A journey to Punjab,

'here and there' & the Sikh identity in Birmingham

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ABSTRACT

Identity, location and networks are intertwined concepts that have always been difficult to define or observe in modern transnational study. How self-identification has become muddled in a world where individuals can shift their cultural, religious or geographical identity to their current location, is of interest. Sikhs, with modern conditions such as the reinforcement of the communicational network, are able to reinvent the concepts that influence their identity and behaviours in different localities. This paper presents how travelling to the homeland and back may engage a Sikh in new locational networks and play on one's personal identification. In the meantime, those who are connected with Sikh values outside Punjab, the homeland, can feel various degrees of influence, either closer to their Sikh origin or to their British nationality, on their personal views of themselves, and this despite the growing network connections with Punjab in this modern age.

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INTRODUCTION

About two years ago, at the beginning of 2012, I began with enthusiasm my new project on Sikhism. I was moving to England, in the little town of Walsall with the idea of studying the Sikh community of Birmingham, the neighbourhood's major town. I had built a decent project for the short fieldwork of my master's degree and I was just settling in a small house for my stay in England. My project had a simple and neat approach; I was supposed to meet the Sikh community of Birmingham, learn their ways, live like them as much as I could, and study in the most theoretical way how was their ways of being and their ways of belonging (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004: 1011). Little did I know that this project would grant me the chance to study more than how they acted upon their identity but more precisely, I was about to discover through a very short time, how a Sikh's identity can be shifted through (re)networking while traveling to their 'homeland': Punjab. I was then invited by the family of one of my informants, to visit their ancestral home in India and to meet the extended family myself while traveling to Jalandhar, Punjab. I do not suggest I understood every concept I observed or lived during this fieldwork, but I think that the chance that was given to me to see how traditionally Sikhs from abroad may experience their return to Punjab on holidays, was a great opportunity. It has also helped me a great deal in my work and continues to do so in my future research. In this short paper I will try to present how networks and locations can affect identity(ies) even if it is for a very short period of time and from very precise locations in the world. I will do so through one personal journey I experienced with some Sikh friends, and this with my own perspective on these concepts.

A JOURNEY TO PUNJAB

Fieldnotes from 21ˢᵗ of February 2012, not very late at night:

> We finally arrived at the house. It is not that late, but I am so jet lagged that I do not know what time it is. And of course, my phone is dead. I left from London Heathrow with Simran on Monday early morning; we had a stopover in Abu Dhabi, and then we took another plane to Delhi, India. When we arrived, it was very early in the morning over there and we ran to get on the bus that would bring us to Punjab. After a ten hours bus ride on a very bumpy road, we finally arrived in Jalandhar, where Simran's father was waiting for us. I don't know what day we are. We then took a three wheeler with our luggage to go to the house in Central Town. I was so excited that for a moment I

forgot that I almost did not sleep of the whole way from London to Jalandhar. Nevertheless I am so happy that I decided to come here. It was such a 'random' decision to follow Simran who was coming to see her parents on holidays in Punjab.

Now I am here, it is late afternoon and I was already nodding off. But Simran's family was right; if I wanted to be good the next day I had to stay awake until night and then sleep. So I joined Simran and her father to get her a SIM card to put in her Indian phone. When we came back she started to call some people to make arrangement about where to go and what to do. I am so tired that I start to see everything blurry... Punjabi words and English words start to sound the same to me... After about an hour of calling people, suddenly Simran's phone starts to ring. But I mean, all of a sudden it was like everyone realized she was in India and she had a phone. Everyone called her! Her sister Priya called from Birmingham to know how Simran and I were doing, then her friends, family members, her cousin Narinder Singh who lives in Sultanpur, etc. It was crazy. Even if Simran started to be as tired as I was, she kept answering her phone and connecting with everyone. They were either from home Birmingham, which she had left for only 2 weeks, or from friends in Punjab whom wanted to see her or found out she was in the country. She was recreating her networks through this phone... and it went on for almost all evening. All what I was thinking... was to go to bed...[1]

COMMUNICATIONAL NETWORK

This verbal snapshot presented above is one of the first field entries I wrote after my arrival in India. I was tired of my journey, I was shocked about many things such as the weather, the people, how people reacted towards me and I was grateful to Simran's family for hosting me in their home in India. Despite everything I could have written about, this tiny benign moment stunned me. Before she even thought of unpacking her luggage, Simran was immediately re-networking between Britain and India. It all happened so fast. A SIM[2] card was bought and used to reach some people and then suddenly, everyone contacted each other to share Simran's phone number. It was the creation of a network happening right before my eyes. The reason why I named this creation of a network, a 're-networking' is because that network existed in Britain before that very same day, but it was now re-created from Punjab, and it had its reasons to exist and to connect with those people, because of this new location.

This was quite meaningful given Vertovec, a well-known researcher of the concept of transnationalism, states that "central to the analysis of transnational social formations are the

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[1] [Fieldnotes 02.21.12]

[2] SIM: Subscriber Identity Module. It is a smart card which securely stores the key identifying of a mobile phone service subscriber, as well as subscription information, preferences and text messages.

structures or systems of relationships best described as networks" (2009:4). In other words, this communicational network created in this simple living room of an Indian house while we were resting, may be central to the understanding of transnational social formation. It created a system of relationships amongst people that had certain reasons to connect. What I mean by these 'reasons to connect' is that this network or relationship structure was not creating something completely new, as stated above, it was simply remodelling something that existed, but from another locality. This remodelled version of a network from another country introduces the main argument that Sikhs' identity(ies) are reinvented within the frame of modern conditions such as this reinforcement of a communicational network from various locations.

Usually Simran would contact her family and friends through her Birmingham phone or through the Internet, but this time it is from India that she started it, another locality. This shows the concept of simultaneity, a different location but a similar connection between the same people. It is evident that the previous network coming from Britain may not have reached as many people since sudden bonds were created because of this close by location. Given that this paper highlights the idea of a different locality, this transnational trip to India is a small representation of what usual migrants experience constantly in their lives. This creation of a local network with transnational agents is a phenomenon that would be best described as being part of the 'Information Age' by Manuel Castells (1996). It includes new technologies that "do not altogether create new social patterns but they reinforce pre-existing ones" (Vertovec 2009:5). The network here was pre-existing, but became more relevant for the people living close to the new location from where the network was being created this time.

NETWORK LOCATION

When a person changes their location, it does not create a new type of transnational connection, but it reinforces certain aspects of life depending on this person's actual locality. Of course, it may have created "forms of solidarity and identity that do not rest on an appropriation of space where continuity and face-to-face contact are paramount" (Gupta & Ferguson 1992:9) but where one is in the world may change the topic of the conversation since proximity (even if simply through a direct Indian to Indian phone number) is relevant for others to understand the way of life (see Levitt 2007: 142-143, c.f. Smith & Guarnizo 1998:12-13). Simply discussing the weather is more likely to be of interest when one knows that the interlocutor could and would comprehend in a much more thorough way because of proximity; it brings a total new meaning to the conversation. These new temporary transnational local networks become more and more

common and most of the time necessary while the transnational migrants come back to their homeland for a short period or a holiday and are expected to visit every family members and acquaintances residing in the location. This is very true of the Sikh religious and ethnic traditions.

This connection amongst family members, acquaintances and the returning transnational migrant during holidays creates a sort of consciousness of the community from within and from the outside. This consciousness at the individual level, which Vertovec names 'diaspora consciousness' is "marked by dual or multiple identifications [...] there are depictions of individuals' awareness of de-centred attachments, of being simultaneously 'home and away from home' or 'here and there' (Vertovec 2009:6). In the previous excerpt I intended to demonstrate how Simran, a 50 year old British women would reconnect with her Indian identification by using her Indian phone, buying an Indian SIM card and then contacting every person she knows, from the area she is staying at the moment. Even if she is British, because she has been living in Britain since the age of 12 and she identifies herself as British, during this change in location, she will temporarily reconnect with her 'Indianness' and therefore, she re-contacts friends and family living in India as a first step towards acting upon her Indian identity. Her identification may be of 'here and there' at the same time meaning, as a British in India or as an British Sikh back home, but the communicational re-networking is the first step towards trying to feel at ease or at home in a temporarily new environment, even if it is the place where she was born.

What is showed here, is another practice that enacts identity and thus a conscious connection to a group. How Simran is behaving makes her act much more tangibly upon her belonging to her Indian identification rather than her British one. She previously had transnational networks with people abroad when she was in England. But now that she is in India, even if she did have a certain network with those people, the then temporary close by location of her and her friends and family, makes her recreate this telephone network more extensively and powerfully. This sudden and rapid reconnection with people in India while Simran is in India is a visible action that marks, to a certain measure, belonging to India. In theory, ways of being and ways of belonging are situational and contextual, which is exactly what is happening due to the new location. "Individuals within transnational social fields combine ways of being and ways of belonging differently in specific contexts" (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004:1010 cf. Levitt 2007; Smith & Eade 2008). Thus Simran, in this different and somewhat new context changed her way of belonging by acting more Indian. In fact, before that trip she had been away from her country of birth for couple of years, and thus this trip in February, with me as a guest, was a moment she was waiting for, for a long time and she wanted to make the most of it, especially by reconnecting

with friends and family still living in India. The transnational telephone network remodelling was not the only action done that was a concrete example of group association. As stated above, the SIM card in the Indian phone, and the phone calls, were only the first step towards her locational shift in identity. Simran, in India started to follow more of the Punjabi cultural customs such as dressing up in Indian outfit which was most likely expected of her, as she was back in India. At home, she would dress in an Indian outfit once in a while, while being with the family or at the Gurdwara, but rarely when going to work or to school. Nevertheless in India, everyone dresses up in the typical, ancestral or cultural *salwar/kameez* (Indian outfit), so did she and as a matter of fact, so did I. This and the many other steps she used during the week I was with her, showed her happiness and her ease in being back to Punjab. She was more and more happy and of course, she was acting less British as she was before taking the plane with me from London.

MULTIPLE IDENTIFICATIONS

At this point in the paper, I shall explain the relationship that Sikhs from Punjab entertain with Britain. Many centuries ago, after the British conquest of Punjab the Sikh homeland in 1849, one of the last provinces of India to surrender to British control, the Sikhs were slowly and increasingly recruited into the Indian army. Consequently, the Sikhs were involved with Britain for the two World Wars and thus increased their accessibility to migrate to countries under British control. Britain itself became one of the favourite destinations for Indians and more specifically for Sikhs. Their 'homeland' was of very strict importance in their lives at the time, despite major migration outside India. Almost two centuries later, the Sikhs are still present in Britain and form a substantial and well-established minority. Some have moved directly from India to Britain, others have set down in British East African countries, then travelled to Britain and others with regards to the younger generations were born and brought up as British citizens some who had never set a foot in India.

Transnational migrants are often embedded in more than one culture, in this case, for the younger Sikhs, they may be embedded in the Indian or British and sometimes African culture. How can one, in this case, define 'what' the offspring can be depicted as? Sikhs, from newer to older generations are embedded in two cultures, one culture from the homeland and the second from the receiving land, in Simran's case Punjab and Britain. The newer generation may feel less connected to the homeland. With this recent proximity technology which can bring them to their 'homeland' in a computerized way or on social networks, they can decide to have

any interest in it or not. And this along with the western British way of life that they pursue, people like Simran or her children, may decline the interest and practices of their Sikh culture.

However these Sikhs still have their ways of being Sikhs because of how they were raised at home by their family. In other words, despite their disconnection, the newer generations are as capable as the older generations, as much as Simran did, to shift from one identity to another because of their embeddedness. Simran, before the trip to India, explained to me that she really felt British and not much Indian. She said that she is a Sikh as a religious person, but she felt much more British in her way of life. Nevertheless, my very small experience of Punjab with Simran, showed me how easily someone identifying so strongly with one identity, can pivot to another that is, even if she would deny it, embedded in herself. This makes people like Simran to have multiple identifications, they could be or act more British, as they could act upon being more Sikh or Indian. The concrete actions, may it be through culture, religion, media or location, reorganized in the way that fits who they are, can always pivot and permit them to be a person or another as said before, through various contexts and situations.

'FROM HERE AND THERE'

Simran was indeed showing me another identity that she possessed. I was aware of her way of being Sikh, in a sense that she was one of my main informants in the Birmingham Sikh community, but in India, it was one of the first times that I had seen her acting upon more of her Sikhness than of her Britishness in concrete ways.

While being in India I also met with her family and realized that every generation that travelled outside their homeland and lived abroad for a time, was able to act upon their multiple identities. Simran's mother, whom I called the 'Indian mummy', presented this multiple identities concept in a very thorough way. This phenomenon may well be described as "while some migrants identify more with one society than the other, the majority seem to maintain several identities that link them simultaneously to more than one nation" (Glick Schiller et. al. 1992:11). Simran's and Priya's mother who was hosting me during this trip to Punjab, once was sitting outside with me under the sun. Her husband was inside, facing the mirror while combing his hair to tie his turban. Simran was in her room, getting ready to leave or making a phone call, of course, to people living in the region. We were waiting for a cab to come pick us up to join her husband's side of the family when I asked questions about how she felt being back in India for two months. Then she explained:

> "I cannot decide if I am Indian or British, you know... I lived in India for 23 years and the rest of my life in Britain. No matter what, my place is with my children. They all live in Birmingham, so this is where I need to be. I don't have a British passport, my husband and children do. If something happens, I know they'll help...[3]"

This knowledgeable woman presented the issue of transnational migrants in a new angle. Who you are may be changing, as a migrant embedded in many social fields and you have the potential to act and identify differently at particular time (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004:1010), but where you belong is definitely where one is anchored, 'place' or 'locality' plays an important role in the identification of transnational migrants, 'translocality' is the place where mobile migrants are locally grounded (Smith & Eade 2008: 62-63) and for her, it is Britain. She is definitely a mobile migrant as she travels back and forth for 1 or 2 months twice a year to India, but where she is locally grounded is Britain and this is a conscious and concrete example of her way of belonging to Britain.

Despite the general assumption in academia that transnational migrant may feel dispersed (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004: 1003), the Sikh community that I have researched, for example, the family I joined to India does not feel dispersed, they are part of society in their new country and maintain transnational relations which are reinforced during these transnational trip back to the 'homeland'. They can 'be' from 'here and there', not only feeling it but being as well. As for Simran, she 'is' British and when she goes back to India, in her occasional holidays, she will gladly re-create those new networks with her cultural Indian phone. No matter how her actions may act upon her Indian, Punjabi or Sikh identity, she still knows where she belongs and thus despite her obvious nostalgia towards the country she was born; she is British. Her ease to pivot identity depending on her location shall not be seen as a feeling of being 'dispersed' but as a strength of adaptation in some cultures in which her transnational background permits her to live and understand.

'FROM HERE'

The Indian mummy and Simran showed a deep understanding of multiple identities and the will to use them, but it is not always the case with younger generations since it is not necessarily perceived positively in a Sikh life. During my research I met Sikh families that sometimes had a long history in Britain and some that had just arrived. Some youths that I interviewed may experience a different view on these multiple identities phenomenon. It is explained in

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[3] [Field notes 02.26.12]

transnational research (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004:1010 -1017; Levitt 2007: 134; Levitt 2009:1231-1236; Nesbitt 1991; Nesbitt 2009) that the children of migrants despite the fact that they may have never or rarely return to their parent's ancestral homes or do not speak the language, they were raised in household where the homeland values yet, the practices and the ideology where constantly there. Transnational activities may or may not be an important component of their lives as it was for their parents but since they were socialised directly and indirectly into this transnational social field and this regardless of where one was born or lives now, they have the potential to assume this identity if and when they want to do so.

In other words, in this section of the paper I shall present the reverse side of the multiple identification effect. As explained above, location is of prime importance. Of course, the new generation can access online in many ways with new technologies, to reconnect with the 'homeland', this different location. This easy way to reconnect in a computerized or online way, has made it easier to those who seek this connection, and as a reverse, also made it easier for those who wants to avoid it. In the last part of this paper I will present some of my informants whom explained their connection or disconnection with the home land. The only common factor amongst these people is that they were all born in Britain and on the contrary of the Indian mummy, they do not celebrate or endorse this multiple identity character that they have when they are raised in a Sikh family. Most of them have travelled to Punjab as I did with Simran. They took a plane during holiday to visit distant family and friends. I gather they did not enjoy it or lived it the same way Simran and her mother did. This is very important in a sense that these Sikhs are born in Britain and are educated within a Sikh family. They have a somewhat similar embeddedness as Simran did, except they did not live a part of their life in India. How they see their identity is of importance, and it comes in this paper as a balanced way of being and of belonging. Nobody will ever feel or act upon the same identity, even if they may have the same background, and this is imperative to understand. After presenting how Simran identifies, along with her mother, here I will present three examples of young Sikhs raised into really different types of family.

The first is Mandeep a 20 year old young man, living in a very westernized influenced family. His parents moved here along with their family when they were both about 2 years old. Both parents studied medicine at school and travelled a lot. Nevertheless, the grandparents tried to keep ancestral traditions and organized an arrange marriage for the parents nevertheless, they had a lot of freedom, thus experienced a different way to be than the Sikh traditional way during their lives. In other words, they involved their children into a more westernized influence and

permitted them to live a more British life. Mandeep explained that when he is asked what he is, he would answer 'British' but never 'Indian', and if he is asked what his ethnicity is, he would answer: 'British Asian' which is the dominant discourse in a sense. While discussing about ethnicity, he reported:

> Mandeep: My friends sometimes wondered why I aren't into the culture as much as the other Indians. And then I have to explain to them that I have never really had that, you know, influences. They know that Liverpool is not as Indian, as all the other cities in the UK. Yeah it's quite harder for me to meet other Indians.
>
> Catherine: Nevertheless you are still Sikh and part of the Sikh society. So...
>
> Mandeep: I joined the Sikh society to learn more about my religion, because for most of my life, I knew almost nothing about my religion. I knew some stories; I knew what to do or things like that. But my grandparents wanted me to know more about my religion. All my other cousins, apart from me, my brother and sister and some other people that live in London or something, they all speak Punjabi and they do know about their religion. And I have lived in Birmingham so long, so it's about time that I get some interest in the religion. [4]

The second is Rajdeep, a 19 year old young man that considers himself atheist, born and raised in a very religious Sikh family. Both of his parents were sent to the UK, his father was sent to Britain when he was four and his mother when she was 20. Raj, his preferred nickname, was then born and raised in the UK. His family does follow Indian traditional life such as the food, the dress, the language, but he himself refuses it and often gently argues with his parents about the non-necessity of religion. Despite all of this, he is still part of Sikh society and is fairly knowledgeable about his own religion, which makes him a fierce arguer when the topic of religion comes up. Again when the topic of how he identifies himself came up, he answered:

> Catherine: Do you see yourself as Indian?
>
> Raj: No.
>
> Catherine: Do you see yourself as British?
>
> Raj: Yes.
>
> Catherine: Do you see yourself as Sikh?
>
> Raj: NO...NO...no..!
>
> Catherine: But, you are born in a Sikh family...

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[4] [Interview 007—03.15.12]

> Raj: I am born into a family of Sikh. But it is like when someone says that they become atheist or they become Jew even if they are born in a family of Christian and so on. I just don't associate myself with one group of people. I just..., I am me, I am who I am! I was born in a country called Britain therefore I consider myself as British. You know if I was stranded on an island somewhere and I needed to be in contact with a foreign office to help me, I could contact every foreign office in the world but there would be only one that would help me. It would be the British foreign office rather than the Indian foreign office, because I am British. And the Indian government wouldn't get two sips about me... so...[5]

The first interesting detail about this excerpt is the intensity that Raj puts into his answer about religion. The fact that he is atheist is basically because he is not Sikh; Sikhism does play a role in the way he sees himself. He creates his Britishness against his Sikhness and even shows in a good illustration the conflictual identity worldview: if you are born in Britain, why can't you be simply British? But to be Indian or Sikh is an ascribed status and despite a different place of birth the society will always pressure an individual more to the Indian rather than to be British.

As for the last example, I will present Amrit an 18 year old young woman, language student who travelled a lot and always enjoyed her trips especially those to India. Both of her parents were born in Punjab and moved to Britain when they were young and got an arranged marriage there. Her father is working on navy ships and thus travels a lot and got a more western mind, as her mother 'is still living in the village in her head' and considers that 'the right way is the Punjabi way'. She explains: "sometimes I feel like I don't fit in anywhere and I am quite happy about that, it's not a problem. I do feel like a sense of belonging to different groups but not completely". In her view she likes that she is unique and not like the 'boring' everyone else. But of course the decision of whom to be is not always easy.

> Amrit: This is one of the choices you have to make when you are growing up British Indian. Do I want to live the way my family wants me to, or do I want to do what I want. And it is a very difficult choice to make 'cause you are torn between two worlds that you want to be part of. You want to be part of both of them, but you want to make your own decisions, so you can't. You have to pick one or the other.
>
> Catherine: so you picked...?
>
> Amrit: In my mind yes, but I keep changing my mind...
>
> Catherine: why? You keep thinking that you are going to stay home?
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> Amrit: No, I think my mom expects me after university to come home and get married. And live a traditional kind of life and I don't really want that at all.

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[5] [Interview 006—03.08.12]

> Not something I would like to do, you know. I want to build a career; I want to travel the world. What's the point of doing my degree if I don't go out and see the world? And then, maybe I want a family but I don't want to have to pick a Punjabi Sikh. I don't want that! I want to marry who I want... [6]

These three examples are quite different but at the same time they present a view on multiple identity that is not resembling Simran's or the Indian mummy's one. Raj and Amrit were raised in a somewhat traditional family, as Mandeep lived a total different way since his parents did not follow the traditional pattern of Indian Sikh families. Mandeep and Amrit do not deny their religion and are interested in it, as of Raj, he already knows about it and do not want to have to deal with it anymore. They are still born and raised in a Sikh family, if it is not through the parents it is with the extended family, therefore their ways of being are necessarily Indian Sikh, but since they were born in Britain they are also British. Here comes again the way to identify oneself, because of phenotype such as Indian physical characteristics, they will never be considered 'fully' British. The question will be raised as Mandeep mentioned, 'what is your ethnicity?' and thus one will have to precise 'British—something'. The three of them sometimes attend events at the Sikh society and are somewhat comfortable about that, but the rest of their time, they act more upon their 'Britishness' rather than their 'Indian' background.

They all still have the potential to 'be' someone else, therefore having multiple identities. If you look carefully at those examples, they do not look dispersed in who they are. Mandeep is confident about who he is, but is curious to learn more. Raj knows that he is who he is, and no one can change his mind; he already knows about who he is not as well. Amrit knows that she is not fitting in completely anywhere and embraces this idea completely. It happened to define her much more than to be put into one box, one identity. She feels unique and enjoys having the choice of identity, despite its difficult consequences on her life. Her vision is closer to the one the Indian mummy had; the difference is not about embracing this multiple identity idea, but that she knows what she doesn't want in both worlds, and this will lead her choice.

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[6] [Interview 013—03.21.12]

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, with this paper which started away in the 'homeland' where the communication and networks were reinforced through modern ways, one could see the importance of locality. This work showed how transnational migrant renegotiate their multiple identity while being in the homeland and in their 'home' new country. The expectation in India is that the transnational migrants will reconnect through technology from this new location and will thus act upon the Indian or Sikh—ness. This culture is embedded in them notwithstanding the difference in generations. As seen towards this end of this paper, younger generations may also struggle with this multiple identity and by using this contemporary method of reinventing their tradition, culture and religion—sometimes by denying it—they can recreate who they are and have multiple identities depending on the context and situation. Therefore, identity is indeed intertwined with network and locations but it is not simply so. Every case is different and the personal view of oneself may be influences by the concepts discussed in this paper as much as the family influence and the interest one may have for his or her culture.

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