

The Village of Richmond Hill:
An Analysis of Punjabi Youth in New York City

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ABSTRACT

Due to political, social and economic push factors in Punjab and various pull factors to the United States, a significant number of Punjabi Sikhs have immigrated to build their homes throughout the nation—particularly in the last three decades or so. Specifically, a neighborhood in Queens, Richmond Hill, New York, has a high concentration of these immigrants and is a community that can be identified as a Punjabi Sikh enclave. As this demographic group continues to grow and foster a particular social environment, the children of Punjabi immigrants have forged a unique identity in which they balance the traditional values of their family's heritage with the intricacies of urban America. Though Punjabi immigrants moved with the hope that the next generation will have more stability and opportunity than they did in the homeland, Punjabi American teenagers and adolescents inherit their own set of gender, education and class challenges. The plethora of obstacles they face originate because of different structural, communal and cultural reasons. These problems work together to be a heavy burden on the youth of a community that is still very much assimilating into the nation's landscape. The detrimental and arduous circumstances that Punjabi youth are in essentially threatens their ability to climb the ladder of upward social mobility their parents dreamed of and perpetuates a cycle of disempowerment for a majority of young people growing up in Richmond Hill. Although there are Punjabi youth from the community who are beginning to access the resources and education they need in order to uplift themselves and their families, much more is needed in order to develop the ability of this lower-income, first-generation group to navigate through the hurdles they face in order to experience the prosperity that their parents dreamed of.

TABLE OF CONTENTS	Page
List of Figures.....	ii
List of Tables.....	iii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
Dedication.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1– A Communal “Eye”: Navigating Punjabi Gender Norms and Cultural Conflicts.....	49
Chapter 2 – An Educational Paradox: Slipping through the Cracks.....	86
Chapter 3 – Cycle of Poverty and Disempowerment: Implications of Service-Oriented Work on Punjabi Youth.....	125
Conclusion.....	165
References Cited.....	183
Appendix.....	186

LIST OF FIGURES

Page

Figure

1. Map of Northern India and Eastern Pakistan that highlights both Punjab before the Partition of 1947 in white and the contemporary borders.....	5
2. A scene of trains in East Punjab highlighting the chaos that ensued during the migration from one region to another.....	7
3. The 5 Symbols of a Sikh with turbans wore as a way to cover one’s hair.....	9
4. The Akal Takth, one of the places of worships that were attacked, after Operation Blue Star.....	13
5. Map of Richmond Hill, Queens highlighting major <i>Gurdwaras</i> , the largest park in the area and major Punjabi-owned grocery stores and restaurants..	22
6. A re-built Sikh Cultural Society <i>Gurdwara</i> after a fire in 2003 destroyed the original building.....	25
7. Punjabi Dhaba (“street food shop”) is one of the many restaurants that mark the presence of the Punjabi community and serves their needs.....	28
8. A picture of Richmond Hill High School from 2008, red trailers were built as extra classrooms.....	97
9. Adolescents’ Sense of Family Obligation According to Generational Status and Ethnicity.....	132
10. Performance Comparison between Markets.....	150
11. My father standing next to the medallion he saved up to purchase last year.....	153

LIST OF TABLES

Page

Table

1. NYC South Asian Youth, national origin and borough.....38

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For my parents and siblings,
Who are always willing to sacrifice everything for my well-being.

For the youth who I write about,
Whose tenacity and will to succeed inspire me every day.

And for my nieces and nephew,
Who never cease to make me smile.

Introduction

As New York slowly woke up from the long winter slumber of 2014, a group of youth ranging from the ages of 13 to 22 gathered together for the first time in the backyard of a building on the corner of Lefferts Boulevard and 101 Avenue in Richmond Hill, Queens. Being a new organization, this was one of the first congregations of its kinds for Punjabi teenagers and young adults in Richmond Hill. With the aim of creating youth empowerment program, college students from a variety of schools got together with students in middle school and high school. For the last activity of the day, everyone had the chance to engage in a poetry session that was aimed to push participants to think more critically and introspectively about their multiple identities. Having done this exercise in other conferences and workshops before, the organizers decided to have everyone write an “I Am” poem. In this exercise, each person has to write at least ten sentences beginning with “I am” and that describes aspects about themselves. The last person to go was Ajeet Singh, a senior at the State University of New York (SUNY) studying pre-med. Prefacing with the fact he has never written a poem before, he spoke strongly and loudly the words that he thought defined him:

I am Sikh, not a person that has a disease.
I am a comma of a generation that does not stop the progression.
I am a warrior that fights for his rights.
I am a thread, waiting to create something big.
I am a lion that is ready to lead.
I am a Singh and, no, I cannot sing.
I am a wind, blowing through society.
I am a bullet, piercing through your heart.
I am [Ajeet] Singh, a leader.

This anecdote comes from a workshop on March 15th, 2014. Formally known as Richmond Hill Organizing Opportunity for Punjabi Youth (ROOP), this was the inaugural workshop for a leadership development and mentorship program being developed by Punjabi youth who feel that there are not enough opportunities to connect with each other.¹ The program began because a group of young Punjabi adults in college felt that adolescents in the community face a variety of challenges and do not have the proper guidance, resources and overall support they need to succeed. The purpose of the first workshop was to engage everyone with issues about identity, culture, race and education, as the platform to do so is not readily available for Punjabi youth. Though there was a diverse group of people in terms of age and educational background, the underlying connection was that everyone identified as first-generation, Punjabi Sikhs who were predominantly born and raised in Richmond Hill, New York. Although Punjabi Sikh Americans have been very successful in terms of socioeconomics and education on a national scale, this is not the case for many families in under-resourced areas like Richmond Hill who are consistently overlooked for a variety of reasons.²

Punjabi culture undoubtedly provides youth growing up in Richmond Hill with many positives and plays an important role within their lives.³ Yet, Punjabi teenagers and

¹ The acronym ROOP also means image/beauty in the Punjabi language.

² Of the many successful Sikhs, a few examples include Ajaypal Singh Banga, the CEO MasterCard, Waris Ahluwalia, famous designer and actor, Valarie Kaur, an award-winning filmmaker and interfaith leader, and Savneet Singh, co-founder of Gold Bullion International. Although in Sikhism it is mandate for males to have the last name of Singh and females to have it Kaur, it is not necessarily always practiced.

³ According to the standard definition by Merriam-Webster, a youth is a young person between adolescence and maturity. This definition provides a large range in terms of age. For my purposes, I am referring to youth as people who are children, adolescents and young adults—from the ages of 11 to 23. These numbers are based on the Punjabi youth I interviewed for my thesis and the age range in which I find the particular issues I discuss to be particularly relevant. This age range is when people develop emotionally, mentally

young adults, like other youth in inner city neighborhoods, are faced by a lack of economic and educational resources that underlies their experience growing up in a largely immigrant community. This lack of proper access to the opportunities available gives them few opportunities to break the cycle of disempowerment their circumstances place them within and, therefore, potentially uplift themselves and the Punjabi community overall. However, in addition to the challenges they face in terms of socioeconomic class and education, cultural conflicts between themselves growing up within the Western context and their parents who come from Punjab provides a range of other difficulties for adolescents. Through there are diverse sets of challenges that Punjabi young adults and adolescents face, Punjabi American youth are resilient, ambitious, creative and driven as Ajeet's poem touches upon—calling for a deeper exploration into this group's agency.

Purpose and Background

From an American mainstream perspective, South Asians in the United States are a group that is often seen as homogenous. Caught in the cycle of the model minority concept, there are many assumptions about this particular group of people that guide these perceptions. However, when diving deeper into the history of South Asian immigration and the communities they built, it becomes apparent that this group is as diverse as the region they come from. There is an immense amount of variety in terms of language, culture, skin tone, class, residence and migration patterns that go overlooked when non-South Asian Americans imagine who a South Asian is. Non South Asians

and physically the most. I will focus on those who were either born in the United States or moved when they were toddlers.

tend to associate South Asians with the tech boom and use them as a symbol of how racial minorities can find economic prosperity in the United States. Though this is valid for portions of the South Asian diaspora, there is little awareness about the contrasting trajectories of different groups within this larger umbrella identity.

With this context in mind, the purpose of my project is to study and understand a diaspora of a specific South Asian ethnic group. Focusing specifically on the Punjabi Sikh American diaspora, there is not a lot of literature on understanding this group's immigration to the United States and their assimilation into the nation's landscape—even though Sikhs were amongst the first Asians to come to the United States in the late 1890s. Although more studies and research needs to be done on Punjabi Americans overall, I will be focusing on the poorer and less-educated Punjabi Sikh immigrants who settled in New York because their narrative is often times overlooked within the discussion of the South Asian diaspora. Honing in even more specifically, I will analyze and understand the challenges Punjabi youth growing up in the urban enclave of Richmond Hill, Queens. In hopes of expanding the existing literature on the Punjabi experience in the United States, focusing on lower-income, first-generation Punjabi allows for an extended dialogue on a plethora of class, race, gender, communal, institutional problems. Studying Punjabi youth who are raised in Richmond Hill and these sets of challenges also gives the opportunity to visualize and understand the longer-term obstacles the children of immigrants from this wave of migration face in assimilating into new nation they call home. However, before diving into the specifics of institutional and cultural challenges that Punjabi teenagers and young adults face, it is

important to understand a brief history on Punjab, Sikhs, Punjabi Sikh immigration to the United States and the formation of Richmond Hill as a Punjabi enclave.

Background on Punjab

Historically, Punjab is a region in South Asia that included a large portion of modern day Pakistan and India. As highlighted by the white region in Figure 1, Punjab made up a large portion of both Pakistan and Northern India.⁴



Figure 1. Map of Northern India and Pakistan that highlights both Punjab before the Partition of 1947 in white and the contemporary borders (*Wikipedia Commons*, 2006)

Therefore, a Punjabi person is one who has roots and identifies with this region. This region is composed by a diverse group of people who identify with a plethora of different religions. Though Hindus and Muslims made up a large percentage of the region, Sikhs also made up a significant percentage of the population in addition to the presence of

⁴ It is important to acknowledge this map is slightly skewed. Technically, pre-partition Punjab also included large parts of Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir—making the original Punjab larger than portrayed in this visual.

Buddhist, Christians and other faiths. After the independence of India in 1947, there was a partition of Punjab that split this region between the nations of Pakistan and India.

The Partition of 1947 was essentially based on religious lines. Muslims who were living in India were mandated to the state of Punjab found within country of Pakistan. Sikhs and Hindus were mandated to move to the state of Punjab in India and relocate there. As Kuldip Nayer is a scholar who lived through this time and writes extensively about the topic, he constantly refers to the Partition of Punjab as one of the largest and most violent migrations in human history in which thousands were killed and millions were uprooted.⁵ Figure 2 highlights a very small proportion of the gravity of this divide. People in the thousands tried to rush onto trains taking them where they were now supposed to be. Many others were forced to walk for days without food or water, susceptible to violent mobs, looting, disease and unbearable heat on the way.⁶

⁵ For more information on the political reasons behind the Partition of Punjab and the violent aftermath of this division, please refer to [Beyond the Lines: An Autobiography](#) by Kuldip Nayer and the [Partition and post-colonial South Asia: a reader](#) by Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya.

⁶ My family originally was on the Pakistan side of Punjab. Though we owned a lot of land and property before 1947, mostly everything was loss with this transition. By listening to stories of my grandparents and talking to the elderly during my visit in Punjab in the summer of 2014, I have tried to piece together my family's history.

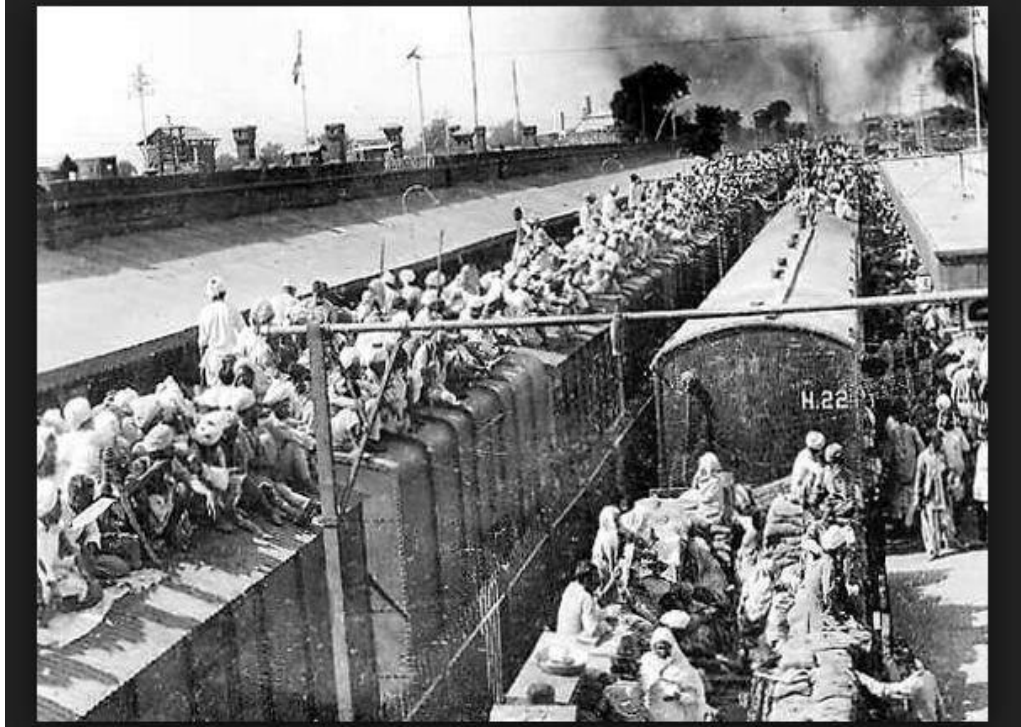


Figure 2. A scene of trains in East Punjab highlighting the chaos that ensued during the migration from one region to another (*The Literary Yard*, 2013)

Background on Sikhism

Although the region of Punjab constitutes a long and diverse history of many people, a Sikh is person who identifies with the monotheistic religion of Sikhism which originated during the 15th century within this region of Punjab.⁷ Sikhism is currently the world's fifth-largest religion with 25 million followers (Maroke 2014). Most of the world's Sikh population lives in India, but many have made homes all around the world. Guru Nanak Dev Ji founded the religion and nine other Gurus followed him, adding important and foundational aspects to the faith over time. The last living Guru, Guru

⁷ According to Sikh *Rehat Maryada*, the Sikh Code of Conduct, a Sikh is “any human being who faithfully believes in One Immortal being, the Ten Gurus, the Guru Granth Sahib, the utterances and teachings of the ten Gurus, [and] the baptism bequeathed by the tenth Guru” (Rehat Maryada 1950, 1).

Gobind Singh Ji, passed away in 1708 and made the Guru Granth Sahib, the central religious text in Sikhism, to be the final and eternal Guru of the Sikhs.⁸

In essence, Sikh translates student or seeker of knowledge—an underlying tenet of the faith. Sikhs believe in one Supreme Being or Creator, referred to as Waheguru. Although there are many lessons and practices all the Gurus laid the foundation for, there are three basic principles of Sikhism that govern the faith (Sikhism Guide). The first is *kirat karna*, which translates to working hard and honestly. The second is *wand ke shakna*, sharing what one has with those in need. The third is *naam japna*, always remembering Waheguru throughout the day. Sikhs believe that all people are equal, regardless of class, gender, caste, and faith. They are also advocates for religious freedom, living a moral and ethical life, rejecting all forms of ritual and standing out against injustice.

Additionally, Guru Gobind Singh Ji instituted the *Khalsa Panth*, or the Sikh brotherhood/sisterhood, in 1699.⁹ During this creation, he introduced the five *kakkars*, or physical symbols, that denote a Sikh. As demonstrated by Figure 3, they include *kesh* (uncut hair and beards), *kara* (a steel bracelet), *kanga* (a wooden comb), *kachera* (cotton underwear), and a *kirpan* (steel sword). Although each has a different significance, the Guru introduced them to be the common symbols that would identify the members of the

⁸ In the Sikh faith, Guru does not denote the same meaning it usually does. According to the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board, “Gu” means darkness and “Ru” means light—making Guru translate to the light that dispels darkness. For Sikhs, the Gurus were those who carried this divine light that was “installed” by one Guru to the next starting from Guru Nanak. More than just teachers, the Gurus were founders of the faith who preached the values of equality, service, peace and the important of remember Waheguru. No one can take the place of the ten living gurus and the Guru Granth Sahib.

⁹ For more information on the Khalsa Panth, please refer to the 2009 BBC article titled “Vaisakhi” and the Sikhi Wikhi article titled “Khalsa panth”.

Khalsa.¹⁰ Although many Sikhs all over the world are proud of their history, the visibility turban that covers the *kesh* causes many problems for Punjabi youth growing up in New York as I will discuss at a later point.



Figure 3. The 5 Symbols of a Sikh with turbans wore as a way to cover one's hair (*Sikh Coalition*, 2014)

Before the Partition of 1947, Sikhs could be found all over Punjab. However, as mentioned, there was an extremely large migration of Sikhs and Hindus from what became West Punjab in Pakistan to East Punjab in India and vice versa for Muslims. This resulted in the fact that a majority of Sikhs became concentrated in the state of Punjab in India. Although the term Punjabi and Sikh refer to two different characteristics, one a region and the other a religion, a majority of Sikhs in New York are Punjabi and, therefore, these identities are inherently intertwined. For my research, because of the

¹⁰ These are applicable for both men and women. However, traditionally, less women wear their kesh in a turban than men do.

strong intersection of the region and the religion for my subjects , I will refer to them interchangeably in this paper though there are many Punjabi people in Punjab and throughout the world who are not Sikhs but also Hindu, Muslim and Christian.¹¹

Push Factors of Punjabi Immigration to the United States

After the partition and the emergence of Punjab as a predominantly Sikh state, India began the long process of setting up a democracy. However, like many other nations gaining independence from their colonizers, this was not an easy process as issues such as corruption, violence, economic development and improper governance plagued the nation. Many of the challenges of developing nations from all over the world caused many of their residents to think outwards to Western nations for more economic and political stability. Punjabis were no exception to this, as many people slowly began to leave their motherland and make homes elsewhere.

Focusing specifically on the Punjabi Sikh American diaspora, there is not a lot of literature on understanding this group's immigration to the United States and their assimilation into the nation's landscape—even though Sikhs were amongst the first Asians to come to the United States in the late 1890s long before the partition. In order to illustrate the obstacles that Punjabi Sikhs face upon their immigration and to expand the existing literature, I focus on will focus on analyzing and understanding what the

¹¹ It is important to acknowledge that there are also Hindu and Muslim Punjabis in the community. However, within the area of Richmond Hill specifically, they make a much smaller percentage of the population. Because statistics are difficult to measure, it is hard to provide what percentage of Punjabis are non-Sikhs. I am personally not aware of any large Hindu temples or Muslim mosques dedicated solely to Punjabis in the community (although I am sure smaller scale paces do exist). Although there may be a lot of overlap in terms of challenges that Punjabi Sikh youth face, looking at non-Sikh Punjabi youth is a potential avenue for further research.

challenges Punjabi youth in New York City face. By studying young people in an urban area with a high concentration of Punjabi immigrants, it becomes possible to explore the nature of Punjabi Sikh migration while articulating the longer-term experiences the demographic group in a nation that is not their homeland. Before doing so, it is necessary to understand how political, economic and social turmoil in Punjab set the stage for many Punjabis to even decide to leave their homes.

After the partition of Punjab, the question whether the region was even home for Sikhs anymore came up into the minds of many. However, it was not until the 1980s and 1990s in which the actions of the Indian government directly discriminated against the Sikh community on multiple occasions—creating a tumultuous environment for Punjabi Sikhs that further exacerbating immigration to the United States. Although the history during this time is complex, civil unrest and political tensions between the predominantly Hindu government and the Sikh community were the major factors for many Punjabi immigrants who moved to the United States to make their homes. Gunisha Kaur, a scholar who writes extensively about Punjab and the devastating series of events after Indian Independence, provides a context for these events in the first chapter of her book. She notes how the Sikh Gurus' message of universal equality has always been at odds with the social stratification of India's caste system (Kaur 2009). Throughout Sikh history, many Hindu and Muslim leaders have tried to marginalize the faith because of disagreements revolving around fundamental practices and beliefs. However, rather than promising sovereignty as a state as initially promised, the majority Hindu government continued to marginalize the Sikh community after India gained its independence.

Not only were the damage and wounds of the Partition still fresh in the community's minds, the Sikh community's demands for recognition were not taken seriously and were interpreted as indications of separatist movement—laying the foundation for ongoing political dissatisfaction and unrest. Sikhs played a huge role in India's independence movement, but there were active efforts to minimize their strength as a region. Through the coordination of the Indian government, Punjabi as a language was not allowed to be taught in Punjab until many years after the Partition, Sikhs were classified as members of Hindu sects, Punjab was stripped of its water rights and the state itself was further divided into three parts—taking away from its economic potential (Kaur 2009, Chapter 2).¹²

This unrest and tension essentially led to the Sikh community demanding minority rights and challenged the government's discriminatory policies through peaceful protests. However, these protests were met with hostility. In June of 1984, the Indian government launched "Operation Blue Star" which was a military attack aimed to "flush out" Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale, a major Sikh leader, from the Darbar Sahib in the city of Amritsar—the holiest place of worship for Sikhs. In reality, this operation attacked many Sikh places of worship across the state of Punjab and was a planned way to control a minority population that was seen to be getting out of hand. Thousands of Sikhs were

¹² Many of these policies and ordinances from the government still cause many problems for the community today. Sikhs are still not regarded as an independent religion, the division of Punjab into Haryana and other states has caused many internal problems and the lack of water in the area is having immense complications on the agriculture heavy state.

killed during Operation Blue Star and the Darbar Sahib was essentially destroyed by military tanks and assault weapons, as shown by Figure 4.¹³

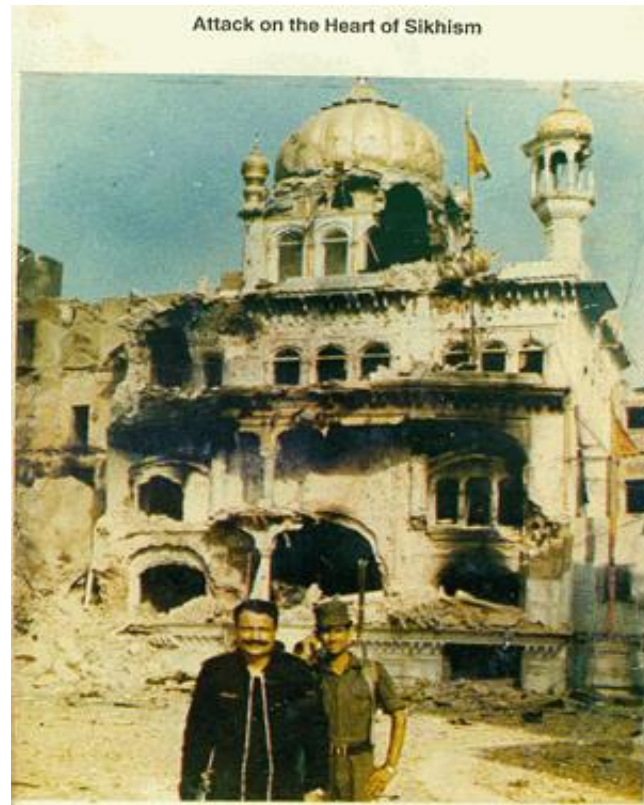


Figure 4. The Akal Takht, one of the places of worships that were attacked, after Operation Blue Star (*The Telegraph*, 2014)

What happened after Operation Blue Star is perhaps what even made the region of Punjab fall into further economic and political turmoil. After the destruction of the Darbar Sahib, two Sikh bodyguards assassinated Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India who was behind the operation. As a result, anti-Sikh pogroms following the assassination emerged in major cities throughout India in November of 1984—further

¹³ The topic of 1984 is a contentious one both within the Punjabi Sikh community and India at large. Although there are many different perspectives behind what actually happened, the legislation issued that ended up minimizing the strength of Punjab and the thousands of lives lost are historical facts.

adding to the tension that already existed. As Gunisha Kaur points out the evidence of government involvement within these riots, Sikhs were targeted in the streets and killed alive. Thousands more were killed and many Sikhs cut their hairs and hid their identities to survive. Additionally, the late 1980s and early 1990s were also denoted by what is called to be the torture state of Punjab. Supported by the Indian government, the Punjab Police began to explicitly target Sikhs and young men in particular and arrested them. They would be accused of being threats to national security, tortured and many were killed without proper clause through false police “encounters”. This era is known to be a dark one in Punjabi history as the government still continuously denies the occurrence of these events. Many families still do not what happened to their family members.¹⁴

In terms of Punjabi Sikh immigration to the United States, the 1980s and 1990s were not safe times to belong to this faith India. The large increase of Punjabis coming to the United States was thwarted by the immense amount structural violence and discrimination. Although the structural violence and the terror state by the Punjab Police is a problem that was resolved by the late 1990s, Punjab still faces many economic, political and social challenges as a result of the Partition and the events of 1984. Amongst the many problems, a faulty educational system makes it harder for young people there to succeed in academia. If they do end up succeeding, the unavailability of jobs or the recent high costs of living becomes a stark reality. Drug abuse and alcoholism has reached record levels as many people in impoverished areas are dying from over us. Though the political and social violence on the Punjabi people may have receded, there are a plethora

¹⁴ For a much more in-depth and proper analysis of the historical facts of Punjab and Sikh massacres from Partition to contemporary day, please read Lost in History: 1984 Reconstructed by Gunisha Kaur.

of social and economic problems that still fuel the desire for many to leave and look for the stability and resources they believe the United States can offer them.

Pull Factors to the United States

The Indian government and the overall state of Punjabi forced many immigrants to think about moving to other nations for stability. However, what was happening in the United States that made it easier for Punjabi immigrants to move to the United States and eventually settle in urban areas like Richmond Hill? Parallel to the factors pushing immigrants out, there were various pull factors that allowed Punjabi immigrants to come. The immigration of the growing Punjabi community is inherently tied to the larger phenomena of South Asian immigration to New York and United States as whole. It is helpful to understand the different contemporary waves of immigration to see which category of immigration Punjabis in Richmond Hill fall into because it is those factors that shape their cultural and social experiences.

Some of the first South Asians to ever immigrate to the United States were Punjabi Sikhs from India in the early twentieth century. Prior to 1965, the South Asian population in the United States was mostly limited to these Punjabi Sikhs who were labor migrants in California (“South Asian Immigration to the U.S.”).¹⁵ Even long before the Partition and the events of the 1980s, Punjabi Sikhs were attracted to the job prospects that the United States offered. In addition to building the railroads, they were migrant workers who helped to support the burgeoning lumber industry and the variety of crops

¹⁵ Early migrants for the most part were Jat Sikh, one of the highest caste status group among Sikh landowners. However, there were people from other backgrounds as well. Mitra provides a detailed explanation on the caste of Punjabi immigrants (2012, 15).

grown throughout the West Coast (Mitra 2012, 15). According to Daniels (1989, 19) immigration records showed “almost 5,800 immigrants, only 109 of them female” living from the Pacific Northwest to California—a significant number of these immigrants being Punjabi Sikhs amongst other Asians. Nevertheless, it was not until the rapid immigration of the second half of the century that Punjabi communities begun to take their current shape.

Beginning 1965, immigration reform and new legislation led to more relaxed policies—making moving to the United States in hopes of living a better life a more viable option for many around the world. As the United States relaxed its immigration laws for various reasons, South Asian immigration to the country saw large increases (Panetta 2000). In addition to the labor migrants who came to the country before these changes, there were different types of immigration that broadened the economic and cultural diversity of the South Asian, and therefore, the Sikh community. In the U.S., the first new wave of immigration starting in the 1970s predominantly constituted of “highly educated professionals from the upper classes” (Panneta 2000). They came to the United States to pursue lucrative educational and career opportunities—helping them to assimilate much easier to mainstream society due to their success. As Anjali Sahay relates, the early 1970s “was rife with discussion of ‘brain drain’ [of India] and how this could potentially be checked and converted into benefits for the home country” (2009, 121). Many Punjabi Sikhs who were more educated and technically trained in India also did come to the United States looking for more professional, tech-oriented roles.

Though many immigrants of the tech boom have experienced their own

challenges within their upward social mobility, this demographic is not well represented in Richmond Hill. Concurrent to this influx of professionals, another wave of South Asian immigration consisted of people who were not professionals, but rather were known to be more entrepreneurial and wage-oriented. Between the mid-1960s and the 1990s was also an era in which Punjabi immigrants of lower socioeconomic backgrounds were able to move to the United States despite their lower socioeconomic class and weaker educational background (Mitra 2012, 55). This was largely due to key provisions of different immigration acts in 1965, 1986 and 1990. In the 1965 Immigration Reform and Control Act, there was a clause called the “family reunification” provision (Mitra 2012, 35). Although this was created to spur European immigrants, it allowed for Punjabi immigrants to “[sponsor] their family members for permanent residency through that provision (Mitra 2012, 35). Though the numbers were not very large, this served to encourage immigration by allowing for immigrants to bring their families from abroad. In New York, this definitely played a role in the increase of the Punjabi population. Prior to this act, most immigrants were males and came alone to send money back home. Through this legal change, they could now sponsor multiple family members to come over—which started to allow for whole families to come over together from Punjab.

Two decades later, the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act also catalyzed the immigration of working class Punjabi immigrants even further. During this time, there was a general need for labor in the United States, which created immigration opportunities “for those in the lower tiers of the class strata” (42). Since this provision built on economic interest, it gave leeway and helped to legalize the status of many

Punjabi immigrants who were moving to the United States in hopes of economic prosperity. Although most of these immigrants were not very well educated and came from rural backgrounds, they came to urban areas like New York because that is where most jobs were available and previous migrants had settled. Similarly, the third immigration law that spurred immigration was the Immigration Act of 1990, which played a similar role to the Act of 1986. Though the United States had unstated intentions to curb non-white immigration in these times, the family reunification policies that they created for essentially for European immigrants simultaneously allowed for Punjabi immigrants to benefit.¹⁶

If there was such a large influx of Punjabi Sikhs into the United States, how many exactly Sikhs are there in the country? This question is very difficult to answer because of the lack of concrete quantitative data. The exact number of Sikhs in the United States is unknown. According to Conrad Hackett from the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, there is no definite answer because the U.S. Census Bureau does not ask Americans about their religious affiliation—causing a large variance in estimates (Pew Research Center 2012).¹⁷ The 2012 Statistical Abstract of the United States estimates about 78,000 Sikh adults resident in the U.S. in 2008. However, the World religion Database at Boston University estimates there are about 280,000 Sikhs in the U.S. based on estimates of the number of Punjabi immigrants from India. On the other hand, the Sikh Coalition, an

¹⁶ For More information on the specifics of these laws and how they spurred immigration, refer to [Punjabi Immigrant Mobility in the United States: Adaption Through Race and Class](#) by Diditi Mitra

¹⁷ Identifying as Punjabi on the Census Bureau is difficult as well because Punjabis technically fall under Asian Americans.

advocacy group cites more than 500,000.¹⁸ As this large-scaled immigration is relatively new, the diverse stories of these families continue to unfold.

*The Punjabi Enclave of Richmond Hill:
New Working Class Immigrants Build a Home*

Although there a significant amount of Sikhs who have come to the United States with diverse backgrounds for diverse reasons, I will be focusing on youth whose parents came to the country during the 1980s and 1990s as part of thee less-educated, lower socioeconomic class wave of migration. Though many Sikhs came during the tech boom and many have gone very far professionally, this is not the majority of the Punjabi community that makes up Richmond Hill. As mentioned, Punjabi families in this enclave for the most part come from rural villages, have agricultural backgrounds and were not wealthy or educated in their homeland—causing them to live in urban areas that offered an abundant number of service sector jobs on which they depended on. For Punjabi Sikhs from this background moving to New York, Richmond Hill, Queens became the place to start from.

Through her in-depth, ethnographic study, Didta Mitra (2008) confirms the notion

¹⁸ The lack of a precise number could be for a variety of reasons. The first has to do with the lack of a Punjabi/Sikh identification within the U.S. Census. From my organizing in Richmond Hill, I have learned that much of the community does not even fill the form out to begin with. On top of it, the lack of a specific identification makes it much harder to calculate the precise number. In addition, there are many Sikhs in places like Richmond Hill that are undocumented and still continue to arrive—making it much more difficult to get an exact picture. Given Punjabi family structure and life in Richmond Hill, many of the undocumented immigrants that have been coming more recently have been younger males in their early 20s. However, there are many more who have been here for quite some time and are still not U.S. Citizens or Permanent residents for a variety of complex reasons—adding to the complexity in measuring these numbers. Though the technicality of this definition may shift if youth are born or brought here from an early age, the challenges that affect Punjabi youth are relevant for anyone who spent a majority of their time growing up in New York.

Punjabi Americans who represent the wave of labor-oriented migration of the 1980s and 1990s are the majority of people who make up the neighborhood. Looking for work in New York City, many of these immigrants moved to Richmond Hill and began to drive taxis. Referring to Punjabi Americans who lived in Richmond Hill, she says that, “this group fits the profile of Indian immigrants who were incorporated into the service sector of the U.S. economy” (19). In addition to the taxi industry, these immigrants also tend to dominate the gas station, small business, construction and restaurant businesses because these jobs do not require a specific level of education (19). In her book about Indian communities, Madulika Khandewal (2002) also does an extensive job highlighting how Punjabi immigrants living in Richmond Hill transitioned into the service-sector industry:

As increasing numbers of nonprofessional Punjabi immigrants arrived, many found work in Richmond Hill in automobile related-occupations-- trucking driving taxis, operating gas stations, and working in auto-repair shops. In the early 1990s these business proliferated, along with Punjabi restaurants and grocery stores.

She provides a snapshot of what Richmond Hill has become in the past few decades and inherently ties the nonprofessional Punjabi immigration service-sector work. Though I will discuss the implications of this work in later chapter, an important question that comes to mind is exactly why and how did Richmond Hill became the go-to enclave for this wave of immigrants coming to New York City? Although both Mitra and Khandewal supports the claim that immigrants who depended on labor-oriented jobs congregate in Richmond Hill and fostered their own community, it is helpful to understand the formation of this enclave as it serves as the foundation for the challenges that the community faces as a whole.

In the traditional sense within the urban context, an enclave is used to refer to

“racial or ethnic minorities living in economically self-contained communities” (Abrahamson 2006, 2). However, Abrahamson in his book about the topic complicates this definition even further. He says that an enclave refers to “concentrations of residents who don’t have the same ethnic or minority status but also share commonality based on wealth, occupation, lifestyle, or combination of these attributes” (2). By the traditional definition of the word, Richmond Hill is an enclave because there is a high concentration of Punjabis living in one area and is economically self-contained. According to the extended definition, Richmond Hill’s position as a Punjabi enclave is even further fortified. As the community is also dependent on the automobile, restaurant and grocery industry as Khandelwal points out, they are also tied together by their preoccupations in addition to their ethnic identity. With urban phenomena generally, things do not simply just happen as there are many factors that lead to the formation of enclaves. It is clear that many working class Punjabi immigrants who moved to New York at the end of the twentieth century moved to New York. However, an important question to ask is what is the history of Richmond Hill and how did Punjabis end up creating an enclave in this specific neighborhood.

Why Richmond Hill, Queens?

Richmond Hill is primarily a middle class and commercial neighborhood that is located in the central-southern area in the borough of Queens, New York. Geographically, it borders Kew Gardens to the north, Woodhaven and Ozone Park to the west, South Ozone Park to the South and South Jamaica to the east. The neighborhood was originally home to a large Irish, German and Italian population (Mokha 2014).

According to Carl Ballenas, a local historian, "a part of Richmond Hill was unofficially known as 'Berlin' in the 1800s on account of its large German population" (Mokha).

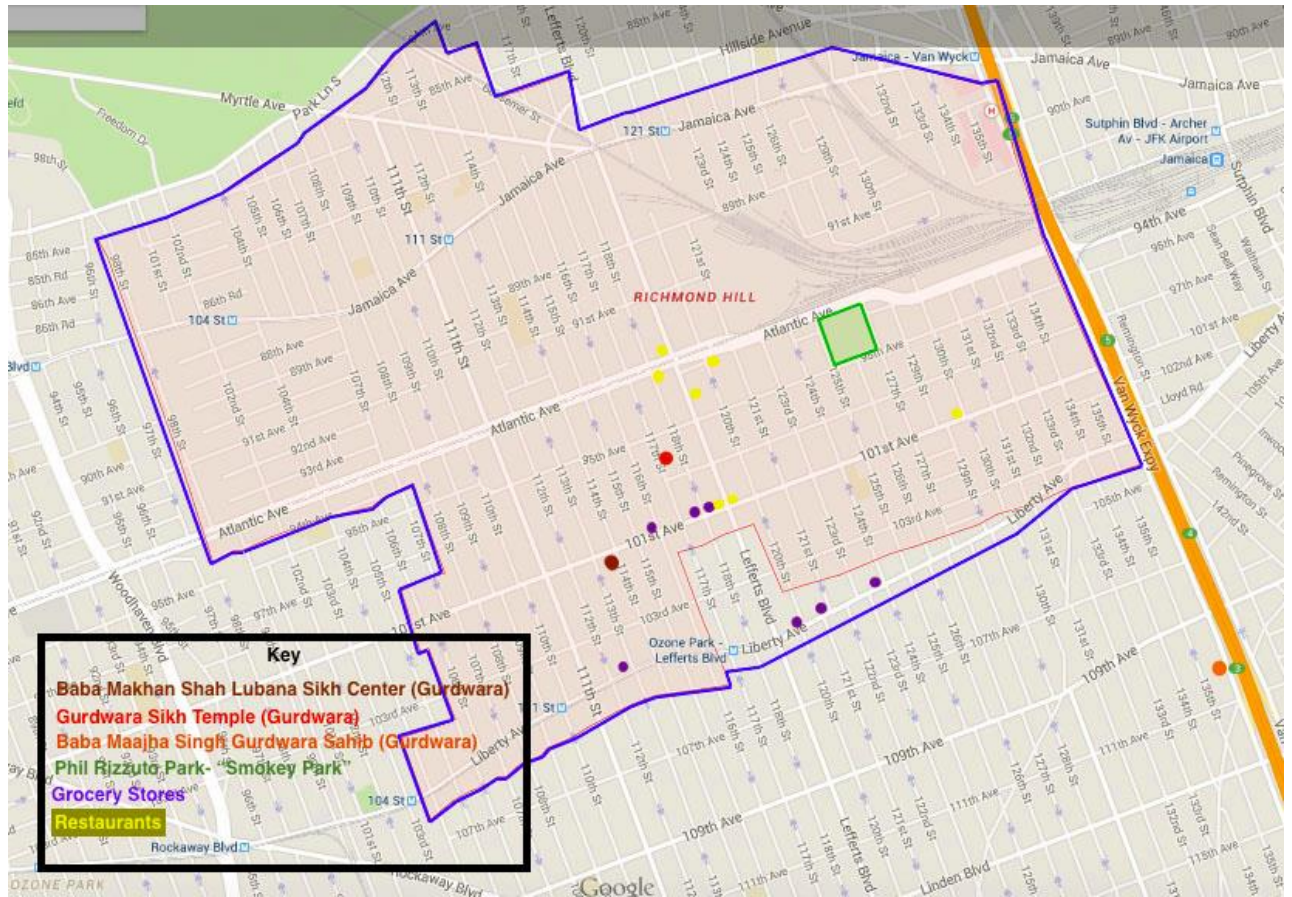


Figure 5. Map of Richmond Hill, Queens highlighting major *Gurdwaras*, the largest park in the area and major Punjabi-owned grocery stores

However, the neighborhood has experienced a drastic demographic shift in the last few decades. As Mokha explains, "a large number of European immigrants were drawn to the area to work in the [Long Island] Railroad repair shops. But many left for bigger homes elsewhere, making way for the newer immigrants from India, South America and the Caribbean" (Mokha). During the summer of 2011, while working on a redistricting project with Seva NY in order to create more up-to-date political

representation of the Richmond Hill community, I learned that there has been a drastic amount of white flight in the community in the last fifty years or so that has led to a totally different social, cultural and political environment.¹⁹ The new Indo-Caribbean and South Asian immigrants purchased and occupied residences being vacated and have also economically vitalized the area through small the plethora of small business that they have opened. In addition to the Caribbean business, Punjabis in the community have also opened up restaurants, clothing shops, grocery stores, delis and cellphone stores in the area. Figure 4 is a map of Richmond Hill that highlights major *Gurdwaras*, Sikh places of worship within the community and major Punjabi-owned restaurants grocery stores. Although this is a minor representation of all the property and businesses now owned by the Punjabi community, it highlights the presence the Punjabi community has built within the community.²⁰

For Punjabi Sikhs, New York's oldest Sikh place of worship, Sikh Cultural Society, was the central focal point that the Punjabi community began to build their enclave around when they first immigrated to the city in large numbers. From my personal experiences growing up in Richmond Hill, I knew that Sikh Cultural Society was the oldest *Gurdwara* in the city and noticed that there were many Punjabi households and business around it. However, I did not know its history and its role in helping form the Punjabi enclave in the community. In order to understand its importance further, I

¹⁹ Being my first project within the community, it was the first time I began to question how the area has changed over time.

²⁰ The restaurants and grocery stores that are noted are major, well-known ones. There are many other Punjabi-owned business throughout the community that are not included. There are many clothing, cell-phone and liquor shops amongst other services. Creating more interactive and in-depth map of Richmond Hill based on Punjabi presence is a potential extended project.

reached out to Dr. Singh: the father of one of my friends who has been in New York since the 1980s and has observed Richmond Hill grow. Although the Sikh Cultural Society *Gurdwara* was already there before he came, I was hoping he would know more about how it started. When I asked him about the history of the *Gurdwara*, he said that, “In 1965, the Sikh community bought a church and started a *Gurdwara* in it. It was the only place of worship for Sikhs living in a 200-mile radius of New York City. Later on, people started moving in the vicinity of Richmond Hill to live” (March 2015). From my understanding, the Sikhs who came to country in the 1960s were looking to build a Sikh place of worship in New York. When they found an old church in Richmond Hill that served their purpose, they built the Sikh Cultural Society *Gurdwara*, which in turn attracted more people to the neighborhood so they could be closer to the new place of worship.²¹ Figure 6 shows the new Sikh Cultural Society *Gurdwara* complex that was recently opened after a fire destroyed the older building. (Please refer to the Appendix on more information on *Gurdwaras*.ⁱ

²¹ Like many other religious groups, many Punjabi Sikhs find it important to have a *Gurdwara* nearby where they live. In Punjab, the immigrants moving to New York predominantly lived in villages that had their own place of worship which they could walk to. Moving to New York, this is something they continued to look to have.



Figure 6. A re-built Sikh Cultural Society *Gurdwara* after a fire in 2003 destroyed the original building

Interested in understanding the history of the *Gurdwara* further, I followed up and asked why they chose the *Gurdwara* to be in Richmond Hill of all places. Was it simply because property was available or was there other reasons? Dr. Singh responded and said,

It was not any property, it was a church for sale. There must be many factors. First, it means this place already had certificate of occupancy for place of worship of God. Sikh community doesn't have to get one. Second, generally once a place of worship of God is always a place of worship due to deed restrictions. So these properties are reasonably priced. Third, you can't build [a] *Gurdwara* anywhere you like [and it won't be] be a nuisance. In this case it was already resolved. It was a church [that is already on sale because it didn't] have enough members. If members are leaving that neighborhood, it means there is a room for another community, Sikhs, to move (March 2011).

According to Dr. Singh, many factors made it easier to build the *Gurdwara* in Richmond Hill. Since there was a church in the place before, the growing Sikh community did not have to worry about getting a certificate of occupancy, a document that certifies that a building complies with specific codes and laws. Additionally, the church that was there before was losing membership, most likely because of the white flight that began in the 1970s in the community. Not having to worry about legal logistics and finding an affordable place allowed the Sikh community to come in and built their own place of worship. Sikh Cultural Society became the focal point of the community and Punjabis

began to build other religious, social, cultural and entrepreneurial institutions around it to serve the needs of the population.

Chain migration is an important aspect of any community's movement to the United States and therefore cannot be ignored when we discuss Punjabi migration to Richmond Hill. According to the Encyclopedia of American Immigration, chain migration occurs "when one migrant facilitates the subsequent migration of another" (249). Because previous immigrants are settled in a specific place, the special social and economic relationships that are fostered within that community further encourage even more people to move to that specific area. U.S. immigration laws prioritizing reunification has also intensified this pattern. Since the Sikh Cultural Society was built in Richmond Hill and the Sikh community started to move in, the Punjabi immigrant community began to build social and communal capital within this area. The building of this place of worship catalyzed Punjabi chain migration to Richmond Hill. A move to New York City began to mean a move to Richmond Hill, Queens in the late 1980s and even up until now.²² As Punjabi immigrants looked to keep as many of their communal and social traditions even when they moved to the United States, Richmond Hill began to serve similar purposes to the villages they were familiar with growing up.

Though Sikh Cultural Society initially sparked Punjabi immigrants to move to Richmond Hill, other places of worship began to be built throughout the community over

²² Many Punjabi families who have now been in the country for a long time are beginning to move out from Richmond Hill to different suburbs, in the same way White immigrants did before them. Long Island with bigger houses and more space is becoming more lucrative as there are a plethora of *Gurdwaras* throughout the tri-state area. However, for newly arriving immigrants, Richmond Hill still serves as the place where they first come because of the existing social capital, cheaper cost of living and connection to someone who current lives there.

the years based on different religious or social lines. According to Khandewal, “the Richmond Hill Gurdwara [Sikh Cultural Society] continued to be the central focus for this community, but some of the new Punjabi families attended newer Sikh or even Hindu houses of worship as well” (2001, 31). More *Gurdwaras*, such as Baba Makhan Shah Lobana, also opened to serve the needs of the growing Sikh population. As Khandewal notes, even Hindu Punjabis built their own institutions. Khandewal also notes that the “Punjabi-presence in the neighborhood was [also] underscored in 1993, when the Jackson Heights—based immigration attorney Kuldeep Singh Kasuri opened a second office on Lefferts Boulevard in Richmond Hill” (31).

The Punjabi Sikh community that initially began around the Sikh Cultural Society slowly began to build itself up and spread out further and further. With the increasing population, there are a plethora of small businesses that have changed the face of the neighborhood—particularly 101 Ave. It is now possible to find grocery stores such as “Singh Farm” dotting the neighborhood. Punjabi restaurants also play a huge role in the community. Not only do these restaurants help support the social and cultural needs of the Punjabi community, they also help to cater to the non-Punjabi community who appreciates the food or the culture.

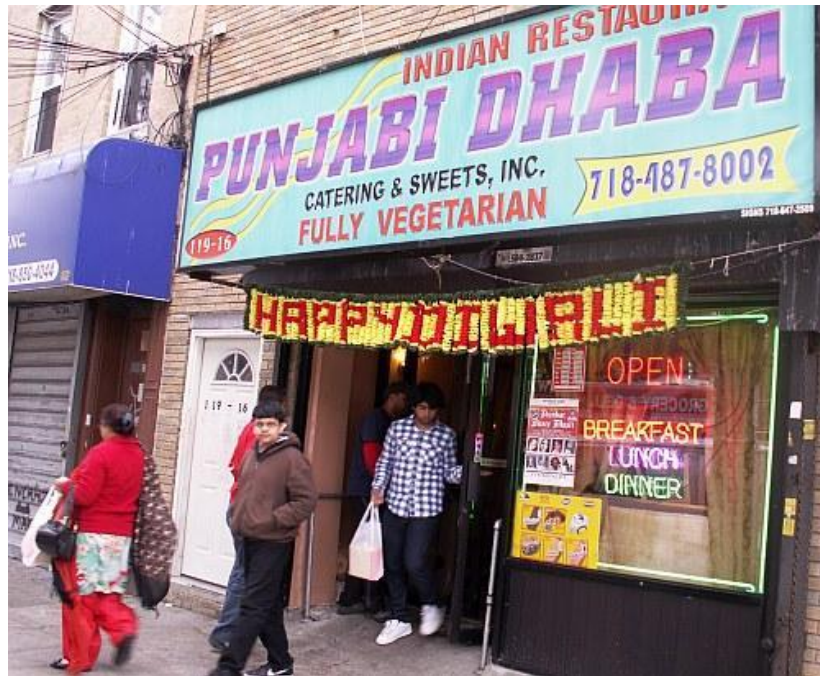


Figure 7. Punjabi Dhaba (“street food shop”) is one of the many restaurants that mark the presence of the Punjabi community and serves their needs

For events like Diwali or any other familial events, businesses like Punjabi Dhaba in Figure 7 help to make sweets and food for those who need them. Although it is difficult to get exact statistics on how many Punjabis there are in the community, it is possible to use numbers for Indians as a proxy to get a sense. The general Indian population in the Richmond Hill area was 8,500 according to the 1990 Census. That number grew to 42,600, according to the Census Bureau’s 2006-08 American Community Survey (Mokha 2014). However, even with these numbers, the rapidly changing area makes these numbers nothing more than an underestimated estimate since not everyone fills the surveys out. (Please refer to the Appendix for an extended discussion on as to why this is.)ⁱⁱ

Although the transformation of Richmond Hill by newly-arrived immigrants is fascinating in many ways, the picture is not all so glorious as Richmond Hill has its

abundance of problems. Though immigrant groups face a diverse set of challenges during assimilation, it is important to acknowledge structural challenges in the community. Political engagement is one of the major issues in Richmond Hill that is keeping people living within the area from progressing. A widely acknowledged problem on the city level, in addition to a really low voter turnout, is the lack of engagement with the U.S. Census. Because of documentation issues, language barriers and cultural stigmas, Richmond Hill has some of the city's lowest participation rates when filling out these important forms that help to determine the amount of resources that are allocated to the area (Kirk 2014). The politicians and political institutions that are in place in the community are also not without faults. In the district that Richmond Hill falls under, political corruption is a serious problem as multiple leaders have pleaded guilty to different charges over the years (Grace 2011). For a community that needs as much support on the governmental level as possible, there is not much happening on the local government level to help support this growing demographic. Focusing specifically on youth, there are also many issues related to harassment, discrimination, mental health, violence and a lack of proper communal and educational resources which I will discuss in different capacities throughout the body chapters.

Focus and Argument

Given the background and history of Punjabi Sikh immigration and the formation of the Punjabi enclave in New York City, Richmond Hill, Queens is now a vibrant community with particular challenges. Though Punjabi immigrants faced many

difficulties in their migration over and founding of the community, the children of these immigrants have developed their own identity and also face a different set of challenges growing up in urban America. Through this thesis, I closely analyze the intersectional challenges that Punjabi youth as first-generation, predominantly low-income teenagers and young men and women face in the inner-city New York enclave of Richmond Hill.²³ Punjabi Sikhs have migrated and made homes in enclaves all across North America, notably in places such Surrey in the British Columbia province of Canada, Brampton in Ontario province of Canada and in the U.S. State of California (Daily Sikh Updates 2014). These areas with high concentrations of Punjabi Sikhs have been studied by scholars. However, Richmond Hill is home to the highest concentration of Punjabi Sikhs on the East Coast and has not been studied to the same extent. My subjects will specifically be youth who live predominantly in this area and bordering neighborhoods (Daily Sikh Updates 2014).²⁴ Although the youth I study do not represent the entire community, understanding the experience of the youth is a gateway into understanding the contemporary experiences of a growing demographic.

The underlying purpose that drives my research and analysis is to understand the complex factors that affect the experiences of young people and the key barriers they face within their upbringing—barriers that have the potential to prevent assimilation and

²³ For the purposes of my research, I refer to anyone who was either born in the country or came from Punjab at an early age and were brought up in the United States as first-generation.

²⁴ Surrey, Canada is the area with the highest number of Sikhs at 120,000, 42% of the population. Richmond Hill is supposedly the second most populated area with a significant Sikh population as a percentage of total population. Daily Sikh Updates cite Sikhs as 38% of the total population but does not give a concrete number of how many people there actually are. As measuring the total population of Punjabi Sikhs is difficult, there is a need for a deeper analysis and investigation of these numbers.

achieve the economic and scholarly success that their parents hoped for when immigrating to the United States. The obstacles that Punjabi youth growing up in Richmond Hill are essentially rooted in institutional, communal and cultural challenges. Like other immigrant youth in urban America, Punjabi youth face a plethora of external and intrinsic problems related to their integration. Many are raised in inner-city areas in which poverty, weak educational institutions, discrimination and lack resources are integral to their experience. Internally, segmented assimilation and intergenerational conflicts produce unique challenges that are particular to specific ethnic groups in different spaces. Though Punjabi youth face similar issues to other youth growing up in urban enclaves, the particular cultural conflicts that they face within the particular social environment puts them in a unique position. Looking specifically at communal, gender, educational and class barriers that youth constantly face growing up, there is an inherent rift between the immigrant generation and their children that underlies various aspects of their lives—affecting the manner in which they navigate spaces and obtain upward social mobility.²⁵

Research Situation and Theoretical Framework

Though the Punjabi Sikh Diaspora has set its root in the United States for well over a hundred years now, an analysis of Punjabi American experiences within academia

²⁵ When looking to analyze the challenges of first-generation Punjabi youth in Richmond Hill, it is important to understand the plethora of complex and intricate factors at play. What makes this a challenging project is that a majority of these issues are intersectional, that many factors are constantly having an influence on both the development of these young people and the problems they face on a daily basis. Though I might separate the issues of gender, class, education and identity, the issues that youth face are intersectional and are in play simultaneously.

is still emerging—particular studies that look at youth. In addition, the community is continuing to grow as families continue to have children and through continued immigration. The narrative of this recent group's integration, assimilation and contemporary challenges is still unfolding. Despite the ability to build off a consolidated group of literature about Punjabi youth, it is important to highlight and acknowledge the work of scholars that does exist and how it has been instrumental in allowing me to further understand this demographic and to balance my own views. I will refer the work of scholars throughout, especially that of Diditi Mitra who has done some great scholarly investigation into the Punjabi community in New York and their immigration and recent current experiences. She is a Professor of Sociology at Brookdale Community College in New Jersey. Her area of focus is racial and ethnic stratification and international migration with a focus on South Asian Americans, particularly the Punjabi community.

In 2008, Mitra published an extensive article titled Punjabi American Taxi Drivers. Conducting forty semi-structured interviews with forty immigrant Punjabi taxi drivers in the New York Metropolitan, her purpose is to analyze their class and racial experiences to articulate the specific racialization of different non-white groups, their racial identity formation, and their contribution to the existing racial order. Amongst all her findings, she concludes that the Punjabi American respondents of her study demonstrated an awareness of their subordinate class and race position within the American social order (311). The theories she presents on immigration and racialization in her study transcend the taxi drivers she discusses to the next generation of Punjabi Americans living in Richmond Hill. Because of Punjabi domination of the taxi industry

and the struggles associated with it, there are major implications on the upbringing of youth whose parents are taxi drivers or work in the service economy. A dependency on these industries lead to issues of social status, cash flow and the type of social capital that is available for youth within the community.

Perhaps one of the most vital texts for my study, Mitra's book titled Punjabi Immigrant Mobility in the United States: Adaption Through Race and Class (2012). It tells the story of the moment of the arrival of Punjabi immigrants to their gradual adaption to America. The book works towards answering how so many Punjabi immigrants find themselves behind the wheels of taxis and how race and class influence settlement patterns, class, assimilation, adjustment, reasons for immigration and sense of belonging. She concludes that race and social class are influential in the lives of the immigrants from the moment they come to the country, stays with them through their job search which directs them to the taxi industry and their interactions with law enforcement and passengers while working. Not only is the context about the Punjabi community foundational and extremely useful for my thesis, I build off this very theory and argue that the race and social issues she discusses have moved past just the immigrants themselves and onto their children. However, as Mitra focuses on race and class issues within the Punjabi community, I call to attention another layer of challenge that youth face on top of these issues. Apart from race and class challenges, Punjabi teenagers and young adults also face the challenge of navigating the cultural values and expectations of two cultures that do not always agree.

In addition to Mitra's work, Punjabi immigration and key challenges that this ethnic minority faces on a global scale has begun to surface in scholarly articles and research studies over the past decade. Looking at overall Sikh migration, many Sikhs chose to settle in United Kingdom, Canada and Australia amongst other places. As India was a former British colony, migrating to these countries could have proven to be easier because of their familiarity with English or the British regime. Dr. Pritam Singh, a professor at Oxford Brookes University in England, co-edited the first book written about Punjabi identity, which traces the history and development of this identity from pre-colonial times to the present day (1999). In addition to a discussion about their role within this global context, there is also a pool of literature that focuses on immigrant Sikh communities in Canada where there is large Sikh population. In one of the earliest studies, James Chadney (1984) discussed the assimilation process of the Sikh diaspora in Vancouver. Similarly, Archana Verma (2002) analyzed the development of Punjabi enclaves within the urban landscape of Canada. Because there are much more limited scholarly works focusing on the Punjabi Sikh community in the United States, looking at parallel studies based on urban areas in Canada is helpful to understand the American narrative.

One particular study that is foundational for my own thesis is Jageet Kaur Gill's dissertation titled "Exploring Sikh youth in Toronto and issues of identity" (2005). Not only is Gill's literature review helpful in providing a concise overview of various issues related to the diaspora, but also her focus specifically on the challenges that young people face is critical for my work. Gill's dissertation concludes that there are many extrinsic

and intrinsic factors at play in influencing the identity of Punjabi Sikh youth, with institutional racism and cultural practices and pressures being at the forefront. Mitra, as a sociologist, focuses on structural inequalities of the Punjabi community. On the other hand, Gill is an anthropologist who offers a more holistic approach by including cultural conflicts that youth face as well. In conjunction with other writing, this well-written dissertation serves as a model for my own work as it also shares the same mission of analyzing and understanding major problems that Punjabi youth in urban enclaves face.

To supplement the scholarly works about the Punjabis, I will utilize and implement different theoretical frameworks to support my ethnography. There are many key theories and assumptions related to the migration of one country to another that are also applicable to the Punjabi American experience. The theories of Maria Hernandez in “Psychological Theories of Immigration” (2009) and Chris Lee in “Sociological Theories of Immigration: Pathways to Integration for U.S. Immigrants” (2009) are important to highlight. Popular in sociology, an important theory I refer to often is segmented assimilation: the process that is different for different groups depending on the influences of the social environment and individual groups and behaviors. Some groups might assimilate to the values of the new nation and obtain upward social mobility while others may not in the same capacity. Also important for anthropology, segmented assimilation articulates how the unique social environment and group behavior is what really makes the experience of one demographic different from others. Another important framework is acculturation theory. It defines assimilation as a multidimensional process, which includes attitudes, values, behaviors, language, and cultural identity, in which the

immigrant does not disregard the values of the country of origin, but rather adjusts values while adapting to those of the host society.

When discussing the different components within the relationship between American-born children and their immigrant parents, it is also important to mention the work of Kasnitz, Waters, Mollenkopf in Inheriting the City: the Children of Immigrants Come of Age (2008). This book analyzes how immigrant groups fare relative to native groups and what major distinctions are. It provides an in-depth look at how the first generation, the generation that is born here, is integrating to American mainstream. As this is relevant to Punjabi youth in Richmond Hill, the definition and discussion of assimilation and cultural conflicts provides a framework that helps to further understand the obstacles I am looking to understand.

The specificity of my topic poses unique challenges because of a lack of a consolidated literature about Punjabi youth. As a result, my research will build upon a variety of parallel literature or subtopics. Gender double standards Through supplementing the theories and knowledge of others with my own data and analysis, I am able to fill a gap in the literature by presenting my own revelations about Punjabi youth in New York and their assimilation process—inevitably working towards creating a more diverse portrayal of the Punjabi Diaspora. My thesis will hopefully shed light on the complex narrative of Punjabi American youth growing up in urban enclaves in a way that has not been done before. Through the course of my research, I want to observe and understand major challenges of Punjabi youth growing up in New York City. In addition to laying out what these larger problems are, I question which challenges are institutional

and structural that affect other immigrant groups and which challenges emerge from cultural conflicts. In my analysis, the major trends I constantly noticed across all the interviews were how salient communal pressures, gender double standards, educational challenges and a lower socioeconomic class were for all the youth.

Methodology

Focusing specifically on urban Punjabi youth in New York poses some problems when it comes to the quantitative research aspect of this project. Because of the nature of the Punjabi diaspora in New York, it is very difficult to get accurate numbers on how many people live in the city. As a resident and a community organizer with Seva NY, a non-profit in Richmond Hill working to address the lack of information, assistance, organization and resources within the community, I was able to directly experience how difficult this task is.²⁶ As Richmond Hill undisputedly has the highest concentration of Punjabis in the city, one of the major endeavors of Seva NY in the past few years was to seek more just representation by the government by getting more people to fill out the United States Census. However, since many people did not understand the significance of this form, many families chose not to fill it out—causing an inaccurate representation of the true makeup of the area. Getting accurate information for the allocation of municipal, city, state or federal funds is complicated by this lack of awareness of its importance and a worry that somehow the government will use this information against them. This worry comes from the fact that a significant portion of the community has documentation

²⁶ Although the non-profit is not a religious organization, *Seva* translates to selfless service and is an important concept within Sikhism.

issues. Even though many within the community have their permanent resident cards or are citizens, there are people who are not completely legal and are here under political asylum.

Whether it's the fear of the state evoked by state persecution and violence in Punjab or it is because of deep history immigration, information collecting and any relationship between Punjabi people and the government is complicated further. Because of this level of informality, in addition to figuring out how many people live here, figuring out the average or median income for people within this community also becomes difficult. Furthermore, not knowing the general numbers about the population makes it difficult to figure out the number of youth in the area and their specific family incomes in relation to a national scale. However, it is possible to look at data for South Asian youth in New York City to provide a rough estimate.

	all SA youth	Bangladesh	India	Indo-Caribbean	Pakistan	other SA	all youth
<i>all boroughs</i>	102,224	27,596	23,972	21,421	19,565	9,670	1,995,187
Queens	64,446	14,839	17,838	17,895	7,846	6,028	516,480
Brooklyn	19,354	6,731	1,825	1,783	7,788	1,227	662,949
The Bronx	8,294	4,529	1,055	1,125	1,189	396	417,266
Manhattan	5,890	1,386	2,006	219	843	1,436	276,711
Staten Island	4,240	111	1,248	399	1,899	583	121,781

Table 1. NYC South Asian Youth, national origin and borough (South Asian Youth Action, 2013)

According to Table 1, there are 17,838 Indian youth who live in the borough of Queens. Although being Indian denotes coming from a plethora of different regions with many languages, Punjabi youth do make up a large portion of the Indian population in Eastern Queens in Richmond Hill and other surrounding neighborhoods. There is no accurate

way to say how much of this percentage identifies as Punjabi, but it is safe to assume that a significant portion of this number is made up of Punjabi Sikhs.

Though quantitative might be limited to general South Asian numbers, my data collection and methodology largely depend on my ethnographic work supplemented by scholarly articles and books—an approach that offers a distinctive perspective that statistics always cannot. I will heavily rely on my past involvement with Seva NY as community organizer and my current endeavor to develop the youth program mentioned in the introduction. ROOP’s mission is to create a sustainable leadership development program for middle school to high school-aged students aimed towards personal and academic development. Although the program is still in its developmental states, the numerous meetings and workshops we have organized reveal the larger issues at hand—allowing me to collect ethnographic throughout the past year. Since January of 2014, we have had more than seven workshops in addition to the organizing meetings and recruitment sessions necessary to make the program successful as possible with limited time and resource constraints. A majority of these workshops have taken place in Richmond Hill, either at the Seva NY office, the Queens Public Library or at my family house. The conversations from ROOP serve as a large basis of my data.²⁷

Not only am I one of the handful community organizers my age in the neighborhood, I have grown up in Richmond Hill and my family has lived here for more than a decade now. Previously, my family lived in Jamaica, Queens an area that borders

²⁷ Although Seva NY and ROOP are experiences I have had in the community that inform my research, they are separate organizations and initiatives. Seva NY receives funding from larger organizations and has been operating in the neighborhood for almost a decade. ROOP is relatively new and we used their office space when needed because of my personal connection.

Richmond Hill—a neighborhood that is considered an extension of the enclave. Using the rapport that I have within the community I am studying, my fieldwork is supplemented by extensive interviews that I conducted with individuals who fall within my target demographic. With the hopes of getting a diverse as perspective as possible within the time constraints of navigating between Columbia and Richmond Hill, I interviewed twelve different Punjabi youth from the neighborhood—six males and six females. In terms of age, the youngest informant was a ninth grader in high school, approximately 14 years old, and the oldest was a recent college graduate, approximately 22 years old. Though I was open to interviewing anyone from the community who identified as Punjabi youth, it worked out that the six males wore turbans and the females did not. In terms of the structure of the interviews, a majority of them were one-on-one. However, there were two interviews that I conducted in which there I asked questions to two informants together.²⁸ Each interview lasted from an hour to two hours, depending on the informant's availability. Please refer to the interview questions in the Appendix.ⁱⁱⁱ For the safety and security of my informants, I have also changed every informants name to a generic Punjabi name that I assigned them. Although I may refer to their involvement or their schooling, I attempt to keep their personal details to a minimum even if they expressed with me they are comfortable with me writing their names.

To understand intergenerational problems on a deeper level, I also initially planned to interview five parents—including my own. These formal interviews would

²⁸ Though I thought the group interviews might be problematic because one person might influence the other, it ended up not being an issue. The group interviews only consisted of two people and, in those instances, the two people agreed, disagreed, and debated about the different questions I asked—providing even more data.

have been helpful to get a deeper understanding of the intergenerational gap. However, due to time constraints and the schedule of potential informants, this was not possible. Even when I tried to pick a time with my parents, conflicts constantly arose between family engagements and their work. Additionally, I was able to gather a lot of insight from my interviews with youth so, in turn, I decided to focus on their experiences for the my thesis. Considering myself a low-income, first-generation Punjabi youth, a portion of my ethnographic data will also come from my own personal experiences and family. Although I will discuss the potential bias behind this, using these experiences as a secondary perspective is helpful in understanding whether the issues that informants bring up extend beyond their individual experiences. Using my experience organizing within the community and growing up in the same environment as informants, I hope to use supplement my ethnography in whatever way possible.

Acknowledging My Bias

The purpose of my study is to dive in and explicate the story of a specific immigrant that helps to add to the diversity of the nation. But why exactly have I chosen this subject and what is it about the factors of their experiences that pull compel me to write about them? What draws my interest is profoundly related to my personal identity and affiliation to the topic. I myself am a Punjabi youth who grow up in Richmond Hill, New York. A member of one of the largest enclaves of its kind, I have witnessed firsthand how cross-generational, race, class, religious and educational issues impact the

collective experience of Punjabi Americans. It is important to acknowledge that my distinctive position within the community I am studying creates different aspects of bias.

In her study of her own graduating high school class from Newark, NJ, anthropologist Sherry Ortner points out some of the challenges and potential biases that emerge from being both an “insider” and a researcher. Citing other “native ethnographers”, she says “being a ‘native’ among the people one studies makes the work both easier and more difficult, no more and no less complex than standard other-culture fieldwork, but certainly differently complex” (2003, 17). Similarly, I am faced by a particular set of challenges that emerge when one is an integral part of the community they are studying. As mentioned, the majority of my ethnographic data is the result of various community organizing initiatives within Richmond Hill and the Punjabi community that I have personally been a part of. In addition, my experiences within my own family’s immigration and assimilation play an important role in serving as windows into the experiences of the diaspora. Though my insider’s perspective is valuable, my integral role within the community itself can be problematic.

The first form of bias in both my research and analysis comes from my preconceived notions about Punjabi youth. In essence, I am not working with a clean slate because my personal stake in and experiences as a member of the community have already created many perceptions about this collective group. Unlike ethnographers who tackle unfamiliar cultures and phenomena, I already have a deeper connection to what I am writing about. However, though first hand knowledge and an insider’s perspective are really valuable, I do lack the increased objectivity of an outsider. By primarily using my

personal initiatives and experiences, I am potentially limiting myself to the specific group of youth I know and potentially not being aware of all the diverse experiences that might occur within Punjabi youth in Richmond Hill.²⁹ What is the case for my immediate circles and me may not be true for all my subjects and it is important to point out when the information that I cite comes from a prior knowledge. Before diving deeply into my analysis, I listed a few characteristics that initially come to mind when I think of the community collectively. For me, Punjabi youth like to have fun and are positive, resilient and hardworking—values that reflect the overall community. However, many not as happy associations also come to mind. There are many who work extremely hard and others who seem to be “lazier”. For example, from an organizing perspective, I have worked hard to put on an event but there are times when many people say they will attend but they do not. This is a slightly negative experience that I have had that played a subconscious role in my research and analysis. Yet, my research gave me deeper insight with the different challenges that youth are facing and why they might not come to the events I help to organize.

Secondly, incorporating my personal story also creates some room for distortion within the narrative. Attempting to understand my life in retrospect within the larger scope of Punjabi youth opens up the door for me to use experiences that might not be the most relevant to the experiences of others. My emotions and memories about particular instances may inherently gear my research towards preconceived ideas without always

²⁹ For example, a majority of my experiences with youth like myself is pertinent to first-generation youth who have spent most of their life growing up in New York. My ethnographic data has not been as strong when it comes to dealing with youth who immigrate here more recently.

being aware of it. In order to mitigate this distortion, I constantly crosschecked the experiences that I had with the youth I interviewed and other Punjabi youth that I personally know. I made an effort to only use personal stories that I know resonate with others in the community.

A third potential bias comes from my emotions and passions for my subjects. Throughout the past few years, I have been dedicated to helping youth succeed and overcome the obstacles they may be facing. My empathy for the group might make me portray my subjects in an overly positive light. Or for particular points, I might also compare the young people I am writing about with myself. For example, if youth fail to take my advice or any help I offered them, I perhaps be personally upset with them—also potentially distorting my writing. In order to ensure that my personal experiences do not lead me to distort or overly sympathize with my subjects, it is important in my analysis that I separate what perceptions are mine from the perceptions of the youth that I am trying to capture.

Because of this personal stake in my work within the community, I never carried myself at any point with the intent to simply write a research paper. Rather, as an activist in the community, I was genuinely interested in learning about the youth and figuring out how I could help them best. All of the informants that I interviewed were people I knew through personal connections, Seva NY or ROOP. Since I have a lot in common with the informants and have interacted with them in certain capacities, I was able to build a legitimacy more than of just a researcher—a rapport that would have taken much longer for someone outside the community to achieve. Within the realm of anthropology, there

has been a shift from a desire to study exotic and foreign subjects towards studying “ourselves” as the subject. Insider ethnographers have a very advantageous position to learn about particular communities.

Though these biases are very interesting and almost inevitable within ethnography, a variety of tools could be used to mitigate their effects. By supplementing my narrative and perspective with history and the voice of others, the potential gains of this approach surpass the potential negative incidences. As I mentioned in the section about my sources, I will also work to make my own input and experiences secondary to the youth I interviewed. I will use my informant’s ideas as the main body of information in my analysis and will use my own experiences as a supplement. By not making my story the primary narrative, I will try to tell the narrative of the entire demographic as best as possible. In an attempt to be conscious of my own biases, I will note when my own pre-conception does not match with the informant.

“A Tree Without Leaves”

In February of 2011, the White House hosted Conference on Bullying Prevention. Hundreds of youth, educators and community organizers were invited to participate in this forum dedicated to fighting the bullying epidemic seizing the nation. Many Muslim and Sikhs were also invited to partake because of the surge of in-school violence and xenophobia that ensued after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. As the conference opened up the space for many young people to come and share their experiences, Zoravar Singh represented the Sikh Coalition—a large Sikh American civil rights organization. Notably

tall with a wide frame, this 18 year old is surprisingly extremely timid given his physical presence. With a shaky voice that got more confident as he went, he began to share different parts of his story in hopes that it would bring light to a larger challenge:

In 2003, in the summer before middle school, I came home one day and told my dad, “I want to cut my hair.” I was eleven years old. “Are you sure?” my dad kept asking. “Your mom worked so hard to grow your hair, and [your decision] is very bad because of our religion.”

I told him again, “I want to cut my hair.” I had made my decision. I didn’t want to look different from everyone else. Finally, my dad took me to the barber shop, and they cut my hair. I couldn’t look at myself in the mirror. I just saw hair falling off. I thought of leaves falling from a tree, and a tree doesn’t look good without leaves. The leaves make it look more beautiful.

My mom was the one who used to comb my hair every morning, wash my hair, put oil on my hair, and braid my hair. She was shocked and sad to see how different I looked. She said, “I worked so hard to grow your hair, and you just cut it off.” When I had my hair cut, I didn’t feel as bad about it as I did later, when I was exposed to Sikhism more and I learned that cutting your hair is disrespecting your religion. When you’re baptized, the Five Beloved Ones tell you that you are not supposed to cut your hair. That’s part of your five Kakkars, your five sacred symbols. Now I know it was the wrong decision, but at the time I was forced by the way people treated me.

After I cut my hair, I started acting differently. All the bullying had changed me, and I guess I started acting like the kids who bullied me. I turned into one of them. I was rude and mean to other people. I was becoming a bad person.

I started hanging around with bad kids. They would ask me, “Do you want to smoke?” I would tell them no, but sometimes I wondered, *Should I be in a gang? Should I join them?* (Zoravar Singh Narrative 2011)

Fortunately, despite the challenges that Zoravar faced, he did not fall into these negative influences that surrounded him and what he considered to be a darker childhood. His resilience, work ethic and faith are to be admired as he regrew his hair and has become a driving force behind the organizing of ROOP. Unfortunately however, his story is far from having a happy ending. Having his education from low-performing academic

institutions in Queens, he has struggled academically throughout his time in college and is currently in his fifth year—with the hopes of finishing up after winter and summer classes. His struggle in the classroom seems minute in front of the loans and exhaustion he is facing to get his education. Not only does he work a part-time job delivering pizza, Zoravar wakes up at 5am to commute to Stony Brook from home: a commute that adds an extra three and a half hours to his day. His family recently sold the house they owned because of debt and now live in a two-bedroom apartment on rent. On top of these financial struggles, Zoravar mentions that his father is always cursing him out because of his dissatisfaction with him and everything else going on in the family and his mother is always sick. With all these challenges, both his family and Zoravar himself is forced to deal with a variety of depression and anxiety issues that have been detrimental to his development.

To truly understand all the challenges that youth like Zoravar face, it is necessary to understand what the different components of these problems and their roots. His personal narrative and the challenges he is currently facing as a 21 year old are reflective of the complex familial, racial and cultural challenges that Punjabi youth face growing up in under-resourced areas. But just as importantly, what keeps Zoravar going despite the various obstacles that he faces? How does it shape the adult that he is becoming? What makes Ajeet feel like “a warrior” who has to fight for his rights in his “I Am” poem in the introduction? In order to understand the major obstacles that Punjabi youth in New York City face and how they are connected to institutional and assimilation problems, I will discuss how the social environment of Richmond Hill is based upon this idea of the

“communal eye”. As parents and their generation works to ensure that their children maintain certain values, a major cultural conflict arises between youth and the expectations placed upon them—particularly relevant when it comes to specific gender norms. Following this, I will dedicate a chapter to educational challenges that youth face—both institutionally and within the community. Moving forward, I will tie in educational challenges to class challenges. As many of the youth would be considered low-income, there is an inherent component of socioeconomic class that plays a strong role within their social mobility and experiences. Looking at the challenges of youth through these three larger topics will allow us to articulate the intersectional barriers that youth constantly face.

Chapter 1

A Communal “Eye”: Navigating Punjabi Gender Norms and Cultural Conflicts

On January 3rd 2015, my family crowded together in a large black Suburban as we went around the neighborhood picking up as many cousins as we could fit in the car. Each family unit was only supposed to send a one or two of members to this congregation, as these types of meetings are not necessarily publicized. Yet, it seemed that everyone from my mother’s side of the family wanted to go regardless. Energy buzzed in the air, not only for my parents, aunts and uncles but also for my cousins and I. We were excited, nervous and confused as to what was going on. Noor, my mother’s brother’s daughter, is a 24-year-old graduate student and her family is in the process of finding her a suitable boy to marry.³⁰ A family friend of ours thought that Noor and a young man from Indiana he knew would be a good connection so they arranged a meeting at someone else’s house. Traditionally, the family friend or person who makes the connection facilitates a meeting between the two families. The young man we went to meet is a Ph.D candidate in Dental Sciences in Indiana and came with his family for this occasion. Coming into it, he knew he was going to be judged on his looks, what he studies and what his aspirations are as these were the major criterion that have always been used to find a suitable partner.

³⁰ In order to protect my cousin’s identity and respect her story, I have changed her name to Noor as a pseudonym which I do for all my informants.

At first, both the young man's family and my family sat together in the living room. It was quite clear that our family outnumbered his. Since his family is based in Indiana, only his brother and his sister-in-law were there. As everyone sipped on cups of *cha* (tea) and sweets, my family sat on the couch and chairs in a circle in the living room—all eyes are on the potential groom. In the moment, I am not sure if I am the only one who felt awkward or tense as there were a few extended periods of silence as eyes jumping around the room. I knew that this is a practice that happened often, but I was not expecting it to happen so soon for people that I grew up with. The family friend who made the connection continued to talk about the details of the young man's family

The only person who was not in the upstairs living room was Noor. Traditionally, it is custom that the woman sits in another room in the house. In this case, she was waiting in a room in the basement with some of our family members. To relay my initial perceptions of the potential groom and what is going on upstairs to Noor, I went downstairs. I was also very curious to hear her thoughts about all this. What made her agree to agree and follow such a tradition? She said she was nervous and was not very talkative as a result. Though I have known Noor for my whole life, we rarely confide our feelings to each other, so I was not surprised if she did not feel comfortable sharing her true feelings with me. As she struggled to fix her hair because she knew she would have to meet the family soon, she told me that she had no idea that this was happening until earlier in the day. After our family talked with the young man and his family, the potential groom and his family came downstairs and got a chance to talk to Noor in the same way we did with him. In a few moments that I had with Noor when the ordeal was

over, I asked her what she thought. Knowing that my response may be relayed forward to others in my family, she replied to me saying, “it’s up to my parents. It’s their decision”. When I tried to get her to open up more and say what she really felt, she was not too responsive.

When the meeting was over, we all went our separate ways and headed home. Once back, my father and I sat down to share our thoughts about the person we met who might become our relative and our thoughts on the situation. Amongst the plethora of ideas he expressed, without necessarily knowing it, he articulated the perspective of his immigrant generation and a major pressure that emerges within assimilation for first-generation youth like his children. He spoke about how important it is to be well educated, well spoken, respectful and responsible. I asked him why he found these specific qualities so important. With a light hearted-tone and shrugged shoulders, he said, “in our culture, we have to pretend. That’s what it’s all about. It’s about presenting yourself intelligently”. He went on to say that he knows we’ll go to college, spend time with a lot of folks, and probably do *pute kam*. Translating to “bad things”, my father referred to things such as drinking, doing drugs, smoking, having any romantic relationships with a person of the opposite gender, and not maintaining our Punjabi heritage and assimilating to other things that are not found to be acceptable—such as clubbing or wearing certain clothes. For my father, maintaining your “face in our society” by upholding Punjabi Sikh ideals of integrity and respect is one of the crucial duties of a Punjabi child—parameters defined by his generation. Although many of these things are expected of young people from many societies, a young person’s failure to comply to

these parameters is seen a detriment to the family's respect and integrity and inherently affects the way both the individual and family are perceived in society.

The idea of presenting yourself intelligently and maintaining respect is one that is deeply rooted in the traditions of Punjabi immigrants homelands. However, in the context of Richmond Hill, this concept and the push for maintaining certain traditions is enforced by all members of the community, not just by parents and immediate family. The community as a whole, through its social networks, "watches" what youth do and asserts their opinions and beliefs upon them. The Punjabi community does this either through direct remarks to youth in one-on-one conversations, conversations with the youth's parents, or through gossip between community members themselves about specific people. I refer to this communal pressure to adhere to certain Punjabi traditions and values and the reinforcement of these ideologies through the social networks in the Punjabi enclave as the "communal eye". As many youth felt that people in the community were constantly watching them, the need to maintain certain traditions creates an environment that many youth mentioned to problematic.

By understanding where parents are coming from and the social environment that exists in the Punjabi Sikh enclave of Richmond Hill, it is possible to understand that a plethora of challenges that youth in the community face emerges from the tension between the conflicting values of their parents and those of the American world. In this chapter, I will define key cultural values that Punjabi parents attempt to instill within their children, the resulting atmosphere, and which cultural conflicts are particularly salient for youth. One set of these conflicts that is especially salient for youth that I will

discuss at length has to do with conflicting gender norms and double standards. Though Noor mentioned that she is okay with what her parents decide about her marriage partner and the trajectory of the rest of her life, the situation she is caught in is reflective of the challenging circumstances that youth can find themselves in—circumstances that extend beyond their individual choice but are tied to the Punjabi community at large.

Roots of the Communal Eye

Not engaging in activities that would be deemed controversial in the Punjabi community, such as having romantic relationships before marriage or engaging in drugs, is essentially how to maintain reputation and integrity within the Punjabi community, particularly the community within the enclave of Richmond Hill. The vital importance of keeping a proper reputation comes from the cultural history of Punjab, “the land of five rivers.” Predominantly an agricultural state, most people live in villages where they know each other and rely on each other socially, economically and politically for survival. Like many agricultural cultures, Punjabis have historically used collective and reciprocal strategies to combat the scarcity of resources and lost harvests characteristics of rural life. They recognize and value the importance of service as resources for each other and maintaining relationships with family, no matter how extended.³¹ The more social capital

³¹ A good example of this would be Punjabi weddings. Every time there is a wedding, there is a ceremony where the entire extended family gets together and offers money as a loan to help pay for the cost of the marriage. When my older sister got married, many of my uncles and aunts and their respective families lent my family hundreds of dollars to help. Everyone remembers how much was lent and when a person from another family gets married, that is when you pay back the person who borrowed your money's loan. In April of 2015, my mom's brother's son is getting married and my dad is paying back the money they loaned us for my sister's wedding in addition to some extra money to keep the cycle going.

one has, the greater his or her insurance against any potential disaster.³² For the most part, my parents and the parents of many of those I interviewed grew up in this world and value system that stressed honor, integrity, selflessness and dependency. However, this collectivist approach contrast the American individualism that Punjabi youth growing up in the West are surrounded by.³³

In her dissertation about Sikh youth in Canada, Gill (2003) brings up the point that in Eastern cultures, such as the South Asian community, parents tend to make life decisions for their children (10). Pushing this even further, the entire village, family or community has a role in what a child studies, who they marry, the friends they keep and how they spend their time. This is the case because these decisions ultimately affect them if everyone is so close and interconnected. As a community that is reliant on one another, everyone in the community has a stake in each other's individual well being.

Within Sikhism, *seva* refers to doing work or service for the benefit of society without any expectation of result or award. Though the Gurus in the history and their teachings heavily stress this concept, it is a concept that extends into the cultural practices of how families operate. However, this concept extends beyond religion and is something that is of expected within the family. According to Gill, the concept of *seva* extends to the home as everyone is expected to support and help the family in whatever way they can. Contrasting Western values of individuality, "values of collectivity, the family unit, and

³² This type of society is characteristic of rural communities all over the world, from Ireland to Melanesia to Punjab and everywhere in between. It is also characteristic of poor urban communities. It is less common in urban communities where people come from different cultures and have less trust of one another, but it can exist and thrive in urban ethnic enclaves like Richmond Hill as it clearly does.

³³ For more about American individualism, please refer to The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism by Max Weber.

showing respect to elders through silence” (9) are the pillars for proper behavior in Punjabi communities. For example, the choosing of Noor’s husband is a decision that is made by the entire family and their decision trumps her ability to choose who she seems the best person for her. In my own family, talking back, yelling or arguing angrily with anyone who is older in the family is deemed to be disrespectful—even if the elder is in the wrong. Many times, disrespecting an elder results in serious scolding, ostracization, and, historically, physical punishment.

Although Richmond Hill Punjabi parents grew up in a country where these values and concepts are widely accepted, this is not the case for first-generation Punjabi youth who grow up in Richmond Hill. Within the Punjabi enclave of Richmond Hill, the core cultural values of selflessness and maintaining respect are something that a majority of immigrants my parent’s age still whole-heartedly believe in and encourage their children to follow. However, there is a dichotomy between these traditions and the public realm that youth now live within the Western world (Gill 10). Gill (2003) constantly describes this tension by saying that youth live “between two worlds.” The first is the world at home and in the community in which youth must abide by the old values and customs of their parents as mentioned before. However, the second world they live in is the Western world they live in within New York City—a world that has its own cultural values and systems that prize individuality and independence. As Punjabi culture emphasizes and prioritizes dedicating oneself to their family as a form of success, this is not necessarily the case in a city that provides many opportunities to spur one’s individuality.³⁴

³⁴ Come back to and add how Western/NYC values are different and clash

Gill (2003) goes on to say that the conflicts between old values and new customs provoke stresses in the family, and result in a re-examination of lifestyles and value systems. Dating, career choices, education and marriage are usually individual decisions in the West, yet South Asian parents usually make life decisions for their children (10). Traditionally, Punjabi households have not been nuclear and extended family members also usually live under one roof. Though it is not always the case, seniority is determined by one's age, which also connotes wisdom. From the perspective of parents, they are wiser, have a deeper understanding of the world and, as my father says often, "knows what is best for his children".³⁵

Because Punjabi culture promotes ideas of selflessness and sacrifice within the home, Punjabi youth feel the pressure of being under surveillance by members of the family who constantly watch and correct them. Preet, a senior at a private university in Brooklyn studying pharmacy, said that she feels that everyone is watching her at home (Interview, January 4th 2015). As her family consist of her parents, aunt, uncle, three cousins, two cousins-in-law, and five kids in a three family house, it is hard to get off the radar as someone is following your every move.³⁶ When deciding which college she should go to or what she should major in, everyone had his or her own input on what is better or more profitable. When it comes to going out and socializing, her parents are sure to make sure they know exactly what she is doing and who she is with to make sure she does not engage in anything they do not agree with. Though smoking, drinking or having

³⁵ Come back to find source

³⁶ Complex family structure also plays a role within the environment that youth grow up in. Unlike traditional American households, it is very rare to just live with your nuclear family.

romantic relationships is something that American parents would also not approve of, Punjabi youth are constantly questioned for even more basic activities—such as spending any time with someone of the opposite gender who is not a family member, working, or even going to a social gathering whose purpose they do not understand.

These sentiments of being constantly watched also extend past the homes of youth and into to the broader community. What is actually happening is that youth feel that the entire community itself encourages these concepts. Because the older generation stresses traditional arranged marriages, not drinking, not maintaining social relationships with people of the opposite sex, youth feel that they constantly have an eye on them to make sure they are not “doing the wrong thing” in their homes and the neighborhood. As a result, when youth are engaging in activities that may be shameful, they are constantly watching out to make sure no Punjabi adult can see them. Even though they personally might not know that adult, there is always a fear that the news of what they are doing will get back to their parents and have ramifications. A large part of the reasoning behind this is that these things deviate youth from their families. However, parents are more so against these activities because they challenge Punjabi traditions and are deemed to be controversial. When a youth engages in activities that the community is against, it jeopardizes the whole family’s reputation and could have far-reaching effects for the young adults who do not necessarily see the ramifications of a tarnished reputation down the line depending on the severity of the youth’s actions. Although I will discuss gender norms in length, a potential consequence that parents constantly bring up is that no one will marry so and so person because of their reputation that has become public

knowledge. Moving past just the idea of maintaining tradition, parents become more concerned about maintaining one's image within the larger community.³⁷

As a result, youth have to navigate this double life: one in which they create a façade to maintain respect and integrity for their communities and the other being the reality of the way they actually navigate their lives that is hidden from parents. Although many youth do engage in socializing or activities their parents might not approve of, it is very rare that they tell their parents because they know it will be disapproved. Even though non-Punjabi American adolescents also refrain from telling their parents about specific things, the stakes for Punjabi youth are higher because they feel directly responsible for the reputation of their family's and bringing any harm to it. Even if a person is very selfless, respectful and is praised by the community for their accomplishments, they still cannot publically declare anything that their parent's generation wouldn't like because it would still not look good for the "image" of both the youth and their families.

Many youth, both younger and older, constantly stressed that they cannot truly be themselves because they know that the community overall would disapprove of their actions because of the clash of western value of individuality with the Punjabi value of collectivity. Although my informants did not articulate the clash in these words exactly, they constantly mentioned how there were many things in regards to their family they had

³⁷ To illustrate this, I can offer a personal example. Although alcohol is against Sikhism, many Punjabi families still engage in this activity. However, there is a pressure from youth, especially boys, to stay away in order to prevent them from engaging in something toxic. However, my parents found out that I drank alcohol on a few occasions before. Though they were upset and scolded me for damaging my health as they saw it, it was just as important that I did not engage in drinking openly or public because it might hurt both mine and my family's reputation.

to worry and think about that their American peers did not have. People like my parents continuously promote traditional values and practices on their own children and youth of the community because they find it an important part of their heritage they want to pass on. Although selflessness for the family is perceived by youth to be a positive thing that they use for inspiration, certain expectations that come with maintaining their Punjabi heritage, such as arranged marriage or seeking certain career paths that have been historically been lucrative like being a doctor, lawyer, engineer, creates a huge sense of pressure on youth that they do not appreciate because they want to have the freedom to make their own choices. In addition to personal marriage and career choices, Punjabi teenagers and young adults express the desire for self-determination. However, it is these communal and familial pressures that make things difficult.

As a result, maintaining core cultural traditions with an atmosphere where social networks inescapably create an environment of annoyance and tension for youth. Though parents do not purposefully want to create stressful environments for the children, the reality is that youth feel that the Punjabi community in Richmond Hill's need to promote certain values of what is righteous is resulting in lack of modernization, gossiping, comparison and shame and guilt within the community. In the process of assimilation into New York, these challenges limit their ability to choose their own path and openly make mistakes and learn from them. Because of these heavy pressures to succeed and maintain traditions, they must always be on their best behavior. Consequently, there is no unlimited ability to experiment and explore American culture.

Youth Sentiment

Almost every single person I interviewed brought up the fact that the way in which the older generation “keeps an eye” on them to be problematic. The way discontent and judgment is passed is through gossiping, is an aspect that youth openly brought up. Loveleen, a 22-year-old born and raised in Richmond Hill and Barnard alum, described Richmond Hill to be a “mini-Punjab.” People live close by to each other like to talk about each other’s business. Loveleen said that she believes “that there is more to life than talking about each other’s suits; what she’s wearing for what occasion and its critique” (Interview, January 8th 2015). She believes that one reason why this happens and why this constant critique is relevant is because of a lack of education and this is a type of coping mechanism.

Karam, a high school senior from the neighborhood, also echoed this sentiment. Karam said “she doesn’t like aunties making assumptions” and they need “transition into the modern world and not talk shit about each other” (Interview, January 11th 2015). Repeatedly, youth mentioned that there was a level of talking or gossiping within the community about the actions of youth that can be demeaning and detrimental to self-esteem. Karam goes on to say that the community judges the entire character of a person through one or two incidents that they might not approve of: such as being caught romantically with another person or drinking. This “tarnishes” one’s reputation as it spreads through the grapevine and she does not think this is fair in as it can really hurt the person’s emotions.

More than just a lack of education, Gagan and Hardev, students who are in their second year of community college and founders of a new local sweatshirt company, also touched upon how local communal pressures have the potential to antagonize young people. When I asked them what are some of the challenges they see within the community, Gagan mentions that he hates it how parents keep tabs on everyone and make comparisons to other youth in the community. He said, “they never absorb what we want to do but always relate it to other youth. ‘He’s doing this, she’s doing that. Why aren’t you doing that too?’” (Interview, January 3rd 2015)³⁸.

Hardev clarifies what Gagan, Karam and Loveleen all hinted at by their examples. The problem is that Punjabis bring each other down through these comparisons. He says that, “no one’s ever happy. Everyone always wants more and more. I’ve never met a Punjabi person who’s happy before.”³⁹ When referring to people wanting more, he refers to both the fact parents always want their children to be like successful children of other parents and the feeling that youth get that the older generation is never satisfied. Perhaps this feeling ultimately emerges emerging from their parents feeling the stress from their own parents and peers.

Combining the gossiping and the comparisons made by the older generation and even among youth themselves produces a lack of freedom of expression: a core American value. When I asked Gurchit, a freshman in high school, what his least favorite thing about Richmond Hill and he responded saying, “he can’t do stupid things” (Interview,

³⁸ Gagan and Hardev are also good friends of mine since middle school. My family has gotten to know their families over the years. Gagan mentioned that I was one of the people he was compared over the years.

³⁹ Potential comparison to the Irish and other ethnicities who have social leveling mechanisms

January 3rd, 2015). From my interpretation, Gurchit seemed to be referring to simply being silly and messing around with his friends. As a young person, he feels that he cannot be goofy in the neighborhood with his friends because he's afraid that word will get back to his father. Similarly, Akaldeep, a freshman at Richmond Hill High School, said that she constantly feels "stuck." She sees her friends and realizes that their families are really strict and feels that "their parents control their kids too much." Because parents are worried about their kids going in a bad direction, meaning doing things that they find morally corrupt, she feels that Punjab youth cannot do anything deemed not to be respectable because their families have to maintain respect. Akaldeep, and the other youth mentioned as well, do not agree with this mentality and mention that it should be changed but have no choice but to be subjected to it within their daily lives.

The anecdote of Noor's meeting of an arranged suitor at the beginning of the chapter poses a good example of how the cultural environment that Punjabi youth grow up in can clash with Western values. After the meeting between the two young adults, both families were happy with the relationship and the match was successful. About two months later, the relationship became official when the two families congregated to perform a ceremony that serves a similar purpose to an engagement. Noor is a person who has been raised in United States for a majority of her life. She is well educated as she graduated from college with honors and is in the pursuit of her master's degree. She has been to Model UN conferences all around the world and has experience from a variety of different work opportunities. From what I know, she is socially adept and has had romantic relationships before. So how is that she is okay with being set up for

marriage entirely by her family? As a person who has shown that she can make perfectly good decisions for herself, it appears as though the major pressures of the environment I in which she lives and the push from her parents to continue their traditions is requiring her to follow this path and it does not come from her own accord.⁴⁰

Gender Norms:
Navigating an Inherently Patriarchal Society

The example of Noor's marriage does much more than just articulates the social environment that Punjabi youth are in. It begins the larger conversation as to what the expectations are for different genders, norms of socialization and how the duty of maintaining integrity is different for different people. As parents grew up in a country where men had certain responsibilities and women others, the extension of those same gendered ideals to Richmond Hill and the United States causes some contention. One major cultural challenge that constantly came up throughout my research was gender and the role of double standards for Punjabi youth. Whether it was through my own personal and familial experiences, or through different duties that youth have because of their gender, or through the interviews I conducted, one thing was absolutely certain—norms of social conduct and behavior are very different for women than for men like me. A lot of the ethnographic evidence supports the claim that the community and environment that women have to navigate is by American standards not only difficult, but also potentially

⁴⁰ Although I never got a chance to directly speak with Noor about how she really feels about everything during her engagement event, I asked my sisters about her thoughts who are closer to her than I. According to them, she was rather sad at the engagement and my sisters saw her crying. She expressed that it is hard for her to be happy because she knows nothing about the guy—providing evidence for the idea she feels pressured into it rather than complying because she feels that she would not be able to find an ideal partner on her own.

misogynistic and disrespectful.

Gender Norms in Sikhism versus Punjabi Culture

Gender is one topic in which there is a fundamental paradox between the Sikh religion and Punjabi practices that play out in Richmond Hill. Sikhism was the first religion to explicitly demand the equality of genders within the Holy Scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib that we turn to for guidance about how to live our everyday lives. There is a particular prayer translation that many youth, especially women, cite within the context of their personal challenges and to support feminist ideals:

From woman, man is born;
within woman, man is conceived; to woman he is engaged and married.
Woman becomes his friend; through woman, the future generations come.
When his woman dies, he seeks another woman; to woman he is bound.
So why call her bad? From her, kings are born.
From woman, woman is born; without woman, there would be no one at all.
(Guru Nanak, Raag Aasaa Mehal 1, Guru Granth Sahib Page 473)

This prayer is written by Guru Nanak who founded the faith and helped to get rid of practices that were horrifyingly unjust toward women in South Asia. It directly tackles any rationale that one may give for gender discrimination. Guru Nanak points out that we all are so dependent on women and, without them, humanity would not exist—doing any harm against them is equivalent to attacking the source of life itself.

Another testament to the importance of equality in Sikhism is the use of last names. Anyone of the Sikh tradition who is a male has the last name Singh and everyone who is a female has the last name Kaur. Singh means lion and Kaur translates to “always

pure” or princess.⁴¹ This was a clever move by the Gurus to ensure that one’s caste was not associated to one’s name. Anyone who was a Sikh was denominated by these two names to ensure an even playing field, regardless of their background. What was also revolutionary about this was that women only kept Kaur as their last name before and after marriage. Their name did not change in the way it does in Western cultures. When a Sikh woman is born, she is Kaur. When she dies, she will also still be Kaur—her identity within the world is not associated by a man and his lineage. This was a way to challenge the dependence of women on their husbands in terms of defining their own identity.

Although Sikhism is widely acknowledged for its revolutionary stances on the equality for women, the story Punjabi females growing up in Richmond Hill tell reveals that the reality is far from offering equality for women. Nowhere in Sikhism is discrimination or unequal practices written or condoned, but there are differences in how each respective gender carries themselves that makes it hard to believe that equality is truly achieved. If a woman were to face an injustice within the Sikh community, there are structures in place to support women and ensure they receive justice. She could appear in a congregation with democratic elements that would decide what the outcome of the situation is. However, the reality is that women are not given the rights and responsibilities. In most Gurdwaras, women are not encouraged to be part of leadership positions and committees that run Gurdwaras and they are predominantly male-dominated. Even at one of the holiest Gurdwaras, the Harmandir Sahib or the Golden

⁴¹ Although Kaur translates into eternal purity or princess, it is important to acknowledge that these are rough translations into English and these translations should not be looked at from a Western context. The concept of purity and royalty have very different connotations in Sikhism from our mainstream American perceptions.

Temple, women are still not allowed to perform *kirtan* (religions hymns) or sit right behind the Guru Granth Sahib.

Amar, a freshman at a private college in Upstate New York, provided further insight into the gap between core Sikh values and actual practices within the community specifically in Richmond Hill. For a long time, one of his aunts was being domestically abused by her husband. Her husband made her life living hell. He eventually took her to India and left her without her passport, permanent residence card or any other proper documentation. Not revealing too many details, Amar explained that she found a way back and eventually pursued legal charges against him. Amar's parents are helping to support her through the process. However, what was even more appalling about the situation was that Amar's father received a phone call from the leaders of a local *Gurdwara*, Sikh place of worship, in Richmond Hill. They asked Amar's father to push Amar's aunt to take her case back because it would ruin the abuser's life, cause him to go to jail and ruin his life. In turn, the *Gurdwara* leaders will force her husband to apologize for his actions. The fact that the leaders of the primary place of organization for the Sikhs called and said that is inherently and disgustingly against the core values of justice that preaches. In pushing Amar's aunt to take her legal case back for the sake of a man's terrible actions, they are promoting misogynistic actions and a lack of sensitivity to these serious communal problems.

Looking back at Punjabi youth specifically, there were not any mentions of gender based abused that was brought up during my interviews. However, this does not mean that gender discrimination is not a rampant issue for female teenagers and young

adults. One of the other major things Karam said she does not like about the Richmond Hill community is the catcalling by both non-Punjabi and Punjabi men and the fact that boys and girls are still not treated equally. ⁴²Both men and women I interviewed pointed out discrepancies and double standards that existed between boys growing up in Richmond Hill and girls growing up in the same environment, particularly when it comes to responsibilities of maintaining respect and image, domestic tasks, norms of socializing and the cultural gender based discrimination that deeply affects women. The “nosiness” and lack of privacy that results from the communal eye directly targets female youth much differently than men. In many cases, the “eye” and pressures of adhering to certain social norms falls heavier on women than men. Because it is harder for women to recover from a tarnished reputation, the stakes of adhering to social norms is even higher. However, what is interesting and even dangerous is that many of these double standards continue to be supported by the youth themselves.

In order to understand the challenges that youth brought up, it is important to provide some context to Punjabi cultural values and norms. Punjabi culture inherently operates as a patriarchal society, perhaps because cultural practices emerged long before the creation of Sikhism. Historically, as is the case for many other cultures, men are supposed to “wear the pants” in the family. They are the ones who are the breadwinners. Back home in Punjab, this meant being a farmer, laborer, military personnel or other service sector worker. When a male came of age, he got a job and helped to support the

⁴² Karam expressed that, a lot of the time, it was groups of young Punjabi men seemingly in the 20s and have recently arrived from India. However, in addition to this specific group, I have also witnessed many Punjabi males who grow up in Richmond Hill also behave in this manner.

family. For the most part, women did not hold formal jobs in which they were economically providing for their families. They may help out with tasks in the fields but their domain was related to home. Their role was predominantly was to cook, clean and take care of the children and the entire family. When a female came of age, she was married off and continued to do domestic chores in the home of her in-laws.

Even though the specific demographic I am focusing on no longer lives within in the place where these norms originate from, these gender norms and the inherent challenges associated with them are still imposed on Punjabi youth.⁴³ For the most part, the sentiments of youth that I interviewed supported that this division of labor between genders existed. There is a strong pressure for men to be successful within their careers and do whatever they can to support their family financially and for women to stay in the home and prioritize the family's wellbeing over everything else. However, a patriarchal society that depends on women being domesticated inherently benefits men over women. When asked one of the major problems within the community is, many cited that boys and girls are not seen as equal: something that came up multiple times in different conversations. Punjabi fathers still continue to have a larger say in important decisions, extending to decisions in their children's lives. Multiple youth cited that their fathers always have the upper-hand when it comes to any significant decision that affects the family (Interview January 10th, 12th).⁴⁴

⁴³ Within the context of the Punjabi community in Richmond Hill, this has changed in some ways. There are many girls who do much more than the domestic tasks at home. Both men and women pursue higher education and hold part time jobs. In this regard, economic gender norms for the family are being challenged. This is related to economic challenges the community faces which I will discuss in Chapter 3.

⁴⁴ From my experience, women can have influence behind-the-scenes. Though not many mothers take up the responsibility of making money for the household, there are a handful of Punjabi mothers I know whose input in decision-making is paramount.

Beyond decision-making, the traditional norms set out for men and women pose unique problems for youth growing up in New York. Karam argued that Punjabi culture overall values the lives of boys much more than the lives of girls—even in the community where we live in currently (Interview January 11th 2015).⁴⁵ Despite being raised in New York where women have many more freedoms and opportunities for prosperity compared to Punjab, Karam’s argument in many ways holds true for the Punjabi community of Richmond Hill. Female youth continue to face immense pressures of domestication, and limited mobility and they carry the burden of “maintaining honor”—norms that ultimately lead to misogyny and a lack of respect that creates their “devaluation” as individuals.

Pressures of Domestication on Female Punjabi Youth in Richmond Hill: Cooking, Cleaning and Washing

When asked what are different responsibilities or norms that the different genders have, almost every informant pointed that woman have a larger pressure to be “domesticated”. As this was a word use by multiple informants, they used it to refer to the familial pressure to learn to all the tasks revolving around making their homes their primary spaces of navigation. As a result, there is a need for girls to know how to cook well, clean, wash clothes and be respectful and be selfless to the needs of others in terms of household tasks. On the other hand, males face a larger pressure in terms of being

⁴⁵ The rate of female infanticide is extremely high. Karam’s argument about people valuing men over women is deeply engrained in the culture—causing people to want to have sons more. As parents see sons as economic prosperity and a path to their own well-being, girls are always welcomed with hesitancy and not always looked at with the same joy because they are ultimately given away.

successful at school and in their careers and do not have to worry about work in the house as nearly as much. A large part of this emerges from the concept of arranged marriages and family structures. Within Punjabi tradition, it is a norm that when a girl is married, she moves into the house of her husband. In essence, the girl becomes much more than just a wife. She is representative of her parents and family who raised her. She is expected to be well-behaved and well-domesticated. If she is not, then her parents “failed” in her upbringing and she shames the family. Essentially, girls and how well they adhere to social norms of Punjabi culture reflect the honor and respect of a family. If she veers away from these norms, she is seen as “corrupt” or is perceived negatively. Hence, there is a cycle for Punjabi parents to stress their daughters knowing how to do these tasks—an additional pressure of the communal eye for women.

Regardless of the reasons or origins of these pressures, the reality is that female youth face a plethora of challenges that male youth do not. In my interview with Loveleen, she said that knowing how to cook, clean and “knowing your place” is synonymous with being a Punjabi female in Richmond Hill (Interview January 8th 2015). In terms of knowing your place, Loveleen refers to the fact that women are expected to be subservient to men and are expected to make more sacrifices for the wellbeing of the family. A girl has to fit her family into her career and her life decisions and is raised in stricter circumstances. At home, girls always have this an fear looming over their heads. Loveleen said that, “her brother talks back to mom but she doesn’t say anything. On the other hand, I’m afraid to even let her know what I think. I’m scared that I’m going to get thrown out of the house and I’m 22 years old” (Interview January 8th 2015). Even though

this threat of being socially ostracized and the potential of being cut from familial ties is something that happens rarely from my experience, it is a legitimate threat that is not used lightly and causes a serious amount of stress for people like Loveleen. On similar lines, Karam says that Punjabi girls are “constantly stepped over. They have to always put others needs before their own” (Interview January 11th 2015). She goes onto say that there is a stigma against females being born and everyone constantly scrutinizes them.⁴⁶

I have personally witnessed the pressures of domestication for women and the need to put family before everything growing up. Being the only son of four siblings, my sisters face the pressures of cooking, cleaning and other household tasks that I never have had to deal with. Whenever I am home, I constantly hear my father telling my sisters to drop whatever they are doing to heed to when he is calling. When guests are over, it is their responsibility to cook and help. When my mother needs help with something, they must find the time to help. If they are studying, they must stop and help first. If they retaliate or speak against my parents, they will feel the backlash from my parents and get “lectures” on why it is important to do all the things they are asked for. These lectures are the result of parents feeling that their children are veering from the norms set out for them. On the other hand, I am not expected to do nearly as much. If I actively get up and go to do the dishes, my mom will stop me and do it herself because it is not the norm for boys to engage in these activities.⁴⁷ Even though I feel that my mom has internalized this

⁴⁶ However, Karam personally strongly disagrees with this. Being a young activist, she believes that women have such power to change communities and cites women’s rights activists who have made huge movements for their communities. She mentioned that she discusses these issues with her parents, but there are certain boundaries she still cannot cross, such as being allowed to study abroad as I will discuss later.

⁴⁷ As mentioned, the role of young men is to help support financially and focus on moving the family up the ladder of social mobility. Although I focus on women in the next few sections, I will discuss the implications of this at length in the chapter on class.

norm, she finds it that is necessary for me to do the dishes when there are women like her and my sister around—potentially reflecting on their character and ability to do their duties. The role of the man is to solely focus on his education or career, something that is passed down into our household—even though my sisters continue to balance their education with numerous household chores.⁴⁸

Domestication and Female Limited Mobility

In addition to learning how to take care of things at home, another challenge particular to Punjabi females is limited mobility. Manjot is currently a first year at a prestigious seven-year program at City University of New York (CUNY) in which students graduate with both their Bachelors and their M.D degrees. He was born and raised in New York and helps his father run many of the classes that happened at the *Gurdwara*. During our interview, he constantly brought up how he felt there was so much misogyny in the community and was very aggravated at the fact at how a “close-minded” mentality led to hindered mobility for women. His frustration was highlighted by an anecdote about a girl his parents used to tutor (Interview January 8th 2015)⁴⁹. She was in the 12th grade and, every day for tutoring, her mother would come drop her off at his house. While this, in itself did not seem strange, she only lived one and a half block away, so it was strange that her mom should feel the need to drive her there. Manjot said,

⁴⁸ Though this is the norm, this is not necessarily always the case. Taran, one of my informants, mentioned that her family actively chooses to make her younger brother do household tasks. Her parents find it important for him to learn how do to these things. Similarly, my father has never forbade me from engaging in these activities when I would like. However, my engagement was not encouraged in the same way my parents pressured my sisters to do these tasks. I have the privilege to opt in or opt out.

⁴⁹ Manjot’s parents are unique in the sense of their role in the community. They are both well-educated and work as teachers. They have helped tutor many kids over the years.

“What are you educating them for if you can’t let them walk down the streets? And all because you’re worried about what the neighbors might say if they see her walking by herself?” From my understanding, it is perfectly safe for young girls to walk about in the community. Yet, from the perspective of her mother, she must not want other people in the community to see her and question her motives and where she is going—even it is for a second the reasoning of the girl’s mother to take her there, there is this constant need or parents to make sure that girls are not being looked in a negative light: a need that Manjot believes that is hypocritical to the education they are getting and unfair to girls themselves.

The different constraints on young Punjabi females in Richmond Hill produces a lack of mobility that inherently hinders their freedom to navigate the way in which they would like to. Taran, a high school senior who received a scholarship to a liberal arts college, believes that in “the Indian mindset, boys are girls are not equal” (Interview January 8th, 2015). She says that,

boys can come home at two in the morning and no questions will be asked. Even though girls can take care of themselves, we are not given the same liberty. We have to stay home, cook, clean and be picked up and dropped off. The norms are much more lax for boys (Interview January 8th, 2015).

Taran was not the only one who felt that this was the case. Ironically, this played out while I was conducting interviews as well. Preet, a friend of mine who I have known since high school, is doing extremely well for herself. Not only she is beginning her doctoral program for pharmacy, she is very involved at school and is currently working at a pharmacy, which she loves. Even though she has a car and does not have to be dropped off and picked up like Taran does, she will be bombarded with phone calls if she is an

even a bit late. Because our interview ran late, I heard her mom yell at her for not being home exactly when she said would be.

Because of this pressure to stay and work at home and to be accounted for at all times, female Punjabi youth do not have as many freedoms as men and continuously find themselves in interesting predicaments. Akaldeep, a senior at Richmond Hill High School, mentioned a few times in her interview that she feels “weird” and “stuck” (Interview January 3rd, 2015). On one hand, she said she feels “the pressure to lie to get out of the house” because girls do not have as many freedoms to do the things she would like. Even if she is not doing something she thinks is bad, sometimes having to alter the truth is the only way in which they feel like they can get past these constraints. However, having to lie in order to do things she wants to do is not without its consequences. She feels that she is going in the “wrong path” because her mom would not agree with what she might be doing (Interview January 3rd, 2015).

Because Punjabi parents care about respect, Akaldeep believes that feeling guilty for going against her parents is something that other girls also feel (Interview January 3rd, 2015). This is due to the difference between what youth might find to be corrupt versus what their parents might find. It could also be related to something that is harder to explain what they are doing to their parents so they alter the truth in order to minimize that tension. For example, when I scheduled my interview with Akaldeep, she made it clear that she would like to specifically meet me at the library. Telling her mother she had to go do some work there, she did not explain to her she is meeting a male college student for an interview for this thesis—something that would be much harder to explain to

immigrant parents. Since I am male and it is taboo to spend time with people of the opposite gender, she wanted to prevent any potential tension even though she knows the purpose behind meeting has nothing morally corrupt to it.

Because of this limited mobility and pressure of domestication, there are many additional hurdles for female Punjabi youth to obtain upward social mobility and fully navigate the opportunities around them. Though Punjabi male youth also feel similar tensions between the norms of Western society and those of their parents, the psychological and social impacts of navigating these constricting norms are higher for women. For men, there is much less guilt when it comes to disobeying or breaking the norms their parents place on them. For example, Hardev's parents do not want him to drink alcohol. He nonchalantly mentioned that he disregards this rule and pressure and continues to do so with his friends anyway. However, if a Punjabi female youth were to go out and drink, and her family was to find out, the consequences would be much higher. As the communal eye sets these norms of conduct, there is inherently a stronger eye on women that hinders their mobility and places higher pressures to follow the rules set out for them when compared to their male counterparts.

Gendered Norms of Socializing for Punjabi Youth

The concept of limited mobility is closely tied to norms of socializing for youth. Growing up in New York City with western norms and traditions, first-generation Punjabi youth face interesting dilemmas as the older generation pushes traditional responsibilities onto them. As socializing is an important part of young people's lives

growing up in the city, this proposes specific problems for Punjabi youth whose families stress being at home and knowing what their children are up to. The guilt that Akaldeep feels about lying to her parents to create more freedom for herself is not solely limited to Punjabi youth, but is something that comes up often with South Asian youth generally. According to Gill (2003), South Asian parents do not approve of socialization outside of school. South Asian youth feel that “parents place ‘unreasonable demands’ on them to act in an ideal manner... [which] conflicts with how to act outside the home” (13). For Punjabi youth in New York, the friction between traditional pressures and western norms impedes on their ability to navigate the space of the city. In New York City, it is common for most Americans to go to clubs and bars after they become 21. However, for Punjabi youth, this is something that Punjabi parents like my own heavily disagree with despite their child’s age. Not only did most youth mention that they felt that they could not talk to their parents about social or romantic relationships, the level of openness to these western norms displayed by the community is limited and also differs based on gender.

Friends not getting “it”

In an interview with Preet at a local Dunkin Donuts at night, I got a chance to catch up with an old friend while asking her about how her Punjabi identity affects her friendships and relationships with non-Punjabis at college. Looking specifically at what barriers youth face, Preet cites her experiences at college to highlight the challenges that Punjabi woman face navigating the social scene. When I asked Preet if she thinks parents are usually right about the decisions they make for her, she said that her parents are usually wrong when it comes to decisions about her social life—reflecting the cultural

conflict Gill discusses. Preet wanted to go to an end of the semester party to “enjoy and let loose” after a really tough few months. She said her parent’s response was, “oh no, you’re a girl. You should stay home” (Interview, January 4th 2015). What frustrated Preet was that it seemed to her that her parents only cared about what other people thought and that was the rationale of their decision. Coming back to the idea of the communal eye, her parents do not like her wearing short dresses or jump suits and going out at night with friends because they are worried about how others many perceive her. She finds this as a hindrance to her own life and feels she has to fight just to enjoy herself. On the other hand, her parents care because what Preet would like to do is a deviation from traditional forms of social engagement. Her decision to wear dresses and go partying could potentially be seen as negative because it is synonymous with assimilation and adaptation to certain Western traditions, such as drinking, dancing and hooking up with men—actions that are seen as corrupt for Punjabi women and can tarnish her image.

Another way in which Preet finds gender norms hindering her social life comes about in terms of the friends she keeps at school. Joining a career-oriented sorority recently, Preet feels the pressure from her friends at school to go out and socialize on the weekend. As going to bars and partying is an important component of undergraduate life, this is practically impossible for her because of her identity as a Punjabi woman. Preet feels that she cannot go on spring break trips or to parties like other people when her friends want to because it is not an easy thing to explain to her parents. This results in her either lying to her parents without getting caught or staying at home with family. In turn, this is detrimental to the friends she keeps because there is a barrier with people who

want to spend time with her but cannot because of the cultural constraints she feels. Many times, Preet cited that her friends “just don’t get it” (Interview, January 4th 2015). By it, Preet refers to the plethora of hoops she has to jump through before being able to hang out with anyone so openly because of both her cultural identity and her gender. Although she continuously tries to explain why she is doing what she is doing, her parents do not always support the actions because they would much rather just have her stay at home.

On the other hand, hanging out with friends from college or going out is not such a big hurdle for Punjabi males as it is for females. Although most parents do not condone going to parties, drinking or socializing with the opposite gender for young males either, the pressures hindering their ability to socialize are far less. For high school, I went to a private school in Brooklyn where I was the only Punjabi. Whether it was a party to celebrate the end of the year or going to prom, my parents did not really understand why I wanted to engage in it. However, after explaining the purpose, I was usually allowed to go as long as I explained who I was going to be with and how I was getting back. However, for women like Preet or my sisters who would want to do something similar, it is an entirely different situation. Not only do they have to justify their actions, they are questioned extremely more and their time out is limited. If they are late or deviate from what they told their parents, Punjabi parents begin to stress out about what they are doing in a way they do not about their sons—making it easier for males to socialize over women.

Gender Discrimination in Romantic Relationships

In addition to socializing with friends, another controversial subject for Punjabi youth is romantic relationships. Culturally, arranged marriage has been the norm for centuries of Punjabi folk. However, western norms that Punjabi youth grow up around stress individuality in dating and youth choosing their own marriage partners. However, this challenges the South Asian tradition in which parents choose the spouse of their children. Though many youth dissent the idea of arranged marriage, there is a wide spectrum to what extent youth agree or disagree with the tradition. However, what is more important to discuss is the reality of what actually happens. Knowing that their parents and society would disapprove of their romantic relationships, most youth keep any relationships they have with the opposite sex hidden for the most part. Manjot, a freshman in college, said he has been in a relationship with non-Punjabi person for multiple years now because his parents would heavily disapprove and would see it as a distraction for him during college. Yet, the way in which romantic relationships are perceived when they are revealed is much different between males and females—with woman not surprisingly getting the tougher side of things.

A joint interview with two of my friends, Hardev and Gagan, touched upon this subject well. Knowing that both of them had girlfriends beforehand, I asked them whether their parents knew about their relationships. Gagan said that he did not tell his family because the “girl thing is always going to be there” (Interview January 3rd, 2015). By this, he means that he has had multiple relationships before and has become comfortable with his family simply just not knowing about it. Surprisingly, Gagan had told his family about his girlfriend. Although it is pretty uncommon for youth to tell their

parents about their relationships, Gagan did not feel a huge pressure to keep the truth to his parents for a variety of reasons.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, he says it has definitely been the “hot topic” of conversations at home. His parents are putting a pressure on him to marry her, but he believes he is way too young to think about that.⁵¹

Building off of this, I asked what they thought were major differences between how boys and girls were treated in our culture and how would they feel if they found out their sisters had romantic relationships in the same way they do. Gagan, whose younger sister I also interviewed, said “it isn’t fair, but we don’t want our sisters doing what we do. We don’t want them to be put down and that causes insecurity. It’s why we always ask, where is she? Why is she not back yet? It’s all cultural, about maintaining reputation” (Interview January 3rd, 2015). Referring back to the communal eye, Gagan endorses the idea that women have a bigger stake in maintaining reputation and harsher consequences. Therefore, it is a bigger deal in society if they have significant others because of the possibility of tarnishing their reputation.

Soon after, Hardev says that “guys in our community get second chances, girls don’t. And we grow up like that. There’s need to marry her off to get tension free. It’s worse if girl has a boyfriend cause a girl is the honor of the house and you lose your honor if that happens” (Interview January 3rd, 2015). When referring to families marrying their daughters to be “tension free”, Hardev is referring to how the Punjabi community

⁵⁰ Knowing him and his family for awhile, his parents are very traditional in certain regards but seem to be more progressive on certain fronts. They most likely understand that he would keep the relationship regardless so do not give him as much trouble.

⁵¹ Both their girlfriends are Punjabi. This thought about marriage only happens because she is Punjabi. If she were not, it would not be a joke that was openly made because Hardev is expected to marry a Punjabi woman and an interracial relationship would not be taken as seriously.

finds women as a burden that will eventually go live in another's household. If a girl loses her "honor", it becomes much difficult for her family to find a suitable partner and she is looked down upon within social circles. Regardless if the relationship a girl is in is serious or not, any sort of physical or emotional relationship is supposed to be refrained from.

What is extremely interesting about their statements is that, even though they were hesitant at first to answer, they show that they are continuing to carry on the traditional gender norms of a generation before them. Although it is okay for them to have girlfriends, they would not want their sisters to have boyfriends—further helping decreasing their mobility by supporting the cultural norms that women say are problematic and unjust. When I heard this, I decided to push back on their ideas and asked if they find that to be fair. Although they acknowledge that it is not just, they mentioned that this is the reality of the world they live in. Rather than challenging it and saying that it should be okay for their sisters to have relationships, I got the sense they believe that they cannot change it even if they might want to because of the communal consequences.

Reverting back to the fact that the communal gossip proposes challenges for youth, Gagan and Hardev's reasoning behind not wanting their sisters to have the mobility they have is because they do not want them to be talked about in a bad way. If their sisters were to have a boyfriend, they believe that people would talk and say things such as "this girl's a hoe" and that kind of negative information spreads around quickly. Although most youth meet in secret if they are in relationships, a girl's honor, respect and

reputation would all be on the line if someone were to find out because word goes around fast in our culture. If people found about their girlfriends, it would not nearly be as tarnishing because it is more acceptable for boys to do these kinds of things. Yet, if the families of their girlfriends found out that they were in relationships, the consequences would be much higher—leading to a lot of emotional and potentially even physical stress for some women. Though the existence of gender norms is undeniable, the strength in which they continue with the next generation is what took me aback and does not seem to be fair. Even though immigrant parents brought these norms, youth like Gagan and Hardev seem to be continuing traditional practices—calling into light the question of which values they are accepting and which they are rejecting.

Though Gagan and Hardev represent one perspective of how youth react to certain gender norms, Manjot presented another. As mentioned, he has been in a long-term relationship with a non-Punjabi female. When I asked him if he would be okay with for his younger sisters to be in a relationship, he said he would wholeheartedly support them if that were the case. He said it would be hypocritical for him to be in a relationship and then to say his sisters cannot. Although he acknowledges that his parents would not want his sisters to be in a relationship, he says it is an important part of social development to have interactions with people of the opposite sex. Taking on a more progressive and westernized view on gender norms and socializing, Manjot presents a viewpoint that rejects the notion that women's reputation would be tarnished if they keep these relationships.

Conclusion

Gender double standards and discrimination undoubtedly pervade different aspects of the lives of Punjabi youth, from responsibilities at home to how they socialize at school. Though gender norms were apparent and an issue that multiple people brought up, it hit me hardest when I asked Manjot about his thoughts about different pressures that existed for females than males:

So much misogyny is inherent in Punjabi culture and we don't even realize that we're being misogynistic. It's like a big deal if a boy messes up in school, his mom would be like *oh changa nahi karda*. It's not good that he's messing up. But if a girl messes up, she gets married, it's fine. How do you come up with something like that? Can you explain that mentality to someone outside from the community who doesn't know Punjabi culture? Like it's such a foreign, close-minded tradition. I don't blame my parents for being misogynistic just because their parents were before them.

When we say the word misogyny, we're like 'oh bad'. When they hear it, it's normal. We're not harming them, just demeaning them. He wants to tell his parents that they're fine [to make their own decisions]. Let them do what they want to do. It's fine if she doesn't know how to make roti. She's going to be fine. It's okay mom if I'm doing the dishes, it doesn't look bad on my sisters. The misogyny is crazy. (Interview January 7th, 2015)

Though this was a very small portion of the interview, Manjot so quickly encapsulates the overarching problems that exist. Calling himself a feminist, Manjot was very angry and upset during the interview about these gender norms. Contrary to Hardev and Gagan, he did not seem to accept Punjabi gender norms but openly challenged them. When he mentions that it is fine that if her sister does not know how to cook or if he does the dishes in her behalf, it is his way of challenging gender norms that exist within the household. Manjot does not doubt that there are many valuable traditions within Punjabi culture. However, the gender norms are damaging in his views. It is very rare for youth like Manjot to point out the fundamental flaws of the community that we grow up in but

he feels like it needs to be done. Not only do these big gaps in gender norms produce a lack of respect for women, Manjot and the others pointed out to me how it pins women down and hinders their prosperity in so many ways—holding so many back from reaching their true potential in the long run.

Coming back to Noor's arranged marriage, the communal eye that dominates the environment Punjabi youth grow up in works to enforce the gender roles that young people face. As some youth accept, reject or challenge certain Punjabi norms and traditions, Noor seems to have been pressured to comply to the tradition of her parents picking the spouse of their children. Yet, in a brief conversation with her in April of 2015, she expressed that she is happy and could not ask for better. For her, it is a "complete package" because he is educated, handsome and her parents are happy which means a lot to her. Although Noor might very well be content with her fiancé and with having an arranged marriage, the role of the communal and familial pressures is undeniable as she did not have complete freedom over this large decision. As her parents and immediate family made this decision, the tears and lack of joy on her actual engagement day reflect her selflessness to respect her parent's decision and the need to continue traditions in order to maintain her reputation. Though I am hoping she is truly okay and is comfortable with this major decision in the long-run, the gender roles for Noor have increased as she will now have to play the role of a housewife and a good daughter-in-law when she gets married—more responsibilities that may potentially clash with her graduate school education and personal aspirations.

Despite all the challenges that women face, many do continue to persevere and

move past these traditions that look to bind them. Not only is Preet a female, she is also an only child. In a society where having a son is more valued, this puts her in an uncommon situation. When I asked her how she fights these gender norms, she said she asks her parents, “If I was your son, would you let me go? What can a son provide you with that I can’t?” (Interview January 6th, 2015). Every day she faces so many struggles because she is a girl. She tries to convert negativity into positivity by proving herself and showing her family and the community that she can be just as valuable and just as successful as any boy within the community. Her goal is to use what she is learning in school and utilize that intelligence; she is determined to prove that she has what it takes to obtain her doctoral degree and accomplish a task that is seen as rare for female Punjabi youth in the community. Not only does Preet use school a way to challenge traditional norms, I will discuss extensively in the next chapter the larger role that education plays for Punjabi youth overall.

Chapter 2

An Educational Paradox: Slipping through the Cracks

During May of 2014, Columbia University's campus was taken over by silver bleachers as it always is during this time of the year. To accommodate for the thousands of students graduating this year, the University uses every inch of space that they possibly can. On Commencement Day, flashes of blue graduation robes, energy, joy and a nervousness for what is next to come can be seen and felt everywhere. Loveleen is amongst the many graduates. Like her peers, she is excited, nostalgic and unsure of what is in her future. Reflecting on her accomplishments, she cannot help but to be proud. During her senior year at college, she earned a straight 4.0 GPA. She helped to found a student group that has held transformative events on campus. Studying neuroscience, she has even published articles in notable journals—causing her to be solicited by large research to firms to work for them. But perhaps what sets Loveleen apart even more is where she comes from. Loveleen is a first-generation Punjabi woman born and raised in Richmond Hill, Queens. She is one of the first people with her background to graduate from an Ivy League institution.

Unfortunately, Loveleen's moment of pride was short-lived. After packing up her bags and moving back with her family, she woke up to a storm one day soon after returning home. Like many recent graduates, Loveleen was still figuring out what her post-grad plans were. Although she was pre-med during her time in college, she always felt pressured to pursue that trajectory and never felt passionate about it. Though her

neuroscience thesis gained recognition within the field, she could absolutely not envision herself spending her time continuing doing research because she felt that was not her calling. Loveleen's mother, Ms. Kaur, was not too pleased with her decision. Born and raised in Punjab, she believed it was such an honor to be a doctor and Loveleen was a failure for throwing it all away. Her accomplishments and transformative experiences in college did not matter. In a fitting rage of anger, Ms. Kaur told Loveleen she had three days to figure out what her plan for the next few years was or she would kick her out the house. There was not a sense of hesitancy in her voice—this threat of disownment was genuine.

Many Punjabi parents like Loveleen's mother highly value becoming a physician because it has culturally always symbolized a profession that offers financial security and respect. Since becoming a doctor is not easy, it is common for the more intelligent and harder-working students in Punjab to pursue their M.D. because it brings both prosperity and an increase in reputation for the family. Loveleen's parents were educated in Punjab and understand the rigor one needs to be able to get to a position where they can attend medical school. As her parents both depend on working class jobs to provide for the family, her mother in particular was extremely disappointed that their capable daughter does not want to pursue the career path they think would serve her best even if Loveleen does not think so. Loveleen has had the pressure to study science and medicine her whole life and even was pre-med throughout college. Because her mother thought Loveleen was going to apply to medical school upon graduation and was not aware Loveleen had other plans, she responded in this fit of rage. Loveleen did not tell her mom she was not

thinking of going to medical school much earlier because she knew her mom would reach in such a way and she would therefore feel guilty for not following through. Additionally, Loveleen has an older sister who also studied to go to medical school but decided not to either a few years back—shattering her dreams of her daughters becoming doctors

Like Loveleen, many other first-generation Punjabi youth from Richmond Hill feel academic pressures from their parents or families. A cultural value that many parents brought along with them on their immigration to the United States is the utmost respect for education. Viewed as the ladder of upward social mobility, youth like Loveleen constantly hear from their parents the importance of doing well in school and the benefits of performing well academically. Many youth also acknowledge how their Punjabi roots ingrain the values of grit, hard work and the value of school as they grow up. However, if the Punjabi culture that youth grow up in stresses the importance of education so often, the question then is why do such few people from the neighborhood attend and graduate from better schools and institutions of higher learning? And, when they do as in Loveleen's case, the struggles that youth from the community face are far from over. In order to understand this educational paradox and to understand what the challenges Punjabi youth face that hinder their success, it is necessary to look at both the structural and communal barriers that they face.

The first major reason why youth do not reach their full potential and make it as far as possible in their education has to do with institutional problems. The schools and environment in Richmond Hill are not supportive and conducive to propelling students forward—they are tainted by a failing education system, a lack of resources, and

racialized bullying. However, even if students are able to jump this first hurdle and still do well academically within these constraints, specific cultural conflicts and internal tensions add to the mix of problems. Even though students grow up with their family and the community valuing education and seeing it as a form of upward social mobility, certain mentalities about what to study and going away to college combined with lack of mentorship, role models and gender norms keep youth from reaching their full potential and pursuing their own paths.

Education as a Form of Social Mobility

Before diving into how institutional and communal challenges hinder the development of youth, it is helpful to look at how the idea of upward social mobility through education is tied to the immigrant experience. According to Papademetriou (2009), social mobility is central to immigrant integration (1). When immigrants first arrive to the United States, they must work low-skilled or low-earning jobs. Their downward mobility is initially accredited to

language barriers, differences in educational attainment, difficulties obtaining recognition for credentials and experience gained abroad and problems accessing opportunities through social networks and other recruitment channels (1). This is definitely the case for Punjabi parents who immigrate to the United States.

Because of language issues and lack of education, they are forced to do labor-oriented work and face many obstacles within their integration.⁵² However, Papademetriou (2009) goes onto argue that, with the next generation that is either born or raised for a majority of their lives in the United States, many of the obstacles and barriers to the labor market

⁵² I will discuss class and the implications of this to youth in the next chapter.

and educational success that parents face is eradicated (1). For both parents and youth, the goal always seems to be do be successful so the next generation does not have to see tough times the older generation has.

For Punjabi youth, seeing the difficulties that their parents faced and understanding their sacrifice is the primary motive behind them doing wanting to do well. According to Gill (2003), there is a heavy influence on education for Punjabi Sikhs, like other immigrant families, to do exceptionally well with the thought that it will lead to social mobility (46). The importance of education and remembering the sacrifice of parents is something that is very prevalent within my own personal household. Growing up, my father would tell us anecdotes of how he had to commute more than two hours to Long Island to work as a janitor for only thirty dollars a day. Even until this day, if he is fatigued, he motivates himself by telling us that he “is doing all this for [us]”. In return, he emphasizes that we focus on our education and succeeding in college—otherwise we would be forced to work labor-oriented jobs through which he is struggled his entire life and it would make his sacrifice less important or fruitless. During my interviews with students from Richmond Hill, I asked every student to what extent did education play a role in their lives and what value does it have for them. Almost every single person, regardless of age, gender or level of education, cited their parent’s and their struggles as their motivation behind their desire to succeed in school. Growing up, our education was consistently set up by our parents as our way out from the difficulties our parents are going through within the cycle of poverty.

When I asked what her motivation was to succeed, for example, Taran, a high school senior applying to colleges, immediately began to speak about how her parents were not educated. She mentioned that her father dropped out of the sixth grade in Punjab in order to help support the family (Interview January 8th, 2015). Eventually coming to the United States, he faced many language barriers and was forced to do odd jobs. It was evident that Taran understood and internalized the difficulty that her father faced and still faces. And she stressed it was not in a position she would like to be: “I don’t want to end up like that and see so many struggles. I want to do better” (Interview January 8th, 2015). Similarly, Gurchit and his brother Parmeet echoed similar sentiments. Though they are underclassmen in high school and are not thinking about college specifically yes, they spoke about how their education is so important because of the obstacles their father has seen. The younger brother, Parmeet, said that, “We’ve seen him struggle. He has no degree and drives a cab. I feel bad for him. I want to help him overcome it” (Interview, January 3rd, 2015). For these brothers, helping their father overcome these challenges is through working part-time but also succeeding in school. Youth are very conscious that focusing on their education and doing well will eventually allow them to help their families out in the long run. They are conscious because parents make their sacrifice known. In addition to the notion of telling their kids not to be in the positions they are in, hearing things like “we moved here for better opportunities for you” or “education is everything” are extremely common in Punjabi households. Not only are parents making their sacrifice known in their upbringing, youth are internalizing the implications of their parent’s immigrations and understanding that their parents want them to use their

education as a way to move up in society. Confirming the feelings of the other youth, Akaldeep said that, “it is really important to study. My parents brought me here for this purpose. They left Italy because of education. My parents wanted their kids to do something” (Interview, January 3rd, 2015).⁵³

In addition to being the answer to economic social mobility, youth also mentioned other reasons why their education is important. One such person was Bani, a first year at a private four year university in Queens studying Biology. The purpose behind Bani’s education is also that she does not want to be in the financial and social situations her parents are in. However, she also mentioned that she “wanted to make her parents proud and be independent” (Interview, January 3rd, 2015). By wanting to be independent and proud, Bani is able to accomplish multiple things. Not only is she able to challenge the gender norms and expectations placed on her as discussed in the previous chapter, there is a both intrinsic and extrinsic reward that is given by her family for doing well. She is able to make her family feel happy, but also is able to increase her family’s reputation in the community because of her success.

Gagan, a second year at a local community college, saw his education as important because “no one can take away knowledge from you” (Interview January 2nd, 2015). Having a family that has gone through many challenges upon their immigration, he views the empowerment one receives through education as an asset that can never be taken away. Parmeet, an underclassman in high school, really wants to go to college because “society and humanity doesn’t treat you as an equal without education”

⁵³ Akaldeep’s family initially moved from Punjab to Italy. Believing the education and opportunities were better in the United States, they moved there even though they had a small business in Italy.

(Interview January 3rd, 2015). Not only is this an observation that he has made in his own life, this statement is deeply related to his family's immigration to the United States. In Punjab, there is not much respect for the poor and those who do not achieve a higher status through their education. Here in the United States, he has observed that taxi drivers and others are in a lower socioeconomic position and understands their status in conjunction with their education.

Amongst being a valuable asset and increasing one's status, youth also believe it's important to get their education to set an example. Akaldeep, a freshman in high school, motivates herself to do better because she wants "to be a better role model for [her] brother so he won't be a dumbass" (Interview, January 3rd 2015). Akaldeep is cognizant of all the challenges that young people face in the local community and at school. For youth born and raised in the United States, there are many negatives that affect young people, such as violence, drug use, and dropping out of school, that very well may be a reality for Akaldeep's younger brother. As a result, she wants to make sure her brother does not fall into any bad habits and finds it to be her responsibility to ensure that. Additionally, identifying as a man of color, Manjot realized education is important early on and it should not be taken lightly because "there is no tolerance for failure for minorities" (Interview, January 3rd 2015). Presenting a more larger and systemic issue like Akaldeep, Manjot says that people of color and immigrant communities already face so many institutional challenges. Being educated and being successful is to challenge that and defy those norms set out for minority groups like Punjabi americans. Despite the fact that the importance of education is pushed on their parents, it is clear that youth have

internalized a plethora of reasons why education is important and empowering. They have also incorporated reasons based on their experiences in New York City as Punjabi adolescents.

Is motivation enough?

Though youth understand how education is intertwined with their own mobility and that of their family, motivation is not enough for them to reach the success they aspire for because there are a myriad of challenges. Papademetriou (2009) argues that the generation born and raised in the country of immigration generally does much better than their parents' generation, "despite a number of obstacles to labor market and educational success, including low parental incomes, language barriers, residential segregation, difficulties accessing services, and discrimination" (1). However, it is not necessarily the case that youth will completely catch up with the children of non-immigrant natives (1). Surprisingly, Papademetriou (2009) says, "the second generation still performs worse in the labor market on average, and even in countries such as the United States, where it currently outperforms native workers, there is evidence of a downward trajectory" (1). Discussing education specifically, second-generation children are not as educated as their non-immigrant peers and therefore do not do as well when it comes to obtaining more white collar jobs. Many children of immigrant communities grow up in predominantly poor urban areas and therefore it is likely to get a less education in addition to many other challenges—putting them at a disadvantage to their native American peers. Applying this evidence to the Punjabi community, this is particularly relevant. Though Punjabi might do much better than their parents in terms of how far they go in their education, they will

consistently still find themselves behind their peers whose parents are not born outside of the country.

David North (2009) provides insight into why this is, allowing us to further understand the experience of Punjabi youth relative to others. Over time, the American tradition “has been that the first generation of immigrants struggles, the second generation does better, and the third generation does even better in terms of income, education, personal health, and overall achievement” (1). Though there is data to support this, social scientists are finding that this overall pattern with the second and following generation is not happening—“on many measures, the following generations do not achieve as much as their forefathers, the immigrants” (1). Amongst the various factors that work to limit and slow the upward mobility of today’s immigrant children, one major reason is that there are various failures of the host nation in understanding the complexities of the children’s identity (North 2009, 5). Societal institutions, particularly public schools, fail to integrate the culture and value of immigrants as it once did with the descendants of European immigrants. Another major reason is that immigrants and children of immigrants are two very different populations. Immigrants are self-selected because they must have the drive and fortitude to leave their homes. However, children of immigrants are not self-selected and those in poor urban areas in particular are “subject to the usual stresses and temptations and discriminations of growing up in what we used to call slums” (6). Youth growing up in the United States, they face a set of pressures that their parents growing up in their home country did not in the same way. For Punjabi

youth, this includes the complex array of urban challenges for inner-city New York City kids that their parents growing up in their villages did not.⁵⁴

North's explanations as to why the generation of immigrant children do not do as well as presumed are extremely relevant to Punjabi youth in Richmond Hill. Though parents have been successful in conveying the value of education to their children, institutional and communal challenges hinder their success despite the aspirations to succeed academically. Not only do schools fail to integrate and safely welcome Punjabi youth into the fabric into the city, these youth come into public schools are already failing to give many immigrant groups and people of color the chance they need to catch up with their non-immigrant peers. In addition, a large portion of Sikhs face discrimination during their time in school, bullying and a racialized environment that further deter youth from positively engaging with their school environment. In addition, communal and societal pressures within the Punjabi community play a large role in keeping them from competing with non-Punjabi youth.⁵⁵

The Failure of Public Institutions

Like the children of most immigrants, a majority of Punjabi youth attends New York City public schools. Although there are many great schools within the education system, most schools continue to fail many students of colors and other marginalized

⁵⁴ This does not mean that Punjabi parents did not face challenges growing up. Poverty and access to resources is an obstacle that continues with both generations. However, growing up in urban areas in America has many differences to the lifestyle that parent grew up with.

⁵⁵ Portes and Rumbaut's book on the immigrant second generation, *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*, carries a chapter heading: "Not Everyone Is Chosen: Segmented Assimilation and Its Determinants."

groups. Chapman (2014) attests to this fact by citing that a “stunning 371 New York City schools [out of 1800+] are failing students in masse, according to a new report” (Chapman 2014). According to the CEO of Families for Excellent Schools, “entire neighborhoods in the highest-need areas of this city are flooded with schools that fail to pass even one out of every 10 students” (Chapman 2014). Based on a recent report, Chapman (2014) emphasizes the intensity of the situation by reporting, “at nearly one-quarter of city schools, 90% of students fail to read or do math at grade level” (Chapman). For Punjabi immigrants who come into the country without knowledge how to navigate the system, these are the schools in which much of the youth ends up.

The case is no different for Richmond Hill. As education can be used to obtain upward social mobility, Richmond Hill High School, in fact, was one of the dozens of schools shut down because of low academic performance in June of 2012 (ABC News).

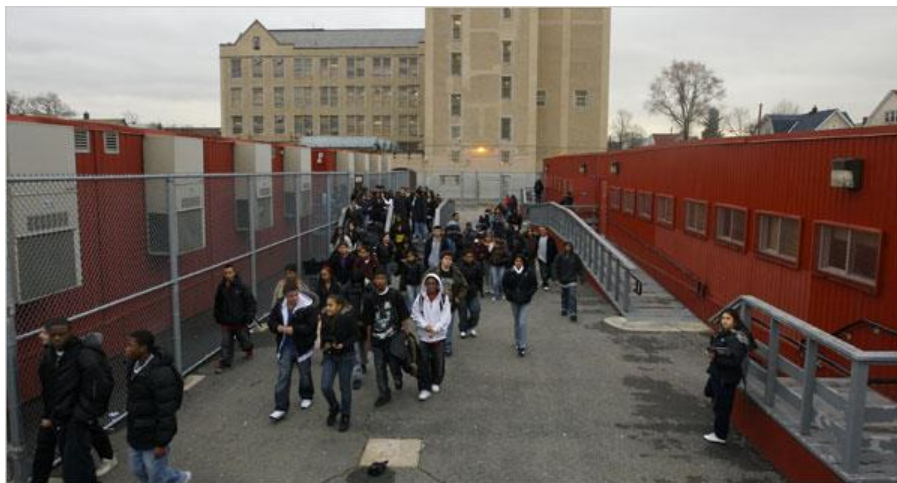


Figure 8. A picture of Richmond Hill High School from 2008, red trailers were built as extra classrooms

The City Department of Education reopened the school in September, but it is now called the 21st Century School of Richmond Hill (Gustafson 2012). The DOE replaced up to 50% of teachers and changed the vision of the school to be more technology oriented in

hopes of improving its success rate. Though changing the mission of the school and hiring new teachers might help, it does not necessarily solve all the issues that the youth who continued to attend the school faces. The lack of proper schools in the neighborhood forces them to try to find schools outside of the neighborhood. In an interview, Ranveer, a college student from Richmond Hill, responded that the biggest problem that the area faces is that “kids have to leave their town to get a better education because the schools in Richmond Hill are not at as good as they should be” (Interview, October 2015). When I asked Karam what she would like to change about the neighborhood, she said she would want to create better schools in the neighborhood. As schools educate and create future leaders, “I want to encourage students to be teachers and use school to make good changes” (Interview, January 11th 2015).

The caliber of educational institutions is perpetuating a “second class” citizenry for many first and second-generation children who are in the process of learning how to utilize the opportunities available in the city. Papademetriou (2009) mentions that there are a set of policy recommendations, “such as investing more in preschool education, supporting bilingual education, strengthening after-school programs, and learning from successful immigrant communities what those communities have done to help their own people” (6). However, this lack of support for immigrants in Richmond Hill causes the school system to disempower immigrant youth. And for youth who look for better schools outside of the neighborhood, their families and community are not always knowledgeable on where to turn. For Punjabi Sikh youth growing up in New York, the struggles of integration within the public school system in terms of the academic

coursework and the school environment mitigates their ability to use education as a form of upward social mobility.

*Further Disruptions to Education:
Social Challenges and Prejudice at School*

As mentioned, Punjabi immigrants who come to the United States and make their homes in areas like Richmond Hill depend on local schools that are underfunded, failing and are tainted by environments that are not productive for their education. However, during a ROOP workshop in October of 2014, many of the youth brought up other issues they face at school that add to the list of challenges that local academic institutions already face. Sitting around a large table and prompting students to discuss their experience as Punjabi Sikhs at school, there was a consensus that teachers, administrators and fellow students did not know about Punjabi culture or the Sikh faith at all. A majority of them felt that, although there were many Sikhs in the community and the middle and high schools they all attended, not much was done to include their history when it is relevant and educate the broader community about their cultural and religious identity.

This issue was particularly salient for Akaldeep, a first year at Richmond Hill High School. Raising her hand high to add her input during the discussion, she said, “in our social studies class, we mostly study Hinduism and like Chinese people and their religion. I don’t know why we don’t study the Sikh religion. I believe our God has done a lot of things” (October 24, 2014)⁵⁶. In classes that teach about global religions already,

⁵⁶ Something interesting I noticed during the workshop was how youth misconstrue certain words when it comes to their Punjabi or Sikh identity. I believe she meant to say what the Gurus have done in our history, not necessarily the ideology of God itself. Studying how youth view Sikhism and which aspects they learn from their cultural experience is a potential venue for future studies.

she questions why Sikhism is not if other faiths can be. Taran, a senior at a public high school outside of the Richmond Hill, had a similar sentiment when she was learning about the Indian independence movement: “There’s no mention of Sikhs and the part they held in the whole independence movement. I felt like that there should have been someway were taught about that too cause I feel like they had a big part in in.” Adding to Taran’s point, Gurchit added, “Yeah man. How can you not mention the Sikhs? Udham Singh? Bhaghat Singh? There’s so many of them that played a big role in the movement” (October 24). The youth in the conversation understand the significant role that Sikhs have played in South Asia and are not properly accredited within their classes.

Zoravar, a ROOP co-founder and a senior at the State University of New York, was helping to facilitate the conversation. He asked the youth who spoke about the issue if they raise their hands and try to talk about Sikhism when the topic of Indian history is brought up. Sharan, an eighth grader who came to the workshop, shared that she actively tries to do. When the class was talking about religion, she said, “[Other students] were like calling us Hindu and we were correcting them that we are not Hindu and our religion is different. They keep us asking us, are you Hindu? We are from the same place, near each other but are different”. Although Sharan is a little younger than the other participants in the workshop, her attempt to educate her peers about Sikhism gives evidence to the fact that the public school environments overall that are not open to accepting and understanding the differences in South Asian religions. Not only is the history of their identity not being incorporated into the classroom, they do not seem to be

in atmospheres that allow them to educate others or their teachers to give them the space to do so.⁵⁷

Bullying and Hate Crimes

Not incorporating Punjabi Sikh history or educating all students about this particular identity is one part of a much larger issue. On a national level, many different ethnic or religious minorities are not taught not about and, therefore, make many youth feel excluded from the education they are receiving. However, this lack of awareness and consciousness about the particular identity of Sikh Americans had many specific reverberations. As discussed in the introduction, Sikhs are mandated to wear five different symbols that denote their faith: including the highly visible turban that covers their long unshorn hair. After 9/11, there was a rapid increase in Islamophobia. Hate crimes against Muslim, Arab and Sikh Americans soared exponentially and brown skin and turbans popularly became associated with terror. Media misrepresentation began to have effects on all aspects of life for anyone who had these markers. For Punjabi Sikh youth in New York City who wore a turban, the lack of consciousness about this identity became further complicated with a false association with terrorism that came from fear—leading to the serious issue of bullying in schools.

⁵⁷ The only person who said that the history of Sikhism was studied in-depth at his school was Harpal Singh—a senior at an independent school in Brooklyn. Harpal was the only youth in the room who is on almost full financial aid at a top-five rated private school, the only person who has gone to a private high school in the room other than myself. He felt that his teachers made an active effort to include Sikh American history when possible, making him feel welcome and accepted. Everyone else discussing that they felt their history was not incorporated went to local public schools and did not have the mentorship and privilege of attending such a highly ranked school. I will discuss the reasons behind how he was able to get to such a position later on.

The Sikh Coalition is a community-based organization in New York that focuses specifically on the civil and human rights violations against Sikhs. Their goal is to “work towards a world where Sikhs may freely practice and enjoy their faith while fostering strong relations with their local community wherever they may be” (Sikh Coalition). They do so by providing legal services, advocating for laws and policies, promoting diversity through education and fostering civic engagement on the local community level. From all the projects they have taken up over the year, the organization is well acknowledged for their work on dealing with bullying against Sikh youth. In 2008, they published a civil rights survey, which found out that half of all Sikh Students and 60% of turbaned Sikh students in New York City experienced bullying (2014). In 2014, they built what they found in the 2008 survey and released a report about bullying against Sikh children throughout the nation. In this report, they found that turbaned Sikh children experience bullying at more than double the national rate.

As there is a high concentration of Sikh youth in Richmond Hill, bullying and discrimination growing up is something that is inevitable for many youth. Like Richmond Hill High School, other elementary and middle schools in the area are also failing. Not only are they are not helping youth succeed overall, administrators, teachers and the curriculum does not properly integrate the diverse identities that now make up the area—producing very malicious and negative environments for Sikh youth who stand out. Although males traditionally wear the turban more often than women, female youth are also not exempt from bullying and discrimination. As the Sikh Coalition points out, about half of Sikh youth, both males and females, are bullied because of their long hair:

whether it is in a turban or a long braid. Though bullying happens because of an increase in Islamophobia post 9/11 and failure of educational institutions to provide safe spaces, it is important to understand what the consequences of this bullying are for youth. For Sikh youth growing up in Richmond Hill, there are detrimental physical and psychological impacts on young teenagers growing up.

During my interviews with teenagers and young adults in the community, bullying during middle school and into high school was a big threat that many of the males brought up in particular. Out of the six male informants, all of them brought up that they have faced either prejudiced remarks or physical violence throughout their education at different points. In addition to all the other academic or familial challenges they have, they must navigate environments in which they feel they might physically get hurt or be harassed by comments such as being called a terrorist. This fear, threats and acts of violence serve as a significant distraction and impedes their ability to focus solely on school and being able to integrate themselves completely within their social environment.

Amar, a first year at a private college in Upstate New York, spoke at length about how he was physically harmed because of his turban and Sikh identity growing up. During the beginning of middle school, he moved to a different part of the neighborhood and transferred to a different school. Amar said that because he looked different, was very quiet and he was new, he was constantly pushed around by his peers and was called a plethora of degrading names (Interview January 7th, 2015). However, Amar said he believed in “non-violence” and decided not to fight back or retaliate. Not being a confrontational person, he quietly took whatever was thrown his way. He mentioned that

other kids just followed a “mob mentality” and they only bullied because others were doing so. Following up about his response, I asked him whether he took any actions to stop these threats. Amar said that he went to the administration to report it when it first started happening. However, Amar said that the administration thought he was lying and did not help him address the issue. Not only did Amar was being bullied, the school did not believe him when he reported it and did not take actions to ensure his physical and mental well-being.

However, unlike Amar, not every Sikh youth being bullied decides to endure quietly. In addition to already being threatened physically, many youth decide to fight back against their aggressors—putting them in even more risk of getting hurt and distracting them further. This was the case for Gurchit and Parmeet, the two brothers who are underclassmen at a public high school in Manhattan. During their time in middle school in Richmond Hill, they said they were called terrorists often. At first, their priority was to ignore them. However, if the threats persisted and the bullies continue to harass them, they would try the whole “verbal thing” (Interview January 7th). By trying the whole verbal thing, they meant that they would try to come from a place of understanding and try to educate the bullies about their identity.

However, when all this failed, Gurchit, the older of the two, mentioned that he would not be afraid to “punch them and knock them down”. Contrary to Amar who is a smaller and more timid person, both Gurchit and Parmeet are both physically large for their age and were confident in their ability to engage physically if need be. However, Parmeet said that he hated every time they had to. He would “feel bad for knocking them

down”. He wants to come from a place of understanding and not govern their actions from a place of fear, yet they were placed in tough situations where they had to make judgment calls. In the case of Gurchit and Parmeet, not only were they physically and verbally harassed, their need to fight back in situations in which they were being bullied put them in more risk and put them in a position where they could get into serious trouble with their school and family.

In addition to these physical threats, there are psychological impacts on Punjabi that are damaging to their self-confidence. In the introduction, I discussed the personal experiences with bullying that Zoravar recounted when he represented the Sikh Coalition at a conference about bullying at the White House. In his statement, he discusses how he felt as he was at a crossroads in which he had to choose between his safety and well-being and the faith he loved so much. Although his Sikh identity had value to him, the fact that he was being bullied relentlessly forced him to cut his hair—mentioning that he felt like a “tree without leaves”. Not only were his parents extremely saddened by his decision, he felt a huge loss because he was cutting his hair that connected him to his religion. However, when he cut his hair, bullying continued to persist and he was still in the same negative environment. As feelings of insecurity continued to persist even without his turban, Zoravar felt that his insecurities just got worse. Although this is Zoravar’s personal account about his decision to cut his hair to try to avoid bullying, this decision reflects a realistic thought process that many youth who are in similar predicaments think about. Not only does bullying and prejudices serve as a major distraction, they force youth to question their identity and make difficult decisions that

have the potential to create serious insecurities about their appearance and how they are perceived.

It is evident that bullying is a major physical and mental distraction for Punjabi youth, particularly males, when growing up in Richmond Hill. Fortunately, most youth mentioned that bullying and racial prejudices decrease as they grow older and enter high school and college. However, for youth like Amar, Gurchit, Parmeet or Zoravar, what are the longer-term consequences of this persistent harassment over the course of many years and how has it affected their connection with Sikhism? For some youth, it does not have major impacts on their identity and well-being. Gagan and Hardev cited that they were called terrorists all throughout middle school and even got derogatory remarks in high school. However, physical violence was not something they were threatened by and were able to navigate through the racial remarks. For some youth, bullying actually had some positive consequences over the long run. Although Gurchit and Parmeet got into many fights because of bullying over the years, they mentioned that being picked on forced them to think critically about why they actually wear their turban. Doing more and more research on the history of the turban, they learned more about the Gurus' reasoning behind keeping one's hair and began to associate their turban as a testament of their strength. In the interview, they mentioned that some people cut off their hair to avoid the teasing they may face growing. However, Parmeet said that he now views his turban as a "big middle finger" to his aggressors and bullies because he was able to preserve through challenges and obstacles he faced in practicing his religion.

Although many youth find different reasons and ways to preserve through the bullying and keep their identity, not everyone does as the effects of this racialization causes many youth to get rid of this marker completely. When Zoravar was being bullied, he decided to cut his hair. But when he realized that he did not want to forsake his connection for his faith, he eventually regrew it and now dons a turban again. Yet, people like Amar, who was bullied all throughout middle school, decided to cut his hair and not wear his turban anymore about a month after our interview in January 2014. Ajeet, the senior at State University of New York who wrote the creative “I Am” poem in the introduction, also cut his hair soon after as well. Harpal, a senior at an independent school who is also a main organizer with ROOP, also decided to cut his hair in April of 2015. Although I did not get a chance to speak to them personally behind their decisions, there are complex reasons as to why youth chose to do so even though they have wore turbans their whole lives. For some, they simply do not feel a connection behind the reasoning and do not see the value they once saw or the value their parents placed upon them. They simply might not want to deal with the maintenance that comes from the long hair or find it to be a hindrance to the way they navigate socially within western society. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that their decision not to keep their hair is linked to the marginalization or bias they face growing up in Richmond Hill because of the faith. Negative associations and experiences can continue to effect their decision to keep their hair for years even when bullying may stop.

Communal Hindrances to Educational Achievement

For Punjabi Sikh youth growing up in New York, failing institutions and the bullying from fellow students are clear problems that hinder the ability of these teenagers to do well. However, apart from these issues, it is also important to acknowledge that there are some key challenges that Punjabi youth face that originate from cultural clashes between youth and their parent that also act as hindrances. Despite the weak academic institutions in the area, many Punjabi youth do excel and have the potential to get into well-respected colleges and universities that give them many opportunities for their personal and professional growth. Yet, even if many of these youth can get through the barriers at school, there is another set of hurdles within the Punjabi enclave that they must also get through. Because of the intergenerational gap, many parents and older people in the community's desire to pass on their own values and beliefs onto their children when it comes to education. Although the immigrant generation wants their children to be successful and do well, there are certain practices and ideologies embraced by the Punjabi community in Richmond Hill that keep youth from doing so. Pushing for certain career tracks, trying to keep youth close to home and not emphasizing the importance of higher education can keep youth from reaching their full potential and has the potential to cause additional stress within their lives.

*Becoming Doctors, Lawyers, Engineers:
An Old World Mentality in a New World*

One major source of stress for Punjabi youth in Richmond Hill is the cultural conflict that arises between parents and their children on what youth should be studying and pursuing in their career. The example of Loveleen and her mother is perhaps is the

ultimate example. Loveleen is a person who went to public schools in New York City her whole life. Despite the different flaws of the educational system, she was able to navigate through, excel in high school and attend Barnard where she graduated with honors.

However, when she graduated and decided not to go to medical school, her mother was devastated and gave her the ultimatum of finding and choosing a career path her mother found suitable within three days or being forced to leave her eyes. Even with all of Loveleen's academic accomplishments, Loveleen was thought to be a failure by her mother who caused her a great deal of anxiety upon graduation (Interview January 8th, 2015).

Like many other Punjabi parents, Loveleen's mother has a mentality that career paths such as being a lawyer, doctor, or engineer are the most lucrative, financially stable, and honorable paths one can follow. Although there is validity in these careers offering stability, this mindset also inherently causes parents to think that anyone who pursues career tracks that are not these fields is relatively not as educated or intelligent. This thought process is related to the upbringing of parents in Punjab and positive cultural associations that come with being a doctor, engineer or lawyer. In South Asia in general, becoming any of these professions is extremely difficult because of the strain, resources and level of intelligence needed to get there. For lower socioeconomic class Punjabis, there are not many who have the skill set or necessary resources to be in a position to get there. As a result, there is an increased sense of honor and respect associated with these professions because they are seen as a way to obtain financial security for oneself and family. For Loveleen's mother, her daughter has the resources, intelligence and ability to

apply to medical school and be a successful doctor—something that has not happened in Loveleen’s family before. When Loveleen decided that was not the path for her, her mother felt that she was throwing away an opportunity to become a doctor which she associates as the most honorable and respectful profession one could follow.

Loveleen knew that being a doctor is something she would not enjoy at all and she cannot imagine living the lifestyle of on. When her mother gave her the ultimatum to find a career that is suitable, the criterion ultimately included finding a job that served similar purposes to being a doctor, lawyer or engineer—one that made a significant amount of money and was respected. Although Loveleen would have loved to be a full-time community organizer or work for non-profits on social justice issues, her mother would not allow it because it does not bring the same cultural and financial rewards as being a doctor. Ultimately, Loveleen decided that she was going to go back to school and become a dentist. As she still enjoyed the sciences, pursuing dentistry allowed her to follow a career path that has more stable hours than doctors, pays well and is a reputable career path. When I asked her if she’s truly happy, she expressed that she is genuinely interested in the material and it fits the criterion of what her mother laid out for her. However, the reality is that her decision to pursue dentistry did not come from accomplishments and transformative experiences in college. In this case, those were not relevant and it was ultimately the pressure from her family that led her to take her entrance exam and apply to dental school.

Though it is fair for working class Punjabi parents to want their children to pursue careers that have traditionally offered stability, they do not understand the liberal arts

educational system their children are growing up with, and do not always internalize that it is possible to be successful without being a doctor. In Punjab, a student picks his career path at a very young age and follows that path for many years. Liberal arts and not having a solid plan to get to a specific job is looked down upon. However, that is not the case in the United States. In fact, the top colleges and universities champion liberal arts educations where students can decide their own career paths and explore many different things—endorsing Western individualism. The intergenerational rift comes when parents want their children to know exactly what they are doing to get to a career that is respectful and pays well, but the educational system does not necessarily operate in the United States. For Punjabi youth growing up in New York, there are many more diverse job opportunities when compared to their parents who grow up in Punjab. It is hard for many parents to completely understand that it is possible to get a good job, be successful and be well respected without becoming a lawyer, doctor or engineer.

This was the case for Manjot who is currently in a seven year combined B.A. and M.D. program. When he was accepted to this program, he was not completely passionate about it and was not sure he wanted to do it (Interview January 7th, 2015). His top choice was to go to a top liberal arts college because it was difficult for him to commit for such a long time. He was worried that he would decide that he does not want to become a doctor during the middle of the program, putting him in a tough predicament. His initial plan was to apply early decision to an Ivy League school, but his parents did not let him. His parents pressured him into applying to the seven year program and eventually pressured him into accepting the offer because of the benefits they saw. From the perspective of his

parents, getting into medical school is very difficult. They did not want him to go to a liberal arts school and then have to go through the process again during the senior year of his college, with also the possibility that he might not want to become a doctor anymore. Although he would have liked to have options and explored different fields, the pressure from his parents won. Manjot mentioned that he “wanted to be that exception” and challenge this traditional mentality. He wanted to do his “own thing”, meaning explore his options and get into medical school after he confirmed that is what he really wanted to do. However, his parents wanted what is best for him, and it was hard to convey to them that there were other options that would have given him similar respect and financial stability. Like Loveleen, Manjot’s parents played a huge role in choosing his career path and not allowing them to choose what they would do themselves.

The mentality of Punjabi parents to know exactly what one is doing to get to a reputable career is something that has been a personally challenge in my family over the years. During the summer of my freshman year, my father and I got into a very tense conversation about the topic. My father told me that he appreciated me and respected that I am studying at Columbia. However, he constantly asked me “what I am doing?”. Although I was doing well academically, my father was always worried because I was not sure what profession I wanted to pursue and whether it would help support the family. In terms of the communal “eye”, many people in the community also constantly asked what I want to do and also wanted to know my career goals: adding to the worries my father already faced. I made it clear early on I was not interested in studying science in college. However, I told him that I was pre-law to help quell his tension and also help

him explain to his friends and colleagues exactly what my long-term goals were—even though I knew I was not sure about this. Fortunately for me, my father had some education in Punjab and is relatively progressive and understanding. Ever since our conversation freshman year, I have continuously tried to explain him how the liberal arts system works and that it is possible to be successful without following a strict and traditionally successful career path. Although it has taken a while to show that there are now more diverse career options that are successful than he had around him growing up, my experiences through different internships and jobs showed him that it was possible.

For people like Loveleen, Manjot and myself, we are incredibly fortunate to have had the chance to get our education from great colleges and universities. We would not have even had these opportunities if it were not for the sacrifices of our parents to come to this nation and do what they can to support us. As Manjot and Loveleen are steadfast in their studies to become dentists and doctors, I am proud of them as a friend for persevering and learning all they need to be successful in those fields. However, in terms of Punjabi youth growing up in Richmond Hill, this pressure from parents and the intergenerational rifts when it comes to career paths and education is a huge additional burden onto youth in addition to all they already face. Because of this constant pressure to pursue paths that will offer financial security and an increased reputation, many youth feel constricted and nudged in certain directions even if they personally do not want to do certain things. Hardev, a second year at a local community college, said that “he does not want to be coerced in doing something he doesn’t want to” (Interview January 3rd, 2015). For him, he wants to do something he cares about, such as being an artist. However, he

says that Punjabi parents “care about money and respect” and that inherently clashes with what he would personally like to study and achieve—withholding him from reaching his true potential in a field this parent’s generation does not necessarily view as successful.

Limiting Mobility and Keeping Youth Close

Building off cultural conflicts between parents and children, another major communal problem in hindering the educational achievement and locking the true potential of Punjabi youth is related to the geographic location of colleges and universities. For Punjabi parents who come from villages where it is not common for children to leave to go study elsewhere, there is a pressure for Punjabi youth in Richmond Hill to stay at home and commute to colleges in the city. Additionally, school has traditionally seen as a stepping-stone to get into a career or position. Medical or law schools are just ways to become trained to become a successful professional. Because of this, many Punjabi parents do not completely stress the quality and caliber of a school and many uneducated parents do not necessarily understand what makes one college or university better than other.

As a result, Punjabi parents are not always comfortable letting their children dorm and leave New York City to go to a college that might be better for them professional and personally than their options at home. Although doing well and being successful is important for Punjabis in Richmond Hill, this is inherently compromised when youth are not allowed to leave the community to explore their options. There are great institutions of higher learning in New York that youth take advantage of. However, for those who are

high-achieving and have the potential to gain from opportunities elsewhere, the chance to do so is limited because of this geographic constraint. A majority of Punjabi youth who go to local public high schools do not have the structural support and guidance they need to navigate the college process. However, if they do have the chance to gain a unique experience by attending school elsewhere to dorm, that option becomes controversial.

During my interview with Karam, a senior at a local public high school, I decided to ask her if she is thinking about college and what her prospects are. She told me that she is planning on applying to CUNY schools. When I asked her if she planned on applying to any other schools, she said that, “my parents are not letting me go to anywhere but CUNY” (Interview January 7th, 2015). Curious as to why this is, I asked her why is that is the case. She responded by saying that, “most people go to CUNY. For a lot of *desi* [South Asian] kids, it’s usually CUNY or nothing. Parents have certain attachments to children and they won’t let their kids go to state [schools]. They want to keep them safe”. Karam feels that most Punjabi youth in the community attend schools in the CUNY system. Because their parents would not want them to leave the city for college, many do not even apply to state or private schools outside of the city. This was the case for Karam and her older brother and sister who also attended CUNY schools. Even if they had the potential to apply elsewhere, they never even took the opportunity because of how their families would feel.

Since Karam considers herself an activist, I asked her how she feels about not being able to leave home and apply to other colleges that might serve her need. She replied by saying, “It’s not okay, but there’s not much I can do. If I challenge them about

leaving the home for studies, there's always a threat of being kicked out the house. It's just about being closer for them". Whether or not Karam would actually be disowned from her family if she wanted to leave Richmond Hill for college, the reality is that the idea of applying outside the city for college causes the family to make the youth feel guilty about wanting to leave their home. Instead of viewing applying to a plethora of colleges throughout the country as a valuable thing to do for their future, it is seen as an act of disobedience and desire to separate oneself from their family.

A majority of Punjabi youth in Richmond Hill goes to local public schools that are not always conducive for educational achievement and helping them go to college. If they do reach a position where they are going to college, this pressure to stay at home limits their options to schools that are close to home—predominantly the CUNY system or other affordable colleges in the area. However, looking at this issue through the lens of the communal eye and gender norms, the pressure to stay at home for college is higher for female Punjabi youth than it is for males. From my personal experiences, female Punjabi youth do better academically than male Punjab even within the given circumstances.⁵⁸ Yet, even if they are better positioned to succeed and go to better colleges and universities, they are more likely to be held back by their parents. Not only do Punjabi parents stress their daughters stay at home in order to help with tasks at home, going away to college does not allow parents to keep an eye on their women to ensure they are not “tarnishing” their reputation or image in any way.

⁵⁸ This is perhaps due to their higher responsibility to provide financial support for their families. It may also be linked to the fact that men of color systematically underperform when compared to their female counterparts. A further analysis of this is definitely needed.

During our conversation about college, Karam provided evidence to the fact that female youth have a more difficult time going away to pursue any opportunity that causes them to leave the community. Although she felt that she was not in a position to challenge her parents about applying to schools that are not in New York, she wants to study abroad during college and is hoping she will be position to talk to her parents to let her do so. On the topic of leaving home to pursue educational opportunities, she said that

Punjabi parents want to here to keep an eye on you. They are not okay with you making your own decisions so that's why it's harder for girls to go to schools like SUNY and study abroad. They believe you're not capable of staying with strangers and can be independent (Interview January 7th, 2015).

Due to the additional caution that Punjabi parents take when it comes to the girls, gender double standards hinder female youth from truly reaching their potential. Women are not to be seen as independent as men so it is hard for the community to understand that they are capable of going away to college or live by themselves. Additionally, by letting their daughters go away for extended periods of time, there is this unspoken fear of assimilation. Without someone in the family keeping an eye on them, there is a fear that their Punjabi daughter will engage in actions, such as drinking, partying or having romantic relationships before marriage with men, that are seen as taboo for female youth.⁵⁹

Apart from the psychological impacts and hindering youth from achieving their potential, particularly Punjabi female youth, not allowing students to take the opportunities that would benefit them the most has huge consequences on their long term

⁵⁹ On the other hand, if Punjabi boy got a great opportunity to study elsewhere, parents would be more open for him to engage than they would be for a girl. Punjabi males are seen to be more independent and their academic success is prioritized over females—why many parents do not feel remorse in not allowing their daughters to go to better schools.

growth as individuals. A perfect example of this would be the daughter of a Punjabi mechanic from Richmond Hill. A friend of my father's, I spoke to him a few times to give advice to his children about school. Reconnecting with him in December of 2014, I asked him how his daughter was doing. In the conversation, he told me that his daughter was accepted to University of Pennsylvania. Really excited to hear that, I congratulated and told him that is a major accomplishment. However, he soon told me that he did not let her attend even though she really wanted to. Instead, he wanted her to stay at home and did not want her to go too far for college. Instead, she now attends Hunter College and commutes from home. His reasoning to me was that it was better for her to stay home.

Although Hunter is a great college and I am sure she would be able to accomplish a lot there, not understanding the differences between the two colleges and the need to keep his daughter home in order to keep a closer eye on her from attending an Ivy League university where she would have had a completely different experience. Living by herself, she would have gotten the chance to be more independent and learn how to take care of herself. She would also have access to funds, resources and professors in a way she would not be able to at a predominantly commuter and public school like Hunter. Though my father's friend cares about his children and wants them to do well, the fact that he did not understand the stark differences in the two options and wanted to keep her at home kept her from going to a school that is respected internationally. For Punjabi youth in general, their mobility and potential for upward social mobility is further hindered by geographical constraints placed upon them. For female youth in particular,

the additional pressure to maintain respect and reputation keeps them from going away and having experiences outside the community.

*Lack of Role Models and Insecurities:
A Major Component in the Cycle of Disempowerment*

In addition to pushing certain areas of study and trying to keep youth local, a third major communal issue that underlies the experience of Punjabi youth in Richmond Hill is the lack of proper mentorship and role models. Since most children are born working class Punjabi immigrants who are uneducated and fall under a lower socioeconomic bracket, Punjabi youth, like many other immigrant groups, do not have the people who they look up to for advice on how to navigate both educational institutions and the intergenerational challenges. Working in conjunction with the institutional and communal challenges already discussed, not understanding how to navigate issues they face and not having anyone help them jump academic hurdles creates a sense of complacency and being lost amongst youth. Because of the difficulties they face at school, the cultural challenges fostered by the Punjabi community in Richmond Hill and lack key support systems, many Punjabi youth are caught in a cycle of disempowerment in which they do not have the confidence or guidance to break.

The first person during my research that used the word “cycle of disempowerment” was Loveleen, the Barnard alum. I first met Loveleen during my freshman year in college in 2011. Reaching out to me to help organize events for the Sikh Students’ Association, we became good friends over the years. When Loveleen found out

that I grew up in Richmond Hill, she said she was “shocked” to hear that. Throughout her personal experiences growing up in the neighborhood and during college, she had never met anyone else from our Punjabi enclave who also went to Columbia. Understanding the institutional and communal challenges within the community, it was difficult for her to associate my identity as a Punjabi from Richmond Hill with me being a student at Columbia because those two do not intersect often.

Interested in hearing more about why she was surprised to connect those two identities, I followed up with her about her initial reaction when she first met me. During our interview in January of 2014, she elaborated on her thought process. Discussing the Richmond Hill community overall, she feels that there is a “lack of higher goals with youth”. As a result, when she met me, the fact that I had both the educational background and drive to attend Columbia surprised her. Since Punjabi youth in the community are predominantly first-generation, the preliminary thought would be that teenagers and young adults overall would have extra zest to succeed—which many do. However, because of the different circumstances that youth grow up with, Loveleen believes that self-confidence is a huge problem and “many kids don’t believe they can do it”. By “it”, Loveleen is referring to attending college, learning how to think critically and working to break the cycle that she feels many youth are caught in. Though I will discuss the reasons the class reasons why youth are caught in a cycle in the next chapter, she feels that the reality is that many Punjabi youth lack the fire need to fight against the obstacles they face.

Because Punjabi youth do not know many people who are excelling at school and breaking barriers, many of them doubt themselves and do not have people telling them otherwise. For Loveleen, Punjabi youth become okay with driving taxicabs, going to community college and continuing living similar life-styles to their parents because it is hard for them to envision themselves being different. From Loveleen's observation, she feels that youth have these internal issues that are keep them from breaking this cycle. What Loveleen mentions as the cycle of disempowerment is a generalization for a large and diverse demographic. The reasons why Punjabi youth overall do not excel academically are linked to many of the gender, educational and class issues that keep them from excelling. However, she is not the only one who supports the idea that youth lack confidence and drive to overcome the circumstances they are placed within.

Amar, a first year at private college in Upstate New York, faced a lot of bullying growing up and also went to public school his entire life before college. He mentioned that the biggest concern about Punjabi youth is the fact that higher education is not emphasized enough and teenagers do not realize the value of going to good schools (Interview January 7th, 2015). Whether it is because of the failure on local schools, hindrances from their community or the inability of youth to understand how to navigate their circumstances, Amar understands how difficult it can be. However, he truly believes that fellow youth can live a better life by going to and being successful at college—therefore not having to be in similar circumstances their parents forced to be in. From his observations as well, this does not happen.

On the other hand, it is difficult to fathom how to get to college and then excel if one does not know what the process is like or not prepared for it. During my interview with Akaldeep, a freshman at Richmond Hill High School, I asked her if she would like to go to college. She responded saying, “Sometimes I do. Everyone makes it sound so hard you know. It makes me doubt myself. What if I can’t make it?” (Interview January 3rd, 2015). Although Akaldeep is aware that college is important, she explicates the confidence issues that Loveleen discussed. From what I know about Richmond Hill High School, the case very well might be that she is not being prepared properly to get into college and do well once she is there. Nevertheless, without someone telling her that college does not have to be difficult and there are ways to succeed makes her feel that she cannot be successful.

As discussed throughout the chapter, there are undoubtedly a plethora of institutional and communal challenges that impede Punjabi teenagers ability to succeed at school. Yet, if they are prepared to go to college or do have the talent to succeed, which many do, Punjabi young adults like Amar and Loveleen feel that Punjabi youth are missing drive and inspiration to go further in their education. In addition to addressing the educational challenges address, Loveleen believes that instilling the inspiration and confidence for youth in the community is an integral component of helping them achieve upward social mobility.

Conclusion

Punjabi immigrants who moved to New York move because they were in search for a better life for themselves and their families. They make their sacrifices known and

Punjabi youth grow up with the need to help their families get into better positions than they are currently in, particularly through using education as a tool for mobility.

However, Punjabi teenagers and adolescents are not succeeding in large numbers. Local educational institutions have many problems and the different communal obstacles also hinder them from studying at more progressive and competitive schools. And for people like Loveleen who get a world class education, the challenges still do not end as the intergenerational gap between them and their parents can serve as a major point of conflict.

In theory, the best solution would be to improve local public schools that serve a majority of the youth in Richmond Hill. However, given the bureaucracy of the Department of Education and the intricate challenges plaguing these schools, it does not seem that this will be the fastest solution. In order to bypass the ailments of failing schools, the most efficient response would be to ensure that more Punjabi youth are being placed in better educational institutions that are available all throughout the city. In order to deal with the communal problems, a more formalized system of mentorship from young adults like Amar and Loveleen could potentially help people younger than them deal with the communal challenges that the older generation throws at them.

Unfortunately, the obstructions that Punjabi youth face when it comes obtaining a proper education and achieving upward social mobility do not end at institutional and communal challenges. There are persistent class challenges that are inherently connected to the cycle of disempowerment they face because of the circumstances they face. A perfect example of this is Taran, a high school senior. Throughout the year, I have helped

her throughout her college application process. She was accepted to a great college in Baltimore where she received an academic scholarship. However, when I followed up with her in April, I asked her whether she finalized where she was going. She visited the school with her parents and even they supported her attending, meaning she overcame major gender norms that constrain female youth. Yet, she told me that she still would have to pay the hefty sum of \$20,000 a year if she decides to attend. Although Taran overcame the educational and cultural challenges that female Punjabi youth face, her inability to pay that much money is an additional stress factor that she must think about-- demonstrating the fact that the issues that Punjabi youth face are intersectional and are working in conjunction to be a detriment to their social mobility in the United States.

Chapter 3

Cycle of Poverty and Disempowerment: Implications of Service-Oriented Work on Punjabi Youth

Starting during the summer of 2014, ROOP organizers, Loveleen, Zoravar and I met often at a local Dunkin Donuts. Found on the intersection of Jamaica Avenue and Lefferts Blvd, it was found in a relatively new commercial complex created in a predominantly residential neighborhood. With the Q10 bus stop close by, there are many people moving around to different shops, to the bus or train station or simply heading home. On Sunday, September 24th, I ventured out to Queens to meet with the organizers to talk about an upcoming event for ROOP. The event was coming up in a few weeks and we were working out logistics of how to ensure students attend the meeting and are engaged.

As usual, we begin by checking in with each other and see how things were going. Right off the bat, Zoravar seemed to be a little tense and had a worrisome expression on his face. He kept shaking his legs and had his shoulders crunched. I remembered from a text conversation earlier that he mentioned that he was stressed because he had three exams and had to be at Stony Brook, two hours away, at 6pm for a student session so it was a crazy day for him. Because of this commitment, we agreed to cut the meeting short and have a longer Google Hangout session later in the week. However, when Loveleen and I asked him how he was doing, he inevitably began to tell us what was bothering him. It was his father.

Zoravar told us that on top of commuting to Stony Brook, working as a deliveryman at Pizza Hut and being involved with different groups, his father does not

understand all that he has on his plate.⁶⁰ His father sees that his son is working at Pizza Hut, but is angry with Zoravar because Zoravar is not supporting the family with the money he is making. Zoravar repeatedly mentioned that his father does not understand that he is only making enough to pay off his credit card bills and is barely staying afloat to cover his own expenses. Whenever he comes home, he must face what he calls a “lecture”, or a larger rant, or condescending remarks from his parents—a pressure that he is always thinking about.

In many ways, the challenges that Zoravar faces embody the diverse challenges that Punjabi youth in Richmond Hill face. First, he faces the huge pressure that males face about providing for their families. Secondly, he is the result of an educational system that did not give him the proper support he needed. Not only did he face bullying during his adolescent years as shared in the introduction, he attended a local high school in nearby Jamaica, Queens that has been widely acknowledged as a failing institution. During college, he has also transferred multiple years and is graduating a year later that he initially attended. Now looking for a job after school, he is struggling to find something because he feels that he does not have the necessary skills that employers are looking for (January 2015). And as shown by the stress he was feeling during the meeting, his need to work in order to support his education and personal expenses because of his family’s inability to offer financial support is a constant burden. Between

⁶⁰ During this conversation, Zoravar also mentioned that he chooses not to wear his turban while deliveries as a safety caution in preventing any incidents of racial bias—a point demonstrating the intersectionality of youth problems.

trying to work while being a student full time and the burden his family places, Zoravar constantly feels that his overcommitted with his responsibilities.

Zoravar is not the only one who feels the challenges of coming from a lower-income family. Loveleen, many of the youth I interviewed and myself have felt the lack of financial resources being a problem in varying capacities. Poverty and its effects on the development of city residents are widely acknowledged. The challenge of being raised in a lower socioeconomic status has unfortunately become an integral component of cities—disproportionately for people of color and immigrant communities. Punjabi youth in Richmond Hill are also not exempt from these challenges and ignoring this aspect when diving into their experiences would be naïve.

In the previous chapter, I discussed how education is seen as a form of social mobility and how pursuing education is valued. However, because many Punjabi families in Richmond Hill are working class and struggle financially, the emphasis on making money can clash with the demands of pursuing academia and can undermine youth actions and decisions. Not only do Punjabi youth struggle to have the resources they need to succeed in school, their class has the potential to have crippling effects even when they reach college and are supposedly on the ladder of upward social mobility. When analyzing the role of socioeconomic class in the lives of these youth, this analysis calls for a deeper discussion on different structural and cultural factors that play a role. Structural disadvantages in the community lead men to work as taxi drivers, construction workers and other labor-oriented jobs—having specific implications on youth adolescent development. Although the effects of working blue collared jobs are relevant for

immigrant youth in urban areas elsewhere, there are also specific cultural factors in the community that have emerged that add to the stress of youth beyond the lack of money within the household. In addition to the structural challenges of class, Punjabi youth inherit social capital that is particularly strong and prevalent within working class jobs. On top of the pressure to work part time and increased responsibility, Punjabi youth find themselves being pressured to make money and follow in their parent's footsteps-- especially if they are not succeeding academically.

Statistics, Pervasiveness of Poverty, and a Deeper Sense of Responsibility

Mentioned earlier, it is difficult to get the exact numbers about quantitative data about Punjabi youth in Richmond Hill. However, looking at comparable data for South Asian youth in New York City is useful to look at as background for a discussion on class. South Asian Youth Action (SAYA) is one of the few non-profit organizations in the city that works specifically with low-income South Asian youth to do transformative work revolving around youth empowerment.⁶¹ Their website offers preliminary statistics and gives important descriptions about the first-generational and class issues South Asian youth face in general. Talking about Brooklyn and Queens where a majority of youth live, they outline some facts that tend to be not widely known:

Within these two boroughs, a greater percentage of South Asian youth live at or below the federal poverty level (\$22,350 for a family of four) compared to youth from all other ethnicities. In Queens 23.1% of South Asian youth live in poverty compared to 18.9% of all other youth, and in Brooklyn 34.8% of South Asian youth live in poverty compared to 31.3% of all other youth. ("Our Youth & Community").

⁶¹ To learn more about SAYA, see <http://saya.org/>

Regardless of their ethnic background, the sad truth is that the socioeconomic status of youth inherently plays a huge role in their development. Immigrant communities who move to the United States often face many challenges because of the lack of economic resources, eventually leading to a range of other problems that wealthier, white counterparts do not have to face to the same extent. However, what is surprising about these statistics is that South Asian youth in New York City generally live in higher rates of poverty even when compared to other minority groups. Not only does poverty deeply affect the development of youth overall, the data that SAYA offers in their study shows that more South Asian youth are in poverty than any other group.

To further understand the intersection between Punjabi youth and economic class, a report by an organization called Desis Rising and Moving (DRUM) is extremely useful. Even though it is hard to determine concrete poverty data because of a lack of official data, this organization has determined that “39% to Bangladeshi youth, 34% of Pakistani youth, and 26% of Indian youth in New York City live in poverty” (DRUM 15). For the youth represented by these statistics, a huge cause of this poverty is the fact that the parents of these youth belong to the wave of migration that was made up of less educated, poorer immigrants. As they were not as educated or have marketable skills as compared to those who came during the “brain drain” era, many South Asian families, as mentioned with Punjabis earlier, tend to be employed “within the informal sector as taxi workers, construction workers, newsstand attendants, restaurant workers, domestic workers or other service sector employees” (“Our Youth & Community” SAYA). Because of the nature of these jobs, they must consistently work many long and hard hours for a small

income with no benefits. It is not uncommon to see students whose families work in the informal sector to work on top of school to supplement their family's income. In addition to all the problems they might be facing, they must work to support their families, which inherently hinder many things such as their education.⁶²

Whether it is struggling financially or living in unsafe environments, the pervasiveness of poverty deeply affects many aspects of these individuals' lives. Because of the financial circumstances that many youth face, they are forced to either get a part time job or pressured to drop out of school and start working at an early age to either support themselves or their families. In addition to financial stresses, there are many overarching issues that most urban youth generally face within the presence of poverty—"the influence of gangs, substance abuse and street violence" ("Our Youth & Community" SAYA). Although these issues are not as severe as they are in other neighborhoods in New York, there are definitely prevalent for many of the youth in the community. As some youth feel squeezed from all sides with these circumstances, they resort to other venues of expression. Zoravar expressed this concern very articulately in an informational interview I conducted with him regarding his socioeconomic status growing up:

I do consider my family to be poor because we didn't have the resources to support us when growing up. I saw the struggle and it wasn't easy at all. My father would put countless hours into working and trying to support a family of 4. I know it might have been worse for others, but my experience was definitely not better. Because of the financial circumstances at times I would force myself to do things that were against moralistic principles. For example, I remember stealing things from the store to fulfill my desire. I would get caught many times, but ended up getting away with it.

⁶² Update with most recent report.

Though the pressures are extremely pervasive and structural, Zoravar struggles while growing up under the federal poverty forced him to engage in activities that are not at all representative of his character. Although there are no Sikh gangs that I am aware of in the community, problems such as alcohol and drug abuse are prevalent in the community (not always necessarily discussed or done openly because of the communal eye). Luckily, Zoravar did not engage with violence and drugs as many other youth are susceptible to these issues. However, growing up without having money to support his needs consistently put him in place that made his experience growing up uncomfortable and in clash with the values his culture emphasizes.

However, though poverty causes many challenges for youth growing up, the struggle of immigration and belonging to a lower socioeconomic class is not all completely negative. According to Fuligini, numerous ethnographic studies demonstrated children in immigrant families are well aware of their parents' desire for better educational and economic opportunities for their children when coming to the United States (2006,1). When the children of immigrants become adolescents, those children "acknowledge their parents' efforts and cite their parents' sacrifices as sources of motivation for trying to succeed in American society" (1). As result, youth have a strong sense of obligation to their parents and families and have a strong source of academic motivation. Fuligini provides significant amount of data based on various ethnic groups to support these claims.

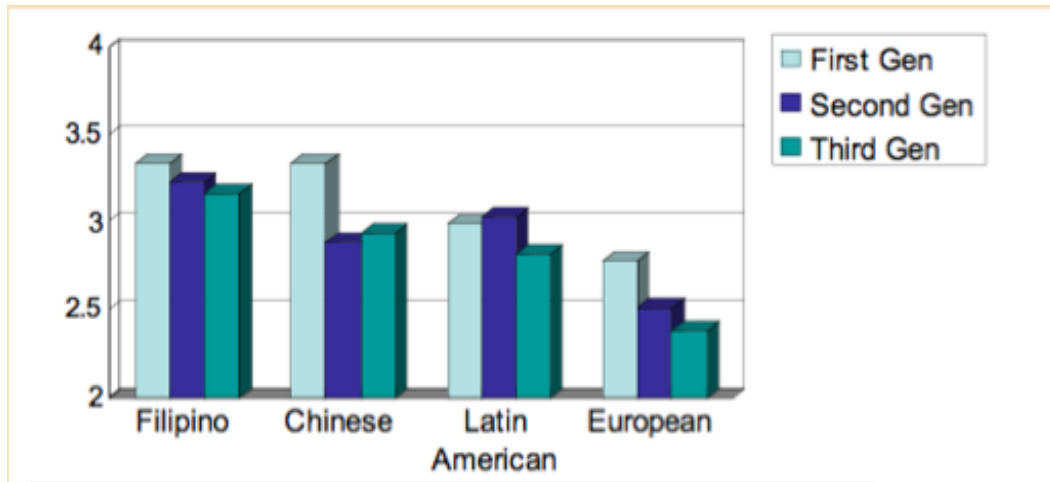


Figure 9. Adolescents' Sense of Family Obligation According to Generational Status and Ethnicity (Fulgini 2006)

As the figure above outlines, Asian and Latin American adolescents generally feel a higher familial obligation than their European counterparts. Though Fulgini does not specifically discuss South Asians or Punjabis, Punjabi youth demonstrated a similar sense of obligation throughout my research. As acknowledged in the education chapter, many youth want to do well in school to make sure they can propel their families forward and make sure their parents sacrifices are not in vain. In this chapter, I will discuss the structural challenges of the labor-oriented work that Punjabi families find themselves doing. More specifically, I will then discuss how this type of work impacts Punjabi youth and the sense of obligation and responsibility they feel to their families as a result. I will also discuss how the social capital that is created in the community further produces class challenges for youth and encourages them to also engage in labor-oriented work.

Structural Challenges:
Implications of Service Oriented Work

Not only is immigration to New York still strong, many of these immigrants that are now flocking to the city for economic opportunity come from lower socioeconomic and less educated background and continue to work lower wage jobs. And this is definitely the case for Punjabis as well. Didta Mitra (2008) offers an in-depth, ethnographic study of the experience of Punjabi Americans who move to the United States and drive a taxi for a living. As these taxi drivers are reflective of this labor-oriented migration, she says that “the rural education of the Punjabi immigrants included in this sample and their lack of fluency in the English language preclude them from membership in the Indian middle classes” (18). She also goes on to say that, “this group fits the profile of Indian immigrants who were incorporated into the service sector of the U.S. economy” (19). As Mitra explains throughout, many of Punjabis that move to and work in New York City tend to be less educated before moving here and therefore are caught within particular jobs that do not require special skills. In addition to the taxi industry, these immigrants also tend to dominate in gas station ownership, small business, construction and restaurant businesses because these jobs do not require a specific level of education. Entrepreneurial endeavors such as these can be important and successful strategies for immigrants to obtain upward social mobility. Although many of the Punjabi immigrants who came to Richmond Hill have done so, owning and operating business is not something that is done by a majority of these immigrants. Because a majority of the community depends on labor-oriented work, many Punjabi immigrants are not in high

socioeconomic positions, so financial stress and having overworked parents is an integral component within most families.⁶³

Challenges of the Taxi Industry

For the first ROOP workshop we had with the youth in January of 2014, we decided to facilitate a conversation revolving around different components of the youth's identity. In order to begin a conversation about class, I attempted to engage in order to understand their financial standing a bit more. Knowing everyone's family to a certain extent, I realized that the fathers of most of the people in the conversation were taxi drivers. I asked everyone to raise his or her hand if that were the case. Every single person in the room did raise their hand because their father drove either a yellow cab or black livery for a livery company.⁶⁴ Although there are Punjabi fathers in the community do not drive taxis or livery cars for a living, I will use the taxi industry as a lens to the discussion on labor-oriented work. The working class faces many challenges as they depend on their wages to ensure the wellbeing of their families. However, because a large portion of the community does depend on driving to support their families, there are very specific effects, strains and implications that this type of work has on Punjabi families and, therefore, youth.⁶⁵

⁶³ In order to provide a further analysis, I will focus my discussion specifically on taxi driving. Although the Punjabi community depends on various labor-oriented industries, I will use the taxi industry as a lens to show challenges of financial stress and the creation of specific social capital as a majority of the youth's families I worked with depend on this work. It is important to keep in mind the Punjabi community also heavily depends other industries as well.

⁶⁴ Going back to the concept of gender norms, fathers were the ones who served as the primary breadwinners in their family and mothers are the ones who serve as housewives taking care of the family. Though some mothers do work part-time, their primary domain, as was the case with the mothers of this group of youth, was to stay at home.

⁶⁵ In addition to class challenges, Punjabi Sikh drivers face a plethora of racial challenges driving taxis in a post 9/11 New York as Mitra points out in her book. For the purposes of my thesis, I will focus on the

7 Days a Week, 12 Hours a Day: A Bondage to the Leasing System

The initial challenges that the taxi driving industry specifically produces are related to the lease system of medallion taxicabs through which many Punjabi men work. Essentially, a taxi medallion is a metal plate with a four character alphanumeric combination, such as 4F84, that can be found on the hood of a taxi. This medallion gives New York City taxicabs the exclusive right to respond to street hails. Since there is a limited number of medallions and they are only sold infrequently through auctions or individual owners, they are extremely expensive and are highly coveted since there has been an increasing demand within a limited supply.⁶⁶ Because of these high prices, a majority of them are owned by investment companies and leased to drivers. For the Punjabi community, many were able to buy their own medallions early on and their investment definitely paid off. However, many drivers still depend on leasing the medallion from other owners or large fleets to work.

Under the leasing system, drivers pay a flat per-shift fee and keep fares and tips above the lease fee and cost of gasoline. After incurring the cost of operation, taxi drivers now saved whatever they made during their shift. For example, if a taxi driver leases a licensed taxicab to work the day shift from 4am to 4pm and makes \$350, he will only take home whatever after he deducts his costs of operations. If daily lease is

economic, health, and familial impacts of the taxi industry even though there are many more. It also is important to acknowledge that there are also another set of challenges for people who are undocumented in the challenge. Though this topic and subset of the population is important, this is a potential venue for further research.

⁶⁶ In another paper titled “Bugatti or Taxi? A Deeper Analysis into the New York City Taxi Medallion Market”, I explain the complex reasons as to how medallions came to cost more than \$1 million dollars at one point. I will also discuss the desire to own a medallion and its effects on youth later in the chapter.

approximately \$120 and gas costs \$30 dollars, the driver will take home \$200 for the day.⁶⁷ The leasing system made drivers autonomous and self-employed. As long as they are licensed by the Taxi and Limousine Commission, the government entity that monitors yellow taxicabs, they can lease a car and work without a problem as long as they have access to a car with a medallion. As there are many fleets with cars and medallions available, this is very possible. For Punjabi immigrants coming into the country without much education, driving a taxicab was an option that offered a lot of mobility. Initially, it was not extremely difficult to get a license. When my fathers and uncles began working as taxi drivers in the mid-1990s, there was no English component in the test for their license and the exam was not as intense as it is currently. For these immigrants, it became a way to make a decent daily salary that did not pose many barriers to entry.⁶⁸

Though the taxi industry allowed many Punjabi immigrants from Richmond Hill to find work and eventually allowed some to save enough money to even start their own businesses, the leasing system is problematic because it pushes drivers to work as much as possible. Firstly, the leasing system incentivizes drivers to work as much as possible because the more they work and are on the streets looking for fairs, the more money they will directly make. Unlike working an hourly wage, a lot of the work of a taxi driver depends on picking up a number of customers throughout the day that add up to a specific

⁶⁷ This can also be more complex depending on multiple factors. This calculation assumes the driver is leasing both the medallion and the car for a day. If a driver leases a medallion and the car for a week, this rate is lower. However, drivers can also lease a medallion but own the car. This is what many long-term drivers do to reduce the weekly cost of operation. In this proposition, they still pay the lease to the owner but maintain and own the car, which the medallion is placed upon.

⁶⁸ Because so many immigrants wanted to start driving taxi in the last ten years or so, they made the geography test much harder and added an English component. I took the test for my license in January of 2014 and there were a few questions on my practice tests that my father was not even sure about.

wage. There is a constant pressure to be on the street to make as much as possible. Sometimes, a driver can go to work and make a lot of money because he picked up many high fares. And sometimes, they can have terrible ones because they did not—there are no guarantees. As a result, if an individual has the opportunity to work extra hours on their shift, many Punjabi cab drivers take that extra time in hopes of making a few extra dollars before heading home for the day. While they are working, there is a huge need to be constantly active.

Not only does the leasing system make it so that drivers make the most of their twelve-hour shifts, it makes it so that many of them are incentivized to work seven days a week. For long-term drivers, they usually have a weekly lease they owe to the medallion owner. If they have miss work for whatever reason, they face a loss because of the direct costs of operation they have already incurred. Because the lease is seven days, they are paying lease for all seven days. If they take one of those days off, there is an approximately \$120 loss for lease the driver has already incurred (depending on the lease rate they have agreed to). As a result, there is a huge financial burden for taking any time off within the leasing system because it constitutes losing money that you have paid for the lease or on the insurance of the car. As a result, many taxi drivers in the Punjabi community work seven days a week for twelve hour shifts a day.

The leasing system is a major reason why my own father can count the number of days he has taken off in the last twenty years on his two hands. For newly arrived immigrants in the 1980s on, the incentives are clear for becoming a taxi driver. In a conversation with my dad, he said that he believes the “living hood” is one does not

necessarily have a boss or when they are a taxi driver (February 2015). He felt that he does not have anyone watching over him and can provide for his family without jumping through the hurdles of an employer. When I pointed out that there are no benefits other than the income he makes and that he is always working, he understood and agreed that this is one of the major downsides. He says that drivers definitely feel a strong responsibility to not take time off because of the cost of operations associated with being independent contractors in an industry that is dependent on lease. When he thinks of taking a day off, he is forced to think about his taxi staying idle and not covering the costs he owns for his lease and the insurance he pays on the car. As he gets older and the wear and tear of the job is more apparent to him, he wants to take time off here and there but he feels that he is constricted and that he cannot do so without facing a loss.

Health Implications

Punjabi immigrants came to the nation to find economic stability for their families and taxis allowed them to do that. Not only does the way the taxi industry operates give them opportunity to work more, many of them are very driven to support themselves and their families so do not hesitate to work extremely long and grueling hours. However, coupled with a system that incentivizes working as much as possible, the nature of driving a car in a bustling, traffic-filled city for so many hours has many other detrimental effects. During January of 2014, I obtained my TLC license—making me a New York City taxi driver. During the summer of the same year, I had the opportunity to drive for a few days to learn how to navigate the city and understand firsthand the challenges that people my father and uncles face. I learned the bureaucratic way in which the TLC

manages taxi licenses and the industry, how taxi drivers must try extra hard to avoid cops that do not hesitate to ticket and experience stress of looking for fares from the morning to the evening. From all the things I was able to observe and understand, the physical and health burdens of this line of work is what immediately struck me.

In mid-August before school started, I drove a taxicab for four days during the day shift. Every day, I would wake up around 3am to commute to the taxi garage in Astoria, Queens from where I would be leasing the car for the day. I would enter into Manhattan around 4:30am to 5pm and work until approximately until 4:30 to 5:30pm. After my day at work, I commuted on the train back home or was picked up by a family member or friend who also drives a cab. While I was working, I took one half hour to forty-five minute for lunch and two to three five minute breaks to use the bathroom. A majority of the day, I roamed through the streets looking for people who needed a taxi. When a customer sat in the car and told me where they needed to go, I had to quickly calculate in my mind what the best way to get there while ensuring I was driving as safe as possible.

As there are many taxis visible during the day throughout Manhattan, it is easy to take the service for granted. However, after only working for four days in a row, I gained a newfound appreciation for how difficult and labor intensive driving a taxi is. Driving a taxi for a twelve-hour shift for seven days a week is an extremely challenging and gruesome task. It involves sitting down and being constantly on the run amongst other issues related to the customers one serves. Because of the constant hustle and bustle of trying to find fares and dropping people off for a very long time, my ankles and back were

extremely sore from driving all day. When I got home, I was too tired from work to engage in anything else other than to relax and get ready for the next.

During my reflection from the days I worked, I could only imagine the longer-term impacts on Punjabi immigrants, like my father and uncles, who have been driving from ten to twenty years. Not only is there a huge pressure on one's physical body each and every day, the extraneous hours does not give drivers much room to create good health practices. Since they are always on the go and longer breaks constitute less time working, I noticed that taxi drivers on their lunch were always eating very quickly and whatever food is more convenient. Not only is it harder for taxi drivers to eat well during the day, their long work days make it harder for them to find times to exercise to compensate for sitting in the car all day. These health implications are important to acknowledge because they cause many physical problems for Punjabi immigrants in the long run. From my own personal experiences within the Punjabi community, there are very few taxi drivers that I met that are not slightly to very overweight or do not struggle with any issues related to blood pressure, diabetes or cholesterol. Of the six uncles, my mother's cousins and brothers, these issues are applicable to all of them in some shape or form. Though there are complex reasons to these problems such as diet and genetics among many others, taxi driving and other similar jobs are not conducive to healthy lifestyles for the primary income generators of Punjabi families in Richmond Hill.

On top of working a job that is not conducive to health living, the leasing system also does not make it easy for workers to take time off when they do get sick or hurt. Technically, taxi drivers are self-employed. As a result, they get no health insurance, no

paid time-off or no sick leave. Because of the economic loss in the leasing system when drivers do not work, there is a looming pressure not to take time off when one does not feel well in addition to the already heavy physical health burdens of driving a taxi all day. Additionally, if they also get hurt for whatever reason, they cannot provide for their family and also can potentially face a plethora of health costs. On top of the individual problems taxi drivers face, their family and children do not get health insurance from their father's employment either. For Punjabi immigrants moving up the social ladder, the serious health implications and lack of insurance resources play a larger role in the lives of taxi drivers and their families.⁶⁹

Evaluating the Impact on Youth

The complex implications of the work that Punjabi parents find themselves doing moves past beyond just the parents who are working to support their families to have overall various impacts on the family. The first major complication these implications have an impact on his proper family development. Because of this dependency on the taxi industry and other labor-oriented industries, Punjabi parents who work a lot cannot spend a lot of time with their children and foster the best potential family dynamics that focus solely on the wellbeing of their children. In addition to not having the proper amenities or financial resources, the concept of the nuclear family gets fragmented for Punjabi youth. As mentioned with my family, days off to spend with your parents, vacations or family bonding that are important for growth are practically a myth as parents cannot afford to

⁶⁹ Many families in the community, including mine, depend on Medicaid as their primary way to cover their medical expenses. Many youth under the age of 21 whose families fall under a certain income bracket use this in order to go to the doctor. There are other subsidized co-payment plans for parents as well.

take a day off or they will continue to lose money because of fixed costs. And by the time most fathers come home, they are too exhausted to healthily engage with their children-- further thwarting any cross-generational differences they might already have.

Referring back to the increased sense of responsibility and motivation to succeed, there is an underlying financial stress that is always prevalent within the household that youth understand very well. Because of the financial and health problems, youth are very conscious of the challenges their parents face and it adds to their desire to succeed well and support family. For many youth, understanding their family's class challenges pushes them to want to help support everyone and their own personal costs. To understand the health and financial impacts of the industry further, many brought up their family situation but Gagan's family dynamic is a good example to illustrate this point. In my interview with him and Hardev, he mentioned, "the whole house thing bothers him" (Interview January 3rd, 2015). Discussing his financial situation at home, he said he does not want his father working as much as he does. His father used to be a taxi driver and now drives a black car through a limousine service. He disclosed that his father is a "heart patient", but he still continues to work hard because there are so many bills that need to be paid. He sees his father's health wavering and feels the pressure to help financially as a result. Hardev currently works at Dunkin Donuts while going to college. He plans on getting his livery license soon so he can drive his father's car so he can take more time off. After explaining his situation, he optimistically said that "I only need a few more years, I have a mindset". Referring to the fact he is choosing to go into dentistry and knows what he needs to do to succeed academically, he sees his family

situation as only temporary as he plans to provide the full support his family needs soon.

Though men play the role as breadwinners and male youth tend to face the heavier burden to take on financial responsibility for the household as mentioned in the gender chapter, women and female youth are not exempt from the pressures of class challenges. To begin with, there are Punjabi mothers who take up part time jobs to also support the family. I have also observed many women in the community work as support staff at restaurants or at the airport. In my family, I have three different aunts who have worked at Target, GNC and even as a livery car driver in the past. Even though they do not work as many hours or days as their husbands, they still work to bring home an income in addition to their responsibilities to cook, clean and take care of their children. However, from my experiences, Punjabi mothers who work are still a minority in the community. A majority of Punjabi mothers who immigrated here primarily are in charge of domestic tasks, which take priority over the possibility of working. My aunt who worked at Target and the other who drove a livery cab have stopped doing so in the last year to focus on taking care of their homes and children.

The role of Punjabi mothers in the household is important to acknowledge for the development of youth. Because fathers tend to work more and are venture out of the household a lot more, their English and social skills tend to be more knowledgeable about Western society and how to navigate the city.⁷⁰ Yet, fathers do not spend as much time at

⁷⁰ For example, my mother only went to school up until 8th grade in Punjab because she had to help her family at home. On the other hand, my father went as far as getting his Bachelors but eventually had to leave home to go the army to support his family. As he is a taxi driver who has met hundreds of Americans throughout his time here, he understands current events and Western cultural norms much more than my mother who has never worked outside of home.

home and it is mothers who are given the responsibility of the children's education.

Although mothers are crucial in ensuring their children are taken care of, this could pose to be problematic. Since women tend to speak English as well as men and even tend to have less formal education than their husbands, they are not always be the better suited parent to help with any school related problems parents might have. The lack of fathers at home has the potential to have an impact on youth's education. On top of not being home and helping their children develop, the fact that fathers are always at work makes it harder for them to be role models for their children—both to their sons and daughters.⁷¹

For female youth specifically, they also endure the high stress environment created because of finances within their family. Though it is not necessarily still encouraged for young girls to work because of gender norms that dictate that a woman's primary space of influence is in the house, they also have a profound understanding of the challenges their fathers and potentially mothers are going through day to do. However, they perhaps even have an extra burden. If they do choose to work and overcome the communal and familial eye that is instructing them not to, they must balance school and working like their male counterparts. Additionally, they also must handle the responsibilities of helping out with domestic tasks at home.

A prime example would be my younger sister. She is currently 19 years old and attends a community college in Queens. To support her expenses and get experience, she works part-time at CVS as a Clerk Cashier and Hallmark Card Specialist. Not only does she work almost 20 hours a week and goes to school, my parents expect to her do

⁷¹ After a certain point, neither parent can really help much because their English and education only goes to a certain point.

housework when she is there. If we have guests over or there is cleaning that needs to get done, there is a pressure to do so the time when she is at home. And as my family also helps to babysit my older sister's daughters, she finds herself having to pick them up and drop them off from school many times. And when these two duties conflict, my father many times mention that she should quit or minimize her hours to make sure she is helping out at home. However, when I talk to her about it, she said,

[working] offers [her] a chance to build independence. I like to work hard to keep myself busy and it gives me a slice of reality. That every penny counts and after a day of hard work it shows me the struggle [there is] to save every penny you can. I want to build myself up in the career of business and I am taking baby steps to get there (March 2015).

Not only does working allow her to get outside of the confines of the house, it essentially allows her to increase her mobility as a Punjabi woman by being financially independent. She also feels that she is learning a lot and doing what she needs to do to get experience for her career. Though it is challenging dealing with everything at school, work and at home, there are both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards she gets from working part-time.

Educational and Emotional Consequences

Although Gagan and others like him are optimistic that they will be able to support themselves and their families financially soon, there are many educational and emotional consequences of this financial burden however. The first is that focusing on both your education and the pressures to work are inevitable going to have an impact on their ability to manage their lives. There is mental and physical exhausting associated with the part-time jobs that many youth take up because of the pressure. However, perhaps just as salient is the emotional damage that students feel when they fail to

support their families financially. Though South Asians are included in the model minority myth that Asians are more academically, economically, and social successfully than other minority groups, many in reality are not super high achieving and many of the challenges they face are too much.⁷² When compared to their parent's generation, they face many challenges and disadvantages that obstruct how much they are able to accomplish as discussed throughout. If a Punjabi youth does not do well in high school or college or cannot provide for their family for whatever reason, there are many emotions of regret, guiltiness and feelings of failure that come with it.

The concept of guilt and feeling like a failure is particularly relevant for Zoravar and the situations he finds himself in. Because he is working part-time to support his own expenses while going to school, he is already spread too thin to take on the responsibility to pay for more expenses at home. Although Zoravar is set to graduate this year and has overcome many of his educational challenges, he constantly feels guilty for not doing more for his family. He was adamant about making sure he finished, but he cannot help feel that he should be driving taxi and making a significant amount of money right now to alleviate the financial stress that is breaking down his family. On top of it, he is having an extremely difficult finding a job for post-graduation—making any options other than labor-oriented work limited. Though he is glad to be finishing soon, he constantly feels like a failure because he cannot find an opportunity along the lines of what he studied in school. Not only are the pressure and guilt heavy on him, he feels that he is caught in a

⁷² To read more about the model minority concept, refer to David Crystal's "Asian Americans and the myth of the model minority" (1989) and Brandon Yoo's "Unraveling the Model Minority Myth of Asian American Students" (2010).

cycle because he feels that he does not have the proper tools to alleviate financial struggles without going into a labor-oriented job.

Communal Challenges for Youth:
Constraints of Social and Economic Capital

In the last chapter about education, Loveleen discussed a “cycle of disempowerment” that youth face. Because of lack of proper role models to help them navigate cultural and institutional challenges, a majority of students do not have the proper support systems they need to succeed and face many issues as a result. The cycle of disempowerment is inherently tied to the class challenges that immigrant Punjabi families and youth face. The community is stuck in a cycle of poverty because of their dependency on working class jobs and many youth cannot break out of it via their education because of the plethora of challenges they face. In addition to the educational, communal and cultural challenges that hinder the upward social mobility of Punjabi youth, the different forms of economic and social capital that the Punjabi community has developed over the years also now plays a role in disempowering the youth. Although Punjabi parents have worked extremely hard to build financial and social foundations for themselves within the community, the type of capital that exists for Punjabi youth is not the type of capital they need in order to reach educational success and eventually break the cycle of poverty their families face. Many youth, particularly males, who eventually end up not doing well in school join the labor market that is similar to their fathers because the networks already exist and the increased sense of responsibility ensures they are active. The capital in the Punjabi community in Richmond Hill essentially helps to

push youth into labor-oriented jobs because of existing—even when the hope upon immigration was not for them to do so. For youth who already face many obstructions in breaking the cycle of poverty and succeeding in their education, the larger scale effects of depending and investing in labor-oriented industries over so many years makes it even harder for youth to break the “cycle” Loveleen spoke about.

Economic Capital in the Taxi Industry

Mentioned earlier in the chapter, many Punjabis who came to Richmond Hill did labor-oriented jobs such as drive taxis or do construction work. However, with the hopes of strengthening their financial foundations, they looked to invest in the work they were doing to make more profit and, therefore, save more for their families. For construction workers, upward social mobility meant finding ways to get together and start their own contracting company. For people who worked in restaurants or stores, it was finding ways to take their acumen to have their own small business. For taxi drivers, it was about investing in an expensive taxi medallion for the long-term economic benefits. Regardless of the industry, many Punjabi families took their economic profits and made large investments back into the industries they were working in. Though this allowed the community to gain economic strength, the next generation inherited these precedents and investment. Looking at the taxi industry and the specific increase in value for the medallion, it is possible to understand how these economic investments by their families and the community creates a pressure for youth to partake.

Investing in a Medallion

When Punjabi immigrants first came here and began to drive cabs, they had to lease their cars from large fleets whose medallions were owned by someone else. However, as time went on, the need and desire to invest in a medallion became stronger and stronger. If a taxi driver could own the own medallion, it meant that the weekly cost to rent the medallion would now go towards paying off the loan for the medallion. Eventually, this loan would be paid off and they would become owners of this property that allowed them to operate a taxi. Even if they decide not to drive anymore, owning a paid off medallion can be leased to someone else which will also make a profit. For a taxi driver who recently came to the country and is driving a taxi, owning a medallion is a dream that works to help save and generate income regardless the way one looks at it. Over the past few decades, many Punjabi taxi drivers tried to save up and buy medallions because it would serve their long-term interests. In turn, they would also be paying off a medallion that will eventually become a valuable asset for their families.

If it is better to own a medallion, than why is it that not every Punjabi taxi driver save up and buy them? The first reason is because there are not that many of them. When the medallion system was created after World War II, only 11,787 taxi medallions were issued and that number essentially remained intact until new ones were issued through auctions at the beginning of this century (Taxi License Commission 2014). Even though the demand for taxis and medallions themselves began continued to increase rapidly in New York, the Taxi License Commission (TLC) artificially kept the same amount of medallions. Because of this high demand and low supply, the second major reason why not many more immigrants bought medallions was because it was way too expensive. For

poorer Punjabi immigrants who recently moved into the country, it was difficult to conjure up the lump sum of money needed to pay for the down payment.

However, for those who were lucky to find a medallion on the market and could save up enough money to invest a medallion after a few years of their arrival, their investment surely paid off. During the period from the 1980s to 2011, the value of investment into the medallion market was much better than any other investment during this time period. In an article titled “Better than Stocks, Better than Gold: The Taxi Medallion as Inflation Hedge”, Thomson demonstrates that, except for the aftermath of 9/11 and the 1970s oil shock, the upward climb of medallion prices has been uninterrupted and been more valuable than investing in the housing, gold or stock market (Thomson 2014). As Figure 3 highlights, the taxi medallion value has been much higher and grown much faster than housing prices and gold for a significant period of time. According to Thomson, the price of a NYC taxi license has grown four-times faster than the average home or a brick of gold since the 1980s.

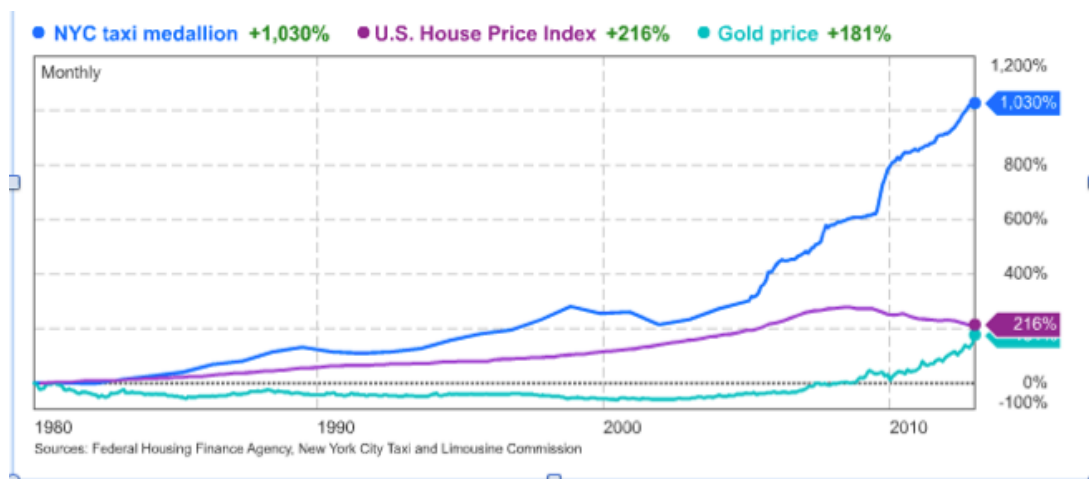


Figure 10. Performance Comparison between Markets (Kolet 2011)

Figure 10 gives us a better look at the disparity of growth between the different industries. According to Kolet of Bloomberg BusinessWeek, New York taxi medallion prices rose about eight percent annually between 1980 and 2011—outpacing inflation, gold, oil and house prices (Kolet 2011). Since 1980, their value has soared a 1000 percent: the major reason why it makes it a better investment over everything else. However, there is something even greater about this investment. Kolet points out that the prices kept growing amid economic slumps and stock market declines. A major reason why investing in a taxi medallion was such a great investment was because it defied the norms of general economy of the country. In the recession between October 2007 and February 2009, the U.S. economy fell into a recession and the S&P 500 index dropped more than 50 percent. However, the value of taxi medallions rose more than 30% in the same time period (Kolet). Not only did the taxi medallion market grow at such high rates, it continued to flourish in moments of economic recession.

For Punjabi taxi drivers who were able to make this investment in the 1980s to the early 2000s, it was a sound decision because the taxi medallion market was extremely high growing and resilient throughout this time period. My uncle, D. Singh, was one of the Punjabi immigrants who was able to invest in a medallion and heavily benefitted from it. He came to New York in the late 1980s with his brother. Since they initially moved without their families and both worked full time, they were able to save up enough money after driving for a few years to pay for a medallion. Both my uncles bought the medallion in 1996 for \$185,000. They were able to pay off their medallion in about ten years or so. As the medallion market soared throughout the years, my uncle's paid off

medallion was worth more than a million dollars around 2010—an incredibly valuable asset to have for an immigrant community.

Economic Challenges of Taxi Medallions

For people like my uncles who were able to buy their medallions cheap and pay them off, a medallion is a great asset to have that can be passed down to the next generation. However, owning a medallion does not come without its own challenges and implications for Punjabi families. My family is an example of the large economic challenges associated with buying a medallion. My parents and my older sister moved to the United States in October of 1992. My father began to work as a taxi driver in almost a year after he came. Although he would have liked to save up and also buy a medallion, he had many costs of living while he was trying to support his newly arrived family and a newborn son that came in the February of 1993. Like many other Punjabi fathers who were in similar predicaments, my father wanted to invest in a medallion because of how much he would save in costs of operation and he liked the ability to put money towards an investment.

My father finally got an opportunity to invest in a medallion in February of 2014 (Figure 11 shows him standing proudly next to it). The TLC had an auction in which they were selling medallions that were specifically for handicap vehicles. Since my father is still driving a taxi and my cousin who now lives with us also drives a taxi, he thought it would be a good idea to bid for a medallion. We ended up winning a bid and buy a medallion for \$816,000, which included an approximately \$80,000 down payment—

money that my father saved over the years and borrowed from different family members. Now, instead of paying lease to someone else, my father and cousin pay towards paying off the loan. As they both plan to drive for years to come, this will allow us to slowly pay off this large loan our family took.



Figure 11. My father standing next to the medallion he saved up to purchase last year

Although we were happy to take out such a large loan because the history of the taxi medallion showed that it was a valuable investment, this quickly changed soon after we bought the medallion. With the onset of Uber, there was a huge shift in the reasoning behind why medallions were so expensive and lucrative to begin with. Initially, only medallions had the legal right to a street hall—allowing for a limited supply of taxi service. However, with Uber, anyone can essentially own a car and serve as a car service through an app. Though there are definitely more complex factors in play, but what is called the “Uber effect” essentially rapidly increased the supply of car service available while the demand stayed the same. Now that people without medallions could do the same type of work, the value of the medallion has fallen more than it ever has in the last three decades and taxi drivers are making much less on a daily basis. In October of 2014, the average price of an individual taxi medallion suddenly fell 17% from its peak of more than \$1 million in the spring of 2013. Going from the million-dollar range, they dropped to average of \$872,000 (Griswold 2014).

For my family, this essentially means that we have an extremely large loan for an investment that is no longer as valuable as it once was because of this disruption. For Punjabi families who also bought taxi medallions in the 2000s for extremely high prices, this means that they have a huge financial burden within an industry that also has not been extremely profitable in the last few years. Fortunately, the cost of operating a taxi equals out to the payments on the loan. This means that as long as someone is driving our taxi and the daily income rate does not fall farther than it already has, we should be able to continue paying off our loan. However, in the long-run, our taxi medallion is

essentially not going to be worth as much as we spent on—binding us to pay much more than it will be worth once we pay off the loan. Even for my uncles who paid off his medallion many years ago, seeing the value of his investment decreasing forces them to think about selling it while they can still make a profit.

Because of the Uber effect, the decreasing value of medallions and the reduced income that taxi drivers are making, there are very specific economic challenges and burdens for Punjabi families and even youth in particular. Buying a medallion puts Punjabi families in a bind. The obvious reason is because drivers must pay off this large loan over the course of many years. However, the TLC also enforces an owner-must-drive rule. This means that whoever bought the medallion must drive it for ten years for a specific amount of hours between whoever is listed as an owner. Although my father is the primary manager of the medallion and is working full time with my cousin, the medallion is under my cousin's and my name. Essentially, my cousin, who is 23 years and moved here from India four years ago, and I are obligated to drive the taxi in order to keep this asset—binding us to this already hefty economic investment we made. Though my father spearheaded this investment and made us the owners as an investment for us, we must ensure that the loan for this taxi medallion is being paid off and someone is driving enough hours so we can keep our medallion. When we made this investment, my family knew that I would not be driving at all and that my cousin and father would be driving. Although I do not have to do much currently not because my brother is driving enough hours for both of us, there is still the stress of having this loan in our names for years to come in a market that is not as profitable.

In addition to inheriting any potential economic burdens, there also other implications of this large investment that add to the challenges that Punjabi youth in the community face. Unlike the construction or restaurant industry, there is not a lot of room for upward social mobility within the taxi driving industry. For example, for Punjabi immigrant fathers who came to New York and became construction workers learned the trade really well. Over the course of many years, many moved up the ranks in term of skill and eventually started their own small companies that became extremely profitable. There was a similar case for those in the restaurant industry who started as just workers. However, in the taxi industry, the major step and investment that one can make is buying a medallion. Albeit this turned out to be a significant one for people in the community, this is the only real step Punjabi taxi drivers can take.

Once Punjabi taxi drivers bought their medallions, most of them continue to drive their taxi cars. There are people in the community that my father has told me about who have saved a lot of money from their taxi driving days and invested in other businesses. However, most Punjabi taxi drivers who own medallions cannot do much more to “move up” in the taxi industry. According to TLC rules, an individual owner can only own one medallion unless they are listed as a corporation. Yet, Punjabi immigrants rarely ever buy medallions as corporation because they usually do not have the capital to ever invest in more than one. Now that the taxi driving is being disrupted in different ways, there is no real desire to invest in medallions at all. For Punjabi youth whose families may own medallions, many are inheriting an asset that is still worth a significant amount. Others, like myself, have a medallion that is covering its cost but it is not as profitable as it once

was. Other than these medallions, there is not much children of taxi drivers are receiving that can help propel them up the social ladder. On the other hand, Punjabi immigrants who were able to invest in small businesses offer their children the chance to grow and move forward in a way that is difficult in the taxi industry. A taxi medallion is something that Punjabi parents worked years to have, but they work to tie Punjabi youth of the next generation to the industry that is not the most productive for youth.

Driving Taxi Part-Time and Existing Social Capital

Other than the economic implications of investing in the taxi industry for Punjabi families and youth, the large number of taxi drivers who have worked in this line of work has created social capital for people within the enclave. However, focusing on Punjabi youth specifically, this social capital has the potential to work against them when looked in conjunction with other challenges that young people face. For Punjabi males, there is an increased sense of responsibility to help provide and support their family financially. While the initial emphasis is for them to pursue their education to obtain social mobility, they are many times not successful because of the institutional and communal barriers they face along the process. When they do not succeed in school, there is still a large pressure for them to provide. When their education is not working out for them, existing social capital in service-oriented work like the taxi industry makes it easy for them to also do the jobs that their fathers have been doing for a long time. Because of this easy transition into labor-oriented work and an increased responsibility, Punjabi youth

continue to live similar life-styles to their parents and are caught in the cycle of disempowerment because the inherent the same challenges.⁷³

After years of working in the taxi industry, Punjabi fathers have gained a keen sense of knowledge about all aspects of the industry. Not only do they know how to navigate the city extremely well, they understand how to navigate the TLC and the process to get licensed. Though Punjabi parents in general cannot offer much help in the educational journey of their children, this is knowledge that they can pass on. Punjabi parents want their children to do well in school. Nonetheless, many Punjabi parents do not find any shame in working if need be. If their son is not doing well, dropped out, or has free time from school, Punjabi fathers push their sons in particular to also work in order to support their own personal costs and help support their family in whatever way they can in the same way they have been for many years.

This is the case for many of my friends who I grew up with in Richmond Hill. All seven of my closest Punjabi male friends who I have known since middle school currently attend a range of different private and public colleges in New York City. A handful of them have transferred from multiple colleges and one of them has also taken a significant amount of time off during college. Of all six of them, five of six of their fathers work as taxi drivers and three of them were informants for my research. In

⁷³ The pressure to support financially and continue working in the jobs that their fathers do is more particular to male Punjabi youth. The implications of not succeeding academically are slight different for Punjabi female youth. If they do not do well in school for whatever reasons, there is an increased emphasis on taking care of domestic tasks at home. There is also an increased emphasis to get females married earlier. Though these are important implications, I will focus on a more general discussion on Punjabi fathers and their sons in order to discuss how class challenges affect the community overall. I do understand that there are serious implications for Punjabi females due to gender norms that cause many problems for them as well which also should be discussed further. I also understand that there are many families in which there is no father figure and mothers also serve as the primary breadwinners.

addition to going to school, four of these seven friends also have their taxi licenses and drive part-time on weekends and holidays. The other two are in the process of studying for their exam and taking care of the logistics to also get their NYC taxi license. They all work when they are not in school in order to support themselves and their families. Though the process of getting a license can be daunting because of the multiple steps, getting their taxi license is not too difficult for Punjabi youth because they have the support of their fathers or other figures in the community who can help them through the process. Since many of them are also born and raised in New York City, fundamental geography and the English component of the exam is not too difficult in the same way it is for newly arrived immigrants.⁷⁴

Working as taxi drivers part-time has a few positives for Punjabi male youth. The first is that, with their license, they can easily lease a car from a garage or use their family's taxicab to go out and make anywhere from a \$150 to \$300 dollars a day. For students, this is a great way to help pay for tuition and other expenses. This also gives them the potential to help give their fathers a break with a day off here and there. Additionally, as in my case, it works to help mitigate the intergenerational gap between parents and their children. Growing up, I knew driving a taxi was difficult and laborious work as I did not see my father often. However, when I got my license and drove for a few days, I was able to bond and appreciate the work my father does in a way that I have never been able to before. Although my father wanted to me learn how to drive for the

⁷⁴ I also obtained my license after being encouraged from my father to do so in January of 2014 during winter break. My father and uncles told me exactly which offices I needed to go to and what I needed to bring with me. When I drove for a few days this past summer, they also stayed on the phone with me to help navigate through parts of the city I did not know.

experience and to develop the skill set in case of emergencies, I became in a much better position to understand what my father goes through on a daily basis and connect with him about it. Before I got the chance to drive a taxi, it was hard to completely discuss with him what was going on at college because of the cultural and language barriers. However, the experience of driving a cab gave me perspective on how he has been working endlessly for so many years doing a job that I got extremely exhausted from quickly.

Unfortunately, the challenge of working part-time doing service-oriented work for a long period of time also has many consequences for male youth. Many first-generation and low-income students must work in order to go to school and support their families. Financial stress is a huge distraction and burden for many groups. However, driving a taxicab is a job that causes serious mental and physical exhaustion. Not only are drivers speeding around the city looking for and dropping off fares for a majority of their twelve-hour shifts as mentioned, their brains are also constantly at work thinking of routes and directions to go. For Punjabi youth who are in school at the same time, this level of exhaustion can make doing essays and projects for college difficult when they are constantly tired from work: an obstacle that my friends have mentioned to me before.

Perhaps more than the mental and physical exhaustion are the longer term consequences of utilizing the social capital and integrating themselves within the work their parents do when school does not work out for them. As discussed in the economic constraints of the the medallion, there is not a lot of room for upward social mobility. Other than working towards owning a medallion, the work is stagnant and does not change year from year. The same job that a taxi driver does when he is 20 is the same

when he is 50. Punjabi youth who fall into this line of work will not be able to move up the chain of command and make more money because there is essentially is none. Unlike getting a degree and working in the public, private or non-profit sector, driving a taxi is solely for the income one makes which relatively does not change over the course of many years.

As a result, everyone, even for those who do not do well in school, who drives a taxi as their full-time job should proceed with caution. This something I learned directly from multiple people who have worked in the taxi industry for years. During one of my license renewal classes, the instructor, a Caribbean man who has been driving a taxi for more than twenty years, said that that taxi driving can serve as a great way to save money. He mentioned how many people drove to make a significant amount of money to go start other ventures. However, he said that you “have to have some sort of goal” in mind (December 29, 2014). For anyone who is young and must drive a taxi for whatever reason, they should have a game plan to somehow exit the industry. As I discussed in the section about health and economic consequences, it is not a job that is friendly on one’s body while does not offer them the room to grow.

Though my friends who only drive taxi part-time, I am interested to see what they end up doing in the next few years. Most of them are adamant about driving being a part-time job as they have aspirations to pursue other fields. However, I have also seen other Punjabi youth who start off as part-time and eventually start working full-time when school does not work out for them-- as was the case for multiple older cousins that I have had. From the group of my friends who are taxi drivers, I have seen them now start to

prioritizing working over their school. One person is taking more than five years to get his Bachelor's degree. Another one is attending community college but is only taking one or two classes a semester. Although I hope they do fully invest themselves in their colleges and build a career for themselves, the reality is that many of them might continue driving taxi for a significantly longer period of time. There is no shame in driving a taxi as an intermediary step before one figures out what they are doing for the long term. However, having strong ties to an industry with not much upward social mobility can hinder their long-term professional, social, and personal development.

Conclusion

After a long commute to and from his college more than 45 miles away, Zoravar has to pull himself up to start his schoolwork. Fighting his exhaustion from his commute and classes, he must summon energy to get everything done. On days he might not have classes, he does not get a chance to rest. He must don his uniform and do pizza deliveries in order to support his personal expenses for school. Additionally, he has to find the time to help take his mom get groceries, take her to hospital appointments or help with anything around the house. On top of it all, Zoravar is a senior who is looking for a job. Whenever he can balance it, he is looking for job opportunities, networking with different people, and questioning what his next steps are. Despite all that he has on his plate, he has surpassed any expectations that anyone has placed upon him. Being a shy and timid person growing up, he has moved passed the bullying he suffered growing up and has made due with the faulty educational systems he depended on. Even though he is fighting

the pressure from his family to do more to support himself financially, he is doing his best to set himself to be in a position where he can use his education to ultimately help alleviate the current monetary stresses his family faces.

Yet, Zoravar definitely feels the heavy weight of all these burdens. Growing up and living near the federal poverty line, the lack of financial resources and his father's dependency on working class jobs has had many strains on him and his family-- as is the case for other Punjabi youth. Now that he is of working age, there is a pressure and responsibility he feels to support his family. However, because of his desire to succeed at school, he feels guilty for not being able to do more because he is spread so thin. Like some of my other friends, he is in the process of getting his New York City taxicab license because he feels that he is not making enough to support both himself and his family. Although Zoravar is a talented and genuinely kind person, his resume is padded with service-oriented jobs from over the years and not the type of skill set that the opportunities that he is trying to pursue are looking for. With his job prospects looking thin, he feels himself being caught into the cycle of labor-oriented work that he has tried many years to fight.

For many Punjabi youth like Zoravar, tackling all the complex issues they face is no small tasks. However, when they do go far, they do not have the proper social, economic and communal support they need to thrive and, in turn, spend every day trying to survive. The implications of the service-sector industry are severe and they continue to affect Punjabi youth for a long time, even those who make it to and through great institutions of higher education in hopes of obtaining higher social mobility. To help

address the class challenges that young people like Zoravar face, a deeper analysis of the social and economic capital that exists in the community is needed. The current capital in the community is not what people like Zoravar, who wants to break from the cycle of disempowerment that his community, needs. A challenge for the Punjabi community in Richmond Hill is to figure out how we can create the type of capital that youth need to help them climb the ladder of social mobility.

Conclusion

Before moving to Richmond Hill, Queens, my family lived not too far away in Jamaica, Queens. For the third and fourth grade, I attended Public School 86—a large building complex that sat on the hill next to Hillcrest High School. Living not too far away, someone in my family would walk me and pick me up to school everyday. However, during the middle of fourth grade, one of my teachers was notified about a new private school that was opening. Called George Jackson Academy (GJA), a group of Catholic brothers were looking to open a middle school for talent, minority boys who are constantly overlooked by the public school education system. My teacher recommended that I take the test for the school. A major problem was that the school was located in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, an hour plus commute from where I lived. My parents thought it was way too far and almost did not let me take the entrance exam. After getting consultation from his friends, my father ultimately decided that letting me take a test for the school would not hurt and, if I were to be accepted, we would work out the logistics of commuting afterwards. Lo and behold, I ended up doing well on the exam, was invited to an interview and was eventually accepted to be a part of the first graduating class of George Jackson Academy.

The school is the only independent, non-sectarian, needs-blind upper elementary and middle school for bright boys from low-income families in New York City. No one is denied because of his inability to pay. Targeting an age group where young men are particularly vulnerable, GJA creates a life-changing experience by challenging its students to grow as scholars, friends and brothers. Although my family moved to

Richmond Hill in the middle of fifth grade, I continued to commute from Queens to Manhattan every day as an eleven year old in a dress shirt and tie. The experience was nothing short of life changing for me. Not only did I was able to get a world-class education for free, GJA supported me during my admissions process to get into the Packer Collegiate Institute: an elite private school in Downtown Brooklyn. After excelling at Packer, I was able to get full financial aid to Columbia University from where I will be graduating on May 20th, 2015. Because of the doors that GJA opened for me, I have been able to have opportunities that I did not even imagine growing up in Jamaica and Richmond Hill. In college alone, I have been able to travel to four different countries, a dozen different cities, make hundreds of friends from all over the world, and get my bachelor's degree from a world-renowned and extremely challenging university.

The reason why I share my own personal story is because I have been extremely privileged to have a plethora of educational and personal development opportunities that my friends and family living back in Richmond Hill do not. While I am caught up in the happenings of Columbia and all my commitments, my cousins, siblings and friends are still dealing with the extensive and complex issues I discuss throughout my thesis.

Although I also face my own fair share of challenges and many of the issues I discuss affect me as well, I have the chance to avoid a lot of the stress that my peers face by living at college, actively disengaging from the happenings from home when possible and jumping many of the hurdles that hinder Punjabi youth from reaching their potential early on. For Punjabi youth growing up and living in Richmond Hill, the profound obstacles and challenges they face have immense consequences on their ability to succeed. They

also have a unique impact on their identity and position on the ladder of upward social mobility in New York. Understanding these intricate problems is the first step in moving towards ensuring that young Punjabi teenagers and adolescents have the proper support systems and guidance to benefit from the resources that New York and the nation in general has to offer.

Overview on Purpose, Argument and Findings

The purpose of my research and thesis was to focus on lower-income, first-generation Punjabi youth whose families belong to a working class wave of migration. Less educated Punjabi immigrants who moved to New York helped to build the unique Punjabi enclave in Richmond Hill, the area in which their children are now being born and raised in. As class, race, urban challenges, cultural conflicts and segmented assimilation are all large-scale elements that affect the everyday lives of Punjabi teenagers and adolescents, there is a complex array of intersectional factors that can be discussed. Though there are many issues, such as mental health, alcoholism, caste and communal violence, that affect youth but that I do not get a chance to discuss in-depth, I focus specifically on major gender, education and class issues that Punjabi youth face. Because of their distinct position growing up in an ethnic enclave while they and their families assimilate to the nation, these Punjabi youth face an abundance of structural, communal, and cultural challenges within these larger issues. These challenges essentially act as huge stressors that have many short-term and long-term consequences, particularly keeping them from navigating their own lives on their own accords and impeding their ability to obtain upward social mobility.

By supplementing my ethnographic data, based on my interviews and personal experiences, with relevant theories and work of other scholars, I was able to provide insight into gender, education and class issues while identifying the source of the problem for Punjabi youth came from. In the first chapter, I defined major communal and cultural problems that Punjabi face through a discussion on the social environment of the Punjabi enclave and gender norms for youth. Essentially, Punjabi youth feel as if there is a communal “eye”, or pressure, that they face. The immigrant generation in the community enforces them to maintain certain cultural values through social networks in Richmond Hill. The community tries to assure that young people are not assimilating and partaking in certain actions that are viewed to be taint one’s honor and respect.

This plays out strongly when it comes to maintaining gender norms of Punjabi culture, norms that are stricter on female youth rather than male youth. For women, both parents and the community push them to be domesticated and make the home their primary space of influence—inherently hindering their mobility. For Punjabi males, the pressure is to support their families financially and be responsible for helping improve the status of their families. The larger scale consequence of these communal and cultural assertions is that it places additional burdens on Punjabi youth compounded by other challenges they face. Additionally, double standards do not allow for the fair treatment of female Punjabi youth and the community is not open to giving them the same opportunities as their male counterparts. Although these norms derive from traditional gender roles of their parents, Punjabi youth in the community are accepting, rejecting or beginning to challenge the beliefs of the immigration generation.

Moving forward, I discuss education and the structural and communal challenges associated that Punjabi youth face in trying to do well in school. Overall, Punjabi immigrants value and push for their children to do succeed in school. Someone who is educated is very respected and honored in the community. However, there seems to be a paradox in the Punjabi enclave. Although education is valued and is seen as a form of social mobility as it is for many immigrant groups, there are not many Punjabi youth who go to college and excel during their time there. Many attend local public colleges and universities, but they drop out or do not complete. And if they go to college, they are not always necessarily going to the high caliber institutions that would help lock their true potential and offer them unique experiences. The major institutional reason as to why is that public schools in the community fail to give Punjabi youth the resources they need to exceed. Bullying based on religious lines also perpetuates an environment that is not conducive for their personal growth. In conjunction with these institutional problems that Punjabi youth face, there are many communal complications that also hold youth back when they do have the opportunity to succeed. By pushing certain career tracks, wanting children to stay at home for school, not having the proper role models and support systems, Punjabi youth feel lost on how to navigate their education utilize it for their wellbeing to the best of their capabilities. Though a first-generation student's education could entirely change the course of that student and his or her family's life, educational obstacles at different points throughout their lives keep that from happening for many.

Underlying the educational paradox are class challenges that Punjabi youth in Richmond Hill face. Because the Punjabi community in Richmond Hill is predominantly

working class and depends on labor-oriented jobs, poverty and financial stress are huge burdens for youth growing up. Focusing specifically on the taxi industry that so many families depend on, there are significant health and physical strains on the families who depend on this industry. For Punjabi youth specifically, they grew up in strenuous environments in which youth, particularly males, must feel that they have to work to support their families—having various educational and emotional consequences. Not only does poverty have major implications to the quality of the institutions of schools available for these teenagers and adolescents, these persistent stressors impeded their ability to properly pursue their education when they are in school. Even though the Punjabi community has invested money back into the industries they work in and have made significant gains, the economic and social capital in the Punjabi community is now also generally working to impede the social mobility of youth. When youth do not do well in school, it is easy for them to get into similar lines of work to their parents because of existing capital and, therefore, continue living in the same circumstances that their parents are stuck in. Putting these issues together, Punjabi youth are in a perpetual cycle that keeps them internally within the community: keeping them from key resources needed for social mobility.

Understanding the Larger Significance

When I get the chance to come back home to visit my family in Richmond Hill, one of my favorite things to do is spend time with my nieces and nephew. I am particularly close to my oldest niece who is eight years old. One day when we were hanging out in the living room, she randomly asked me, “[Uncle], are we Indian or are

we American? We're Punjabi right cause our home is there?" (February 2015). At first, I was taken aback that the toddler I saw growing up has begun to ask questions about her heritage and her own identity. After collecting my thoughts, I responded by saying that we are all those things. Our families come from Punjab, India, but we are also American because both of us are born and raised here. In connection to my research, I realized this answer only scratched the surface of articulating our identity as Punjabi Americans from Richmond Hill, New York. More so than just having affiliation to two different cultures, the lower-income, Punjabi American youth group we belong to is a relatively recently formed identity that has emerged in large numbers through a contemporary wave of migration. A new addition to the vibrant urban landscape of New York, we are a demographic group that adds to the nation's diversity and the large immigrant narrative.

The particular Punjabi American identity we belong to also comes with its particular set of challenges. When Punjabi immigrants moved from India to New York, they brought with them the hope of finding more economic, political and social prosperity for themselves and their families. Escaping the turbulent and chaotic state of Punjab in the 1980s and 1990s, they were able to ensure that their children did not grow up in an environment denoted by a lack of opportunity, religious persecution and economic turmoil. Although the children of these Punjabi immigrants did not have to deal with many of the challenges that their parents faced when they were growing up, they inherited their own sets of challenges being born and raised in Richmond Hill. Punjabi youth must consistently mediate between the conflicting demands of what is mainstream while navigating through their own culture, ethnicity, religion and community influences.

Not only are these youth facing hardships because of this constant back and forth between their worlds and those of their parents, they are now dealing with multiple oppressions, such as ethnicity, class and gender and ailing educational systems, which then makes it “difficult for them to find a space for themselves in the context of their family, friends and the wider community, including competing expectations that are imposed on them” (Gill 2005, 1).

Because of the profound intersectional challenges that Punjabi youth growing up in New York City face, their ability to obtain the upward social mobility that their parents dreamed of is inherently threatened. As children of immigrants, they internalize and understand their obligations. However, all the obstacles they face- whether it is from their class background, local institutions they depend on, their parents, or their community- keep many of them from excelling and succeeding. In addition to having trouble climbing the ladder of upward social mobility, the cycle of disempowerment they are caught within because of these issues places many constraints on them and makes it difficult for them to navigate the city and access the resources that could propel them forward. As a result, the the isolation aspect of the definition of an enclave takes a stronger meaning. The detrimental and arduous circumstances that Punjabi youth find themselves within further excludes them from the rest of the landscape-- continually holding them back from moving past the lifestyle and positions their low-income and immigrant families face. Although the community is moving towards a place where youth can develop a capacity to move past the challenges they face, a lot more needs to be done in order to thwart the social mobility that these Punjabi Americans desire.

Solutions and Recommendations for the Community

Based on my community organizing experiences in Richmond Hill and the plethora of issues I explored through this research project, there are specific steps and recommendations I would provide to begin addressing the problems that impede the proper personal, professional and academic development of youth. More time, energy, and resources need to be invested for Punjabi youth in the community, whether it comes from members of the enclave or externally. Although my thesis is the first step, I recommend that more qualitative and quantitative research is done on Punjabi youth. All the obstructions touched upon require a more in-depth look in addition to exploring a range of factors effecting youth that I did not have the space to discuss. Since there is not much written about the challenges that this demographic face, more extensive research could serve as an important role in also offering solutions to obtain upward social mobility.

The second set of recommendations and solutions that I offer are in regards to structural challenges that youth face. Richmond Hill, Queens is a neighborhood that is plagued by failing educational systems that do not properly serve its constituents. A majority of people in the community depend on these institutions to help get them the education they need to move up the social ladder but that is not the case. The Department of Education and local government needs to step up and find ways to ensure that the city's citizens have access to a proper education. Although shutting down Richmond Hill High School and shifting its focus might have an impact, there needs to be a more spearheaded approach that educational institutions are preparing students for competitive

colleges and respecting the diverse identities that now make up the school system. For Punjabi Sikhs who are targeted because of their identity, teachers, administrators and fellow peers should be trained about religious discrimination to help create a more conducive learning environment.

Though the ideal situation would be to fix the public school education system and all its problems, the reality is that this is no easy solution for a multitude of reasons. Working in conjunction with this longer-term solution, I recommend creating a system that works to help place Punjabi youth in better schools throughout the city. There are many competitive schools throughout the city that do a much better job at preparing students to succeed academically and offering more conducive learning environments. Whether this is run by a non-profit or simply by a group of people within the community, this would allow many Punjabi youth to bypass the failures and troubles that local schools place upon them. Although I have helped a handful of students find better schools for them outside of Richmond Hill, the impact has been immediate. Doing this on a large-scale for a majority of students in the community would allow for rapid changes in how Punjabi youth use their education to obtain upward social mobility.

While addressing institutional obstacles are not easy, the solution to address them seems to be clear. Broken systems need to be fixed. However, a trickier question is, how does one address the cultural and communal challenges that many Punjabi youth face? Whether it is convincing your parents to let you leave home for college or feeling that you are constantly being watched, the intrinsic challenges that youth face are complex. However, despite all that Punjabi teenagers and adolescents face, most of my informants

expressed the importance of knowing their history and their heritage. They are all proud of where their families come from and feel that they are unique because of the different values that their faith and culture instills within them. Nevertheless, there are many cultural conflicts and communal problems that also arise from this identity. Reconciling keeping the traditions and practices they love while assimilating to Western practices for others is difficult to think about.

Although I believe it would be naive to offer solutions on how the Punjabi community should or should not assimilate, my third set of recommendations and solutions to thwart social mobility are related to mitigating the effects of cultural and communal challenges. The first major move that needs to happen is that there should be more of an effort to create support networks for Punjabi youth facing these challenges. The reality is that these adolescents are burdened by many different thoughts and circumstances, but have nowhere to turn. By creating more spaces for youth to congregate and discuss their problems, it is possible to build ties between Punjabi teenagers themselves. Perhaps just as importantly, it becomes possible to build relationships between young adults from the community and these adolescents. Older Punjabi people, such as myself, Zoravar and Loveleen, from the community can provide wisdom and insight on how to deal with the things that adolescents are going through: serving as the role models that they need.

This approach does not eliminate the communal and cultural issues that youth face but it does make a difference in helping them process. Throughout the past year, ROOP has held various workshops, discussions and events on different issues. We

discussed issues of identity, class, race and discrimination. Although youth were hesitant to open up at first, these conversations were the first time they ever had the chance to discuss things going on at home or in the community that bothered them. Many young people came up to the organizers afterwards and thanked us for the opportunity to partake in these conversations with their friends. Akaldeep, in one of the conversations, mentioned that this was the first time she felt completely safe sharing her opinions and feelings. Unfortunately, because of time and scheduling constraints of the organizers, ROOP has not held an event in the last six months or so. However, if there were more support circles on a larger and more regular schedule, the impact would be greater. Through more dialogues and support systems, it is possible to make youth realize that they are not alone in facing these issues and that they also have the strength to overcome the challenges they face.

In order to tackle both cultural and institutional challenges, my last major solution to help support Punjabi youth through their challenges is based on creating more physical spaces for young people to congregate through which they have access to productive programming and resources. By essentially creating places where Punjabi youth can come together and engage in activities that may help address the issues they face, the community can move towards creating the social capital that young people can use in order to obtain upward social mobility. Currently, there is no place in Richmond Hill that allows them to do that. As shown in the map of Richmond Hill in the introduction, Paul Rizutto park, or more informally known as “Smokey Park”, is the only place that Punjabi youth have for extracurricular activities. During the spring and summer time, many youth

in the community play sports and hang out here. However, this is not the most productive space. While I was growing up, I personally witnessed many accounts of drug use, bullying and violent behavior. Though it is a good outlet to engage in physically, it is not always the most supportive and is also predominantly male-dominated.

The other major space that youth currently have are the local *Gurdwaras*. After a fire burned down Sikh Cultural Society in 2003, the largest and oldest *Gurdwara* in New York, the Sikh community spent a lot of money to re-build it. Demonstrating the economic strength that the Punjabi community has slowly built, the third floor of the *Gurdwara* is completely dedicated to classrooms. The committee in charge created four shiny and fully equipped classrooms for community use. There are desks and chairs in each of them with a white board at the front. There is nice flooring and there is an adequate amount of space. These classrooms were initially built for Sikh summer camps and weekend programming for youth to learn about Sikhism. However, they now also are used for another number of services.

After speaking with the person who manages the programming that happens, a high school teacher who organizes *Gurdwara* educational programming as community service, I learned that there are also various initiatives to offer academic support for students. In addition to learning about the different components of Sikhism and religious music classes, there are tutoring services that are available for anyone who needs them after school and during the weekends. For students in high school, the *Gurdwara* also offers SAT classes for high school juniors and seniors free of cost. This is huge for the

community because it is the first time in its history that a space was created to offer such resources.

After speaking to people who helped with the management of this programming or benefited from it, this programming is having a significant impact. Between all the programming, the manager told me that there were 200 to 300 people who came to engage in the classes (January 2015). People even came all the way from Long Island and Brooklyn to take part. In terms of the age group being helped, the organizer observed that they predominantly served elementary and middle school school children. Although there was a good proportion of high school students, less youth continue to come as they get older. Two of my informants actually took advantage of the free SAT classes. Karam and Taran both felt the classes were extremely helpful for them. They mentioned that there were about 20 to 30 other students who also took the class.

Although the *Gurdwara* has served as the primary platform of mobilization and education for many young first-generation Punjabi Sikhs growing up in the area, the programming offered and the institution itself is not without its faults. I am very appreciative that the SAT and tutoring resources exist for Punjabi youth. However, their reach is limited as they only happen to support a marginal portion of the population. Though Taran and Karam benefitted greatly, I know of many young people their age who could benefit from this resource but do not know about it or choose not to engage because they do not feel comfortable or welcome within that space. When Gill discusses Punjabi Sikh youth in Canada, she says that many Punjabi youth are disappointed in the programs and services offered because “they did not know about what was offered, or felt that the

group that they belonged to, was shunned by the Gurdwara” (33). This is definitely the case for Richmond Hill as well.

Creating resources for Punjabi youth is a very important step. Yet, the aspect of communal and social empowerment of the entire community through these resources are missing. Even though millions of dollars were poured into making these classrooms, a majority of the programs that run out of the *Gurdwara* are religiously focused. For the first-generation students who highly identify for their faith, this is a great opportunity to engage in because there are now SAT classes and other academic support that is now offered. Many other religious institutions of other faiths do the same. However, if you are a young person who do not have a strong affiliation with Sikhism and are not connected to the ecosystem revolving around the *Gurdwara*, you are most likely not going to engage within these programs-- even if you may need the help. Since the *Gurdwara* is a place of worship, they feel that they have their own agenda when engaging the youth. One of the organizers who spends his free time volunteering as a tutor expressed that this was not the case and the classes welcome anyone who wants help regardless of how much they identify with the faith. Yet, many Punjabi youth hesitate to partake in these resources.

A large part of the reason why many Punjabi youth do not feel open to walking in and using these resources is because of political unrest and tensions within *Gurdwaras* organizing committees. The problem of the *Gurdwara* ostracizing the youth does not end there. In the last decade, the main *Gurdwara* called Sikh Cultural Society has been supplemented by multiple more places of worship for Sikhs. They are emerging not only

because there is more demand for them, but also because of personal caste or clan differences that become more prominent as more people arrive. Nanaki Kaur, a student at Forest Hills High School, said that unity was one of the major problems that exists in our community as it creates tension between different people living in Richmond Hill.

Although Sikhism as a religion does not believe in caste differences and group specific *Gurdwaras*, immigrants moving here still thwart these structures by creating specific places of worship for themselves and their friends and families who fall into same social groups.

This lack of unity that Nanaki speaks of creates an immense amount of unrest and clashes within the internal Punjabi community. As a result, youth growing in New York feel disconnected with *Gurdwaras* because of these committees that are in charge of these institutions. They feel that the committees running the *Gurdwaras* could not relate to them and their experiences. As a result of this inherent distrust because of bad leadership and communal tensions, many youth feel segregated from the activities that are happening with their community and so do not engage at all.⁷⁵

Although I deeply respect and look up to the organizers of the programming at *Gurdwaras* such as the Sikh Cultural Society, I envision spaces that have a much more extended reach for Punjabi youth in the community and offer additional resources that work towards the empowerment of youth. Punjabi youth need a place where they can go to hang out, study, engage in activities, and have space to network with others in the

⁷⁵ A prime example of this would be a fight that happened at *Baba Makhan Shah Lobana Gurdwara* in 2011. After this incident, many youth like myself were outwardly angry at *Gurdwara* committees and lost a lot of hope for our religious institutions as being productive places of engagement.

community. An immediate solution that can serve as the foundation to address both institutional and communal issues is a large community center-- one on the scale of a YMCA. Punjabi youth do not have anywhere to go in Richmond Hill where they can be safe and be engaged in ways that support their professional, academic and social development.

Once Richmond Hill has a physical space for Punjabi youth to congregate, I believe that it becomes much easier to organize various programming that can help thwart Punjabi mobility. In addition to academic and extracurricular activities, I envision a place where diverse opportunities for youth to engage are posted. People who work at the community center can help youth find better schools that suit their needs. They can also even help college students find and pursue internships. I envision rooms in which youth can congregate for book clubs or discussion groups. Speakers come and talk to youth in the community on a range of topics. As Punjabi youth do not have access to the social and economic capital that many of their other American peers have, I see this community center as one of the most immediate major steps in spearheading a front against the challenges youth face. By creating a new kind of capital in the Punjabi enclave of Richmond Hill through these spaces and resources, Punjabi youth will get an extra push up the ladder.

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APPENDIX

ⁱ Gurdwara translates to the “gateway to the guru” and is the Sikh place of worship. Though it has immense significance for Sikhs on their spirituality, gurdwaras are open to people of all faiths. Within the context of Richmond Hill, gurdwaras are the primary places of organizing within the Punjabi community. People from all over Queens and even the tri-state area congregate at the four major gurdwaras that could be found in the community. The largest congregation happens during Sundays and major holidays. Not only are these spaces used for religious purposes, they are also where the community organizes politically and offer resources in different capacities. The largest one that I will be initially focusing on is called Sikh Cultural Society, also known as the 118th Gurdwara. The second largest Gurdwara in the community is called Baba Makhan Shah Lobana Sikh Center, also known as the 114th Gurdwara.

ⁱⁱ As of now, Seva NY is the only major grassroots organization within the neighborhood working towards the issues revolving around the immigrant community. The founders and directors of the organization, Ravisharon Kaur and Gurpal Singh, were appalled by the response rates of Richmond Hill in the 2000 Census: “only about 4 in 10 households [mailed] back the forms” (Kirk Semple 2014). Seeing this lack of engagement, a number of Seva members collectively mobilized in order to raise the number of representation in the 2010 Census. Seva NY played a crucial role in working to dispel the fears that sharing personal information will lead to deportation in this largely unknowing community while helping to overcome language obstacles-- a huge problem for many immigrant communities. Although Seva did do a tremendous job at engaging the community in a way it has not ever been engaged before for the 2010 census, Richmond Hill has a long way to go before it is being properly advocating for itself as a collective community.

ⁱⁱⁱ A formal set of interview questions for youth. This was the framework I went in with, but I did improvise depending on the flow of the conversation:

1. Could you please tell me about yourself?
 - a. How old are you?
 - b. What grade are you in?
 - c. Where do you go to school?
2. Where were you born?
 - a. If you were born in India, when did you move to the United States?
 - b. If you were born in the United States, what city or area were you born?
3. Where in Richmond Hill do you live?
 - a. What is the best thing about living here? What do you not like?
 - b. Have you always lived there? If not, where did you live before?
 - c. What is your favorite place in Richmond Hill?
4. If you had the power to change one thing in the neighborhood, what would it be?
5. Could you please tell me more about your social life?

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- a. Who do you mainly spend time with?
 - b. What do you do for fun? Do you usually stay in Queens or venture elsewhere?
 6. Please tell me more about your school.
 - a. Where is located it?
 - b. What type of school is it? Public? Charter? Private? Religious?
 - c. What is the ethnic/racial make up of it?
 - d. Do you consider to be a good or bad school?
 - e. How do you like your school?
 7. If someone randomly in the street asked you, "Where are you from?", how would you answer and why?
 - a. Does your Punjabi heritage play a role in how you identify yourself? If so, how?
 8. Could you please tell me more about your family?
 - a. How many brothers or sisters do you have? How old are they?
 - b. Do you live with both your parents? What do they do for a living?
 9. Could you tell me more about the relationship you have with your family?
 - a. Who do you feel closest to within the family? Why?
 - b. How would you describe your connection with your parents specifically? Do you feel like that you can approach them about problems you might have?
 - c. Does your extended family (grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles) play a role in your everyday life? If yes, in what capacity?
 10. In your opinion, what are some things that you feel that you have to deal with that others might not have to?
 11. Do you feel that there are any barriers between you and your parents because of the generation gap? If so, what are the reasons behind this gap?
 12. Have you faced any struggles in your life so far? If so, what are they? Similarly, have you faced any successes you are proud of? If so, what are they? What role does your heritage play in these struggles or successes?