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## MARRIAGE, MIGRATION OF PUNJABI BRIDES INTO TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES: A CASE STUDY OF BRAMPTON AND MISSISSAUGA, CANADA

**Rahul Kumar**

Rahul Kumar is a Ph.D. student of Sociology at the Centre for the Study of the Social Systems, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, India. He is currently working on his Ph.D. thesis:

**“Migration, Well-being of Elderly Punjabis: A comparative study of Doaba (Punjab) and England (UK).** He has completed his M.Phil. Dissertation on *“Diaspora and Homeland: A study of Punjabi Migrations”*. His research interest lies in Migration and Diaspora issues. He is a member of the editorial team and a founder member of `Global Research Forum for Diaspora & Transnationalism` (GRFDT).

### ABSTRACT

*The main objective of this study is to explain the prevalence of female marriage migration to a long – distance and their post-migration experiences in transnational families. Canada like other developed countries have been the prime destination for migrants from Punjab<sup>1</sup>. A marriage of a Punjabi bride to Canada is a dream come true. Parents in Punjab are still interested to send their unmarried girls to Canada and tie the nuptial knot into the transnational families. Most of the transnational marriages are arranged either by an immigrant relative or a person known to both the families or sometimes by a marriage bureau agent. This case study of Punjabi brides married to Indian Canadians from Brampton<sup>2</sup> and Mississauga<sup>3</sup> attempts to examine the nature of social, economic, cultural challenges in transnational families. This study tries to situate and contextualize the lived experience of these brides among transnational families. This study assesses the role of husband and in-laws in transnational families. The participants arrived in Canada from Jalandhar<sup>4</sup> district of Punjab in the 1970s when a girl had no opportunity to see her husband before marriage. During these years, the picture of a bridegroom was sufficient to enter into matrimonial arrangements however this practice later on discontinued. This*

*study also understands how ethnicity interweaved with memories of transnational families' lives and belonging. The participant immigrant<sup>5</sup> bride's narratives revealed that they need to adjust or compromise most of the times in transnational families. This study concludes that Punjabi immigrant brides face mental and physical stress in transnational families.*

**Keywords:** Marriage, Migration, Punjabi bride, Transnational Families, Caste.

## **Introduction**

Migration from Punjab to Canada for study, work, family reunion, and marriage is entirely not a new phenomenon. Berger and Luckmann note that migration is conceived not as a one-time event but as an ongoing process. It involves not only leaving a homeland and crossing territorial borders but also continuously crossing social, psychic and symbolic borders which define identity, relations, membership, belonging, meaning systems and worldviews of the realities of everyday life (Helen 1997). Guarnaccia and Lopez argue that conflict, negotiation, and accommodation can characterize transnational relationship (Gopalkrishnan & Babacan 2007).

Drawing from interviews with the immigrant Punjabi brides this study demonstrates that partner choice and marriage are a complex, contradictory, and selective process, influenced by transnational relationships.

Canada, U.S. A, U.K. and Europe are the ideal destination for Indians at large. Punjabis are crazy to go to these countries. When (Non-Resident Indians) NRIs come to Punjab and show their changed lifestyle to the people they make up their minds to go these countries. This was not merely freakish nomenclature. It was a telling comment upon the most anxious desire of hundreds of thousands of people in Punjab: go

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<sup>1</sup> Punjab is a state in north Indian subcontinent.

<sup>2</sup> Brampton is a city in the Canadian province of Ontario, situated in southern Ontario. According to Census (2011), nearly 40 percent of Brampton is South Asian, with Sikhs making up almost 20 percent of population.

<sup>3</sup> Mississauga is a city in the Canadian province of Ontario. According to Census (2011) Sikh population make up 3.5 percent.

<sup>4</sup> Jalandhar Doaba, the region of Punjab from which the majority of Punjabi Sikhs originate

<sup>5</sup> Immigrant refers to a person who is or has ever been a landed immigrant/permanent resident. This person has been granted the right to live in Canada permanently by immigration authorities.

west, by hook or by crook, with visas or without, riding on the back of true love or by arranging marriages. The migration and movement of women have often produced anxieties among the communities, says Annie Zaidi, a columnist for *Frontline*<sup>6</sup>. 90 percent hunt for spouses from Punjab. Foreign girls are not quite in turn with their concepts of a spouse, says, psychotherapist, Kamlesh Nischol: “NRIs bridegroom want a bride who will work and also give them home-cooked food. An Indian man abroad is looking for some respite when he comes home”. Media outlets in India report there is a “booming matrimony market for `brides` who can earn the `groom` coveted status as a migrant to a Western country. The matrimonial ads normally promise that the foreign students` sham marriage plus all travel and study expenses will be paid for the Indian families who determined to have their son or daughter emigrate (*National Post*)

According to Vivek Kumar (2004) when people migrate they do not migrate only as biological souls, they migrate with social-cultural baggage. Transnational marriage, a practice by which members of diasporas are united in matrimony with persons in the homeland is a part of many histories of immigration and settlement around the globe, the later generation –those of the diaspora who are born d raised abroad – may also participate in transnational marriages (Kibria 2012). Westwood and Phizacklea note that people who migrate move with their cultural and social histories, and they experience processes subjectively. The term “transnational” is used to refer to varied transactions and processes that immigrants maintain between home in the place of birth and home in the place of settlement (Gopalkrishnan & Babacan 2007). It is a known fact that marriage is a contract negotiated between two families. The union between two persons as a married couple encompass the most important event in the life cycle of both.

Humbeck describes “Marriage is also pursued as a means of immigration, especially, for those who do not have access to other means of obtaining legal residence status (Humbeck1996).

In the context of Punjabi Sikh migration to Canada, Walton- Roberts (2004) has argued that the desire of parents to find a suitable and promising match for their daughter may be eclipsed by the overpowering allure of international migration following marriage to a Canadian Sikh. Popular traditions urge women to `adjust` or compromise` within their marital homes in order to earn respect from their mother-in-law and win their husband`s gratitude –they would otherwise feel torn between their wife and their mother-and his support in the family (Singh and Uberoi 1994).

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<sup>6</sup> See: Craze to go west, *Frontline*, 2007, 24(11).

A feminist and Neo-Marxist scholars often claim religious ideologies and practices explain and maintain the subordination of Indian women and have obstructed their development (Helen 1997). Patriarchy justifies the marginalization of women in education, economy, labour market, politics, business, family, domestic matter, and inheritance. It is a structure of a set of social relations with the material base which enables men to dominate women (Allanana 2013).

### **The Sample and the Methods**

In the interviews, I introduced myself as a Punjabi researcher from district Jalandhar (Punjab). Punjabi brides' migration is a voluntary migration. In this study, a majority of the Indian families had transnational family connections. In my ethnographic study, I drew on views and experiences of Punjabi brides who migrated from district Jalandhar of Punjab to join their Indian Canadian husbands. These brides came to Canada through arranged marriages where family or kin determine the marriage. This study covers a group of immigrant brides aged 35-55 who live and is now citizens of Canada. Their Canadian husbands were born and brought up in Brampton and Mississauga, Ontario. They had education and employment in Canada. These husbands belong to the second-generation. Their parents immigrated to Canada four centuries back. In the interviews, the respondents were asked about their marriage experience and their marriage preferences for their children. I conducted 50 each in-depth interviews in Brampton and Mississauga with Punjabi brides through a bilingual (English/Punjabi) an open-ended questionnaire. The interviews lasted from 40 minutes to 1.5 hours and were tape-recorded and later transcribed. This study was qualitative in nature. A "grounded theory approach" was used, which develops the idea of what is being studied based on data that have been systematically gathered and analyzed (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

### **Presenting the Findings**

In Kunti's words from Brampton:

*Indian parents already settled in Canada do not want their children should marry white Canadians since there is a danger of cultural conflicts. Marriage among Punjabi second- generation children is also forbidden since they have been impacted by western culture. I had no chance to meet my Indian Canadian husband before marriage. I came to Brampton in 1977 to get married. Upon arrival, I came to know that my husband is not a qualified engineer as was told to me before marriage. He is a qualified car radiator mechanic. As every girl has a dream to marry a handsome, educated husband was watered down. I found my in-laws were quite traditional. They practice all superstitious rituals and beliefs. My sister-in laws*

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*were not cooperative. I was treated like a slave Most of my time was spent in the kitchen.*

In Gandhari`s words from Mississauga:

*My Indian Canadian husband came to India to marry me. I was made pregnant. Within a year I got my immigration papers and went to Canada. Upon arrival, I found that my husband is already married to a Canadian white lady. I was shocked to know and hurt grievously. My husband revealed that he married to a Canadian white lady to get Canadian Permanent Residence (PR). Till date, I could not forget my husband for such deception. My sister-in-laws were inhuman and always treated badly. For them, I am an illiterate woman from a village of Punjab who has been brought to Canada only for household works*

In Devayani`s words from Brampton:

*I am an M.Tech Engineer from Punjab. My Indian Canadian husband came to India and married me. My parents spent millions of rupees on marriage party. I got pregnant and delivered a girl. Upon arrival in Canada, I found that my husband has been living with other white woman. It was not acceptable to me. I took up the matter with my in-laws but all my requests fell on deaf ears. Having no solution in sight, I invited my parents from Punjab to Canada to look after me. We hired a rented apartment with a one year old girl. Till date my husband did not come back. My whole life is shattered. My mother spends her day and night in tears. Our life is in hell. I never dreamt of such Canada.*

In Diviya words from Brampton:

*My Indian Canadian husband and his brother came to India to look for a marriage partner. My brother-in-law liked my younger sister and married her. We both sisters got married in the same family. My brother-in-law already had a wife and child in Canada. After arrival in Canada, he sent a letter to the Canadian Immigration office that he did not want to sponsor my younger sister hence her immigrant visa application was rejected. When my parents and I came to know about this nasty action on behalf my brother-in-law I asked for a divorce from my husband since his brother ruined the life of my younger sister. How can we tolerate such a liar?*

In Amba`s words from Mississauga:

*One day in a Sikh temple I was talking to a man. The discussion was nothing personal. My husband*

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*looked at me from a distance. He thought I have an extra -martial affairs with that man. Nothing was of such sort. My husband mistook it. Since long, I noticed that my husband and my in-laws had been looking for an opportunity to brand me as a characterless woman. This incident offered them golden opportunity to fulfill their hearts desire. I was beaten by a leather belt mercilessly by my husband and mother-in-law. My backbone was hit. Till date, I could not recover from this trauma and pain.*

Dowry system is prevalent in Canada. Punjabi families want their daughter-in-laws to bring gold, and expensive dresses for all the relatives and some money. Though dowries have been illegal in India since 1961, the practices still take place in rural areas of the country. An unmarried girl's parents from Punjab can offer a dowry of up to \$ 33,000 in Punjab (*Daily News 2009*).

Kunti from Brampton shared her experience: harassment at the hands of mother-in-law and sister-in-law on account of fewer dowries.

*However my in-laws were Canadian citizens but still follow and practice all Indian traditional rituals. Before my marriage there was hardly any question of dowry but as soon as I arrived in Canada I was tormented by my mother-in -law and sisters-in laws for dowry.*

In Gandhari words from Mississauga:

*There was not a single day when a quarrel over dowry between my mother-in-law and me took place. My mother-in-law, a greedy woman always taunts me in a sarcastic tone. Sometimes, I was beaten by my husband on account of lesser dowries. Sometimes, I was kicked out of the house in the mid of the night.*

The stigma of caste is prevalent in Canada. Upper caste Hindus as well as upper caste Jat Sikhs practice caste in Canada. Steve Taylor (2014) states that caste-based hierarchies and social exclusion on the basis of caste, especially in relation religious worship/management, marriage, and cremation practices are significant aspects of cultural practices. Dr. Dabri, veterinarian doctor living in Richmond, B.C. says: "People who come from India bring the caste with them. It is in their blood and they carry it with them all the time. According to him, the caste system is still being taught to young people in Canada from elders in their household. He further says it is worse than racism". (*CBC News 2015*).

Kunti from Brampton states:

*We are the followers of Dr. B.R.Ambedkar, a Dalit icon and great Buddhist. We are identified as Dalits.*

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*We go to a Ravidassi or Buddhist temple. All our social and religious ceremonies are celebrated in Ravidassi or Buddhist temple. Upper caste Sikh Jats and Hindus practice caste discrimination against us in public as well as in religious temples. Caste will never die in this world as long as Jat Sikhs and Upper caste Brahmins do not change their dirty minds. Being a social activist, I ask: where are the egalitarian teachings of their religious Gurus and spiritual masters? Are you not ashamed of what you preach and what you practices?*

In Gandhari`s words:

*I belong to a lower caste of a Sikh family in India. My father wears a Sikh turban, No doubt, caste system is present in Canada but not like India. We visit Gurdwara (Sikh temple) on every Sunday. I often hear few discriminating words against some people in the name of caste. In Sikhism, there is no place for the caste system. Everyone is equal to God. Even in Canada, some selfish and greedy people have opened up religious shops in the name of God to earn their livelihood. In Canada, we face racial discrimination. We encounter racial and ethnic slurs in public places. At night, Canadian youngsters throw stones on Sikh people.*

### **Conclusion**

This study concludes that at the family level these immigrant Punjabi brides face tremendous social problems. Young brides face the pressure of balancing between families and aspirations. The institution of patriarchy segregates women off from men in such a way that their capabilities remain hidden. Patriarchal mindset minimizes and marginalized women even in a liberal, secular, multicultural, and open society of Canada. Generation gaps, culture shock upon moving away from the homeland and question of sexuality play their roles in interpretations of gender and what it means to Indians in the diaspora to deal with their new experiences (Jain 2006). Religious bigotry has been institutionalized.

Cultural beliefs and myths assist in perpetuating & legitimating violence against women more vigorously in traditional societies. The traditional and orthodox mindset makes these immigrant Punjabi brides bear the sufferings without any protest. In Punjabi Diaspora women find themselves at the mercy of men. Punjabi men want their wives obedient, docile & dedicated dutiful mothers who look after the household, children & family. Immigrant Punjabi brides have a lower status in the family as men dominate the private and public spaces through patrilineal relations, labor division, and financial decisions.

Immigrant brides feel loneliness, depression and nostalgia and as a result their social and economic mobility has been impeded and eroded. Those women who fall victim to the brutal harassment and physical abuse at the hands of in-laws are afraid to `dishonor and shame` attached to it. Parents of such victims remain silent for fear of unintended consequences. It has been observed that battered women have tendency to remain quiet, agonized and emotionally disturbed after the occurrence of torment. Despite strict legal safeguards in Canada, violence against immigrant Punjabi bride is visible.

Prevalence of caste among the Indian people in Canada has erected several formidable challenges for Dalit community. Divisions on the basis of castes are visible in Hindu temples and Sikh Gurdwara. Caste biases are more pronounced in marriage. Punjabi local newspapers produced mostly by Punjabis in Canada specify caste preferences for spouses. Punjabi men prefer immigrant bride to be a submissive and non-assertive. Women unlike men have very limited social space to interact. Caste imposes the restriction on inter-mixing. Women cannot be free unless they feel safe in the homes and on the streets.

### **Acknowledgment**

I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Vivek Kumar, teaching Sociology at the Centre for the Study of the Social Systems, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi for the patient guidance, encouragement and advice he has provided to me while writing this article.

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