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## Success, masculinity and international migration: the case of Punjab, India

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### ABSTRACT

Harjant Gill, in the documentary film, *Sent Away Boys*, explores connections between Jat Sikh masculinity, success and international migration to the West. The film is part of a series on masculinity. *Roots of Love* and *Mardistan* precede this one. All three films examine Jat Sikh masculinity, but each is distinct in its focus on its particular dimension. Here, I review them with special attention to *Sent Away Boys*. I integrate scholarship that have reflected on this topic. Additionally, I relate my current research on the subject and my prior research on immigrant Sikh yellow cabbies in New York City.

### Roots of Love, Mardistan and Sent Away Boys

In the documentary, *Sent Away Boys*, Harjant Gill chronicles the lives of three rural Jat Sikh men whose dreams of success were intricately linked with international migration to the West. The audience learns that one of the men, whose nickname is ‘Angrej,’ had already migrated to America at the insistence of his wife’s parents, much against the wishes of his mother and sister who remained in their village in Punjab. Grewal, in contrast, aspired to move to the west without any familial pressure. Instead, influenced by material acquisitions of his migrant friends and community members, he made the decision all on his own. In fact, it was during the course of the film making that Grewal finalized his plans to move to Toronto and expressed great excitement for his journey forward. Rana, the third gentleman followed by Gill, was not as fortunate. Like ‘Angrej’ and Grewal, he wanted to migrate to the West as well. But, his attempts at doing so were met with failure. The ‘agent’ Rana had paid in order to facilitate the move had duped him. He continued to live in the village and carried on with farming as a source of livelihood.

In *Sent Away Boys*, Harjant Gill’s story progresses to suggest though that despite differences in specific circumstances surrounding international migration, the three Jat Sikh men are tied together by one common thread – a materialist imagination of success which, they thought, could be only fulfilled by migrating to the West. He grounds this association of Jat Sikh masculinity and material prosperity with his two previous films in the series on masculinity, *Roots of Love* and *Mardistan*, of which *Sent Away Boys* is a part. Both, *Roots of Love* and *Mardistan*, explore the meaning of being Sikh and masculine.

Very skillfully, through interviews of Sikh men as well as scholars on the subject of Punjab, Sikhs and gender, Gill draws out a narrative in the first two films that point to two dominant components of what it means to be a Sikh man – spiritual wisdom as symbolized by the turban and financial self-sufficiency or prosperity. At the same time, however, Gill is careful to not present a monolithic view of Sikh masculinity, whether it's about the turban or the idea of economic advancement as markers of success.

In *Roots of Love*, the audience is exposed to competing values and interests (generational, religious or cultural) that inform the connections, or lack thereof, between the turban and *Sikhi*. It is noteworthy that Gill does so through interviews with Sikh families and individual Sikh men that humanize them and refrains from preaching to the audience. Moreover, Gill historicizes the intimate link between the turban and manhood within British colonial history. Here, too, he is cautious against preaching to the audience. He leaves it up to the audience to explore those ties independently. Interestingly, the film inadvertently challenges the presumed 'natural' love between parents and children. Gill alludes to the socio-cultural basis, and thus the constructedness, of that bond.

*Mardistan* follows a similar intellectual path of complexity. The film explores constructions of masculinity among Sikh men. As the narrative moves forward, the audience learns that dominant Sikh masculinity is constituted of heterosexuality, virility, physical strength, financial self-sufficiency and the ability to fulfill familial duties of provider and protector. In order to complement the testimonies of the men, Gill chose to include interviews with a writer (Amandeep Sandhu) and a scholar (Nivedita Menon). The experts spoke about the larger discourse on masculinity and patriarchy in Indian society – elements of which were reflected in the words of the four men (Amandeep Sandhu being one of them) who were followed by Gill for this film. Here, too, the filmmaker offers a counter narrative to the dominant understanding of Sikh masculinity. By no means do all four of the men agree with the dominant version of it, even when they led normatively bound lives, like the gay man (Dhananjay) who chose to remain married to a woman and meet the standards of a dutiful husband and father, even though his wife was aware of his sexual orientation. Nevertheless, Dhananjay, akin to the two other men included in this film, questioned the normative standards for men in the society.

It is in this spirit of complexity that migrant trajectories in *Sent Away Boys* are developed. Counter to the dominant narrative of the three Jat Sikh men who view international migration as the source of success is the story of 'Angrej's' mother and sister who do not follow the son/brother in his journey to America. Moreover, they expressed vehement opposition to moving abroad. Their story, thus, which interestingly Gill chose to end the film with, begs the following questions: (a) what is the meaning of success for Jat Sikh men which propels them to migrate abroad and (b) is there a consensus surrounding that meaning?

### **Gill's films: the larger context**

Questions exploring the relationship between Jat Sikh masculinity and international migration to the West have been raised by Harjant Gill (2012) himself in his dissertation, *Becoming Men in a Modern City: Masculinity, Migration and Globalization in North India*. As part of that project, Gill directed attention to the intimate ties between Jat Sikh constructions of success, the cultural context for the development of Jat Sikh manhood and

subsequent steps taken toward international migration to the West in order to achieve the success and be a man. Similar to the film *Sent Away Boys*, Gill's focus in this research is on rural Jat Sikh men – it is their definition of success and why they believe it can only be obtained by migrating to the West.

The rural Jat Sikh men interviewed by Gill actually lived in Chandigarh – the liminal space between *pind* (village) and the West that Gill argues is preparation ground for the men's international move ahead. The second film in the series, *Mardistan*, in fact, chronicles the lives of a few of the men included in the dissertation. Gill, in analyzing the experiences of these rural Jat Sikh men in the modern city, Chandigarh, essentially argues that perceptions of limited opportunities of material success are what pushes rural Jat men into the path of international migration. Perceived constraints to upward social mobility are partly due to declining economic returns despite being from landed families. Furthermore, Gill goes on to argue that additional materialist demands brought by globalization increase the burden of socioeconomic success for these men. International migration to the West, with the United States and Canada on top of the list, is where the men, as those shouldering the responsibility of families, imagine success can be attained.

Two of the works exploring the connections between Jat Sikh masculinity and international migration that speaks to the subject of Jat Sikh men and international migration as well as inform Gill's afore discussed research (and his films, too) are important to consider. Radhika Chopra's (2011) book, *Militant and Migrant* is one. In fact, Gill interviewed Chopra as an expert on the subject of Jat Sikh masculinity and international migration from Punjab for the film *Sent Away Boys*, a title of one of the chapters in *Migrant and Militant*. In the book, Chopra, through in-depth ethnographic fieldwork in Punjab as well as with Jat Sikhs in England, locates international migration of Jat Sikh men as decisions taken by families within the larger political and economic backdrop of Punjab.

According to Chopra, political turbulence in the 1980s and continuous decline in economic returns from agriculture have been instrumental in pushing Jat Sikh families to decide in favor of international migration to the West. Men, perceived as the mastermind of 'terrorism' and likely targets of law enforcement as well as charged by society with the responsibility of breadwinners, were the ones sent abroad in order to avoid apprehension by the police and continue to provide for their families. Interestingly, such decisions to overcome political and economic hurdles, as Chopra shows, often involved reconstructing the meaning of Jat Sikh masculinity in a way that led to their demotion in social status, like migrating abroad as *ghar jawaai* or undertake risky strategies for migration. Since the families perceived migration as a way for the men to avert encounters with law enforcement and expand opportunities for individual and familial success, even a stigmatized cultural position or potentially life threatening avenues of migration were acceptable to the men and their families. Implicit in Chopra's discussion is the idea of success that, for Jat Sikh men and their families, is tied with international migration to the West – a point furthered by Gill in his dissertation and film.

Nicola Mooney's (2011) work that culminated into the book *Rural Nostalgias and Transnational Dreams* is the other piece of scholarship on the topic that is crucial to mention. Mooney's work, however, focuses on urban Jat Sikhs. Nevertheless, Mooney's insights on the connection between Jat Sikh identity, ties to land and social status, both of which are masculinized, and transnational migration is instructive. More specifically, Mooney makes the point that even though the lives of Jat Sikh families are securely

tied to the metropolis and they harbor aspirations for international migration as a path to further upward mobility, landownership continues to be a key component of Jat Sikh identity.

Furthermore, and pertinent to the central theme of this review essay, is that this Jat Sikh identity is strongly a masculine one. It is the men who have the privilege of ownership of land, and it is the men whose visible (Khalsa) markers of *Sikhi* that are associated with a Sikh identity. Hence, yearning for the past, while the future is deeply linked with transnational migration is a masculine longing which penetrates all aspects/genders of the family and society. In this way, Mooney's work overlaps with that of Gill and Chopra where she too explores the relationship between Jat Sikh masculine identity, ties to the land and international migration. But, Mooney's informants, contrary to Chopra's and Gill's, have attained the afore mentioned 'modern' higher social status as indicated by their urban middle-class lives. For them, while their Jat identity is a caste identity linked with landownership, they do not rely on revenue from the land for their livelihood. As Mooney asserts, it is a nostalgic attachment. In contrast, the rural Jat Sikh men in Gill's and Chopra's research actually live on the land they own but are disillusioned because the land does not yield enough income for them to provide for their families and for Gill in particular, the men are also enticed by material imaginations of success inspired by globalization. And, in fact, they want to enter the urban middle-classes that the Jat Sikh men in Mooney's research already occupy.

Taken together, the works of Gill, Chopra and Mooney, allude to fluidity in the construction of Jat Sikh masculinity. In particular, land ownership appears to be no longer a viable source of livelihood, and that ownership (even when possible) does not necessarily confer the same degree of prestige in the context of globalization even though it is valued and continues to be an important component to the concept of being a Jat. The glory of land ownership, thus, as Mooney shows, is a fantastical imagination invoked to feel good without necessarily having any concrete ties to it along with socioeconomic and political transformation in Punjab. It is here where international migration takes on immense significance – it is a space to reimagine the meaning of Jat Sikh masculinity, and hopefully, regain the loss of status suffered by the group in a changing social, economic and political context of Punjab and achieve success as defined by a globalizing world.

Consistent with Gill, Chopra and Mooney's work, many of the informants in my current research on rural Jat Sikh families located both in Punjab and the United States as well as my previous work on rural immigrant drivers of yellow taxi drivers in New York City (the latter work culminated into the book *Punjabi Immigrant Mobility in the United States: Adaptation through race and class* published in 2012) perceived the West as the place where chances of success as measured by material prosperity could be improved. As Jat Sikh men, search for better options for work was hence an influential push factor for international migration in that direction. According to the respondents, the larger economic instability of the rural economy challenged them to achieve that goal in Punjab. International migration was the alternate route to that success. The encouragement of migrant friends and/or family members incentivized them to take that step in order to be successful per dominant standards. Also, supporting the works of Gill, Chopra and Mooney are narratives of the rural Jat Sikh informants who offered political turbulence in Punjab as a reason for leaving their homes.

However, my research on rural Jat Sikh immigrants departs from Gill, Chopra and Mooney in two ways: firstly, not all the men associated masculinity, material success and international migration; they had a definition of success distinct from simply material success, even when they viewed international migration to the West as a path for that success; secondly, the narratives of the immigrants revealed a feeling of discontent with their lives post migration. The latter point raises the question whether the meaning of Jat Sikh masculinity changed as a result or whether it was their sense of pride as Jat Sikhs that may have been questioned is what explains their dissatisfaction. The answer is beyond the scope of my work.

## Discussion and conclusions

The scholarship examining the intersection of masculinity, success and international migration is emergent, but not non-existent. Research has shown the centrality of being provider and protector to be at the core of the masculine identity. It is these very characteristics that are influential in the decision made by the men to move abroad (Osella and Osella 2000) as well as reasons that keep them locked into migrant situations that may not be ideal for the men or their families (Walter et al. 2004). Reinforced by these works is the idea that being in control and feeling powerful through material success is central to the masculine identity. Despite this core commonality in the dominant masculine image, research has also shown that masculine identity and hence, the migrant experience for men can be varied and dynamic. Variation in masculine identity has been attributed to overlapping (Charsley and Wray 2015), of masculinity with social class (Ye 2012) or perhaps even a difference in cultural constructions of gender in the sending and receiving societies (Pustulka, Struzik, and Slusarczyk 2015) that can cause tension in migrant families. Or, the very fact of being in the transnational space can in some ways question 'hegemonic' masculinity (Sinatti 2013). Scholars, thus, suggest that while there's a dominant masculinity whereby migrant men have shown to internalize dominant norms of the breadwinner and protector and they might, in fact, hold onto their role as the provider at the cost of separation from their children and spouse (Walter et al. 2004), it can nonetheless be a process of renegotiation and reimagination that is part and parcel of the process of migration itself.

It is within this discourse on masculinity, success and international migration that the films and works of Harjant Gill, Radhika Chopra and Nicola Mooney must be situated. All of them focus on Jat Sikh immigrants. One difference being, of course, is that Mooney's focus is on urban Jat Sikh families with nostalgic attachments to their rural past, while traversing the transnational space. The nostalgia for land ownership, as suggested by Mooney, is a way for the Jat Sikhs (grounded on a dominant masculine sense of self) to maintain their social prestige while they attain their material success through transnational migration. Although farming is not a source of income for the families, its invocation allows them to maintain a superior caste identity and feel good about themselves. In contrast, Gill and Chopra shed light on rural Jat Sikh men (and their families). For this group, and more specifically for the men, international migration is a way to attain material success that they perceive as impossible to achieve in Punjab. In this manner, their dominant masculine sense of selves as the provider and protector is also preserved. Gill's film, *Sent Away Boys*, offers a visual representation of the relationship between Jat

Sikh masculinity, success and international migration that is discussed in the scholarship by Gill, Chopra and Mooney. The films *Roots of Love* and *Mardistan* that focus on Sikh masculinity build the foundation for understanding (Jat) Sikh masculinity and its connection to international migration. Chopra further enlightens the reader with another component in the phenomenon of Jat Sikh immigration. She elaborates on the political persecution faced by young Jat Sikh men, its emasculating consequences to which international migration becomes a solution. Overall, these works fit within the larger discourse on masculinity, success and international migration in two ways: a) they show that Jat Sikh men view international migration as a way to move up the socioeconomic ladder, be it by successfully negotiating economic or political barriers and b) they discuss a particular kind of masculinity by alluding to the intersection of space (rural-urban), caste and social class with masculinity in shaping imaginations of success and therefore, decisions regarding international migration. Thus, to the research specifically on rural Jat Sikh masculinity and international migration, interviews of immigrant rural Jat Sikh cabbies and of the rural Jat Sikh families, both pre- and post migration, show the importance of recognizing intra-group diversity on the meaning of masculinity, success as well as perceptions and experiences of international migration.

Future research on international migration experiences of this group should examine the ways in which immigration involves renegotiation of masculinity, class and caste identities of rural Jat Sikh men as successful. More specifically, how do rural Jat Sikh men (re)define success and masculine identity when their superior caste status is made irrelevant, whose socioeconomic status declines in the process of immigration and who are inevitably re-classified into a lower race category as nonwhites in predominantly white societies, like the immigrant rural Jat Sikh cab drivers in New York City? Also, are their choices for work, despite a decline in their over social prestige, a way for them to retain their sense of successful Jat Sikh men? Emphasis on the independent nature of driving taxis was reported as an important reason to opt for this occupation by the informants. Was that a way for the rural landowning immigrant men to feel that they were not workers and hence, maintain control over their sense of selves as successful? Additionally, do the racism and elitism that the men might encounter as immigrants, like the immigrant Sikh cabbies reported, sting more because they do occupy a higher social location in the sending social context and if so, how is it negotiated in the post-migration context?

Aligned with the larger literature on masculinity, success and international migration, this essay, therefore, emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and analyzing the ways in which divergent forms of masculinity and its dynamic nature shape men's understanding of success. Gill's films, showing the nuances in rural Jat Sikh masculinity and suggesting its social constructedness, is a noteworthy contribution to the conversation. But, it's not the last word on it. It is imperative that scholarship expand on this emergent body of work on the topic for a fuller picture of the meaning of success and how men conceive of its achievement via international migration. To that literature, I would add that it would be enlightening to see whether the meaning of masculinity changes through the life-course and its relationship to imaginations of success and international migration.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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