law had very rigid ideas, which her husband's siblings maintained. Even after her mother-in-law passed away Ranjit's husband's family would have considered it highly inappropriate for her parents to live with them (nor would her own parents consider such a move). These discussions were enlightening because in other conversations about such things as son preference and marriage practices Ranjit and Meena insisted that these issues were "in the villages" only. Even so, it was assumed that the only one of their children Meena's parents would move in with was their son who lived in Toronto, despite the fact that both he and his wife worked outside of the home. Meena in particular mentioned that her brother was rarely at home, and that her parents would be lonely and isolated if they moved in with him. In her house, because she ran her businesses from home, there were always people around. Though Meena and Ranjit experienced a thoroughly 'modern' life both in India and Canada, the tradition of the son being responsible for parental care was deeply engrained and difficult to resist.

In Canada, it is not only the South Asian population that Meena interprets through her lens of cosmopolitanism and resistance to patriarchal norms. She understands herself to be more sophisticated than many Euro-Canadians, in ways that can open business opportunities. Meena did not consider there to be culturally distinctive ideals of beauty, but she was adamant about the backwardness of Canadian beauty technologies.

**Meena:** ..so many girls they came here. They already took training from me [in India]. They are now working downtown [in Vancouver]. Yesterday, my cousin's wife, she came...she had worked with me for 10 years. Now she has a good job. She said, 'Your salon is just very advanced. Because after 20 years [of being in Canada], I am working here. It is the same. And I haven't seen any change.'

**Interviewer:** Here in Canada?

**Meena:** Yeah. She is working in the Mall in downtown.

**Sarjeet:** The techniques we brought to India from Germany and England, you know, 20 years back, they have here now.

**Interviewer:** Twenty years later?

**Meena:** They are new here.

**Sarjeet:** They are now part of things here. In beauty, Canada is a more backward country than India.

**Meena:** England is very advanced.

**Interviewer:** So what order are India, England and Canada, for things like fashion and beauty?

**Meena:** I think Canada is far behind in fashion and beauty. England is more advanced. Europe is more advanced. Even Europe is all advanced.

**Interviewer:** More advanced than India?

**Meena:** It is equal... Whatever is new in beauty, you can see in India at the same time.

**Interviewer:** And is that the same in fashion?

**Meena:** Everything.

**Interviewer:** Like with the Saris and Salwa Kameez?

**Meena:** Even the western styles...They are immediately in India...just the people. They are more casual here. Basically, they are very casual. Even you can see the Canadian people, the whites. In England, you can see them. They are very well dressed. Here they can go in tracksuits anywhere [*Laughter*] Like that! There is a difference. Basically, there is a difference. So people around are also the same. Where everybody is casual. There, people are formal in India. In England people are very formal.

There is a fascinating hierarchy here: Britain and India, with Canada very far behind. Meena appears to be calling up the resources made available to her through India's more recent colonial history, namely closer, more entwined sets of cultural and political relations between Britain and India.

### **Canada and Self-Discipline: the Elder Son**

Meena's portrayal of Canada emerges in other, more positive ways, which had a direct bearing on their decision to migrate. In particular, Canada was cast as a meritocracy, a place where her elder son Hardit could be removed from the decadence of India's upper classes and returned to traditional values of hard work. In this sense, a 'modern' meritocracy is intertwined with strengthening positive, 'traditional' familial interdependencies and 'modern' values of individual enterprise. Meena and Sarjeet were concerned that the decadent lifestyle of India's wealthy would be detrimental to their sons' futures. The older son Hardit, in particular had become very comfortable with the relaxed way of life in Punjab where he spent his days with wealthy friends, driving their cars and at the local flying and cricket clubs. The move to Canada was something he was not particularly excited about:

**Interviewer:** Do you think it was a shock for him in the beginning?

**Meena:** Yes, in the beginning it was a big shock for him, it was very *(laughter)*...Lifestyle was different there.

**Interviewer:** So he was just sort of having a good time most of the time.

**Meena:** There he was one of the very big people, and here he is now working, *(laughter)* you know? In India especially, the kids they don't work much you know.... because there is no opportunity for them. It's good here, here if your father is rich, everybody is the same.... But there...people have problems there now, they have money, but the kids they are not working.

**Interviewer:** They are not working, because there is no work or...

**Meena:** No, sometimes they don't, even though you can get work. Because they get into bad habits, at least I think ...

**Sarjeet:** In Punjab its called "lazy money." That's when we have trouble... Easy money.

**Meena:** Mostly their father's work hard, but they never work. (Interview, September 1998)

Their son, as Meena suggests, was one of the "very big people", and the move to Canada was a dramatic shift since it was expected that he would have to work like everyone else. From their son's perspective, he had little option but to join his parents, and the differences were clear to him from the outset.

**Hardit:** the only difference is here you have to work. You don't have to work there [India] *(Laughter)*. The rest is, like, if you look at the lifestyle, you're a lot better out there....

**Interviewer:** So what did you think, then...when the family made the decision to move?

**Hardit:** I had nothing to say, because I was dependent upon my parents. But, like, even if I used to go out, I'd take money from my parents...So I had nothing to say ...you have to go... I had to accept it... I never used to make my own money. *(Laughter)* I was dependent upon my parents. (Interview, September 1999).

In India therefore, aspects of the Brar's class positions became a disadvantage since they felt that their privileged social position would curtail their eldest son's career in the long term. He had failed to complete any of his university studies in India, and had no interest in moving abroad because "I met people from abroad, like all my friends came from abroad...So I knew all the lifestyles abroad. So I had no, like, excitement to go abroad." (Interview, September 1999).

In addition to concern with "lazy money," the spectre of India's best government jobs becoming subjected to the reservation system was obviously an influential factor. The idea of state

employment reservations for certain classes or castes in India has a long history (Das 2000), but since the recommendations of the Mandal commission report of 1991 were accepted, reservations have been advocated for backward castes in higher education and government service. Politically it appears that Indian society has accepted that ‘mandalisation’ is here to stay, and now many groups are lobbying to be included in the ‘other backward castes’ provision, including Jats, a heterogeneous grouping that includes many Sikhs (Datta 1999). In the case of the Brar family, the spectre of reservation potentially disrupting their sons’ employment options within the Indian Public Service emerged as one factor their decision to relocate.

**Sarjeet:** They are getting reservation in education and in getting the jobs and getting the employment. So the fellow who is junior to me, he may become my boss one day. That’s what the government’s reservation system is.

**Interviewer:** Right, and your sons because they are in a good general caste position might lose out because of that?

**Sarjeet and Meena:** Yeah yeah. (Interview, September 1998)

The reservation system can be interpreted within what Niranjana (1999) terms the narrative of ‘national-modern’ in India, and one (bureaucratic) face of secular modernity in India that disrupts caste and class privilege. Certainly “the politics of caste and religion are thoroughly worked over by the language of modernity” (Prakash 1999: 236), but the interesting irony of this situation is that the Brar’s deal with one modernizing process though the adoption of another, their relocation to the West. In doing so they transform their son’s position and his employment options. This example presents an interesting oppositional movement to the type of ‘regional modernities’ Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan (2003) identify. Their argument is based upon low caste internal migrants in India using circular labour migration to challenge place bound social hierarchies in order to increase their resources, while the Brar’s are reacting to some of this erosion of established social hierarchies through their own patterns of circular migration, in their case international ones. The ‘lazy money’ culture Hardit adopted in Punjab instils a poor work ethic, but even if he did work, the reservation system in India threatened his potential employment options.

Despite the positive rationale for such mobility, the older son was not particularly keen to move to Canada. Ensnarled by his economic dependency on his parents, the elder son was left no option but to follow his parents to Vancouver. He eventually found a retail job, a position to which his father alerted him. The job was hardly high status; in fact Hardit hid his educational credentials to obtain it.

**Hardit:** Even I was told to take off my degree, because if they think I'm too educated... *(Laughter)* That was funny. Nothing like that happens in India, that if you're too educated, they don't hire you.

**Interviewer:** Who told you that?

**Hardit:** One of the managers down there. *(He laughs.)*

**Interviewer:** What, when you were applying for the job in Burnaby?

**Hardit:** You might be too educated for the job.

**Interviewer:** So you, so you took it off?

**Hardit:** I took it off. *(Laughter)* That's funny (September 1999).

While the reduction of occupational status is not an uncommon prospect for many professional immigrants, in the case of Meena's son the intention was really just to find some permanent employment. The job seems to have served its purpose insofar as this son experienced a transformation in his attitude to self-employment. He has joined his mother in developing the import fashion design business in Vancouver. One of its attractions is the opportunity it affords for a transnational lifestyle of travel between India and Vancouver.

**Hardit:** Well, the thing is, we already have it established in India, right? We still have a base down there. If I do work with my mom, then, like, I think I can make more money, like, than working at [retail] maybe... I can still be full-time job and do this part-time....

**Interviewer:** So you'd still hold the job here and, then, do your regular trips to India to sort of organize stuff.

**Hardit:** Oh, yeah.... So, then, I'll have like, here or in India, I'll just go and party for a couple of months... I can even do my business at the same time.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, OK. Do you, um, were you always interested in doing that? Or is this something that you sort of recently thought would be...?

**Hardit:** In part because I work here, like, at [retail] for three or four years, and I see my mom, like, she's doing pretty good, right. So I thought it was better to do something like, you can be better. You have a better scope like. And seeing my mom everyday doing that, it's like, if you could ... do it... I never had it before; but now, I think I might...

**Interviewer:** So when you were in India, your mom had this quite successful business. And, um, so you just sort of used to not think much of it?

**Hardit:** Oh, I used to just think about partying all the time. *(He laughs)*

**Interviewer:** Yeah. But now, when you look at that, you think, hmm, that would...

**Hardit:** Yup.

**Interviewer:** So what sort of, well, what appeals to you about it? Does the independence or...?

**Hardit:** The independence, meeting people and socializing with them.... Getting exhibitions done, like, so you can socialize. You can do everything at the same time. Meet with people, like, um. It's a safe business to be in.

**Interviewer:** Oh, OK. And then do you like the idea of having a business that lets you go back to India?

**Hardit:** Oh, I, I love to (Interview, September 1999).

#### Transnationalism as a strategy to maintain class and gender identifications

If Meena's husband Sarjeet was a reluctant transmigrant, there are still many aspects of his situation that conform to other accounts of transnational migration experiences. In particular, men often attempt to return home quickly and frequently to maintain status in the home country that was destabilized by migration (Pessar 1999). Deskilling and loss of occupational prestige is a familiar immigrant story, and Sarjeet is the one who has lived this story most fully and permanently within his household. Compared to Meena, Sarjeet was positioned very differently in occupational terms: he came as a senior professional engineer, and has suffered the problems of professional accreditation so common among professionals immigrating to Canada. The engineering professional organisations in Canada police their boundaries very closely, and this bureaucratic rationalism contradicts the kind of meritocratic individualism anticipated by Sarjeet.

**Sarjeet:** Actually, the employment problem is there. I have experience of 30 years and they don't recognize my qualifications. With 30 years of experience they must recognize my qualifications. They can give me job training for a few months. They can do anything. I've been doing civil engineering for 30 years. But they say, "You have to pass the exams." At this age – I'm 55 years old – I don't want to study again. [*laughing*]....

**Meena:** Because they don't even get ordinary jobs here. They can't survive. Like his brother-in-law, he's a civil engineer too. He came five years back. He didn't get any job. He's just working in [as a parking attendant] for, like \$7 [an hour]. It's quite...for well-educated people...it's quite... (Interview, 25 March 1998).

Sarjeet was a very senior engineer employed by the Indian government in a position of considerable authority that garnered a good deal of social respect and material resources:

**Sarjeet:** In my department I had about 4,000 or 5,000 working under me, 2 supervisors, about 20 engineers, and about 100 union engineers, and then labour. I was in charge of the whole province (Interview, September 1998).

Sarjeet took early retirement in 1995 in order for his family to migrate to Canada, 6 years before the mandatory retirement age of 55. When we first interviewed him, he was optimistic about consulting opportunities with international engineering companies; by 1999 he was retraining by taking a mortgage broker course, with the hope of doing some of this financial work part-time from his home. Compared to Meena, Sarjeet's possibly higher status in India is geographically rooted in the Punjab, and does not translate to Canada as easily as Meena's does.

In Vancouver, Meena's business generated much of the family income (Sarjeet's pension of @ Cdn \$480 a month was deposited directly to a bank account in India), and his lifestyle was curtailed. This reversal or realignment of gender roles after migration has been recognized as a source of significant tension for families, especially those coming from rural situations with a limited familiarity with changing gender roles (Gill and Matthews 1995). In particular the changing breadwinner role in these families can cause distress for men who may face diminished self-esteem and reduced control over family affairs. In the case of the Brar family, their urban sophistication and awareness of how family dynamics would be altered by migration seems to have made their transition much smoother than cases where the male head of household intended to transfer his professional skills directly to the Canadian labour market. Despite Sarjeet's premature retirement and seeming acknowledgement that Meena's businesses were to be the main focus in Canada, his migration caused some social dislocations as his role changed. In the initial stages Sarjeet was responsible for establishing the fashion and beauty businesses, but later when things were running smoothly, he was left with less to do: "Now I am a little bit free – totally free" (March 25, 1998). As his wife states, he was not particularly happy in Vancouver: "Everyday, he says: "I will go back" (laughing). The lifestyle is different. He used to like....there, you get a lot of perks in your jobs. He has 2 drivers, 2 washermen, like that. We have 10 people around us to work." Sarjeet added: "An official car also." (March 25, 1998).

Sarjeet managed his unhappiness in part by understanding his own identity through a discourse of modern liberal egalitarianism. In a sense, his own modernity, and his willingness to act outside of class and caste conventions, allowed him to stand apart in India and prepared the way for his immigration to Canada:

**Interviewer:** And then how did it feel for you to have that and then come here and not have that sort of authority anymore?

**Sarjeet:** Actually, normally, most of the people who come from - just like us - they feel frustrated here, but we were not. The reason being I used to work there in spite of all my help, I used to cut my own lawn, and I used to clean my car, wash my house everything, clean my home, everything, she also used to do work... So we knew

conditions here because we have travelled in Europe and other countries, and we knew we had to work for ourselves, and it is not very difficult to work here.

**Interviewer:** How do you mean to work here?

**Sarjeet:** So we know we have to cook food, no problem, we did all the preparing of the food.

**Meena:** And you know you have to cook, (*laughter*) you know that.... After a few days you get used to it you know, some people they are not, like they never did work.

**Sarjeet:** I feel that whatever crowd I am in, I never feel that I am better than that fellow, or that I am lower than that. So that's why it is easier... So people they joke with me, they call me my status, "the deputy Chief engineer is cleaning the rug."

**Interviewer:** So you have a good laugh about that.

**Sarjeet:** Yeah, so this is my major job, to collect the garbage. (*general laughter*)

**Interviewer:** ...did you feel the same way in India, with people from different backgrounds?

**Sarjeet:** Yeah, yeah. Even my junior most staff member used to come to visit my house. Normally they weren't allowed into your dining room. Ask them to sit down. They stand outside. I used to bring him in, in the evening, a glass of beer or whiskey. Even the most junior most person, as well as the senior most man. I used to give the same treatment. Of course, it would be a little different, but almost the same. (Interview, September 1998).

Aside from calling upon discourses of modernity, Sarjeet managed his identity by maintaining his life in India, and by insisting on inhabiting transnationalism more fully than his wife envisioned or even desired.

**Sarjeet:** Actually if I totally cut my links, then I won't be happy here. That's why I go every year. I used to be very social, I have a lot of links there, I always wanted to get home for holidays.

**Meena:** Politically...we have connections, lots of connections, so he likes to keep in touch. (Interview, <sup>September</sup> 1998)

Despite the fact that Meena was well connected, it is Sarjeet she suggests is the one who likes to keep in touch. When Meena is asked whether Sarjeet intended to work in Canada, she states:

**Meena:** He never thought it that way, but it is so boring to stay at home, yeah it is very boring....there is nothing to do when you get up in the morning, and you just pass your time like that, you know.

**Interviewer:** What has he been doing usually; I mean he was involved in the business...

**Meena:** He is doing nothing now; he is just looking after my business a little bit, looking after my accounts, the kids and things.... Every thing is done now, yeah, that is why he is free now.

**Interviewer:** So does he think, you know, “I would like to spend more time in India”?

**Meena:** Sometimes he thinks, “I think winters we will spend there.” (10 May 1999)

In a spatial irony then, the ability to move between India and Canada is presented as one way to make Sarjeet’s settlement in Canada more secure, in part because it allows Sarjeet to retain his pre-migratory status and self worth.

### **Homelessness: The Younger Son**

We now turn to the younger son, who secures his identity in very different ways and for whom settlement in Canada has a very different meaning. Sharad appears to conform to a growing academic stereotype of the hypermobile transnational, rootless and hybridized, but we are especially interested in how he accomplishes this through his own deployment of discourses of modernity and traditionalism – and some rather sticky geographical labelling – mediated through his exploration of sexuality.

Sharad describes his identity as fragmented, and “irreconcilable”. He describes his Indian identity as “a type of refuge, when I feel really confused...I can see where I’m coming from and why I do certain things here and why I don’t feel comfortable...It explains a lot of things.” The Canadian side is part of “wanting to be independent...I don’t place a strong emphasis on family, which seems to be a strong emphasis in Canada and India both. And I just don’t agree with the institution much.” (Interview, 20 May 1999). He describes himself as being “scared of going back to India now” (Interviewer: Really? Sharad: It’s funny. Yeah, I feel very, very scared.) Indeed he maintained no friendships from his childhood in India and was the last family member to return to India after immigrating to Canada. He declares that: “I’ve given up on feeling settled...I get scared when things are stable, actually. So I like them to be in motion and to keep me stressed out...I don’t like stability and settling down. So I don’t consider home anything now. So I’ve given up the idea of home.”

Sharad places his identity in two intertwined social, rather than geographical locations, and the move to Canada has facilitated both: one is a non-heterosexual identity, the other is a strong identification as student. He understands that his sexual identification, the process of ‘coming out’, is very much constructed within a Canadian context:

That part of my identity is taking shape in North America. It's a very integral part too...that's why I'm scared to go back [to India] in one sense...like Pride SFU... there's the part of the identity which is really getting formulated here, with the politics that are going on here, and the laws and what not. So when I became politically involved in Canada, it becomes a very North American identity.

This sexual identity was linked to a switch in focus of study, from the sciences to the humanities, a transition that Sharad understood to be more possible in Canada. In India:

**Sharad:** I was signed up for engineering there. You have to sign up after Grade 10. So, god, I would have gone into engineering, and done it. I don't know...I would have done well in school...But I'm not sure how it would have worked out at all... And how my parents would have handled it if I had come out to them there...In a sense I feel happy that I'm here. So I'm not quite so sure what would have happened there. So it's scary.

**Interviewer:** So the social context would have radically determined what path you chose?

**Sharad:** Yeah, it would have. I think so. Yeah. But I strongly believe that social and political circumstances do make a major difference. You can choose to an extent, but I don't think you can go off and do whatever you want. You're really bounded by them.

Sharad identified strongly with his academic success: "it makes me go on, right? At least something is moving in some direction, if everything else is not." He recognized that studying in English was creating a wedge between his two linguistic worlds:

As I pick up academic language...I just don't know the words and things in my old language, because it's just my personal area. As I read and go through university, most of my arguments become more nuanced in English...[the academic language] doesn't fit with the personal that sort of remained there as it was since I was a kid. So it really hasn't developed. So I can basically do basic arguments with people back home but nothing at a more academic level...even in India, it was all in English. So Hindi and Punjabi were languages [courses of language instruction] and everything else was taught in English...so it's been years. And I read books in English, and I almost think in English. When I'm talking to myself, it's in English...It's not always pleasant...it seems to distance me from where I grew up in a way...all these academic developments. I talk to most of them [family and immigrants from India in Vancouver] in Hindi and Punjabi. But I don't even have the words to bring up the newer ideas that I'm talking about. It's hard, hard to translate...It is isolating in a sense.

Schooled in English and, more recently, within the western academy, Sharad has absorbed many of the prejudices of that intellectual tradition. Thus he was pleased and surprised that a teaching assistant for an art history course, recently arrived from India to do a Masters degree, seems...to actually have a good grasp on the issues...I think I began to develop stereotypes about India, coming here myself and not having moved along and seen how people respond to things in universities, how

they discuss them and see them getting discussed here. So I think they don't get discussed there. But actually having TAs who are coming from there and actually talking about the issues very sensibly, it actually gives me more confidence that people [in India] deal with the issues. They get discussed in universities and educational systems [in India]...and then, there are feminist critiques and everything probably in India too, happening, which I never got to see. And it feels its not happening there but very much is.

This moment of recognizing how he has absorbed stereotypes of India and North America, as traditional and modern respectively, simultaneously highlights and renders more fragile the tenuous imaginative geographies through which Sharad has build his sexual identifications, and his experience of Canada as a home.

## **Conclusion**

Meena, Sarjeet, Hardit, Pardeep and Sharad each inhabit transnational space in different ways. Meena has re-established her home in Vancouver and travels between India and Vancouver mostly for business purposes. Sharad has effectively moved to Vancouver, although he declares himself homeless, and it is uncertain where his academic travels will lead him. Sarjeet and Hardeep are more truly in-between, maintaining a home and important social networks in India. Such a small case study eludes generalization but one thing is clear: while it is no simple matter to relate immigration to gender dynamics, it is important to attempt to do so because surely each family member has negotiated his or her transnationalism in terms of their gender, class and sexual identities. In the case of South Asian migration the debate has become sensitized to the powerful role of patriarchal tradition (Fair, Walton-Roberts). But Meena's case demonstrates that social transformations caused by spatial relocation are far from simple unilinear processes. Though certainly there are transformations that have enabled Meena to solidify her position as a powerful economic and social agent within her family and community, in other ways she has been unable to alter patriarchal tendencies in India—it is expected that her parents will live with her younger brother—and ironically in Canada—where 'traditional' gender relationships within the South Asian community have tended to ossify, compared to the very liberal gender relations experienced in her Indian upper-middle class social circles. The complexity of these gendered geographies of power were also revealed in Pardeep's observations of gender practices within the younger Indo-Canadian circles in the Punjab and Vancouver. At the same time, Anglo-Canadian society is portrayed as contradictory. To Sharad, it has allowed his sexual liberation; to Meena, it is rather antiquated in its beauty regimes, and provides a means of disciplining her first born to become a productive economic member of the

family. The family's class position has been altered through their migration, given Hardit's (probably temporary) downward class move through occupational change, and Sarjeet's altered social standing and acquaintances, but this has happened unevenly for each family member and has elicited different adaptations and strategies. The subtlety and complexity of these reconfigurations is only brought into sharp contrast through a transnational approach that explicitly focuses on how gender and class relations are reorganized through migration and ongoing transnational practices. Attending to these subtleties challenges numerous spatial and social binaries – patriarchal/gender equality; traditional/modern --that inform current popular and academic debates regarding immigration to Canada from India.

In particular we see this paper as challenging the popular public assumption that modernity resides in Canada, and that as such 'third world' immigrants 'flock' to the country in order to exploit all the modern trappings of a 'developed' social welfare state. Such a gross generalization overlooks the social complexities of immigrant identities and positions pre and post migration. Indeed many immigrants from India, like the Brar family, are middle class well educated professionals aware of the *negative* socio-economic effects migration may have upon their financial position, but nevertheless seek to build a new life in Canada for a host of complex reasons. Indeed this case study suggests that blind assumptions prioritising the supposed value of economic returns immigrants may or may not receive from their migration decisions, blinds us to these interesting spatial and social contradictions and intersections between places like Canada and India. When we recognize the complex and contradictory reasons why immigrant families relocate to Canada, especially in this age of transnational mobility, we challenge popular stereotypes and undermine the powerful notions of modernity that support them.

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