

# **Punjabi Sikh Community and Punjabi Heritage Language Background Essay**

**Ravneet Kaur Tiwana**

*University of California, Los Angeles*

In this paper, I provide a historical to contemporary sketch of the Punjabi Sikh community's presence in the United States, with a particular focus on California, in order to build an emigration/immigration narrative. It is this narrative and contemporary language resources that frame Punjabi language use and maintenance in the United States, particularly California. I start by sketching a historical background, dating from the late 1800s to the present, that will address the reasons for South Asian and more specifically, Punjabi Sikh, emigration; this group's incorporation patterns in the United States; and language, educational, equity, and access issues encountered by the Punjabi Sikh Diaspora. I then present an analysis of contemporary data on demographics and the social factors necessary for understanding this Diaspora group and its contemporary relationship with India and Punjab. Lastly, I will discuss the contemporary linguistic characteristics of Punjabi Sikhs and the future prospects for the maintenance of the Punjabi language.

Punjabi Sikh immigration to the United States dates back to the late 1800s. The social process of Punjabi language use and maintenance is embedded within this larger emigration/immigration narrative that ranges from being early "sojourners" looking for temporary residence to build economic capital to take back "home," to becoming "pioneers" who had become permanent landowners, truck and taxi drivers, government employees, white-collar professionals, factory laborers, political representatives, and ultimately American citizens.

In this paper, I will provide a historical to contemporary sketch of the Punjabi Sikh community's presence in the United States, with a particular focus on California, in order to build an emigration/immigration narrative. It is this narrative that frames current Punjabi language use and maintenance in the United States, particularly California. I will first provide a historical background, dating from the late 1800s to the present, that will address the reasons for South Asian and more specifically, Punjabi Sikh, emigration; this group's incorporation patterns in the United States; and language, educational, equity, and access issues encountered by the Punjabi Sikh Diaspora. I will then try to provide an analysis of this group and its contemporary relationship with India and Punjab. Lastly, I will discuss the contemporary linguistic characteristics of Punjabi Sikhs and the future prospects for the maintenance of the Punjabi language. It is important to note that in the literature addressing Punjabi Sikh emigration/immigration there is little direct discussion of the complexities of Punjabi language use and maintenance. Therefore, I intend to create an emigration/immigration narrative in which to position and infer language use and maintenance based on a review of the literature, empirical research, and personal anecdotes.

## HISTORY OF IMMIGRATION TO THE USA

### Diversity of Punjabi-Speaking Population

Before I begin the discussion on South Asian and Punjabi Sikh emigration/immigration, it is important to address the diversity of the Punjabi-speaking population, which is the necessary foundational knowledge for understanding this group's emigration/immigration narrative. The region of Punjab – before British colonialism - was located in Northern India. The word, “Punjab”, literally means the “land of five rivers” representing the Beas, Ravi, Sutlej, Chenab and Jhelum rivers. The geographical location of the region brought many conquerors, traders, and travelers from the West, such as the Aryans, Turks, Arabs, Mughals, British, and the Greek invader Alexander the Great. The dominant religions in the region are Sikhism, Islam, and Hinduism.

As part of the “Independence Deal” arranged between Indian politicians and the British colonists in 1947, the region of Punjab was divided into two. One portion was given to modern day Pakistan and the other half to India. The shuffle of people across political borders resulted in Punjabi Muslims shifting to Pakistani Punjab, while Sikhs and Hindus moved to Indian Punjab.

Punjabi, an Indo-Aryan language, has approximately 87 million speakers worldwide. About 60 million people located in Pakistani Punjab speak Western Punjabi. The remaining 27 million in Indian Punjab speak Eastern Punjabi (Linguist list, 2006). Some of the major distinguishing features of the types of Punjabi are the influence of Urdu in Western Punjabi; use of the Shahmukhi<sup>1</sup> script for written Punjabi; and the recording of Eastern Punjabi through the use of the Gurmukhi<sup>2</sup> script. The majority of speakers of Punjabi are generally of Sikh and Muslim backgrounds, with others identifying as Hindus. Punjabi Hindus, who are generally bilingual in Punjabi and Hindi use Devnagri<sup>3</sup> script for written records, and following 1947 communal and state politics, tend to speak more Hindi, particularly in their homes, than Punjabi.

In this paper, I will focus on the use and maintenance of Eastern Punjabi spoken primarily by the Punjabi Sikh<sup>4</sup> population. The reason I have chosen to focus on this South Asian population, is that the largest portion of the early South Asian immigrants to the USA were Punjabi, and more specifically, Punjabi Sikh. Furthermore, today the oldest and largest populations of Punjabis in the American Diaspora are of Sikh background, particularly in California. In addition, I have chosen to focus on California, because this is the state where much of the early immigration to the United States took place. This paper does not intend to overlook the importance of the contributions made by other South Asians and Punjabis to the history of early South Asian and Punjabi Sikh emigration/immigration in the United States, but to bring focus to the forces and dominant patterns of Diaspora settlement. It is these forces and patterns that create the larger narrative, which frame current Punjabi language use and maintenance in the United States. Lastly, my perspective on this paper is heavily based on my experiences as a Punjabi Sikh in the American Diaspora.

## Reasons for Coming to the USA

The *push/pull* factors of Punjabi Sikh emigration from South Asia are deeply nested within a history of colonialism, World War I, and World War II politics. The British Raj provided the reasons and opportunities to leave Punjab to become “passenger immigrants,” while the two World Wars helped frame U.S. immigration policies. Therefore, global politics played a large role in contextualizing the socio-political relationship between the United States and India. Ultimately, this relationship affected the treatment and modes of adaptation of South Asians, specifically Punjabis, in America. Bruce La Brack (1988) writes that the intimate link between push/pull factors for South Asians manifested into push factors that were largely economic, but also political. The pull factors are more vague, “but [were primarily based on] promises of economic gain” (p. 164). He asserts that most Punjabi migrants were engaged in “passenger migration” where the main circumstances that pushed the migrant out of the home country were those that the individual had little control over, such as, “economic necessity, war, political persecution, ethnic discrimination, and legal difficulties” (p. 19). The pull factors were primarily ones of economic gain because the “individual sees the new culture as a place of only temporary importance, a transitory phase of his life, and; ... the ‘sojourner’ is orientated towards some goal, usually financial, and all other considerations are secondary” (p. 20). The early Punjabi migrants were those who had no intention of staying in the United States, they were *sojourners*. However, as a result of changing immigration policies in the United States, shifting geo-political circumstances, and the development of the sojourners’ patterns of social and cultural adaptation, South Asian immigrants, particularly Punjabi Sikhs, moved from being sojourners to *pioneers* - those early settlers that laid the foundation from which further immigration and patterns of settlement developed.

The early history of Punjabi Sikh immigration up to 1975 is generally divided into two groups, “... first was the majority who were illiterate laborers from agricultural and/or military backgrounds; the second very small class was the educated elite of professors and students” (La Brack, 1988, p. 69). Even though the first Sikh in the United States appeared in 18<sup>th</sup> century Salem and is believed to have been an aide or servant to a Captain Phillips, and Sikhs migrated freely by the 1880s as overseas *passengers* exploring the British Empire under the assumption of being its citizens - La Brack (1988) notes that “... it was not until some twenty-years later [early 1900s] that North American immigration commenced” in large numbers (p. 25).

In this section, I will provide a brief historical background of the small number of early pioneers who immigrated to North America in the 1800s as passenger immigrants on overseas ships in order to provide a foundation from which we can examine the larger amounts of South Asian emigration in the 1900s. It is important to note that these South Asian emigrants were largely (85-90%) composed of Punjabi Sikhs, with Muslim and Hindu migrants making up the rest (Echoes of Freedom, 2001).

### Late 1800s-1906

La Brack (1988) explains that, “East Indian immigration to the U.S. is essentially a twentieth century phenomenon which crested over a five year period, 1907-1911” (p. 79). He found in immigration records that there were only about 700 persons listed as “residents of India” who entered the United States between 1820 and 1900 (p. 57). He writes, “The 1903-1906 immigrant is similar to the type of East Indian who came to dominate in the post 1960-period.

That is, the educated, urban-orientated Indian with professional or mercantile interest, often accompanied by his family” (p. 81). The majority of men who came to North America, primarily into Canada as it was part of the British Commonwealth, prior to 1907 were men in the military and merchants who had initial access to the knowledge and resources to exercise their right as “citizens” of the British Empire. One of these rights was to travel and reside freely in British colonies. Furthermore, as part of the British military, which was predominately Punjabi Sikh, many soldiers had heard from people around the world and high-ranking soldiers about the great opportunities for industrial success in Canada and the United States. After their enlistment expired, soldiers stayed in the empire either by moving into the police force, such as in Hong Kong, returned to their home villages, and/or packed their bags for a trip abroad to North America. During these trips to North America, they usually took one male relative. The push factors for these passenger immigrants were “... primarily economic, related to debt, population pressure, and lack of alternate employment in India” (La Brack, 1988, p. 56). Some men were also recruited through the promotion of travel by steamship agents who had heard about the great opportunities for work and economic gain in North America through friends and relatives in the military.

As news spread about the great economic opportunities available in North America more Punjabi men began to sell and mortgage their land to travel overseas. Many of these Punjabis were Sikhs, particularly those of land-owning Jat caste background who would initially become laborers in North America, were from the Doaba and Malwa regions of Punjab in Northwest India (La Brack, 1988).

This early emigration led to chain migration because most men knew of at least one male relative or friend abroad. This social network made them more secure in both navigating a new socio-cultural system and finding jobs. The decisions to leave families behind and incur debt were not made by individual men, but by their entire families. La Brack (1988) writes, “Most did not decide to come to the United States as a result of an independent, personal decision, but as the outcome of a family corporate decision based on a crude cost-benefit analysis of potential loss to the group vs. potential gain” (p. 96). Therefore, these men left with a sense of duty and responsibility for those relatives they left behind because “... to provide some remittance to the group lay at the heart of many decisions to immigrate in the first place” (p. 96). This sense of obligation and responsibility would eventually change from only remittances into resettlement of their entire families.

### **1907-1923**

Restrictive immigration policies in Canada led to the movement of many single Punjabis, who were predominately Sikh, to the West Coast of the United States, specifically California. Most of these men were laborers with a skilled background in agriculture, “...who had little if any formal education, spoke little English, and were without the urban experience or financial backing of the professional classes. This resulted in almost immediate spatial distribution “ ... of professional classes predominately in urban areas, such as Chicago and New York City, and working-class laborers in rural and agricultural rich areas such as Yuba City and the El Centro” (La Brack, 1988; p.81). During the first period, 1904-1923, of large emigration to the United States many important international as well as domestic political and social events took place that strongly influenced the social and economic patterns of adaptation of Punjabi Sikhs in California. These events include the 1908 immigration restrictions imposed by the Canadian

government on its borders; the “Barred Zone” provision of the U.S. Immigration Act of 1917; the development and strong political movement of the South Asian based multi-national Ghadar Party from 1913-1918; and the denial of U.S. citizenship to South Asians based on the 1923 Thind decision of the Supreme Court (La Brack, 1988). These events will help frame this subsection of the report. La Brack (1988) writes that the exterior forces that primarily:

... shaped early Sikh life in California were: 1) a lack of East Indian women, either spouses or potential mates; 2) the fact that the Sikh groups were dispersed throughout the state; 3) employment was often periodic or seasonal in nature; 4) the uncertainty of their legal status due to changing immigration and state laws. (p. 88)

I would add a fourth force called the Ghadar Party, which was primarily active from 1913-1918, and a fifth force related to the 1912 opening of the Stockton Gurdwara by the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society. These forces worked together with the aforementioned immigration policies and politics to create a unique Punjabi Sikh community in California.

The Punjabi laborers came to California to settle in primarily agricultural areas around the San Joaquin Valley, Sacramento Valley, and the Imperial Valley (Das, 1923). These single men formed “gangs” consisting of *pindis* or “village men” who were bound together by being from the same village in Punjab (La Brack, 1988). These “gangs” consisted primarily of Sikh, but could also include Muslim and Hindu men who pooled their earnings together to buy agricultural land to cultivate “... large volume cash crops like cotton and rice, but also crops that required intensive farming like peaches, grapes, pears, apricots, almonds, beans, peas, corn, potatoes, celery, asparagus, and lettuce” (Echoes of Freedom, 2001). In spite of the California Alien Land Act of 1913, and other legal complications during the 1907-1923 period, some East Indians did very well economically.

In 1912, the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society built the first Gurdwara, a place of religious worship for Sikhs in Stockton, California. The Gurdwara was the center of religious as well as social activity for Sikhs in California, similar to Punjab. The Stockton Gurdwara provided a place for Punjabi Sikhs to continue their religious worship and traditions, while providing a local center to socialize with other Punjabis to discuss political and social issues.

Anti-immigration legislation from 1917 contained a literacy exception. La Brack (1988) writes that, “... with the 1917 immigration restrictions the ‘student’ was one of the few types of entry visas available and it was utilized by 1000 East Indians between 1920-1924” (p. 81). In California, many of these students came to the University of California, Berkeley. Darisi Chenchiah, a student from Madras, described their diverse views after his arrival at the University in December 1912, “There were about thirty Indian students in the University of California, Berkeley at that time, comprising mostly Punjabees and Bengalees...The Punjabee students believed in the overthro[w] of the British Rule in India by armed revolt ...” (Echoes of Freedom, 2001).

This strong desire to overthrow the British resulted in the California chapter of the Ghadar Party. The Ghadar Party was a global movement among the South Asian Diaspora in North America, Singapore, and beyond (La Brack, 1988). In California, it was composed primarily of Punjabi Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu students and was largely funded by early Punjabi Sikh laborer immigrants. The “revolutionary” movement did not only direct Punjabi energies towards India, but:

... gave substance and direction to the California Punjabi community's struggle for identity and it provided a platform for the assertion of their human rights to freedom and dignity. The struggle for the freedom of India appears inextricably bound up, at least for many Sikhs, with a quest for a place of respect and honor within American society as well. With a free India, the status of Indians everywhere would be elevated. (p. 141)

During this time other South Asian organizations developed, for the most part these South Asian organizations appeared to lack:

... a concern over the conditions of their life in America. That is, if one examines the overt aims and stated concerns of the various East Indian associations, there is little evidence of any general agitation for changes in their social or legal status in America, at least until the late 1930s, because most anticipated going back to India. ... The three major areas of concern in terms of social and political issues appear to be: 1) maintenance of their cultural and religious heritage; 2) reforms within India including independence; and 3) social welfare for those residing in the U.S. including mutual aid, burial, job assistance, etc. (La Brack, p. 135)

### **1924-Early 1930s**

During this period—without Punjabi women in the United States and with immigration laws making it hard to travel home and bring a spouse to the U.S.—many men married Mexican, Mexican-American, and European women. La Brack (1988) mentions only six or seven South Asian women living on the West Coast before World War II (p. 85). Punjabi men particularly married Mexican and Mexican-American women because they shared similar social practices and understanding as well similarities in skin color, which made it easier to avoid violations of miscegenation laws. Through these marriages, Punjabi men also were able to circumvent policies preventing them from owning land in their names by putting property under the names of their American citizen wives and children. Despite shared social practices, most of the children from these marriages were socialized into their mothers' belief systems and had closer relations with their Mexican relatives. Few spoke Punjabi and many were Catholics.

### **1946-1964**

South Asian immigration from the mid-1930s to 1946 was negligible. With the passage of the Luce-Celler Act of 1946, South Asian immigration began to increase again with a restricted "quota" system. It restored to East Indians the option of United States residence and naturalization (La Brack, 1988). Then, after growing in numbers to over 5,000, as well as obtaining more of their legal rights as permanent residents and citizens of the United States; Punjabi men "became more established in the U.S. at the same time as renewing contact with now-independent India" (p. 75). These men were also able to return to Punjab, be reunited with their relatives and wives, marry Punjabi women, re-settle their families in the United States, and expand their businesses.

As these men returned to Punjab they found that their villages had been torn with communal violence resulting from the partition of Punjab. This bloody border shuffle severed and changed the deep friendships between Sikhs and Muslims in both Punjab and the United States. Prior to partition, particularly in the United States, Punjabi Sikhs and Muslims, bonded together in farming “gangs” and had very close interactions. These were secular ties that trumped religious differences and united them based on a common Punjabi identity. Interestingly, it is after this time period of the changes in global politics and U.S. immigration policies that Punjabis began to separate themselves more along religious lines. Even though, Sikhs had been, for the most part, the largest group to emigrate from India and Punjab, there generally was no stark segregated groupings among these men. It was their Punjabi heritage and shared immigration experience that bounded them together (La Brack, 1988).

Around 1955 the increased immigration of South Asian women and families started to make an impact on the South Asian community in the United States, particularly California. During this time, there was also a marked increase in Punjabi students who entered the U.S. Therefore, with a large inflow of South Asian immigrants after years of stand still, “for the first time in decades ... Sikhs were able to maintain ongoing contacts with India. The new community members represented an important link to their once dissipating cultural world” (La Brack, p. 240). With a mixed immigrant group, a “branching-out” from agricultural work would become more common in the 1960’s onwards, as more family migration increased the available labor pool that could be divided between increasing land-holding, while entering other business ventures (La Brack, p. 225).

This increased migration also led to increased orthodox practices amongst Sikhs. Prior to this mass migration, the small number of early Sikh laborers wanted to assimilate Sikh practices to reflect those similar to the ones they had observed in Christian churches, such as wearing shoes and sitting on chairs. As a small group with very little political power, these older Sikh immigrants felt that one avenue to decreasing discrimination was to become more like mainstream Americans. However, the new Sikh wanted to adhere to more traditional practices they were accustomed to in Punjab, and not to what they felt were “American standards of dress and grooming” (La Brack, p. 243).

## **1965-1975**

The Johnson administration’s 1965 amendment to the Immigration and Naturalization Act, popularly known as the Hart-Cellar Act, dramatically increased the number, kinds, and types of South Asians immigrating to the United States:

In era of civil rights awareness, the system, which heavily favored northern Europeans, had come under increasing attack as being racially biased [in the 1960s] ... The Immigration and Nationality Act established a new quota system of 20,000 from each country with a total of 170,000 immigrants allowed each year and allowed exemptions for reunifying families. Further, it gave preference to people with professional skills needed in the United States. This led to a dramatic increase in the number of immigrants from all over South Asia. (Echoes of Freedom, 2001, Chapter 13)

The Punjabi Sikh community in Northern California, particularly Yuba City/Marysville, had many new arrivals in the 1970s so that there "... were more Sikhs in the northern portion of the Sacramento Valley community of Yuba City/Marysville in 1974 than there were total East Indians in the United States in 1947" (La Brack, 1988, p. 286). Hence, through family reunification, more Punjabi Sikhs were settling into the areas where they had relatives. This reunification allowed an evolvement from farm "gangs" into family-based agricultural businesses and work crews. These family-based work options allowed Punjabi Sikhs to maintain social, cultural, and economic dynamics within the family system similar to those they had experienced in Punjab. The male hierarchy and gender dynamics were reconstituted by being surrounded by a larger Punjabi Sikh community.

This larger population of Punjabi Sikhs in Yuba City also led to the building of a new Yuba City Gurdwara in 1969. Though the impetus for establishing the Gurdwara came from the newly arrived and more orthodox Sikhs, it was substantially financed by middle-age Punjabi Sikh men who were the earlier settlers and not as orthodox (La Brack, 1988). Hence, there was a concerted effort to maintain unity and harmony among Punjabi Sikhs in California.

The Yuba City Gurdwara was not just a place of religious worship but also a site of social exchange and interaction. Furthermore, it was also a place where gender dynamics and hierarchies—e.g. separate seating—were practiced. This gender distance that became a more prominent practice as the Punjabi Sikh community grew larger in the 1970s "limited the type of independence and freedom of movement and expression that Punjabi Sikh girls were accustomed to growing up in the late 1960s" (p. 327). Hence, during the time period of 1965-1975 there was a physical and cultural "reconstitution" of the Punjabi Sikh community

## **CONTEMPORARY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DIASPORA AND HOME REGIONS**

The contemporary relationship between the Punjabi Sikh Diaspora and communities in Punjab as well as India has been built on a basis of much hostility. The "arrogance" of "vilyati"<sup>5</sup> Sikhs, about their economic success, and complaints of Punjabi "backwardness" particularly during their trips back home created friction among individuals. In addition, political movements and social issues of runaway grooms and brides helped fuel hostile relations between the two communities. Since the 1990s though, there has been steady improvement. Thandi (2000) writes:

Until recently, the Indian authorities never saw their Diaspora communities in a positive light. If anything, they were often regarded as a thorn in the side as many of these communities and the organizations that represented them were very critical of India's domestic, foreign, economic, and political policies. Many migrants were also perceived in wholly negative terms, as part of an unfortunate "brain drain" over which India was powerless to act. At other times, these migrants were perceived as exiles who should somehow feel sorry for having jumped ship. These patronizing and arrogant attitudes towards NRIs [Non-Resident Indians] have now begun to change. (p. 217)

The relationship between both communities was heavily influenced by the separatist movement that promoted the establishment of an independent Khalistan. This movement was an effort to have Punjab succeed from India and become a separate Sikh state because some Punjabi Sikhs, particularly those from the Diaspora, believed that India had failed to fulfill its promises it

made during Independence to protect Punjabi farmers' water rights and civil rights as a minority group in India. Hence, the Khalistani movement was primarily funded by the Punjabi Sikh Diaspora, but the crux of the turmoil of fighting and bloodshed was suffered by those in Punjab. Some segments of the Punjabi Sikh population in Punjab and abroad became closer, while others developed antagonistic relationships.

After the Khalistani movement came to rest in the early 1990s, the numbers of Punjabi Sikhs immigrating to North America increased. In addition, families felt safe visiting relatives in Punjab. Economic investment in the region progressed much slower than social integration. Among the Diaspora, hesitancy to invest is based on a strong understanding of the politics, corruption, and bureaucracy that cripples the Punjabi economic and governmental system. Furthermore, they have grown accustomed to an "easier" and more "just" American system compared to the one they have lived in before. However, it is common to see advertisements on Indian satellite television stations available in Punjabi Sikh homes across America promoting investment deals in terms of residential communities, savings accounts, and bonds.

The remittances sent by Punjabi Sikhs to Punjab have had huge impacts on their home villages, with schools and colleges built, underground sewer systems installed, and Gurdwaras constructed. Furthermore, this new found economic affluence based on the remittances, and "fewer mouths" eating from single-family landholdings in Punjab (i.e. one brother and his family are settled abroad, versus two brothers settled in Punjab and sharing family wealth) have allowed Punjabi Sikhs in Punjab to increase their properties, enter new business ventures, and install "luxury" items, such as in air conditioning and satellite dishes.

In recent years, economic liberalization policies in India, and the granting of the near equivalency of citizenship through issuing a card for Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) has made it easier for the Diaspora to forge global economic links to match the strength of the "emotional and sentimental" ties.

## **OBSERVATIONS ON SOCIO ECONOMIC AND LINGUISTIC CHARACTERISTICS**

The contemporary Californian Punjabi Sikh community range across a spectrum of professions, from factory laborers and small business owners, to professionals and venture capitalists. In urban areas, there are higher concentrations of professionals, although working-class families are widely represented among taxicab drivers, custodial staff, and office workers. In rural areas, working class families are more predominant and employed as truck-drivers, factory laborers, nurses, and postal workers. In these areas, it is also common for Punjabi individuals to be small-business owners, doctors, and engineers. Since Punjabi immigrants enter the U.S. on a diverse range of visas - family reunification, marriage, and the H-1B (technical professional) – there is great variation in the educational background and occupational patterns of Punjabi Sikhs, particularly in California (Echoes of Freedom, 2001).

Many of these immigrants who come to the U.S. based on family reunification and/or marriage status, have graduate degrees, but do not have direct access to jobs meeting their skill-level. Many employers find that their programs of study in India do not meet American standards. Hence, these immigrants generally enter working-class occupations, such as truck and taxi cab-driving, entry-level nursing, lab assistants, factory laborers, and convenient store operators or attend local Adult Education programs through Adults School, City Colleges, and

Universities. Generally, those attending Adult Education programs also have part-time or full-time jobs.

The majority of the Punjabi Sikh youth in America is 2<sup>nd</sup> generation and usually has some Punjabi speaking and comprehension abilities. They have grown up in homes where Punjabi was spoken or at least used along with English. If their parents chose not to speak Punjabi in the home or the children resisted learning it because of peer pressure, most Punjabi Sikh youth through family reunification were raised for some period of time by Punjabi-dominant grandparents and/or relatives.

From my observations of current day California, I would argue that regardless of class background, particularly in Northern and Central California there is a stronger tendency to maintain the Punjabi language because there is a large Punjabi Sikh community where 1) the Punjabi language can be reciprocally understood and used through the constant flux of 1<sup>st</sup> generation immigration from family reunification and “arranged” marriages with spouses from Punjab; and 2) there is a tendency to hold on strongly to Punjabi and Sikh practices and belief systems as the community grows – bringing more opportunities to have cultural and religious events that provide spaces to practices these cultural skills.

These trends can be observed today across Yuba City into the Central Valley and “Little India” in Southern California. The showing and availability of Hindi and Punjabi movies is commonplace, even in towns with relatively small populations compared to Yuba City. There are also domestic and international Punjabi language newspapers available at local Gurdwaras and Indian food stores. Furthermore, popular radio shows air across the state from the Bay Area to Central California. In the Central Valley, there is KBIF900 AM, which airs on the weekends. In the past, there was also a one-hour television show in Bakersfield, California on Sunday nights that was primarily in Punjabi.

## **SCHOOLING AND LANGUAGE**

Issues of cultural congruency between American schools and the home lives of Punjabi Sikh youth started emerging after 1965, when South Asian children began attending schools at all different grade levels, and larger numbers of Punjabi-Sikh children were born in the United States (Gibson, 1988). In this section, I will try to provide some comments on the general school performance of Punjabi Sikh youth by drawing on Margaret A. Gibson’s study of Punjabi Sikh youth in Yuba City in the 1980s, and by using anecdotes for contemporary issues, as current studies have been difficult to find.

Gibson (1988) found in her study of American-born and new immigrant Punjabi Sikh, a strong presence of Punjabi monolinguals entering the K-12 public school system. She also found that “Punjabi teenagers, as we have seen, are more comfortable with the formal authority structure of the school than are many Valleysiders [i.e. the white students], but they are far less comfortable with the informal curriculum” (p. 169). She attributed a large part of this difference to these youth’s parents as well as the larger Punjabi Sikh community’s emphasis on cultural “accommodation” and not “assimilation.” Gibson (1988) writes:

While immigrant minority parents may strongly discourage their children from embracing the school’s assimilationist agendas and instruct their young outside of class to resist unwarranted pressures to change their culture, as we have seen is

the case in Valleyside, they may equally strongly instruct their children to set aside ethnic differences in the classroom and to play down ethnicity in any strategic or instrumental sense in their interactions with teachers. (p. 190)

Hence, the students who came from predominately working-class and agricultural backgrounds (both low and high-income families) were socialized into a belief system that viewed education to be a catalyst into white-collar and middle-class occupations. The parents expected their children's education to have little influence on their child's social and cultural belief system.

According to Gibson (1988), Punjabi Sikh students in Northern California performed well academically compared to fellow students who were mostly white or of Mexican descent. She found that Punjabi Sikh students excelled in mathematics and science and, according to their teachers, had good study skills. However, Punjabi Sikh youth, for the most part, had difficulty in their English language classes and were not very involved in extra-curricular activities at school. Hence, she argues that the Punjabi Sikh community emphasized its children's linear-model of acculturation (i.e. education is a route to economic stability and opportunity), rather than a multi-linear model of acculturation (i.e. education is equally important as a route to economic stability and personal, social, and cultural development). However, La Brack (1988) adds, that it is important to note that post-1965 one sees more "... second-generation East Indians [begin] to move slowly into mainstream politics, educational institutions, and to participate in American social life," (p. 76). I would argue that this difference between those who pursued a linear and those who pursued a multi-linear model might be linked to whether a family had rural or urban origins. It may be useful to examine the backgrounds of those Punjabi Sikhs entering mainstream politics and participating more in American social life to see where they are from in India.

Gibson (1988) found that, "Punjabi students who received all their education in the United States, regardless of birthplace, were four times more likely to be classified as fluent-English-proficient in high school than students who arrived in this country in grades five, six, seven, or eight" (1988, p. 192). However, the biggest issue, despite high records of academic achievement in school, was that American-educated Punjabis, both 2<sup>nd</sup> generation and new arrivals, "... continued to suffer an English language handicap throughout their high school years. One in five of these students were still classified as LEP [Limited English Proficient, now EL: English Learner] during high school (p. 193). Table 1 shows the numbers for English Learners in the years subsequent to Brack and Gibson's writing. Not indicated in this table, is that the ratio between high school ELs, and those in the early years has not changed much since Gibson's study. However, similar ratios are found for ELs from all immigrant groups in California.

**Table 1**  
**Punjabi Speaking Students in K-12 California Schools, 1993 - 2008**

	2008	2007	2006	2005	2004	2003	2002	2001	2000	1999	1998	1997	1996	1995	1994	1993
EL*	9,198	9,283	9,138	9,259	8,977	8,751	8,279	8,914	7,906	7,762	7,323	6,491	5,522	5,063	4,348	3,880
% of CA ELs	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.3
Rank	9	9	9	11	11	11	11	11	12	12	13	13	13	14	15	16
FEP**	10,053	9,596	9,276	8,747	8,261	7,608	6,265	6,464	5,626	5,101	4,707	4,036	3,675	3,482	3,387	3,013
% of CA FEPs	0.9	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.5
Rank***	11	11	13	14	13	14	14	14	14	15	18	18	19	19	18	18

Source: California Department of Education. Data compiled by Gerda de Klerk, Arizona State University, from CDE Language Censuses 1993 to 2009.

\*English Learner (EL) students (formerly known as Limited-English-Proficient or LEP) are those students for whom there is a report of a primary language other than English on the state-approved Home Language Survey and who, on the basis of the state approved oral language (grades K-12) assessment procedures and including literacy (grades 3-12 only), have been determined to lack the clearly defined English language skills of listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing necessary to succeed in the school's regular instructional programs.

\*\*Fluent-English-Proficient (FEP) are students whose primary language is other than English and who have met the district criteria for determining proficiency in English (i.e., those students who were identified as FEP on initial identification and students redesignated from Limited-English-Proficient (LEP) or English learner (EL) to FEP).

(In this table, the sum of EL and FEP would be the students that year who indicated they speak Punjabi at home.)

\*\*\*The rank occupied by Punjabi that year as measured by the number of Punjabi ELs or Punjabi FEPs against other minority languages found in CA schools and the number of ELs and FEPs among each of those languages. The range is 1 – 56.

Gibson remarked that Punjabi students favored the concept of ESL instruction because of the increased help and one-on-one assistance they received in smaller classrooms when improving their English language skills. This finding provides insight into the politics of language instruction and maintenance in the Punjabi Sikh community. Gibson (1988) writes that even though students favored the concept of ESL they wanted a more rigorous ESL program and opportunities to move out of it into mainstream classrooms. They felt that the ESL program, "... was like a ghetto ... a trap from which Punjabi students could not escape" and interact with other students (p. 193). Parents were "... opposed to bilingual instruction for their children as part of the formal school program and were quite specific in their preference for an all-English curriculum, for in their view school hours devoted to Punjabi were school hours taken away from mastering English" (p. 194). For parents, an important part of their children's adaptation in American society was having good English language skills.

## LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE OPPORTUNITIES

I would argue that parents (as discussed earlier), formal education, music, and religious scripture are the four most important contemporary factors that influence the prospects for language maintenance among Punjabi Sikh youth.

Formal language learning is available through both community-based and institutionalized educational options. There are a small number of high schools in California, located in areas such as Union City, Yuba City, and Kerman, which offer the Punjabi language as a subject. In addition, San Jose State University, Stanford University, University of California, Berkeley, University of California, Santa Barbara, and California State University, Sacramento offer Punjab language and Punjab-related courses for their students. Students at the university level tend to be both Punjabi Sikhs and non-Punjabi Sikhs. Lastly, there is the Punjab Studies Summer Program administered by Dr. Gurinder Singh Mann from the University of California, Santa Barbara, which provides students an opportunity to learn about Punjabi history and language during a six-week summer program in Punjab (see Mann, 2000; 2004).

Another opportunity to maintain and learn Punjabi is through “Sunday School” programs, primarily at local Gurdwaras and developed post-1965 when the Punjabi Sikh Youth population began to grow in size. These schools are usually conceptualized, developed, and administered at a grass-roots level. The teachers and administrators are generally parents and local community members. The school curriculum is commonly developed from a few volunteers compiling information from different resources, such as those in Kerman, California and San Jose, California. Other schools, such as those in Fresno, California, and Caruthers, California, reach out to community-based organizations, such as the Sikh Research Institute, for pre-developed curriculum. However, I have noticed that schools using a professionally developed curriculum generally still add their own resources and information. There are current efforts in Bakersfield, California to develop a Punjabi Heritage Academy that would teach Punjabi History and Language separated from the Gurdwara to students ranging from elementary to high school.

Punjabi music, particularly Bhangra<sup>6</sup> and Ghidda<sup>7</sup> are other forms of maintaining and learning the language. After a while, some youth no longer are just excited by the beat, but want to understand the lyrics. Others use music as a way to expand their Punjabi comprehension, but few use it to learn from scratch. Moreover, local and national camps and conferences provide a space to learn more about Punjabi Sikh history and traditions, while providing a format to socialize with other Punjabi Sikhs. These spaces help youth better to understand Punjabi Sikh practices and beliefs, while expressing progressive and contrary opinions to those in mainstream Gurdwaras, generally run by 1<sup>st</sup> generation Punjabi Sikh immigrants. However, at these camps and conferences, there is little time and space devoted to learning, using, and maintaining the Punjabi language, besides exposure to translated text excerpts from the Guru Granth Sahib, and music played at the closing banquets.

The Sikh camps are usually attended by elementary to high school students. The camps, for example, are the Longarh Retreat in Pennsylvania, Sacramento Sikh Youth Camp, International Institute of Gurmat Studies Sikh Youth camps across the United States, and Jakara Junior camps across California, along with various local Sikh youth camps put on by local Gurdwara members. The Sikh Research Institute Retreats in Houston, Texas, for college and young professionals allow adults to better understand Sikhi and Gurbani. At these retreats, there is a focus on reading Punjabi. The Punjabi Sikh Youth conferences are attended by those who are between the ages of 18-35 and are attending college or beginning their professional careers.

These conferences include the Jakara Conference on the West Coast, Surat Conference on the East Coast, and the Jago Conference in Florida.

## **FUTURE TRENDS**

The history of South Asian and Punjabi Sikh migration frames the more contemporary use and maintenance of the Punjabi language. It can be inferred that Punjabi language was used among early immigrants, particularly since large portions of them did not have strong facilities in English, and had less formal education and less exposure to urban areas while they were still in Punjab. Among the farm “gangs,” Punjabi language use was also a reflection of the men’s Punjabi identity that crossed religious differences. Maintenance of the Punjabi language most likely was weak prior to 1946 with immigration policies limiting the number of Punjabis immigrating to the United States and many men marrying Mexican and European women. The children of these marriages had little resources to maintain the Punjabi language, particularly because they were socialized primarily by their mothers; the Punjabi Sikh community surrounding them was small with few resources for maintaining their language, and there was a strong assimilationist attitude in public schools.

Changes in immigration policies after 1946 allowed for an environment more conducive to maintaining the Punjabi language with more Punjabi Sikhs immigrating to the United States, particularly those who were primarily Punjabi speakers with little facility in English. The growing size of the Punjabi Sikh community in California created spaces to practice Punjabi language skills and participate in cultural as well as religious activities. These include the construction of Gurdwaras, showing of Punjabi films, and production of Punjabi Melas.<sup>8</sup> Punjabi music concerts are becoming more common across California and the United States. Current trends in establishing Punjabi Language Schools, and the availability of Punjabi language courses at high school and universities in California, are important resources for maintaining and spreading the Punjabi language in the United States. Lastly, I would argue that Punjabi Sikh camps and conferences, even though providing little space to practice Punjabi language skills, are an opportunity for youth to socialize with other Punjabi Sikhs and begin to better understand their relationship with Punjabi community practices, Sikh beliefs, and Punjab as well as India.

There is only one government-funded summer program offered through the American Institute of Indian Studies and the United States government for both elementary and advanced level students to further develop their Punjabi language skills. This program has largely been developed to increase U.S. capacity in Punjabi to better understand political situations in South Asia, particularly Pakistan and India, develop more knowledgeable relationships between America and these countries, and fight the “War on Terror.” As there is a growing Punjabi Sikh population in the U.S. that requires Punjabi proficient providers of social, medical, and economic services—not only for language translation but also for understanding the social dynamics of the community—there may be sustained interested in a range of language programs geared toward heritage language learners. Furthermore, 2<sup>nd</sup> generation populations are good targets for funding of language learning and research initiatives, because of their socio-cultural knowledge of the nuances of Punjabi language use and meaning, something that may not be attainable for those studying Punjabi as a foreign, rather than a heritage language. As the economic and sentimental ties between the Punjabi Sikh Diaspora and Punjab become stronger, and multi-directional through travel and telecommunications, developing a nuanced understanding of language and culture can facilitate and improve many aspects of globalization. Lastly, a deep nuanced Punjabi

language understanding is important, because language proficiency does not always equate to thoughtful use and understanding, particularly around heritage speaking populations in the United States and abroad.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> A local variant of the Arabic script, which literally means “from the King Mouth.”

<sup>2</sup> A script that was standardized by Guru Agand Dev Ji, the 2nd Sikh Guru, which literally means “from the mouth of the Guru”.

<sup>3</sup> A script whose name comes from Sanskrit meaning it is the script of the “City of the Gods.”

<sup>4</sup> The Sikh religion is a monotheistic religion originating in Punjab through the leadership of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, its first leader. *Sikh* is derived from the Sanskrit *sisya*, and Pali *sekha*, literally meaning a learner or disciple, who yearns to learn from the Guru (i.e. teacher). The Sikhs believe in ten Gurus, with the Guru Granth Sahib, being the external Guru. There are both *amritdhari* (baptized), *keshdari* (not baptized, but wear the external 5 Ks or 5 articles of faith, e.g. uncut hair: *kesh*), and *sahjadari* (clean-shaven and do not wear many of the 5Ks) Sikhs.

<sup>5</sup> Foreign or Indians who have gone abroad.

<sup>6</sup> Folk music from Punjab that is being remixed with popular Western beats in the Diaspora.

<sup>7</sup> Folk songs sung by Punjabi women. These songs are also being remixed with Western beats in the Diaspora.

<sup>8</sup> Festival where there are music and dance performances along with Punjabi vendors.

## REFERENCES

- California Department of Education. Language Census. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/dc/lc/>
- Das, T. (1923). *India in world politics*. New York: B. W. Huebsch.
- Gibson, M. A. (1988). *Accommodation without Assimilation: Sikh Immigrants in an American High School*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- La Brack, B. (1988). *The Sikhs of Northern California: 1904-1975*. New York: AMS Press.
- Linguist List-Serve (2006). <http://listserv.linguistlist.org/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0601&L=vyakaran&P=787>
- Mann, G. S. (2000). Sikhism in the United States of America. In H.G. Coward, J.R. Hinnells, & R. B. Williams (Eds.), *The South Asian Religious Diaspora in Britain, Canada, and the United States*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Mann, G. S. (2004). *Sikhism*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- McMahon, S., curator. (2001). Echoes of Freedom: South Asian Pioneers in California, 1899-1965. Online exhibit - South/Southeast Asia Library, University of California, Berkeley. <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/SSEAL/echoes.html>
- Thandi, S. (2004). Vilayati Paisa: Some Reflections on the Potential of Diaspora Finance in the Socio-Economic Development of Indian Punjab. In Thandi, S., & I. Talbot (Eds.). *People On The Move: Punjabi Colonial, and Post-Colonial Migration*. Oxford, Oxford University Press: 210-230.