The Punjabi Pioneers

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Abstract

On a warm day in Imperial Valley California, visitors and residents alike can indulge in a fascinating cross-cultural dining experience: chicken curry enchiladas. The only aspect of this dish more enticing than its expert mix of flavors lies in its rich cultural history. Each bite conveys a story, stories of enterprising migrants from Punjab who married Mexican-American women and fiercely defended their ability to establish roots in their new homeland, despite a host of discriminatory legislation and the barriers of a foreign legal system. Building on primary source material uncovered by renowned anthropologist Karen Leonard in her book "Making Ethnic Choices," I argue that the Punjabis achieved their success by pulling from a host of familiar strategies, including litigation, marriage, and cross-cultural networking, all learned from their interactions with the British Raj. I chart a path through historiography by examining how Punjabi farmers navigated a unique system of land ownership within Punjab before drawing on the experiences of Punjabi soldiers and laborers in the imperial service. I then delve deep into the lives of Punjabi immigrants in the United States, in which critical relationships with Hispanic women and local officials allowed them to circumvent the Alien Land Laws and maintain their status as landowners. This paper will illuminate how the unique experience of being a colonial subject has influenced, and continues to directly influence, how South Asian immigrants establish deep economic and agricultural roots in the Western United States.

At Home in Punjab

The majority of Pacific Coast immigrants from South Asia hailed from Central Punjab, an agricultural region dominated by the landowning Jat caste. The Jat caste encompassed three religious faiths: Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism, and enjoyed a reputation as courageous,

independent, and militant farmers dedicated to defending their land. After the opening of the Suez Canal in the late 19th century, Punjab became a center of wheat production and export to Europe, and over one-third of the land was dedicated to wheat farming.[1] Jats maintained their land through a gendered system of labor in which women were responsible for domestic tasks such as milking the cattle, feeding the household, and weeding the fields, and men took on management and heavier farming duties. Women played an "indispensable" role within the Punjabi household and were also expected to enter arranged marriages to secure land holdings within their families.[2] In Punjab, it was not uncommon for a widowed sister-in-law to marry the younger brother of her deceased husband to retain financial assets.[3]

During the Mutiny of 1857, the Punjab region held in favor of British rule. British officials lauded the martial ability of the Jat caste, specifically among members of the Sikh religion who had a "long history as a brotherhood of fighting men."[4] For this reason, Punjabis were afforded preferential recruitment into the British military service and gained experience as soldiers and wage laborers across the empire. Additionally, the British recognized the socioeconomic structure of Punjab and rewarded it with a unique system of peasant proprietorship different from that established in other Indian states. This system negotiated revenue settlements with the Punjabi peasants themselves (without the use of mediators), enabled

[1] Sucheta Mazumdar, "What Happened to the Women? Chinese and Indian Male Migration to the United States in Global Perspective," in *Asian/Pacific Islander American Women* (New York City, NY: NYU Press, 2003), pp. 58-74, 65.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., 69.

[4] Karen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans* (Philadelphia , PA: Temple University Press, 2010), 25.

individual farmers to maintain a sense of ownership over their land, and developed markets for their goods with "land, labor, and credit freely available by purchase or exchange."[5] Each man was responsible for paying revenue on and managing the cultivation of his own land. By directly negotiating settlements with British officials, Punjabi farmers learned to navigate legal challenges and came to view litigation as an essential tool to protect their land. For example, when urban moneylenders began seizing mortgaged farms and challenging the power of Jat landowners, the farmers lobbied the British government to pass the 1900 Alienation of Land Act. This act "prevented urban commercial castes from permanently acquiring land held by 'statutory agriculturalist' tribes,"[6] and authorized Jat peasants to assert their land ownership privileges in court. According to a Civil Justice Committee Report from 1922, Punjabi farmers filed twice as many legal suits as cultivators from other Indian provinces.[7] As I will discuss later, Punjabi migrants to the United States were equally as forceful in their legal tactics.

In the Imperial Service

Punjabi immigration to the United States in the early 20th century came about due to "population pressure, subdivision of land, and rural debt."[8] Second and third sons who did not inherit large swaths of land were encouraged to find financial opportunities abroad and send money back to their households.[9] These non-inheriting sons capitalized on the opportunities

[5] Ibid., 26.

[6] Ian A Talbot, "The Punjab Under Colonialism: Order and Transformation in British India," *Journal of Punjab Studies* 14, no. 1 (2007): pp. 3-11, 4.

[7] Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices*, 29.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Mazumdar, "What Happened to the Women?", 65.

allotted to them by the British military service. Many of the Punjabis employed by the British military were able to speak English, a fact which made the United States an appealing prospect for settlement. Prior to 1914, the majority of Punjabi immigrants to the United States had served the British government in places such as China, Southeast Asia, and East Africa. In an interview from 2013, third-generation Punjabi-Mexican Leela Rai describes how her grandfather learned broken English during his imperial service and, as a result, was able to establish strategic connections within the Imperial Valley farming community.[10]

Furthermore, Punjabis utilized their time abroad to develop close contacts within and outside of the colonial administration. Leonard cites an example of one Sergeant Singh, who, upon arrival in North America, "produced a book of references from British army officers in India, merchants in Australia, and bankers in Hong Kong."[11] Male soldiers, laborers, and sailors from a variety of cultural backgrounds enjoyed close fraternal networks in shared boarding houses across Asia. These networks were crucial to securing passage to the United States. Punjabis learned of economic opportunities in the Western United States and heard successful tales of "backdoor" migration from Pacific ports. In the book "The Sun Never Sets," Nayan Shah details the journey of Jawala Singh from India to Hong Kong and then to Manila, where Indians could obtain residency status in the United States colony and bypass strict immigration regulations in Seattle and San Francisco. Jawala Singh, like so many of his contemporaries, was

[10] Punjabi-Mexican-American From Yuba City In California, *YouTube* (Kamla Show, September 12, 2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_YhiO3QcP0A, 12:13.

[11] Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices*, 31.

able to finance his journey by recruiting the help of established South Asian merchants.[12] Jawala Singh's later success in the United States can be linked to the same contact-making strategies that served him well in Southeast Asia.

Immigration to the United States

Punjabi immigrants to the United States settled in California, specifically in the Imperial Valley as well as in the borderland states of Arizona, Texas, and New Mexico. The Punjabis established themselves in their traditional agricultural roles as cash-crop farmers and landowners. According to Leonard's study of Imperial County leasing records from 1917 to 1923, Punjabi farmers signed between sixteen and fifty-three leases per year, evidencing the group's rapid landownership and agricultural prowess.[13] A major threat to their early success came in 1923, when the U.S. Supreme Court determined that South Asians were not "white persons," and thus, not eligible for naturalization. The ruling placed Punjabi farmers under the control of Alien Land Laws, which had been instituted across the Western United States to prohibit "foreign aliens" from leasing or owning agricultural land. Despite the legal setback, Punjabis were nonetheless able to depend on pre-established techniques of litigation and networking to continue to prosper in their new country.

Litigation

Without delving into the intricacies of legal theory, I will note that both British and American legal systems are rooted in English common law and are "characterized by a case-law

[12] Vivek Bald et al., "Intimate Dependency, Race, and Trans-Imperial Migration," in *The Sun Never Sets: South Asian Migrants in an Age of U.S. Power* (New York, NY: New York Univ. Press, 2013), pp. 25-49, 31.

[13] Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices*, 31.

system based on judicial decisions and the rule of precedent."[14] For Punjabi immigrants to the United States, this crucial similarity meant that they could benefit from legal experience under the British Raj and continue a tradition of utilizing active litigation to protect their financial interests. Although Punjabis made up only 0.6% of the population in Imperial Valley county, they were involved in 2% of all civil cases between 1919 and 1931.[15] A large portion of these legal disputes were related to bankruptcy, with fifty-nine total cases filed between 1919 and 1928.[16] The Punjabis secured loans from members of their own community, as well as local moneylenders and banks. They dealt with increasing levels of anti-Asian discrimination and intrusion upon their personal property by paying off other Punjabis before declaring bankruptcy and then strategically hiding assets from creditors in order to retain their value. Leonard unpacks the legal battle between Mota Singh and an American moneylender who tried to seize his vehicle as repayment for a loan. Singh claimed that he sold the car to another Punjabi, who sold the car to a third Punjabi, who then re-sold the car to the previous owner for a $550 loss. In this and many other bankruptcy cases, court officials had difficulty locating "any tangible assets" in the farmer's possession and, as a result, wealth was able to remain within the Punjabi community.[17] If one replaces urban Indian moneylenders with American bankers, there are striking similarities

[14] Marion Del-Bove and Laurence Francoz-Terminal, "How Common Is the Common Law? Some Differences and Similarities in British and American Superior Court Decisions," *Alicante Journal of English Studies*, 2015, pp. 59-82, 1.

[15] Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices*, 52.

[16] Ibid., 53.

[17] Ibid., 54.

between the actions of Punjabi farmers under the 1900 Alienation of Land Act and the actions taken during the bankruptcy cases of the Imperial Valley.

Cross-Cultural Networking

Additionally, the immigrants were able to retain land by combining their legal acumen with local networks of relatives and friends. As evidenced by their experience in the imperial service, the Punjabis were adept at creating connections with groups who shared their cultural values (such as other male laborers and merchants, whose support aided passage to America) as well as members of the dominant class (such as British officials). In the Mexican-U.S. borderlands and California, Punjabi migrants came into contact with Mexican women and children who were also engaged in agricultural labor. The Punjabi and Mexican-American communities shared a preference for serially-arranged marriages between joint families, and many Punjabi migrants married Hispanic women out of a desire for kinship and economic benefit. Shah references the Alvarez family, who immigrated from Mexico to Imperial County, California. Within a period of months, two of the Alvarez sisters had married two Punjabi brothers, Sher Singh and Gopal Singh.[18] A photograph from the wedding of Valentina Alvarez to one Rullia Singh, taken in 1917, depicts the latter with a shaved beard and upturned mustache. Evidently, Punjabi men viewed marriage and dress as a part of a larger cultural assimilation strategy that involved retaining land.[19] Borrowing cultural signifiers such as dress from their Mexican American wives enabled the Punjabi men to better assimilate into their new society.

[18] Bald et al., "Intimate Dependency, Race, and Trans-Imperial Migration," 31.

[19] Valentina Alvarez and Rullia Singh, 1917, photograph, Karen Leonard's Punjabi Mexican American Papers, Stanford University Libraries, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-faith/punjabi-sikh-mexican-american-community-fading-into-history/2012/08/13/cc6b7b98-e26b-11e1-98e7-89d659f9c106_story.html.

Just as marriage was a key aspect of securing control over patrilineal land holdings in Punjab, there are multiple instances of Punjabi farmers capitalizing on their Mexican connections to work around the Alien Land Laws. In the Imperial Valley, one Hispanic wife leased land in the name of her Punjabi husband and functioned as his business partner.[20] Upon his arrival to the United States, Jawala Singh married and then divorced Maria Fierro. After 1923, his lawyers manipulated his divorce settlement so that he secured control over 125 acres of land.[21] The divorce allowed Jawala to bypass the Alien Land Laws and continue to maintain his status of a landowner.

Punjabi farmers also established connections and partnerships with white Americans, including those who held prominent positions within the legal system. Shah concludes that Jawala Singh was only able to orchestrate an advantageous divorce settlement as a result of his close friendship with the local county clerk.[22] This can be compared to how the same man negotiated connections with South Asian merchants in Manila to secure financial support for his journey to the United States. In Imperial County, the director of Holtville Bank often held land for Punjabi farmers, earning his establishment the title of "Hindu Bank."[23] One American farmer described the Punjabis as "excellent farmers, very industrious,"[24] echoing the begrudging level of respect allotted towards the Punjabi work ethic by agents of the British Raj. Local judges felt comfortable leasing land for Punjabi farmers in their own names. Leonard notes that these acts of

[20] Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices*, 56.

[21] Bald et al., "Intimate Dependency, Race, and Trans-Imperial Migration," 39.

[22] Ibid., 40.

[23] Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices*, 57.

[24] Ibid., 55.

generosity were often rewarded by gifts of live chickens, proof of the close personal ties between these judicial officials and the Punjabi community.[25] Evidently, Punjabi migrants utilized their experience navigating British imperial networks to form the partnerships they needed to survive on American soil.

Conclusion

In 1946, the Luce-Celler Bill granted naturalization to Indian immigrants and freed Punjabi farmers from the harsh constraints of the Alien Land Laws. However, in the period between 1923 and 1946, the "industrious" Punjabis had not allowed the American legal system to deprive them of their rights without serious acts of resistance, and continued to lease, farm, and own land in the Western United States. At home and abroad, the Punjabis displayed a sophisticated command of the legal lexicon to maneuver around predatory acts of land seizure intent on robbing them of their hard-earned assets. Their experience in the British military service enabled them to assume the role of imperial citizens, adept at navigating cross-cultural networks and establishing contacts who aided their immigration to the United States and, later, assisted their efforts to evade the Alien Land Laws. The relationships between Punjabi men and Hispanic women are especially notable, for they represent how cultural values can defy national boundaries, and foster a sense of community and economic security in an unfamiliar world. Just as in the case of other immigrant groups, the Punjabis experienced structural challenges with assimilating into the American landscape, however, they drew from their vast experience as colonial subjects to negotiate, litigate, and assert a place in their new country.

[25] Ibid., 57.

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