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# **The Diasporic Pursuit of Home and Identity: Dynamic Punjabi Transnationalism**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the pursuit of home within a diasporic British Indian Punjabi community. It is argued that the British Asian transnational pursuit of home is significantly shaped by the dynamic social context of South Asia as well as social processes within Britain and across the South Asian diaspora. Drawing upon a decade of original, transnational, ethnographic research within the UK and India, I analyze the rapidly changing social context of Punjab, India, and the impact of this upon the diasporic Punjabi pursuit of home. I particularly argue that increasing divisions between the UK diasporic group studied and the non migrant permanent residents of Punjab, which are intrinsically related to processes of inclusion and exclusion within Punjab, especially the changing role and significance of land ownership and changing consumption practices therein, in turn connected to the increasing influence of economic neoliberalization and global consumer culture within India, significantly shapes the (re)production of home and identity amongst the Punjabi diaspora. Recent manifestations of these social processes within Punjab are threatening the very lived Indian home of some diasporic Punjabis, their Indian 'roots'.

## **Introduction**

This paper examines the pursuit of home, as an aspect of diasporic identity, within a British Indian Punjabi community. It is argued that the British Asian transnational pursuit of home and identity is significantly shaped by the rapidly changing social context of South Asia as well as social processes within Britain and across the global South Asian diaspora. Previous studies of Punjabi and South Asian diasporic meanings of home, diasporic identities and associated issues, including some recent contributions to this journal (Guru 2009; Thapar-Bjorkert and Sanghera 2010), have focused primarily upon western and intra-diasporic processes in the (re)production of home and identity, neglecting dynamic South Asian processes. Where the South Asian context has been considered significant, it is represented as static and unchanging. Drawing upon a decade of original, transnational, ethnographic research within the UK and India, including fieldwork conducted as recently as 2013, this article discusses the rapidly changing social context of Punjab, India, and the impact of this upon the diasporic Punjabi pursuit of home and identity.

Punjab was divided between India (East Punjab) and Pakistan (West Punjab) upon British partition prior to the political independence of both countries in 1947. Here, the focus is upon East Punjab, a small and predominantly rural region of north-west India which has witnessed dramatic and significant out migration, and subsequent intra-diasporic migration, across the globe. Punjab is widely recognized as a major outsource of South Asian migration to the UK over the past century. The overall economic and occupational

success, within the metropolitan centres of the UK and other western nations, of a group of people who were often originally small scale village peasant farmers has been remarkable. All existing studies of the global Eastern Punjabi diaspora emphasize the strength of continuing links between this group, which includes those born and raised away from India, and the people and places of Indian Punjab, particularly through kinship ties. The diasporic group under focus here can be seen as part of a wider ‘transnational community,’ the territory and people of contemporary East Punjab (hereafter Punjab/Punjabi) are embedded within multiple transnational relations. Previous research (eg, Helweg 1979; Ballard 2003; Singh and Tatla 2006; Taylor *et al.* 2007) also establishes that it is a particular social (caste) group of Punjab, the *Jat Sikhs*, from a particular geographical area, the *Doaba* region, which has dominated migration to the UK. Consequently, this article is partly based upon UK research with one Jat Sikh community, resident within the north east of England and retaining links with Doaba. However, given that transnational processes and relations are ingrained within the lived experience of this diasporic group, empirical research within Doaba (1), focussing upon fast changing relations between diasporic Jat Sikhs and resident Indian Punjabis (including non-Jats), which often revolve around the shifting ownership and significance of land as well as changing consumer practices within the region, directly informs the arguments presented.

### **Theorizing Diasporic Home and Identity**

The term 'diaspora' implies a desire to feel at home in the context of migration (Brah 1996: 180). While Mallett (2004), amongst others, rehearses within a much-cited article from *The Sociological Review* that 'home' has always been difficult to define as it has numerous meanings, the complexity of home is still overlooked within many sociological accounts of it, as in Myerson *et al's* (2010) study of the relationship between rural-urban Chinese migration and conceptions of home within this journal. Home is both 'lived' and 'imagined' (Brah 1996; Herbert 2012) and constituted through multiple (lived and imagined) relationships with people and places (Mallett 2004; Blunt and Dowling 2006). It has also been argued (King and Christou 2011) that, in an era of intensifying global movement, home is an increasingly a-spatial phenomenon, a notion which is particularly relevant to the global Punjabi diaspora. Simultaneously though, wherever it is located, home is often represented as offering complete familiarity and comfort, a place that we either leave and long for, or we move towards, for security and identity. This assumption has been usefully attacked (Brah 1996; Fortier 2003; King and Christou 2011; Herbert 2012), as it is clear that feelings of comfort and estrangement can be experienced concurrently within the same location, or in relation to the same location and events through different imaginings and memories. The diasporic *pursuit* of home and identity necessitates human labour and can involve 'physically or symbolically (re)constituting places which provide some kind of ontological security...'home" (is)...continually reprocessed...constituted by the *desire* for a "home", rather than surfacing from an already constituted home...home is never fully achieved, never fully arrived-at, even when we are in it' (Fortier 2003: 115-31, original emphasis)

It is the ongoing, transnational (re)production of home, through human labour, within an aspect of the Punjabi transnational community that is the focus here. One must recognize that the pursuit of home is shaped by the dynamic social contexts within which it is (re)produced. In particular, it can be ‘intrinsically linked with the way in which processes of (social) inclusion or exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances’ (Brah 1996: 192). Existing studies of Punjabi migration to the UK (eg, Bhachu 1985; Brah 1996; Ballard 2003; Hall. 2002; Singh and Tatla 2006), authors focusing upon British migration from other parts of South Asia (eg, Shaw 2000; Burdsey 2006) and wider discussions around the concepts of diaspora and transnationalism do powerfully illustrate that diasporic meanings of home and belonging, as an aspect of diasporic identity, are continually ‘in process’ (Hall 1990). However, the majority of existing studies of South Asian diasporic identities, despite some notable exceptions (Gardner 1995; Osella and Osella 2000; Levitt 2009; Erdal 2012), focus too heavily upon dynamic processes of intra-diasporic identity formation within western societies, neglecting equally important *dynamic* processes of identity formation within South Asia, the original outsource of migration. Using an empirical study of one Punjabi transnational group as an illustration, I contend that the British Asian diasporic pursuit of home, as an aspect of British Asian diasporic identity, is significantly shaped by the dynamic social context of South Asia as well as social processes within Britain and across the global Punjabi (and South Asian) diaspora. In the particular case studied here, I argue that increasing divisions between the UK diasporic group studied and the non migrant permanent residents of Punjab, which are intrinsically related to processes of inclusion

and exclusion and the rapidly changing social context of Punjab, especially the changing role and significance of land ownership and changing consumption practices therein, in turn connected to the increasing influence of economic neoliberalization and global consumer culture within India, significantly shapes the (re)production of home and identity amongst the Punjabi diaspora.

### **Caste, *Izzat* and Land within Punjabi Society**

Punjabi caste, ‘a non-localized endogamous unit’ (Kessinger 1974: 35), is one mark of identity within Punjabi society. It should certainly be recognized that there are other, often cross-cutting, forms of Punjabi inequality, not least gendered (Chakravarti 1993), but it is caste-based social inclusion/exclusion that is the focus here. It is often according to caste that individuals are assigned high or low status in Punjab. Far from disappearing under the forces of globalization and neoliberalization which have been transforming India since the 1980s, Indian and Punjabi caste distinctions, and their direct relationship to the most extreme forms of exploitation, humiliation and inequality, have intensified in recent years (Teltumbde 2010; Ram 2012). However, manifestations of caste have always varied widely in different Indian regions. East Punjab is a Sikh majority state. Within rural districts, Sikhs constitute between 70 and 90 percent of the population, and it is estimated that around 60 percent of these Sikhs belong to the Jat caste (Ram 2012). With a higher proportion (30 percent) of Scheduled (lowest) Castes (SCs or *Dalits*) among the Punjabi population than in any other Indian state and a particular concentration of these groups within the Doaba region (Ram 2012), the rural villages under scrutiny in this paper are predominantly Sikh, Dalit and Jat (2). Despite an explicit opposition to caste

differentiation within Sikh scriptures and teaching, caste inequalities and social exclusion on the basis of caste are significant features of the lived reality of contemporary Indian Punjab (Judge and Bal 2008; Ram 2012), and there is a strong correlation between caste and class within the state. Jat Sikhs are the most economically powerful, politically/socially influential and occupationally privileged group within Punjab and the 'dominant caste' (Jodhka 2002), owning over 80 percent of available land. The Punjabi Dalit population is greater in number, but their share of land ownership lower, than in any other Indian state, meaning that Jats and Dalits 'live in extreme contrast of affluence and deprivation' (Ram 2007: 4068).

The relative wealth of the Jat Sikh caste group has partly enabled them to mobilize the resources necessary to dominate western migration from Punjab, including to the UK (Helweg 1979; Taylor *et al.* 2007) (3). However, this dominance has also been facilitated by the maintenance of intra-caste endogamy across the Punjabi transnational community (Walton-Roberts 2004; Judge and Bal 2008), and through (largely rural village based) kinship and caste networks which have been crucial to the development of Jat Sikh transnational migration over the past century by providing information about opportunities abroad, communal financial support, support networks for new migrants within a foreign land and a mechanism for attending to responsibilities (eg, land, families and businesses) left behind by migrants (Helweg 1979; Singh and Tatla 2006; Taylor *et al.* 2007). These previous studies have also shown that the Punjabi concept of *izzat* (honour/prestige) is important for understanding caste identity, caste relations and an attachment amongst migrants to Punjab as home even when they are permanently



resident overseas. The maintenance and enhancement of izzat within Punjab is an important factor, alongside and intimately related to economic/material considerations, in the decisions and motivations of Punjabi migrants, with individual behaviour often shaping and reflecting the izzat of the family, kinship group and caste to which one belongs. Jat Sikhs have an historical reputation as expert farmers and agricultural proprietors, with their ownership and cultivation of land being markers of high izzat and attracting high economic returns for much of the twentieth century. Overseas migration, dominated by Jat Sikhs in Punjab, is seen as having displaced agricultural prowess as an indicator of high izzat and material acquisition within Punjabi society (Singh and Tatla 2006; Taylor *et al.* 2007). I will be arguing that Indian land ownership is still central to contemporary Jat Sikh izzat and caste/class dominance within Punjab and the global Punjabi diaspora, but that high izzat no longer primarily derives from the ownership and control of agricultural land and produce, but is asserted by the use of land for consumer display, which is part of, and has implications for, the (re)production of home amongst the diaspora studied. Furthermore, emerging conflicts over Punjabi diasporic land ownership and acquisition as well as developing consumer practices amongst non-migrants in Punjab, the dynamism of the region and nation, also have significant implications for the diasporic pursuit of home and identity.

### **Jat Sikh Migration, Home and Identity**

Jat Sikh Punjabi out-migration, including to the UK, stretches over the past two centuries. It is from 1947, a time of immense upheaval and bloodshed related partition, to the

present day when we have witnessed significant Jat Sikh UK migration, as well as to the US, Canada and Australia. Previous studies of Jat Sikh UK migration (Helweg 1979; Singh and Tatla 2006) demonstrate that such movement was originally viewed, by migrants themselves and their Indian family/ kin, as a predominantly male sojourn for the accumulation of wealth and the maintenance/enhancement of *izzat within Punjab*, particularly via the expansion of agricultural land ownership. International Jat Sikh migration was driven by (lived and imagined) meanings of home firmly anchored within India, despite the ‘lived experience of locality’ (Brah 1996: 192), for individual migrants, also being partly outside the territory. Existing research has also illustrated that as many of these sojourners became permanent UK settlers from the 1960s, and were joined by wives, children and family members, meanings of home became more complex and multifaceted. For example, it is widely reported that financial remittances to India declined as migrants settled, were joined by family and often purchased a private UK property. Nevertheless, the simultaneous maintenance of Punjabi property, frequent travel between the UK and India, information technology aided interaction with Indian kin and Indian diasporic kin across the world, as well as continued orientation to the social and cultural (especially caste) relations of Punjab (Taylor *et al.* 2007) suggests multiple and transnational Jat Sikh relations with, and attachments to, people, places and imagined homes.

It is within the context of multiple attachments to multiple homes, with a particular focus upon second and third (British born) generations, that previous authors have explored South Asian diasporic identities and associated issues. As suggested above, the emphasis

in relation to the Punjabi diaspora has hitherto been upon the relationship between dynamic social processes within the UK and perceptions of home and belonging. For example, Bhachu (1985) and Brah (1996) examine relationships between socio-economic change in the UK during the 1980s (especially recession and rising unemployment), individual and institutionalized racism in the UK and the cultural identities of British Asians. Hall (2002) examines the relationship between postcolonial politics in the UK during the 1990s and identity formation amongst British Sikh youth. Within the recent pages of this journal, Guru (2009), drawing data from social and cultural processes within Eastern Punjabi communities in the UK, considers the impact of rising divorce rates upon South Asian women in the UK, while Thapar-Bjorkert and Sanghern (2010) examine the relationship between social and cultural capital and educational aspirations amongst young Pakistani muslim men and women in Bradford. The influence of South Asia upon diasporic identities is considered highly significant by these studies, for example some inter-generational norms and values within the 'Pakistani' community of Bradford are presented by Thapar-Bjorkert and Sanghern as important dynamics of educational aspirations therein. However, the South Asian social processes involved here are not analyzed in any detail and they are represented as static and unchanging. I wish to add to the existing literature by extending the context within which British South Asian meanings of home and diasporic identities are analyzed, to include dynamic social processes within South Asia. If diasporic identities are inherently transnational we require transnational research to investigate them (Levitt 2009), and this paper is based upon a transnational, empirical research project.

## **The Research Process**

This paper is based upon ethnographic research, primarily semi-structured interviewing and nonparticipant observation. 72 interviews within the Jat Sikh community of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, UK and 123 interviews in the Doaba region of Punjab, India were conducted between 2004 and 2013. Those selected for interview in Newcastle were representative in terms of gender and age. Four particular villages were chosen as research sites within Doaba. These were the villages where the Newcastle respondents, or their parents, originated from. Thus, the first interviews in India (37) were with kin of the Newcastle sample. The research was then widened out across the caste hierarchy to capture the relationship between the diaspora and all those within the villages chosen. Interviews were representative of the age, gender and caste make-up of each village. Relationships within the UK community were observed through attendance at social gatherings within the local *Gurdwara* and a regional Punjabi community centre, as well as interviewing within people's homes. In Punjab, daily village life was observed through guided tours of each village, eating and overnight stays with a representative range of families in each village and through attendance at local ceremonies. The research team was constituted by both UK and Punjabi residents, and was collectively fluent in English, Punjabi and Hindi. Interviews were conducted in a mixture of these languages and all data collected was collectively analyzed by the team.

## **From Sojourners to Multiple Homemakers**

The majority of first generation migrants in this study arrived in the UK during the 1950s and 60s, with a perception that their migration would facilitate economic gain as well as simultaneously maintaining/increasing the izzat of the immediate family and the wider kinship and Jat Sikh caste group. Initially, when these single male migrants viewed themselves as sojourners to the UK, the aim was to utilize money earned in the UK to buy agricultural land and increase family holdings in Punjab – a lived and imagined Indian home. For example, some respondents recounted how partition meant giving up the ownership of land in West Punjab to move to the East and work as a farmer on someone else's land. 'There was little money and the agricultural work was hard work...without land there was little security' (UK Jat Sikh, 69 year old male). Land has always been central to Punjabi transnationalism. There were families within this man's kinship group where males had moved to the UK and told of the opportunities of very high and stable earnings. He decided that migration to the UK (in 1956) 'would be a better way to find security and stability for my family.' The money required for his original passage was raised by his wife's family. As all of our first generation respondents became permanent settlers in the UK, a priority was to accumulate sufficient money to ensure the migration to, and settlement in, the UK of the immediate family (spouse and children). Most commonly, the trigger for this family migration was the purchase of a private UK house.

Although the volume of financial remittance to India has declined as UK settlement becomes more permanent for those in the research sample, it has certainly not disappeared. The maintenance of land holdings in Punjab is also very common, and

frequent communication with Punjabi relatives, kin and friends in India and across the globe is almost universal, throughout the cross generational UK research respondents. Many of the sample still currently visit Punjab at least once every two years, although, as will be seen below, for some of the diaspora studied recently (2013), these trips are starting to recede as Punjab changes. Overall, one can attribute multiple relationships with, and attachments to, people, places and imagined homes within the UK, India and many other locations around the world amongst the Jat Sikh diasporic group studied here. The nature of these multifaceted relationships and attachments, constituting a diasporic pursuit of home, are dynamic and continually (re)produced. Crucially, I want to suggest that this production is influenced by the social context of, and especially processes of inclusion and exclusion within, Punjab as well as the UK and other 'host' nations.

### **Contested Diaspora Spaces**

There is still a commitment to owning land in Punjab amongst the UK Jat Sikhs studied, with the majority maintaining holdings since the migration of themselves or previous generations. However, this land is no longer primarily used for traditional Jat agriculture but most often to build very large, palatial Indian family homes, particularly as the value of Punjabi agriculture has markedly declined under the forces of neoliberalization and capitalist globalisation, as India has 'opened up' to market forces (Taylor et al. 2007; Ram 2012). The landscape of rural Punjab is punctuated, and in some areas of Doaba dominated, by huge brick, and often marble, built NRI (Non Resident Indian) houses. Some of these are built on the site of an original or existing family farm, others on newly

purchased land. These NRI houses do illustrate a lasting attachment to people, places and an imagined home within India, as many of the diasporic respondents, particularly first generation migrants, spoke of the importance of retaining a home within Punjab and that this land should never be sold. However, such sites also constitute what Brah (1996: 208-9) terms ‘diaspora spaces’ within Punjab, points ‘at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion...of “us” and “them”, are contested.’

Until recently (2013), very few of the second and third generation UK Jat Sikhs expressed any intention to dispense with family land or buildings in India as they also stressed the importance of maintaining a tangible connection with the people and places of Punjab, their Indian ‘roots’, for the benefit of their own children and grandchildren. Drawing upon Tolia-Kelly’s (2004) analysis of material cultures within British Asian UK houses, material possessions (Punjabi land and buildings) signify enfranchisement to a particular heritage, home and identity (Indian Jat Sikh Punjabi). Certainly, there was a widespread recognition – part of a ‘collective, visual vocabulary’ (Tolia-Kelly 2004: 319) - amongst the sample (NRI and Indian) that a physical, and most often very ostentatious, home in Punjab is crucial for migrants to (symbolically) illustrate their continuing commitment to their Punjabi heritage, as well as expressing the continuing dominance of the Jat Sikh caste within Doaba (Taylor et al. 2007). Nevertheless, it can be simultaneously argued that the building of large Doaban family houses by the UK sample, the physical and symbolic reconstitution of space within Punjab, is also an attempt to assert the distinction and high izzat of specifically NRI Jat Sikhs, relative to the resident Doaba population and including among them Doaban Jat Sikhs (4). The

pursuit of home and identity, through the symbolic reconstitution of space by building houses within Punjab, can exacerbate and produce boundaries of social exclusion as well as NRI inclusion.

Some of the NRI houses have as many as sixteen bedrooms and a matching number of bathrooms, and they are often surrounded by large gold tipped metal fences. There is usually a gold lettered sign on the gate entrance with the names and country of residence of the owners. The majority of these houses have their own water tanks at the very top which are frequently shaped in the image of a particular symbol to indicate that the owner is an NRI. Such symbols include aeroplanes, eagles and footballs. Both the outside and interior of the UK NRI houses which were visited in Punjab are decorated in a luxurious, western style, with furniture and decorations, such as leather sofas, very large flat screen televisions and framed pictures of western cities and views often imported from the UK. Many of these products and brands are widely available in Punjab and India, but the UK and Indian respondents continually emphasized the importance of the UK origin of those displayed within the NRI homes visited. Guests to these NRI houses were often served popular western snacks and drinks, such as biscuits from *Marks and Spencer* and brands of Scottish whisky. One can suggest a reversal of the process described by Tolia-Kelly (2004) where she examines possessions and artefacts in the British Asian home as signifiers of belonging, geographically and socially, to a particular (eg, East African Asian) community, and of opposition to exclusion within wider British society. The NRI houses described above are signifiers of belonging to, and inclusion within, not only Punjab as a region and India as a nation but also the NRI community in Punjab/India and



the global Punjabi diaspora/transnational community. It can also be asserted that these houses are signifiers of exclusion from the resident Doaban/Punjabi population.

Interestingly, the UK homes of the majority of NRIs studied were decorated to emphasize more strongly their belonging to Sikh, Punjabi and Indian communities, as opposed to their NRI status. The artefacts and possessions on display in these homes, such as carpets, rugs, pictures, crockery, ornaments and religious symbols, were much more likely to signify the Sikh, Punjabi and Indian roots of our respondents. The diasporic pursuit of home occurs transnationally, both 'here' and 'there' (Fortier 2003) and is intrinsically linked to processes of inclusion and exclusion 'here' and 'there' (Brah 1996).

It is common for the NRI houses to stand empty for the majority of the year, only in use when the owners visit. They are an omnipresent symbol and reminder to Indian (Jat and non Jat) residents of NRI distinctiveness and wealth, the former being effectively excluded from a world in which the latter are included. Thus, intense criticism was encountered from the Indian respondents of the NRI buildings within their midst. 'We are annoyed by the NRI houses...they are an insult...some... people in the same village do not have enough sanitation' (Jat Sikh Punjabi 42 year old male). Indian participants also described other ways in which NRIs 'flouted' their wealth which was, from their (Doaban) perception, an attempt to emphasize their distinction and superior status (izzat) from the permanent residents of Doaba. 'They (NRIs) hire the biggest cars and use all the latest gadgets when they come back to Punjab, they are constantly trying to show how they have so much more than us here in Punjab' (Jat Sikh Punjabi 22 year old male). The pursuit of home and identity within Punjab, and the use of land therein, amongst the

diasporic Jat Sikhs studied is predominantly conducted through personal consumption and the related assertion of distinction from the resident Doaban population.

I have recently witnessed the development of some similar forms of consumer display (eg, the building of large, ostentatious houses and the purchase of expensive cars and the latest technological products) amongst non migrants, albeit the majority being Jats, within Punjab. This is part of the fast changing social context of Punjab and India, in particular the explosion of rampant and globally-orientated consumerism (Brosius 2010). As one Indian Jat Sikh put it, ‘many richer people here (in Punjab) have started to build same type large houses...with their own water tanks on the top...and big televisions and American-style fridges and things...the NRIs don’t like it if there is some of these next to them in their village...they then build a bigger one with even more things in it...they are always trying to show us what they have achieved over there (overseas)...we are becoming further and further divided as a community’ (42 year old male). There is some emerging evidence of a dissolution in the distinction, in terms of consumer activity and display, between Punjabi NRI and non-migrant Jat Sikhs but the latter are (even in 2013) only a minority of the Doaban sample. We need to remember that the much heralded and often over-exaggerated growth in Indian middle class incomes, numbers and consumer activity/purchasing power is a predominantly urban, rather than rural, phenomenon (Teltumbde 2010). It is to urban areas that we are witnessing Indian diasporic return/reverse migration (Jain 2013). In rural Doaba, the desire for western migration remains widespread, particularly intensified by the NRI displays of wealth described above, and such movement has displaced the ownership of agricultural land and

agricultural prowess as the route to high izzat and economic prosperity. As one of the respondents (a Punjabi Jat Sikh, 39 year old male) explains, ‘all of our younger generation want to go, it makes it very difficult for us to manage our lives, to be parents to our children and to manage their dreams and aspirations realistically...everyone wants to go...given a chance, we would all go.’ In common with Walton-Roberts (2004) and Mooney (2006), I found that the nurturing, maintenance and development of NRI connections and communications was a priority above all other ambitions, and certainly above the nurturing of agricultural land, for the Indian families researched. The priority of all parental Jat Sikh respondents within Doaba was to arrange the marriage of their children to NRI families, thereby apparently ensuring high izzat and economic security for the family. It is clear that the ownership and control of agricultural land and its cultivation is no longer seen as a marker of Jat Sikh identity and high izzat within Punjab, and that this has significant implications for the pursuit of home amongst the Jat Sikh diaspora, manifested as it is now in Punjab through consumer display rather than agricultural investment and prowess. The UK Jat Sikhs in the sample are still seen by the majority of Indian Jat and non Jat residents, and see themselves, as a distinct and privileged social group. Other studies of South Asian migration, for example from Bangladesh (Gardner 1995), Pakistan (Ballard 2004) and from Kerala, South India to the middle east (Osella and Osella 2000), reveal similar attempts to assert diasporic wealth, superiority and status through consumption practices within South Asia. These studies, and the data here, suggest that the meaning of home amongst diasporic groups can be significantly reproduced as such groups become permanently settled in a primary lived

home away from the outsource of migration and simultaneously exhibit their inclusion in a life (of conspicuous consumption) from which many remaining residents are excluded. To repeat, the social context of Punjab, and particularly processes and relations of social inclusion/exclusion therein, is crucial for a full understanding of dynamic cultural identities and meanings of home amongst the Punjabi transnational community.

Punjabi transnational community division further and most recently manifests itself in the form of increasing NRI-non-migrant conflict over land ownership, as the overall value of land increases, due to its real estate rather than agricultural value, within the Doaba region. Firstly, there are rapidly increasing incidences of intra-familial and intra-village land disputes, as local residents assert what they see as their right to own land that they and their previous generations have often cared for on behalf of an absent diaspora. The Head of the recently formed NRI office of the Punjab government in Chandigarh, Punjab informed me in 2013 that land disputes are the main issue which their employees deal with, at a rapidly increasing rate, on a daily basis. Secondly, we are starting to witness the (second, third and fourth) generation NRI sale of land in Punjab, partly related to the aforementioned land disputes but also a result of the increasing purchasing power of some resident Punjabi Jat Sikhs. Many of those NRIs who had sold land in Punjab as a result of land disputes, a hugely significant emerging development within the Punjabi transnational community given the aforementioned centrality of land to Punjabi history, identity, prosperity and izzat, expressed bitter resentment towards the local population, particularly in terms of the transnational pursuit/meaning of home and identity. The following story was common amongst this diasporic group:

We were forced to sell our family land in Punjab...partly because we had an offer for it that we couldn't refuse, there is so much money there (Punjab) now that you wouldn't believe, local people are investing in land just to make money, or to sell it to property developers...but we also had to sell it because we were always being challenged by members of my father's own family that they owned it and they had a right to this, that and the other...it got nasty at one point, my father spent his last years not talking to his brother in Punjab because of this dispute over who owned what. We don't have the time or the resources to deal with all that hassle...people over there (Punjab) will take you for whatever they can get, even your own family...it makes me feel so sad though. That land was our home, it had been in our family for generations...it makes me feel like I have had part of my body cut off... when we sold it, but enough was enough (UK Jat Sikh, male, 48).

This recent development in the increasingly divisive relationship between elements of the UK Jat Sikh Punjabi diaspora studied and their Punjabi land and residents, the social context of Punjab, is beginning to shape the Punjabi diasporic pursuit of home and identity in a yet different direction, potentially alienating them from their Punjabi 'roots', their lived Punjabi home. The continuing attempt by many of the contemporary Jat Sikhs under scrutiny to use their Punjabi lived home to assert distinctiveness within Punjab via consumer displays does simultaneously suggest a continued attachment to the people, places, and imagined home of Punjab. However, the nature of this attachment is

continually reproduced in the context of social processes within South Asia, the UK, and across the global diaspora. I am particularly stressing the importance of the dynamic social context of South Asia, and relations of inclusion and exclusion therein, as these have been neglected to date.

### **Reproducing Punjab**

Despite the very recent sale of land and houses in Punjab by some of the diasporic group studied, one of the ways in which transnational attachments to multiple homes is still manifested by many UK Jat Sikhs is through regular visits to Punjabi villages. I argue here that these experiences, a lived home in India, also significantly shape the meaning and pursuit of home for the diasporic group studied, once again illustrating the importance of considering dynamic social processes in South Asia as factors in the production of South Asian meanings of home and diasporic identities.

Many of the first generation UK migrants in the sample articulated a longing for an imagined home, especially in terms of kinship relations, which they felt was deficient within their 'isolated' UK experience. The views of the following woman who migrated to the UK in 1963 to join her husband were representative (across genders) of our sample. 'I got a shock when I arrived in England...I still find it hard...one of my brothers came over for six months, he couldn't stand it, he said everyone was always working, life is too hard, the weather is too cold, no-one ever sees anyone and everyone is too isolated, he

went back, he called the UK a “prison of choice”...you leave the freedom of movement and the socializing of India to come to the UK, work all hours and live in small houses’ (UK Jat Sikh 66 year old female).

First generation migrants experience this isolationism most strongly when they stop working. Many of their children have followed the western path of departing the family abode for educational or vocational opportunities, leaving an elderly couple or single person alone, isolated and longing for the support and interaction which the respondents argue used to be offered by the wider kinship group and Punjabi village life. It is common for images of home, particularly an imagined home geographically absent from the lived home of a diaspora, to be poeticised and ‘ossified’ (Levitt 2009). The global outmigration to which the Jat Sikh diaspora have themselves contributed has partly changed rural Punjabi life beyond the recognition and desire, poetic or ossified, of some first generation migrants. Certainly, when revisiting India, the Punjabi imagined home desired in the UK (as above) is seen as having disappeared. As one UK NRI, while visiting ‘his village’, explained:

I was born here (Punjab), I have family here and land here so I have ties here and I should feel more at home here but my family are in England and so I have stronger ties there now, and many of my family are not in India any more. But our culture should be here not in England, I feel that... When we left India (in 1989), there were a lot of people left in our village, forty families, now there are only fourteen families. There have been a lot of changes here. Old ties are breaking down. For example, a wedding here, the whole village would be involved, milk would be collected from the whole village to go to help with wedding food and financial help would be

given from the whole village and furniture and cooking pots shared, but this doesn't happen now, it's all breaking down (UK Jat Sikh 53 year old male).

The wedding referred to was organized by the brother of the above respondent, as his NRI son was marrying a Punjabi resident. However, because the wider village population refused to help finance, organize or, in many cases, even attend the wedding, the ceremony became an NRI event. As suggested earlier by the widespread Doaban criticism of NRI attempts to assert high izzat through consumer displays within Punjab, the UK diaspora are not always afforded the status which they assert, *outside of the NRI community*, within India. Consumer displays within Punjab are highly valued within the NRI community of Punjab, as illustrated by the continual attempts to 'outdo' each other through ostentatious house building and decoration. However, this pursuit of izzat and home within Doaba is simultaneously excluding NRIs from the (changing) village life and culture of Doaban residents. The lived Punjabi home within which Jat Sikh NRIs are embedded increasingly involves interaction with other NRIs, thus challenging and deflating the image (articulated within the UK rather than India) of an imagined Punjabi home constituted by wide ranging and reciprocal village relationships.

However, the pursuit of home is context dependent and ongoing (Brah 1996; Fortier 2003), and the longing for an imagined Punjabi home, constituted by reciprocal and harmonious village relations, was still articulated by many Jat Sikh diasporic respondents when interviewed within the context of their UK lived home. This pursuit is also illustrated by the enhanced 'Punjabiness' of the UK lived home, in terms of artefacts, possessions and decoration therein, relative to the more 'westernized' NRI lived home in Doaba.



When confronted with the realities of contemporary Punjabi life through their Indian lived home, many first generation migrants were very disparaging and attempted to further assert the distinction between themselves and Doaban residents, including kin and other Jat Sikhs. Diasporic respondents often identified most strongly with their UK lived home when relating their experiences of revisiting India, often describing it as ‘corrupt’ and ‘unsafe’, again challenging the images of an imagined Punjabi home with the lived experience of home in India.

Many second and third generation UK respondents also visited India alongside first generation migrants. This younger generation were also active in the consumer displays (pursuit of home) reported above. However, they were also aware, from their lived experience of visiting Punjab, that their NRI status distinguished them from the local population. In fact, there was a recognition amongst all respondents that British born Punjabis were treated as foreign tourists in India:

They crack me up people here (Punjab), they’re always on the make and they are so sharp, so sharp...I can’t get anything at the local price. Even if it’s a packet of fags and I send my cousin (Punjab resident), they know that he doesn’t smoke that brand in the shop so they know it’s for you and they stick the price on and bung you up, you can’t get away with it. Even when I went to the Taj Mahal and they have this one price for Indians and one for foreign tourists...the guy on the gate clocked me. He said “where are you from ?” I said ‘India.’ He said “which state ?” I said “Punjab.” Then he said “who is the Governor of Punjab ?” and of course I didn’t have a clue and I had to pay the full tourist price, he stiched me up (UK Jat Sikh, male, 28 years old).

They get ripped off because people know they are not from here...the police bother the NRIs more because they know they have money...The NRIs are targeted...we don't call them Non-Resident Indians, we call them Not Really Indian (Punjabi Non-Jat Sikh male 25 years old).

When articulating experiences of their Punjabi lived home, the British born respondents emphasized their relationships and identification with other NRIs in India rather than the resident population, even their own family and kin members. Processes of inclusion and exclusion (inclusion in NRI consumption practices, exclusion from 'real' Indian status), which are intrinsically related to the dynamic social context of Punjab, are significantly shaping the meaning of home and diasporic identities of the UK born South Asians studied. The process of exclusion from local status actually led many diasporic respondents to more strongly emphasize their UK citizenship and an imagined UK home when in Punjab. This phenomenon was not necessarily transferred across national boundaries but that does not mean that one should deny the significance of South Asian experiences and processes for understanding the pursuit of home and diasporic identity.

### **Conclusions**

The meaning of home, for human beings, is far too often fetishized (Fortier 2003), as a place of complete familiarity and comfort divorced from the social contexts in which it is continually (re)produced. Through an analysis of one aspect of a Punjabi transnational community, I have demonstrated that home is continually *pursued*, reproduced on an

ongoing basis through human labour, with resulting experiences that can simultaneously offer comfort and estrangement, inclusion and exclusion. There is a long and continuing history, and deeply embedded cultural tradition, of significant and wide ranging global emigration from rural Punjab, India, with the UK historically being the most favoured destination. In a recent study of Sikhs in Britain, Singh and Tatla (2006: 41) argue that Punjabi Sikhs 'are, in many ways, the premier migrants of South Asia.' I have examined the pursuit of home, and the processes which shape and impinge upon it, amongst one group of these migrants, Jat Sikhs based in the north east of England who retain links with the Doaba region of Punjab and who are part of a global Punjabi diaspora.

My particular analysis of the relationship between the changing social context of Punjab and the Punjabi diasporic pursuit of home reveals the significance of dynamic processes of social inclusion and exclusion, in turn related to the changing role and significance of land ownership and consumer practices, within Punjab. Jat Sikhs are currently the dominant caste of Punjab and have been for the past century. This caste dominance in Punjab, and high izzat and relative economic prosperity, was formerly maintained and expressed through agricultural land ownership and agricultural prowess. Land has always been central to Punjabi identity, status, prosperity and transnationalism. However, as Punjabi agricultural land and produce in Punjab has rapidly declined in value and status, related to the impact of capitalist globalization and neo-liberalization within the region, overseas migration (for eg, to the UK) has now displaced agricultural prowess as the route to high izzat, economic gain and caste dominance for Jat Sikhs within Punjab. Consequently, although one can note a continuing attachment to a lived and imagined

home and land within Doaba amongst the Jat Sikhs within this study, the nature of that attachment has shifted. The pursuit of home and identity in the context of migration is now conducted through diasporic consumer displays, a symbolic representation of overseas migration and high izzat, within Punjab, such as the development of ever more ostentatious NRI houses on land which would have once been used to display agricultural strength. The shifting nature of this transnational Jat Sikh Punjabi pursuit of home has been directly shaped by the shifting social context of Punjab and processes of social inclusion and exclusion therein. NRI houses within Doaba, as 'diaspora spaces' (Brah 1996), are boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, an attempt to distinguish and divide NRIs from the resident Doaban population. Through participation in global consumer culture within Punjab, the diasporic Jat Sikhs studied here are displaying their inclusion in a life (of conspicuous consumption) that the majority of Doaban residents are still often relatively excluded from. Very recent developments within Punjab, such as the increasing consumer power of some non-migrant Jat Sikhs and migrant/non-migrant conflicts over land ownership are now threatening the very lived home of some of the diasporic Punjabis studied, their Indian land and 'roots'. This again demonstrates the importance of considering social processes within Punjab within analyses of the diasporic Punjabi pursuit of home and identity.

We have also seen how the divisions which have been facilitated by NRI consumer displays in Punjab have, in turn, led to the exclusion of NRIs from aspects of daily Punjabi village life and 'real Indian' status. The resulting experience of their lived Punjabi home, encountered upon regular trips to and stays within the Doaba region which

are still common for many, consequently challenges the imagined, 'ossified' (Levitt 2009) Punjabi home (of wide ranging, reciprocal Punjabi village relations) which is often articulated in the context of the UK and symbolically represented through the interior design of UK Punjabi houses. The lived experience of the social context of contemporary Punjab often leads to a significant reproduction of the meaning of home amongst the Jat Sikhs studied when they are in India. Such reprocessing leads to an increased emphasis, by the migrants studied, upon their diasporic status and UK identity, and an interaction amongst the NRI community rather than the resident Doaban community, in Punjab. This further exacerbates the tendency amongst NRIs to pursue meanings of home and identity within Punjab through diasporic consumer displays, and it demonstrates the contextual (Brah 1996) and 'never fully achieved' (Fortier 2003: 131) nature of home, cementing the crucial importance of examining the dynamic social context of South Asia, in addition to the 'host' and intra-diasporic social context, when discussing meanings of home and diasporic identity amongst South Asian migrants

I recognize that this analysis is necessarily partial. Firstly, it is based upon a study of *one* UK Jat Sikh diasporic group. Secondly, migrant meanings of home and belonging have a myriad of sources and one could not hope to discuss them all. I have chosen to focus upon processes of social inclusion and exclusion within Punjab which revolve around caste differentiation. There are many other forms of social inclusion and exclusion based around other forms of differentiation, let alone wider social processes, within the region which impinge upon the pursuit of diasporic home and identity. Thirdly, many of the South Asian social processes examined are particular to the rural Doaba region of Punjab.

Thus, the exclusion of many rural Doaban non-migrants from some of the consumer practices of the diaspora studied would not be as applicable in some urban Punjabi and Indian contexts. Nevertheless, such partiality does not negate my central, general argument; the dynamic, ever changing social context of Punjab is important, alongside dynamic processes in the UK and across the global diaspora, in shaping the pursuit of home amongst Jat Sikh Punjabis. Previous studies of Punjabi and South Asian diasporic meanings of home, diasporic identities and associated issues, including very recent contributions to this journal, have focussed primarily upon western and intra-diasporic processes in the (re)production of meanings of home, to the relative neglect of dynamic processes in South Asia. Where the South Asian context has been considered significant, it has been represented as static and unchanging. I make a contribution to the literature here which redresses the balance. It is only through transnational empirical research, within both India and the UK, that this has been possible.

## Notes

1. This paper focusses upon some rural Doaban villages as the migration outsource within its discussion of the transnational Punjabi diasporic pursuit of home and identity. While it is widely acknowledged that the majority of overseas and UK Punjabi migration emanates from these rural areas, this is not to deny the existence of international movement from the urban areas of Doaba, Punjab and India. I am indebted to Professor Manjit Singh and Joginder P. Singh (Panjab University, Chandigarh, India) and Deborah Booth for helping, alongside myself, with the empirical research upon which this paper is based, in both the UK and India.

2. This is not to deny either the great diversity of castes within the 'Dalit' category, or the existence of many other castes besides Jats and Dalits within Punjab.

3. While we can point to significant Jat Sikh dominance of the resources enabling access to western migration, there has been some wider caste migration from Punjab to the UK where it is estimated that at least ten percent of the Punjabi population hail from the scheduled castes, with the majority from the Chamar community and the majority of these from the Doaba region (Hardtmann 2009). There are also other Punjabi populations (castes or sects) in the UK, who would not identify themselves or be identified with either Jats or Dalits. Nevertheless, Jat Sikhs are the majority Punjabi population in the UK.

4. There are, of course, practical and material, as well as existential, aspects to this NRI house building in Punjab, such as the need for families to reside somewhere when visiting the region and the need to avoid the expense of hotel accommodation. However, the very ostentatious nature of the houses erected, and the motivations and reactions to them uncovered by our ethnographic research, also demonstrates the symbolic and status-seeking nature of this activity.



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