

## **Essays by Scholars from Non-Jewish Canadian Minority Groups**

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## **Transnational Punjabis and the Idea of Home(s)**

The Punjabi diaspora has a century plus-long history in Canada (est. 1903), and since this country has provided the impetus towards building a pluralistic society with embedded values of tolerance (acceptance), respect and understanding, Punjabis have thrived in great numbers, sitting at over a million strong in 2023. The Punjabi diaspora holds stories of migration to different countries for various reasons at various periods of recent history, successfully building home and community alike with great fervour amidst a ferocious appetite for cultural maintenance. In his edited volume *No Better Home?* Koffman urges us to explore issues of home, host, emigration and processes of settlement, persistence of cultural production, the extent of assimilation or integration and adaptation, as well as socioeconomic and political participation in the country of origin, among others.

Punjab has been a “host” (unwilling or otherwise) society long before her people began to migrate in large numbers to other lands. Waves of peoples came to settle, conquer, or seek refuge in northern India, impacting and influencing the country with their cultures and placing memories of home in architecture, politics, religion, and language. India has always absorbed different peoples into an increasingly pluralistic society, which today appears to breed an endless capacity for cultural accommodation, even with minority unrest always brewing in various parts of the country. This huge diversity of ethnicities, religions, and languages has made the Indian culture an extraordinarily syncretic one. Indians have “learned to live with difference, developing strategies, norms and institutions which allowed them to live together with a range of groups while retaining their own ethno-cultural identity. The Punjabi diasporas have inherited this very complex legacy and culture and taken it with them to the host countries including Canada.”<sup>1</sup>

The global Indian diaspora began in the form of indentured labour in the 1830s and has continued to be replenished by voluntary family migration, professional mobility, and the information technology booms in recent times. The diaspora is drawn from more than a dozen different regions of India and extends to the most underdeveloped as well as the most advanced countries of the world. It covers half a dozen major religions, all majority and minority castes, many languages and a wide variety of occupations ranging from unskilled labourers to highly skilled professionals.<sup>2</sup> The comparisons amongst the diaspora nations may be warranted as they inform each other’s movements, histories of settlement, challenges faced, successes carved out, and so on. But as Koffman states, comparisons are problematic other than as “structuring principles.”<sup>3</sup> Just like the Jewish community in Canada, Punjabis have only recently become keenly interested in studying themselves, especially around the “national experience” as Canadians.<sup>4</sup>

By the first quarter of the nineteenth century there was a great demand for cheap and regulated labour brought about by European colonization. The demand for labour was accentuated by the ever-expanding colonial economy, the growing oppo-

sition to slavery and its eventual abolition and the inability of European countries to meet the shortfall of labour by deploying their own labour force. India was an extant reservoir of cheap, docile, and dependable labour, especially to work on colonial plantations, far from the home country. Broadly three distinct patterns of Indian emigration are identifiable in this period: (a) “indentured” labour emigration, (b) “kangani” or “maistry” labour emigration and (c) ‘passage’ or ‘free’ emigration. Indentured labour was officially sponsored by the colonial government in full brutal effect. An individual labourer would sign a contract to work on a plantation, beginning in 1834 and ending in 1920. The kangani (derived from Tamil *kankani*, meaning foreman) or maistry (derived from Tamil *maistry*, meaning supervisor) system recruited labourers who were legally “free”; as they were not bound by any contract or fixed period of service, although both things were part of their fate, locking them into countries from which there was no return. These systems, which began in the first and third quarter of the nineteenth century, were abolished in 1938.<sup>5</sup>

Emigration from India did not cease with the abolition of indentured and other organized systems of export of labour. There was a steady trickle of emigration of members of trading communities from Gujrat and Punjab to South Africa and East Africa. Many Punjabi labourers emigrated to East Africa to work on the railroads. These emigrants were not officially sponsored: they paid their passage for themselves and were “free” as they were not bound by any contracts, and many moved back and forth with some trepidation about a guaranteed return home.<sup>6</sup>

A new and significant phase of emigration began after India became independent in 1947. After partition, the emigration of professionals and semi-professionals from Punjab to industrially advanced countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada is essentially a post-independence phenomenon. There was a particularly large wave in the 1960s and 1970s and then it somewhat declined with the adaptation of more stringent immigration regulations of recipient countries. This emigration pattern often described as “brain drain” was essentially voluntary and mostly individual by nature.<sup>7</sup> In the twenty-first century, the Punjabi diaspora has increasingly acquired a distinct global and transnational identity. With historic settlements around the world, and successive migrations in the last two centuries to North America, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, the Punjabi diaspora reflects a growing self-consciousness that has been further strengthened by the developments of new communication technologies and rapid globalization.<sup>8</sup>

## **Punjabi Diaspora in Canada**

The long *durée* of migration history of Punjabis in Canada divides itself into three distinct eras: the early years, 1902–1918; the quiet years, 1919–1947; and the post-war era, 1948–present.

The first handful of South Asians arrived in British Columbia in 1903. Within four years they were followed by over 5,000 others attracted to Canada by comparatively high wages and available work. Most immigrants were Punjabi Sikh, and their service in the British Raj and armies and protecting the northwest frontier province over millennia had provided them with the tools to travel, build strong community solidarity and the work ethic to strengthen their economic, social, and political developments.<sup>9</sup> As more immigrants began to arrive in the early 1900s, the colonial government and public opinion towards Punjabis began to harden, eventually leading to the subsequent ban on immigration. The ban hit the local community hard as it exempted no one and it was felt extensively by the small community. The egregious ban included the wives and children of those who were already in Canada. It was not until the ban was modified in 1919, allowing entry to wives and children, that their economic security increased.<sup>10</sup> It would take four decades for the fight for equality to be fully realized for these immigrants, fought for in all parts of British Columbia where they resided.<sup>11</sup>

The year 1947 marked the beginning of a new era of belonging for Punjabis in Canada. The ban was fully removed in that year, and this led to slow resumption of immigration, with a small over the next two decades. Punjabi settlement and ensuing community development has led to an increase in national, cultural, class, linguistic, and religious awareness, and more fulsome Canadian connections for these new Canadians.<sup>12</sup> This heightened Canadian consciousness has come at a cost, as Koffman suggests, and it behooves us to not just examine the “vertical plane” of Punjabi history but also “the horizontal landscape of global comparisons.”<sup>13</sup> While it took forty years of challenging the system to gain the right to vote, Koffman notes, “if social integration, equality and religious freedom are the right measures of a good home, then Canada seems to offer a pretty good one.”<sup>14</sup> However, like Koffman’s examples of Jewish power in the hallways of political and media centers, Punjabis in recent times also had to take seriously their civic duty to become involved in the three levels of government across Canada to affect real change. This defining involvement has carved out new conversations about political contributions on the ideas of home and family—both in country of origin and in Canada. For example, the often silent and brushed aside role of caste hierarchies in Punjabi Canadian political achievement, where almost all elected members of Parliament are from so called “upper castes,” accentuates the need for an internal debate that has not yet gained much attention or traction.

Crucial to this important evolution of Punjabis as a diasporic community in Canada has been their ability to adapt in an alien setting, while still maintaining those things they hold as important (like caste), but without creating opportunities for critical discourse. Punjabis have set up institutions that are characteristic of social organizations of their ancestral land, without the critical lens of understanding ongoing oppression and coercion. The most important of these has been family; the rites of

establishing family structures and the network of relationships resulting from it has been one of its core strengths, one that has faced much stress in recent times. An aspect of a social organization such as that of family, which has analytical significance in the study of diaspora, is the generational difference and ensuing strife. The first generation of Punjabis as a diasporic community is evidently different from the second and the subsequent ones. Canada now has entire generations of diasporic Punjabis born and brought up in this country.<sup>15</sup> Regardless, families or significant others may identify themselves as originating from and belonging to an imagined homeland.<sup>16</sup> However, the past continues to inform the present and while the Punjabi community in Canada has always looked backwards to Punjab for many reasons, encroachment of Canadian values and experiences has affected some change:

Interracial marriage has not become that common among Punjabi communities, compared to other immigrant groups. The ethnic and religious population patterns of Punjabis indicate how immigration policies affect the formation of Diasporic communities.... When immigration rules softened, limited family immigration through the sponsorship program was allowed, and the Punjabi population slowly developed its composition as it is today.<sup>17</sup>

The experiences of adult immigrants and that of their offspring are significantly different. The second generation is spared the hardships endured by their immigrant parents, but they are expected to achieve greater success than their parents and to fully integrate into society. At the same time, there is great stress within Punjabi families to ensure maintenance of ancestral country's values, ethos, culture, languages, caste, and religion.<sup>18</sup> This second generation is a demographic group that includes both children born in their parents' new home and those who immigrated with their parents when they were children (often referred to as the 1.5 generation). Members of the second generation see themselves and are seen by others as a cultural bridge between their parents' way of living and a new way of living. They are agents of sociocultural change, and a prime locus for understanding the complexities of a multi-racial society.<sup>19</sup> While second-generation youth identify with the ethno-cultural group of their parents' country of origin, they also have a strong sense of belonging to the host society.<sup>20</sup> The parents' home left behind still plays a major role in the imaginary—passed down the generations with what I call a great deal of “nostesia” (a mix of nostalgia and amnesia).

Punjabis are known for jealously preserving their cultural identity as they continue to cling tightly to their norms and endogamy, marital and family solidarity, kin orientation, religion, caste differences, and mother tongue, which is not easily understood by host communities.<sup>21</sup> Overseas Punjabis adhere to their traditional culture so ostensibly that at times it appears that they are more Indian in their cultural orientations and practices than resident Indians are in India, creating tensions in Canada. Culture is an abstract symbolic system, which is composed of values, meanings, and

beliefs and the rich cultural heritage, common language, and a strong sense of being Punjabi (called *Punjabiyyat*) has bound Punjabis together. The transnational networks among Punjabis have become stronger with the development of media, internet, and television. The local twenty-four-hour linguistically rich radio, print weekly newspapers, monthly and quarterly magazines, and more, play an important role of informing Indians abroad about their homeland.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

The Punjabi diaspora is not the mere physical movement of people. Punjabis have carried with them socio-cultural strengths as well as cultural baggage that, among other things, consists of predefined social identity, a set of religious beliefs and practices, a framework of norms and values governing family and kinship organizations, food habits, caste differences, and language. Punjabis are not completely cut off from their original homeland of India; they retain a mental and physical contact with their homeland, often characterized as “the myth of return.”

To return to the question of “no better home?” as proposed by Koffman, it would seem that the one-hundred-and-twenty-year history of Punjabis in Canada, as part of a global Punjabi diaspora, is a testament to their resilience of building a better home in Canada, albeit through much struggle and many successes. They present a powerful example of a mostly successful integration into the new homeland of Canada, secured with their adherence to traditional values, culture, religion and language that have been sustained at some cost of personal, political, and public opinion. In more recent times Punjabis have insisted on no “single story” for a diverse and culturally astute community built on chain migration, but host and home have not always come together with the same understanding of this dichotomy.

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